

FARM BILL SUMMIT SUMMARY

The following is a summation of NDASCD's position on the upcoming farm bill reflecting input from SCDs:

North Dakota's Soil Conservation Districts recognize the importance of a National Farm Bill containing solid support for soil and water conservation programs. This is vital to ensure the sustainability and enhancement of these resources for future generations' food production.

Conservation programs which continue to have more producer sign-ups than available funding are EQIP and CSP (although CSP is relatively new). Within these and other programs, technical assistance is vital to these programs actually being effective and accomplishing their stated purpose. Technical assistance is, above all, necessary to seeing producer intent translated to land improvements.

Other popular programs with producers and seeking funding and professional assistance are CRP, agricultural waste projects including 319 funding, WHIP, WRP (wetlands reserve), Agriculture Water Enhancement (AWEP), and the newly instituted CCPI (Coop Conservation Partner Initiative). With these and also EQIP and CSP, Soil Conservation Districts see a continuing need for funding for small and short-term projects. This would allow financial assistance to be spread over a greater number of producers, rather than just funding one or two large projects in a county each year.

The administration of conservation programs by NRCS is working well. Payments are timely which reflects efficiency with the technical arm and the financial arm of the agency.

Above all, continuing to utilize locally led work groups to provide direction and prioritization to conservation program needs and implementation must be continued. Time and again, the strong advantage of having locally led input has been demonstrated.

North Dakota has seen strong support for conservation programs when compared to the rest of the nation. Continuing with these above stated priorities will provide a solid base to help producers achieve their land and water conservation goals.

Soil Conservation Districts and participants in the Soil and Water Conservation Farm Bill Summit identified several areas where improvements could be made to current conservation programs. Local input in determining conservation direction and priorities is always preferred and desired. Increasing local input will serve to create programs which are pertinent and used. Along with this, producers are experiencing tight margins and may still find it difficult to participate in conservation programs due to cost share requirements. Reducing this requirement and increasing incentives will get more conservation practices implemented as these will allow producers to financially participate.

Trees provide numerous conservation benefits as well as aesthetic and climate modification benefits. Trees which are used in living snow fences also provide tremendous cost savings in snow removal to county, township, and state units of government. Safety is enhanced on these roadways when drifting snow is stopped and visibility improved. The North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts supports funding to pay farmers to devote acreage along roadways for living snow fences, and also to include design and planting.

The Conservation Stewardship Program is desired and highly supported in concept. However, the paperwork requirements of this program have severely curtailed its appeal and the ability of producers to access it. This application needs to be simplified and the process streamlined so producers are not "turned off" by the requirements regardless of their desire to implement the conservation practice(s). Also, the current rating system of getting enough

“points” to qualify for some programs needs to be refined. We have seen repeatedly that producers will come back and go through a difficult and lengthy process to apply for conservation programs only a couple of times and then give up when denied. The time commitment to the application process can become a detriment when nothing but failure is realized. The reasons for failure to be approved for a practice also include inadequate funding for some programs (EQIP) so producers wait for future year’s funding.

CRP has been identified for a number of improvements. A shift in emphasis for funding is suggested from general CRP to continuous CRP. Selective weed control on CRP should also be allowed. The opportunity to re-seed CRP for improved wildlife habitat is also a change which is encouraged. Haying and grazing of CRP can be improved. Flexibility in the frequency of haying and grazing CRP is needed. Feedback to decision makers regarding the results to the CRP plant community following grazing and haying should be provided. Research in this area has been done and needs to be revisited.

Single issue projects need to be considered and evaluated equally with multi-issue projects. Tailor enhancements to local conditions. Yet, urban conservation efforts should receive technical assistance as well as rural activities.

Special incentives to allow beginning farmers to access farmland from retiring farmers are also encouraged. North Dakota’s Soil Conservation Districts are mindful of the future need of increasing populations and the subsequent requirement for food. Young farmers guarantee the future of the nation’s food supply.

In the conservation provisions of the Farm Bill, as in the general provisions, abuse must be eliminated and the ability to take advantage of this well-intended legislation. Unfortunately, the few who seek to profit without regard for the true intention of the program can interfere with the plans and abilities of honest, forthright producers who use these programs as they were intended. Farm program abuses must be eliminated.

What needs exist for new conservation activities/programs?

Enhanced emphasis on living snow fences should be established within the new Farm Bill. This proposal marries soil and water conservation with the safety of the motoring public and also assists subdivisions of local government who have suffered the excessive costs of snow removal during the often cruel northern winters. These costs have drained budgets at a time when other road expenses have escalated. Living snow fence sequesters carbon from the air and provide beauty to the landscape adjacent to the state’s roadways.

Small watershed project’s (PL-566) criteria for cost/benefit ratio has effectively eliminated many good sound projects from funding which could benefit small towns and areas. Higher population centers receive a better cost/benefit ratio under the current system. We favor easing the cost/benefit criteria so watershed projects benefiting small towns and lesser populated areas can receive funding.

Soil and water conservation outreach to producers, schools, and colleges is lacking in rural North Dakota. Conservation mentors to beginning farmers is a program which could also help in this effort. Soil Conservation Districts are uniquely situated to assist in this effort but funding for these efforts is also hard for districts to garner. Special funds to help with these efforts could help instill a conservation ethic in beginning and also established farmers.