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Testimony submitted to the United States Senate 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 support the protection and use of water rights and promote 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 facilities.

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. Funding programs, like the ones housed under the USDA 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 and the agricultural economy that produces 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 Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (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 will 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**

- ***Lower Crooked River Strategic Restoration*** – This is a comprehensive project intended to address degraded fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, and riparian plant communities over 17 miles of the Crooked River in Central Oregon. Proposed restoration activities include both instream and riparian restoration to improve habitat for fish and wildlife, water quality, and agricultural productivity. In addition, the project will reduce the threat of regulatory enforcement associated with the Federal Endangered Species Act and compliance with non-point source impacts from agriculture under Sections 303 and 319 of the Federal Clean Water Act. **RCPP Funding: \$7,091,000**
- ***Three Sisters Irrigation District (TSID)*** - TSID in the Deschutes Basin, Oregon, with government, private industry and nonprofit partners will implement multiple innovative projects to mitigate drought, improve water quality/quantity and improve fish habitat. The project includes the completion of piping Watson McKenzie Main Canal, resulting in the conservation of 800 acre-feet of annual canal seepage loss. The on-farm component of this project will encompass 61 projects, over 1500 acres, in the Upper District, allowing farmers to pipe private laterals, thereby providing access to pressurized water from the District's pipeline. Pressurized water will eliminate electrical pumps that use over 2.5 million kWh of electricity annually. A feasibility study will be conducted to determine the potential for 60 on-farm hydro net metering projects. This project will allow TSID to mitigate drought by piping the entire District. **RCPP Funding: \$990,604**

OWRC also continues to support funding for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (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 allow farmers to pool together and leverage the dollars invested in the off-farm project with the addition of EQIP on-farm projects. The effects of drought combined with ESA and CWA regulation has created a daunting set of circumstances for irrigated agriculture in the West. RCPP and EQIP have become an essential lifeline for farmers to adapt to drought. It is critical to increase funding for new eligible RCPP 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 the Small Watershed Rehabilitation 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 from the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program to fully update their infrastructure.

SWCD has two dams built under P.L. 566 in the Umpqua Basin and while they were built to seismic standards 50 years ago, they do not meet today's standards for earthquakes. SWCD's dams serve as multi-purpose storage for the community; providing flood control, irrigation water, municipal water and recreation. To date, SWCD has been authorized to receive funding for planning, design and construction of one of their dams and planning and design on the other. However, SWCD will still need considerable funding dollars to complete construction on the second dam.

MFID is responsible for the management and maintenance of Clear Branch Dam, a P.L. 566 dam within the Hood River watershed, which provides a clean, dependable water supply and distribution system for the irrigation of pears, apples, cherries and other high value crops. Rehabilitation of the dam is needed to protect the public from flooding, for access to a clean and dependable water supply, and to maintain agricultural productivity. Rehabilitation of Clear Branch Dam will improve fish passage connectivity for ESA threatened Bull Trout and improve water temperature for spawning, rearing and migration.

Once planning and design studies are complete, both MFID and SWCD will know what the costs will be 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 increased funding within P.L. 566 for Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations. The program was funded at \$150 million and included projects that benefit wildlife and irrigation. These funds are available to substantially assist Central Oregon irrigators with water conservation projects that benefit spotted frog preservation while ensuring farmers and ranchers in the region get the water they need for their operations. Considering the high costs to fix just three of the P.L. 566 dams, and the immense price tag of modernizing infrastructure to increase water conservation, preserve wildlife habitat and increase 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 programs, but those programs require robust Federal participation if the agricultural community is to be able to continue its efforts to address Oregon's water supply needs through conservation. Increasing the budget for NRCS programs is a strategic investment that will pay both 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 the USDA's NRCS Programs.

Sincerely,
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