



National Watershed Coalition

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**Comments of
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Committee on Agriculture
U. S. House of Representatives**

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Chairman Lucas and members of the House Agriculture Committee, I am providing these comments as a summary of the interests and concerns of local watershed project sponsors across the country. I live and work in both Lincoln and Pawnee Counties in Oklahoma. I'm an agricultural producer, Chairman of the Lincoln County Conservation District, a local watershed project sponsor and Executive Director of the National Watershed Coalition. I offer the comments below representing the National Watershed Coalition. On behalf of the Coalition we appreciate the opportunity to provide comments during the House Farm Bill field and DC hearing process.

My home county has six USDA-assisted watershed projects that include 63 flood control dams. These dams provide over \$10 million in annual benefits in flood damage reduction, soil erosion control, water supply, recreation and fish and wildlife habitat. The dams benefit more than 1,240 farms and ranches, protect 100 bridges and hundreds of miles of roads. Five of the lakes formed by Watershed Program dams provide the sole source of water for more than 16,000 residents in five Lincoln County communities. These and thousands of other projects across the nation are important to the land and water resources of this nation.

Principal to my perspective on this program is the notion that it is a federally assisted partnership. State and local entities must be full and equal partners in shaping the future, just as they were when the legacy of this program was created. The Watershed Program works successfully where other federal water resource programs will not. The program is right sized for local landscapes, insuring conservation of natural resources, prudent water resource management and securing both environmental and economic benefits. This success can be credited to local watershed sponsors, who make decisions as close to the on-the-ground issues as possible.

While the watershed program has its own authorizing legislation, the current Farm Bill has served as an important piece of legislation to drive the rehabilitation of aging dams built under the USDA Small Watershed Program. The NWC believes that the current Farm Bill process presents a continuing important opportunity for Congress to extend the public benefits derived from work performed under the Watershed Program.

If we analyze USDA Watershed Program information and use the Farm Bill process as a timeline, we see an interesting and perhaps alarming trend. When the rehabilitation amendments were passed in the year 2000 and a Farm Bill was being developed less than 50 of the 11,000 watershed program dams in the nation were more than 50 years old. The average age of the 11,000 dams was 34 years. By the end of 2011, nearly one-fifth of the 11,000 watershed dams in the nation had reached the end of their 50-year planned service life; and by 2016 almost two-thirds of the watershed dams will reach this milestone. Congress, local sponsors and USDA must engage now and address this growing issue in an aggressive, practical and strategic manner.

We ask that you include authorization for the Watershed Rehabilitation Program in the Farm Bill. We would also ask the House to authorize funding for rehabilitation of aging watershed dams in the coming Farm Bill. Our recent disappointment with last minute Senate action which removed the modest funding level for the Program from their version of the Bill cannot be overstated.

Once authorization is in place we would ask House Committee members to join us in working with appropriators to insure authorized funding is fully appropriated. All across this nation, local sponsors are working diligently to secure land rights and generate matching funds. Based on the credibility and accountability of these local sponsors much has been achieved in anticipation of federal watershed rehabilitation funds. A reliable and steady appropriation from Congress is needed to assist sponsors in making efficient use of the often-limited local resources.

We ask that as you develop the Conservation title of the new Farm Bill, that you continue to consider the importance of the USDA Watershed Program as well. The inclusion of the Watershed Rehabilitation Program in the coming Farm Bill is critical to keeping USDA engaged in the commitment made to local watershed project sponsors. If authorization and funding are not addressed the partnership that has accomplished so much will be abandoned. Abandonment of economic, natural resource, flood protection, water supply, health and safety and environmental benefits makes for bad business sense. Perhaps even worse is the potential abandonment of the federal and local \$15 billion dollar national financial investment in conservation infrastructure that provides 2.1 billion in annual benefits to over 48 million citizens.

Watershed project sponsors fully recognize that the House Agriculture Committee does not have direct responsibility in the area of appropriations. However, we would be remiss if we did not point out that the impact of the decline in funding for the Watershed Program can certainly be seen across the nation as well as in my home state Oklahoma. We believe that the Administration's recent recommendations for no funding are not in touch with the reality of the documented need and demand for the program. We have a significant number of well-planned projects across the nation that are waiting on the necessary funding to be completed. Fluctuations in the USDA Watershed Program budget make it extremely difficult to maintain experienced watershed personnel and sufficient technical assistance.

We appreciate the past efforts of this committee to provide oversight for the watershed program. We support your efforts to educate the Administration at all levels concerning the necessity to embrace and acknowledge the value and success of the Watershed Program and the investment, benefits and partnership it represents. We pledge our continuing support for your actions on behalf of watershed sponsors across the country.

Rehabilitation of Aging Watershed Dams

As you know Congress authorized the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to assist communities in rehabilitating their aging watershed dams when it enacted the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Amendments of 2000. With your leadership this came about as a result of the initiative of watershed project sponsors, the excellent partnership that existed between the sponsors, landowners, community leaders, state conservation agencies, state dam safety agencies, and NRCS as well as foresight of Congress in protecting an important national infrastructure. The act pertains to flood control dams built under the Flood Control Act of 1944 (Public Law 78-534), the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (Public Law 83-566), Resource Conservation and Development, and a pilot watershed program (1952-1954).

Communities with watershed projects have enjoyed a long tradition of protecting lives and property and conserving natural resources. More than 11,000 dams and associated conservation practices have been constructed in 2,000 watershed projects in 47 states since 1948.

Major Rehabilitation Issues for Watershed Sponsors

As sponsors consider the future of their projects they face several major issues, among those are:

- Most of the watershed dams were constructed with a designed or expected life span of 50 years. There are watershed dams that already exceed their design life and that number will soon grow to more than 7000 with in the next 5 years.
- The extremely serious trend of reduction or redirection of technical and administrative assistance dedicated to the program from the principal federal partner USDA-NRCS and the subsequent loss of institutional program knowledge has made it difficult for sponsors to secure the assistance needed to keep operation and maintenance efforts current. It has also affected the ability to keep rehabilitation work on schedule even when adequate local or federal funds are available.
- Some dams no longer meet current dam safety standards. Many dams were originally constructed to protect rural agricultural land and now there are homes, highways and other structures downstream that would be at risk if the dam failed. There are 1,700 high hazard dams and 2,000 more that were designed as low hazard, but are now classified as high hazard due to potential loss of life or property.
- Although sponsors have usually maintained the dams in good condition, components such as metal and concrete components of the principal spillway in some dams have deteriorated over the years and need replacement. Some structures have filled with sediment, reducing the floodwater storage.

- While most of the dams are safe, there are some that pose a threat to public health and safety if they should fail, especially to those who live or work downstream, or those who use the reservoirs as a source of drinking water. Some dams also have the potential for creating adverse environmental impacts in the same downstream flood plain they have been protecting.

Watershed Rehabilitation Program efforts represent a successful partnership that must be maintained. Local sponsors and their state level partners are working diligently to meet their responsibilities. It also requires that USDA-NRCS maintain the technical and administrative resources to deliver the program. It requires oversight and funding from Congress. We appreciate your efforts to assist in maintaining the resources and support necessary for future success.

We appreciate this committee allowing the National Watershed Coalition an opportunity to provide comments on behalf of local watershed project sponsors.