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Aquatic Ecosystem Symposium
Western Water Policy Review Commission

Presentation by Warren M. Lee
Natural Resources Conservation Service

The Natural Resources Conservation Service was established by the Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 (7 U.S.C. 6962) which combined the authorities of the former Soil Conservation Service (Soil Conservation Act of 1935) with seven cost-share programs for natural resource conservation.

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance through local conservation districts to landusers, communities, watershed groups, Federal and state agencies, American Indian Tribes, and others at their request. The NRCS staff at the local level works alongside state and local conservation staff and volunteers in a partnership to care for natural resources on private lands. NRCS also develops comprehensive technical guidance for conservation planning and assistance. This technical guidance is widely used by our staff and by governmental and nongovernmental organizations to ensure that conservation is based on sound science.

Benefits of these activities are multi-faceted, including sustained and improved agricultural productivity; cleaner, safer, and more dependable water supplies; reduced damages caused by floods and other natural disasters; and an enhanced natural resource base to support continued economic development and recreation.

The programs by which NRCS delivers its technical and financial assistance are described in Attachment 3. Funding for these programs in fiscal years 1996 and 1997 are shown for the Nation in Attachment 1. Obligations for these programs in fiscal year 1996 are shown for the 19 Western States in Attachment 2. As one reviews NRCS programs it is immediately apparent how almost every program has an impact on water resources. The impacts may not be direct nor physical but wherever an NRCS program is implemented it either affects the quality or quantity of water directly or through economic, social, or ecological means.

The 1996 Food and Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act provided NRCS and its partners with a new set of conservation programs. The 1996 Act greatly increases the emphasis on concentrating technical and financial assistance on priority areas and natural resource priority concerns, the emphasis on water quality and wildlife habitat, and the emphasis on flexibility in implementation of conservation compliance and swampbuster.

NRCS and its partners will strive to allocate scarce program resources among natural resource problems and initiatives and to match programs to natural resource concerns. USDA field staff, conservation districts, and county committees are challenged to use all conservation programs as tools to address natural resource concerns. Integrating USDA programs with those of other Federal, state, local, and nongovernmental programs will be a key to conservation success.

The NRCS Base Program

NRCS works in partnership with 3,000 local conservation districts by which it provides technical assistance to the Nation's private land. This partnership is supported by personnel and funds provided by the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program, the base program for NRCS. Through memorandums of understanding between the Secretary of Agriculture and the local conservation districts and with CTA funded by annual appropriations, NRCS implements conservation programs by providing cost-sharing and technical assistance on private land. The conservation districts, which often match county boundaries, are organized under State and Tribal laws and are directed by locally elected directors or supervisors.

Many of our cost-share and technical assistance programs are implemented through CTA including our water quality demonstration projects, National Resources Inventory, technology and data bases development, and conservation of wetlands (Swampbuster). Technical assistance and policy administration is also provided under CTA for the Conservation Reserve Program and other new programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentive (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program.

New Program Directions

Locally Led Conservation: We have recently expanded the scope of our planning efforts under the CTA program so that locally led conservation becomes the common starting place for all of our programs. In many ways, locally led conservation is a return to the services traditionally provided by the Soil Conservation Service: helping landowners set goals and make decisions about the use of their natural resources in a way that ensures a healthy and productive land.

This voluntary effort of locally-led conservation is fostered by the conservation provisions of the 1996 farm bill and is designed to better tailor the Agency's assistance to meet the needs of individuals and communities served.

Locally led conservation means local people, usually with the leadership of conservation districts, assess their natural resource conditions and needs; set goals; identify programs and other resources to solve those needs; develop proposals and recommendations to do so; implement solutions; and measure their success.

Locally led conservation is voluntary and means neighbors--rural and urban--working together as the foundation for effective conservation: providing a platform for effective communication, achieving mutual understanding, and forging partnerships.

Locally led conservation is based on finding common ground--developing a shared vision of goals for resource conservation and what constitutes success. This process represents a chance to let local people, who know the problems best, deal with those problems. It is based on shared responsibility--neighbors, farmers, ranchers, rural and urban residents taking responsibility for their share of conservation.

This process is based on an assessment of conservation needs and all the assistance available to the community through government and non-government sources. Locally led conservation uses all Federal, State, and local conservation programs--and private sector programs--singly and in combination, as tools to solve natural resource concerns.

Local can mean a county, a portion of a county, a watershed, or a multicounty region--whatever geographic area is best suited to address the resource conservation needs identified. A local community means everyone with a stake in the health of natural resources in the local area.

And what is the NRCS role in this effort? In addition to serving as the catalyst to initiate locally led conservation efforts, our role is to describe the condition of the land and communicate with the people who work the land by providing (1) resource inventories, (2) resource assessments, (3) planning assistance, and/or (4) technical assistance. NRCS supports, facilitates and informs the process.

