

Draft USDA NRCS Small Watershed Program Policy

Background:

“The Watershed Program established through the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (Public Law 83-566) authorizes NRCS to work with local sponsors to install watershed protection and improvement projects. The authorized purposes of the program are flood prevention, water quality or water quantity protection, agricultural water management, municipal water supply management, fish and wildlife habitat protection and public recreation development. Often projects are mutually supportive of more than one purpose.

These projects create and protect vital infrastructure while conserving natural resources and contributing to local economies. The Watershed Program focuses on both the design and construction of structural water control measures and on land treatment measures. Watershed planning provides a basis for partnering at State and local levels to identify and co-invest in projects reflecting the highest priority needs. This critical infrastructure program protects lives and property, builds community resiliency to extreme weather events, reduces the need for federal disaster assistance, improves water quality and quantity, provides reliable, high quality drinking water, creates and preserves jobs, and broadens the economic base.

In a recent report to Congress, NRCS estimates that this program, by avoiding and reducing flood damages, annually provides more than \$352 million in benefits to agriculture and more than \$462 million in benefits to non-agricultural uses, such as roads, bridges, and homes. Other benefits, such as erosion control, water conservation, water quality improvement and irrigation efficiency, exceed \$441 million on agricultural lands and over \$957 million in recreation, fish and wildlife, rural water supply, and municipal and industrial water supply, annually.

In total, as a result of installed watershed projects made possible through the investment from NRCS and local sponsors, the Watershed Program provides an estimated \$2.2 billion in average annual benefits across the nation. Another way to view these benefits is by the number of people and communities who benefit directly from watershed projects. The existing projects are protecting over 610,000 homes, 46,000 businesses, 180,000 farms and ranches, 61,000 bridges, and 28,000 domestic water supplies. As a result, over 48 million people across the United States benefit from the Watershed Program every year. ¹”

This excerpt from recent testimony of the National Watershed Coalition to the House Appropriations Committee lays the foundation of the importance of the Small Watershed Program to a majority of our member state agencies and many conservation districts as local sponsors of watershed structures. For several years, NASCA members have worked with the National Watershed Coalition and other program proponents to rebuild support and funding for

¹ Report to Congress, USDA-NRCS, Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program Multi-Year Plan

the Small Watershed Program. Also, there is growing interest in the program among NASCA member states that do not currently have many watershed structures but would like to utilize the program for watershed planning and new project development. In the face of a changing climate, the Small Watershed Program could provide resources for future water management projects that may otherwise be unachievable without it.

Request for NASCA Action:

- Support the National Watershed Coalition as they work with Congress and the core national partners to rebuild support for and increase funding levels for the Small Watershed Program.
- Provide a forum for impacted / interested NASCA member states to share experiences and innovations with respect to the Small Watershed Program in each state.
- Ensure that NASCA members' interest in accessing the Small Watershed Program for new projects or planning are heard along with the needs of those advocating for existing watershed structure remediation and repair needs.