

**Presentation to
Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee
and
Environmental Resources and Energy Committee
by
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- Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee and the Environmental Resources and Energy Committee today. Specifically, thank you Congressman Causer and Congressman Maher for your invitation.
- The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has a long-standing and powerful history of implementing voluntary conservation practices within the Chesapeake Bay as a targeted watershed going back to the 1980's and more recently the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative.
- NRCS has provided a summary report of activities in the Chesapeake Bay watershed in Pennsylvania between 2008 and 2015 for Committee members today.
- Since 2008, NRCS has allocated more than \$200 million to install and implement voluntary conservation practices within Pennsylvania's Chesapeake Bay Watershed.
- These funds have been utilized primarily for nutrient reduction. The funding has come about through a variety of financial assistance programs, administered by NRCS, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative,

Agricultural Management Assistance Act, and its farm and wetland easement programs.

- On average 80-85 percent of the funds are devoted to livestock producers and those cropland producers applying manure to cropland acres.
- To give you an idea what this money has bought, we have installed 759 agricultural waste storage systems with corresponding comprehensive nutrient management plans, 533 stream crossings, over six million square feet of heavy use areas.
- Funds have been targeted to key high priority watersheds that have been designated by the US Geological Survey that have excessive nitrogen, sediment, and phosphorus loads.
- Within these key watersheds, PA-NRCS has also targeted funds using a precision conservation effort, installing key conservation practices, like buffers and nutrient management, on fields that have the highest percentage of leaching soils and phosphorus runoff.
- This work could not have been accomplished without the help of our partners, Conservation Districts, which we have had a long-standing relationship with for decades.
- Conservation Districts and NRCS were created under the same law in 1935, and we are fortunate in Pennsylvania to have such a long-standing cooperative partnership where we seek mutual goals.
- We share office space, phones, vehicles, and even staff people.
- Since 2009, NRCS has provided more than nine million dollars to Conservation Districts and local grass-roots organizations in the

Watershed to employ staff to implement and install conservation practices.

- These Federal dollars have been leveraged by other partners to maximize conservation efforts on the landscape.
- In FY 2013 and 2014, about 50 additional full-time employees (FTEs) were funded each year by NRCS through cooperative agreements with partners.
- One example is the Strategic Watershed Action Teams (SWAT) agreements.
- Through these agreements, NRCS leverages funds with DEP for direct on-the-ground technical and engineering assistance from conservation district and PACD staff to design and install conservation practices. Generally speaking, NRCS provides 75 percent of the funds and Districts and DEP provide 25 percent.
- This agreement has been very successful in providing additional technical staff to implement conservation practices in Pennsylvania's portion of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.
- Since July 2011, the staff working under the SWAT agreements have assisted 1,738 producers and completed 5,404 engineering components (which includes inventory and evaluations, surveys, designs, and construction quality assurance).
- NRCS also annually trains conservation district staff through on-the-job training, Boot Camps, and Conservation Planning trainings, where conservation districts make up 75 percent of the attendees.
- Some of our most complex practices, like agricultural waste storage facilities and heavy use areas, were installed by Conservation

Districts and NRCS in partnership using NRCS's Engineering Job Approval Authority.

- It is important that we recognize the strides that voluntary conservation has made, and the importance of documenting standards that meet the Chesapeake Bay Program's verification standards.
- For those of us within NRCS, the Field Office Technical Guide is the foundation to managing local resources at the sustainable level.
- For NRCS employees, the policy is clear. Conservation practices planned and implemented on the landscape and entered into our reporting system must meet NRCS standards and specifications outlined in the Field Office Technical Guide.
- We are at a crossroads in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed community and one where we must find a balance.
- Partners need to document practices to show overall phosphorus, nitrogen and sediment reductions, and NRCS has a need to provide technically sound conservation practices that are uniform in function and design to maintain program integrity.
- Throughout the Watershed, there is an ongoing desire and need to document all of the voluntary conservation that is occurring on the landscape. At this time, 85 percent of the practices in the EPA model are made up of NRCS and state cost-share programs.
- To show that producers are doing more than just what is cost-shared, in 2014, NRCS entered into an agreement with PA DEP on a remote sensing pilot project. NRCS is excited to be part of a partnership effort where we have documented through aerial imagery conservation practices that exist on the landscape outside of cost-share.

- This pilot project, approved by NRCS Chief Jason Weller, was an NRCS effort to provide assistance to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to help develop and test a protocol for a cost-effective process to inventory current conservation practices on the landscape and at the same time, protect producers' private information.
- Trained NRCS geographic information systems (GIS) staff identified and delineated conservation practices that can be seen in remote sensing photos of the Potomac River Watershed in Pennsylvania.
- Retired NRCS and conservation district staff then conducted a site specific verification of a random sample of the delineated conservation practices to determine the accuracy of the process developed in the pilot project.
- An analysis of the effectiveness of the pilot project is currently underway and a final report will be provided to PA DEP within the next few months.
- We are excited to release the analysis of this pilot study where five counties underwent 100% inventory of their practices and pleased to partner with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on this project.
- On a final note, it is important that we recognize the strides that voluntary conservation has made through cost-share and non-cost share practices.
- It is also important that we recognize the continued need for a strong NRCS/conservation district partnership, not only in light of continued Federal funding estimated at over \$30 million annually, but also in the event a state cost-share program is funded.

- It takes a full contingent of NRCS, State, District and nongovernmental employees to meet our Chesapeake Bay milestones.