This is not just a one agency effort. We need the willing cooperation of our many partners. We need to extend a hand and ask for help, to join with our conservation partners and sit down together with local people and let them determine what they need. If we can engage all of the diverse elements of our communities and pull together local resources, we will have a powerful voice for conservation.

With locally led conservation we are once again recommitting ourselves to our agency's roots. We will provide services tailored to the needs of the individuals and communities we serve.

Watersheds: The voluntary effort of locally-led conservation is fostered by the conservation provisions of the 1996 Farm Bill and is designed to better tailor the Agency's assistance to meet the needs of individuals and communities served. Along with this initiative the NRCS has underway an effort to redirect the watershed program to serve as an integral component of locally led conservation.

A desire for assistance on a watershed basis is clearly expressed through the growth of a nationwide movement. Local people want to protect and be stewards of their land and water resources. They are creating lake, river, and watershed associations all across the country because they recognize that they need to work together to plan and implement solutions to their natural resource problems. Local people understand that what they do on their land can affect others and that they need to "think globally and act locally." Just as farmers and ranchers have sought out NRCS's technology and planning expertise for the past 60 years, these watershed associations and other groups are seeking the best available science and planning skills to assist them to assess their natural resource conditions and help local people identify solutions to their problems.

Through its watershed program, the NRCS assists States, local units of government, tribes, and other sponsoring organizations to address water-related and other natural resource issues, to conduct studies, to develop watershed plans, and to implement resource management systems. The program includes projects carried out under the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (PL 83-566) and the eleven watersheds authorized under the Flood Control Act of 1944 (PL 78-534). Over 2,000 plans covering 160 million acres in watersheds in every State, Puerto Rico, and Pacific Basin have been completed or are underway.

Land treatment measures have been applied to more than 30 million acres under the watershed program. More than 15,000 individual measures have been installed and have resulted in substantial contributions to environmental improvement, economic development, and social well-being. Many people and communities have come to depend on the infrastructure established by this program.

Authorized purposes for NRCS-assisted watershed projects are wide-ranging—watershed protection, flood prevention, agricultural water management, water based recreation, fish and wildlife habitat improvement, ground water recharge, water quality management, and municipal and industrial water supply. However, program objectives have changed over time in response to legislative direction, environmental concerns, and changing social values. The objectives of many of the original projects were to reduce flooding, improve drainage, and increase irrigation efficiencies. In the 1960's, high priorities were placed on projects that provided jobs to combat poverty and encourage rural development; many of these projects involved establishing recreation areas. In recent years projects have focused on land treatment measures to solve natural resource problems, such as substandard water quality and loss of wildlife habitat.

NRCS will utilize its watershed program to assist in watershed-based natural resource planning as requested by sponsors. The lessons learned through the implementation of PL 78-534 and PL 83-566 – the ability to work with private landowners and communities to plan and install conservation measures on a watershed scale – forms the foundation upon which locally-led conservation is built and supported by NRCS. The “watershed” is the unit of landscape and framework around which to think together about the land and its role in peoples’ lives. It provides the perspective of how people and natural systems inter-relate to affect the landscape as a whole and provide a basis for program accountability. In addition to expanding its planning assistance, NRCS will improve its ongoing watershed program to ensure consistency with current policies. The Agency will continue to modernize the program consistent with current environmental, social, and economic demands.

As NRCS expands and strengthens its national watershed program, the Agency will be guided by the following principles in assisting local communities to plan and implement their watershed projects:

- support locally led comprehensive, science-based planning and implementation
- emphasize and encourage broad base local leadership
- coordinate with State priorities and programs
- work to improve environmental quality and local economies
- build on the successes of the NRCS watershed program
- assist local people to focus on the prevention of problems to achieve natural resource sustainability
- complement the 1996 Farm Bill initiatives
- expand and strengthen partnerships including those with the private sector
- maximize the effectiveness of the watershed program by leveraging with other funds
- use performance indicators that capture social, environmental, and economic benefits of watershed health

1996 Farm Bill Program Changes

The conservation provisions of the 1996 farm bill simplify existing conservation programs and improve their flexibility and efficiency. The bill also creates new programs to address high priority environmental protection goals.

The farm bill authorizes more than \$2.2 billion in additional funding for conservation programs, extends the Conservation Reserve Program and Wetland Reserve Program, and creates new initiatives to improve natural resources on America’s private lands.

