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Testimony submitted to the United States House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on  
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

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**RE: FY19 Budget for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service Programs**

The Oregon Water Resources Congress (OWRC) strongly supports the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs and are concerned that proposed funding is inadequate to tackle the complex natural resources conservation issues facing the nation. We request a minimum of \$150 million for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), \$2 billion for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and \$200 million for the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program. These increases are vital to continue multi-year coordinated federal agency watershed planning watershed efforts, efficiently leverage partnerships, and maximize the value of federal investment in collaborative natural resources conservation projects.

OWRC was established in 1912 as a trade association to promote the protection and use of water rights and the wise stewardship of water resources statewide. OWRC members are local governmental entities, which include irrigation districts, water control districts, drainage districts, water improvement districts, and other agricultural water suppliers that deliver water to roughly 1/3 of all irrigated land in Oregon. These water stewards operate and manage complex water management systems, including water supply reservoirs, canals, pipelines, and hydropower.

Our members across Oregon face challenges related to irrigation water supply reliability and aging infrastructure. While there are common concerns and interests throughout irrigated agriculture, each basin is unique, and necessitates that local communities' work together to

identify their needs and develop solutions to best meet them. NRCS programs are essential tools to meet the myriad of infrastructure needs throughout all our basins, without placing the entire burden on the backs of the farmers that produce vital food and fiber for our nation.

### **NRCS Program Benefits & Needs**

NRCS programs provide a wide variety of benefits to agriculture in Oregon and across the nation. Projects funded through the RCPP, EQIP, and the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program help leverage scarce state and local resources, increase inter-agency cooperation, and result in collaborative on-the-ground solutions that help irrigated agriculture and the natural resources of the surrounding landscape. Financial and technical resources provided by NRCS are often a catalyst to bring other agencies and stakeholders to the table which not only leads to better outcomes but also maximizes efficiency and the value of federal investment.

Over the years, the various NRCS programs used by Oregon districts have been renamed or otherwise changed, but historically, have included the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) and the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI). These programs were used successfully by districts along with other state, local and federal interests to developing cooperative basin-wide approaches and address Endangered Species Act (ESA) and Clean Water Act (CWA) issues in watershed basins and sub basins. The valuable tools under these former programs are now generally covered under RCPP.

OWRC strongly supports RCPP, and while we understand the need to streamline federal agency activities and programs, it is our hope that essential programs like RCPP continue to receive the additional funding that is still needed to meet program demands. The RCPP is a critical tool for districts and other agricultural water suppliers in developing and implementing water and energy conservation projects in Oregon.

## Examples of RCPP & EQIP Benefits

Federal support of water conservation activities funded through NRCS programs, including the RCPP, is essential to the conservation of our natural resources and critical to protecting our food, energy and water supply. In 2018, USDA will be investing \$220 million in innovation conservation partnerships, funding 91 high impact projects across the country, including projects that address water quality and drought like the Oregon projects described below. More projects like this could be developed and implemented with additional federal support through the RCPP.

- ***East Fork Irrigation District (EFID)*** - EFID with a diverse set of partners in the Hood River Watershed, of the Columbia River Basin, will focus on a top-priority water conservation and fish habitat project in the Lower East Fork Hood River. EFID and its partners will construct Phase 1 of the Eastside Lateral pipeline project, assist agricultural producers with approximately 400 acres of on-farm water conservation practices and educate producers and farm workers on the latest irrigation water management techniques. The project will also restore one mile of spawning and rearing habitat on the East Fork Hood River for threatened steelhead, spring Chinook, and Coho. The project will increase irrigation water reliability for high value food crops, improve resilience to drought, and restore instream habitat for ESA listed species. **RCPP Funding: \$2,033,000**
- ***Wallowa Lake Irrigation Modernization, Farmers Conservation Alliance (FCA)*** – This project will address water quantity, water quality, and inadequate habitat resource concerns in the Prairie Creek area of Wallowa County, Oregon. This project proposes to pipe 11.8 miles of private ditches, install water control structures/fish screens on newly piped ditches and install up to ten new sprinkler systems to increase on-farm conveyance and application efficiency. The actions will improve water conveyance and application

efficiency, reduce fish entrainment risk decrease return flows into Prairie Creek and the Wallowa River, and decrease sediment, nutrient, and bacteria inputs into Prairie Creek and the Wallowa River. FCA and its partners seek to benefit threatened or endangered populations of spring Chinook salmon, summer steelhead trout and bull trout.

**RCPP Funding: \$1,730,000**

OWRC also continues to support funding for EQIP, in accordance with the 2014 Farm Bill. As demonstrated by the huge demand for RCPP funding, programs like EQIP need to remain considering the large need for investment in conservation projects. It is essential the EQIP have at least \$2 billion in appropriations funding if Congress would like to see widespread results, particularly in addressing on-farm conservation and efficiency. Furthermore, with the numerous new and potential listings under ESA and increased water regulations under the CWA, there is a dire need for additional funding to support conservation efforts nationwide.

RCPP helps fill a funding void for multi-partner conservation projects and combined with EQIP allows farmers to pool and leverage dollars for both on-farm and off-farm conservation projects. The effects of drought combined with ESA and CWA regulation has created a daunting set of circumstances for irrigated agriculture in the West. It is critical to increase funding for eligible RCPP and EQIP projects that maximize economic investment while benefiting the environment and alleviating some of the negative effects of drought.

**Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program and Watershed Planning Needs**

OWRC also strongly supports increased funding for the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program. Two of our members, Sutherlin Water Control District (SWCD) and Middle Fork Irrigation District (MFID) have dams that were built under this program, through P.L. 566. SWCD and MFID have received funds to begin the long and expensive process of updating their

50-year-old dams to today's standards for safety, however; both districts will need continued funding to fully update their infrastructure. Once planning and design studies are complete, both MFID and SWCD will know the costs to make the necessary improvements to their dams, which is currently estimated at over \$10 million for both SWCD dams and \$9.8 million for MFID.

Additionally, in 2017, Senator Merkley championed \$150 million in increased funding within P.L. 566 for projects that benefit wildlife and irrigation. These funds are available to assist Central Oregon irrigators with water conservation projects that benefit spotted frog habitat while ensuring farmers and ranchers receive the water for food and fiber. Given the high costs to fix just 3 of the P.L. 566 dams, and immense price tag of modernizing infrastructure to increase water conservation, species preservation, and water reliability for farmers and ranchers, a minimum of \$200 million is needed to fund this important program.

Our member districts, the farms and other water users they serve, and the communities in which they are located benefit greatly from the NRCS programs described in our testimony. NRCS programs are essential to irrigation districts in developing and implementing conservation projects that benefit the entire watershed and community. Furthermore, conservation projects also benefit the economy through job creation and ensuring the future viability of American agriculture. Oregon's agricultural community is actively committed to water conservation, but these efforts require robust Federal participation in order to successfully address Oregon's water supply needs. Increasing the budget for NRCS is a strategic investment that will pay environmental and economic dividends to Oregonians and America as a whole. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the proposed FY19 budget for USDA NRCS Programs.

Sincerely, April Snell, Executive Director

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