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National Association of
State Conservation Agencies

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Sponsor: NASCA Policy Committee
Title: Green Infrastructure
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Subject: Green Infrastructure

Background

Growing challenges attributed to climate change (rainfall intensity, sustained heat/drought periods) have further stressed urban and suburban centers and elevated the need for improved green infrastructure. Green infrastructure refers to ecological systems, both natural and engineered, that act as living infrastructure. The 2019 Water Infrastructure Improvement Act defines green infrastructure as "the range of measures that use plant or soil systems, permeable pavement or other permeable surfaces or substrates, stormwater harvest and reuse, or landscaping to store, infiltrate, or evapotranspirate stormwater and reduce flows to sewer systems or to surface waters.[1] Green infrastructure elements are planned and managed primarily for stormwater control, but also exhibit social, economic and environmental benefits. Stormwater basin retrofitting, wetland mitigation, installation of dry wells, bio-swales, rain gardens, green roofs, permeable parking lots, and street trees are all forms of green infrastructure used to address these resource concerns.

Green infrastructure uses vegetation, soils, and other landscape features to restore some of the natural processes required to manage and treat water and create healthier environments. Green Infrastructure can be useful across the country where there is a wide range of runoff conditions, soils, quality of receiving waters, and community development. Green infrastructure capitalizes on opportunities to improve infiltration, evapotranspiration and reuse of stormwater runoff; it reduces and treats stormwater at its source, provides health benefits in communities and reduces heat stress.

For more than 80 years an important focus of soil and water conservation districts has been assisting agricultural landowners with conservation practices which prevent soil erosion, protect water quality and improve soil health. Today, many soil and water conservation districts throughout the country are located in urban or urbanizing counties; the National Association of Conservation Districts estimates that close to 70 percent of the nation's conservation districts are involved in some form of urban and community conservation.

[1] https://www.epa.gov/green-infrastructure/what-green-infrastructure

A growing number of soil and water conservation districts are taking a primary role in the effective implementation of green infrastructure best management practices in both agricultural and non-agricultural settings through outreach, education, technical assistance and in some cases inspection and oversight. Soil and water conservation districts can also play a key role in informing policy decisions with respect to green infrastructure initiatives to ensure that they are compatible with current land uses (e.g. are not sited to take agricultural land out of production or promoting infiltration in areas with contaminated soils). Soil and water conservation districts can leverage technical and financial resources to further voluntary, incentive-driven natural resource conservation programs that benefit all citizens. In fact, 23 NASCA members report involvement in urban agriculture programs.[2]

Action requested to be taken by NASCA

- Work with the conservation partnership, other federal agencies, and other organizations to ensure that federal administrations recognize the importance of green infrastructure, encourage a common understanding, and include funding for these types of practices in all federal infrastructure bills (e.g. H3684 - Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act which includes: $1B – FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program, $500M – Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations and $118M Watershed Rehabilitation Program)

- Increase soil and water conservation districts' capacity to provide technical assistance for green infrastructure projects by pursuing funding, training, and information sharing opportunities, and partnering with agencies and organizations that do the same.

- Support continued funding for Clean Water Act Section 319 Nonpoint Source Management Program grants to states, and encourage projects which implement green infrastructure practices.

- Support policy initiatives that include investment in green infrastructure.

- Promote improvement of soil health as a component of green infrastructure. Soil health is of paramount importance for maintaining soil structure, fertility, climate resilience, production capacity, and protection of water retention, quality, and quantity.

[2] 2022 NASCA membership survey