To qualify for market transition payments under basic commodity programs which replace traditional farm subsidies, farm operators must agree to abide by Conservation Compliance and Wetlands Conservation (Swampbuster) provisions in the 1996 farm bill.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): The CRP protects highly erodible and environmentally sensitive lands with grass, trees, and other long-term cover. This is a voluntary program that offers annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish approved cover on eligible cropland. The program encourages farmers to plant permanent areas of grass and trees on land that is subject to erosion, to improve soil, water and wildlife resources. Assistance is made available in an amount equal to not more than 50 percent of the participant’s costs in establishing approved practices. Contracts are between 10 and 15 years. The farm bill:

- Allows up to 36.4 million acres to be enrolled at any one time. New enrollments can replace expired or terminated contracts.

- Allows owners or operators who entered into a contract before 1995 to terminate contracts on certain acres after giving written notice. Contracts must have been in effect for at least five years. Lands with high environmental values are not eligible for early release.
- Gives the Secretary discretionary authority to offer future early outs for CRP acres.

CRP is administered by the Farm Service Agency in cooperation with the NRCS, Cooperative State Research and Education Extension Service, State forestry agencies, and local soil and water conservation districts. Under the proposed rule for the CRP, the program administrators will focus on enrolling land that will yield the highest environmental benefits when taken out of production. Less erodible land, better suited for planting crops, will be allowed to return to production as contracts expire.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): EQIP was established in the 1996 farm bill to provide a single, voluntary conservation program for farmers and ranchers to address significant natural resource needs and objectives. Nationally, it provides technical, financial, and educational assistance, half of it targeted to livestock-related natural resource problems and the other half to more general conservation priorities.

Four of USDA's conservation programs are combined in EQIP: the Agricultural Conservation Program, Water Quality Incentives Program, Great Plains Conservation Program, and the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program.

NRCS has leadership for EQIP and it works with USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) to set the program's policies, priorities, and guidelines. To advise NRCS, local conservation districts will convene local work groups, comprised of the districts, NRCS, FSA, FSA county committees, Cooperative Extension Service, tribes, and others interested in natural resource conservation. These work groups will perform a conservation needs assessment and, based on that assessment, make recommendations for priority areas and program ranking criteria to NRCS. The NRCS State Conservationist, in turn, will set priorities, with the advice of the State Technical Committee, to be integrated into regional and national strategic plans. These strategic plans become the basis for funding allocations.

EQIP works in priority areas where there are serious and critical environmental needs and concerns. High priority is given to areas where State or local governments offer financial or technical assistance and where agricultural improvements will help meet water quality and other environmental objectives. All EQIP activities must be carried out according to a conservation plan.

EQIP offers 5- to 10-year contracts that provide incentive payments and cost sharing for conservation practices needed at the site. Cost sharing may pay up to 75 percent of the costs of certain conservation practices, such as grassed waterways, filter strips, manure management facilities, capping abandoned wells, and other practices important to improving and maintaining the health of natural resources in the area. Incentive payments may be made to encourage a producer to perform land management practices such as nutrient management, manure management, integrated pest management, irrigation water management, and wildlife habitat management. Incentive payments can be up to 100 percent of the producer's cost, for up to 3 years. These are paid at a flat rate.

Eligibility is limited to persons who are engaged in livestock or agricultural production. Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pasture, forestland, and other farm or ranch lands in identified priority areas. Owners of large confined livestock operations are not eligible for cost-share assistance for animal waste management storage or treatment facilities, although technical and financial assistance for other conservation practices on the farm or ranch may be provided. Total cost-share and incentive payments are limited to \$10,000 per person per year and \$50,000 for the length of a contract.

Wetlands Reserve Program: Congress authorized the WRP under the Food Security Act of 1985 and it has been modified by the 1990 and 1996 farm bills. NRCS administers the program in consultation with the Farm Service Agency and other Federal agencies. Funding for WRP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation.

Landowners who choose to participate in WRP may sell a conservation easement or enter into a cost-share restoration agreement with USDA to restore and protect wetlands. The landowner voluntarily limits future use of the land, yet retains private ownership. The landowner and NRCS develop a plan for the restoration and maintenance of the wetland. The program offers landowners three options: permanent easements, 30-year easements, and restoration cost-share agreements of a minimum 10-year duration.

Permanent easements are conservation easements in perpetuity. Payment will be the lesser of: the agriculture value of the land, an established payment cap, or an amount offered by the landowner. USDA pays 100 percent of the costs of restoring the wetland. Payments for 30-year easements--conservation easements lasting 30 years--are 75 percent of what would be paid for a permanent easement. USDA also pays 75 percent of restoration costs.

Restoration cost-share agreements are generally for a minimum of 10 years and are to re-establish degraded or lost wetland habitat. USDA pays 75 percent of the cost of the restoration activity and does not place an easement on the property. The landowner provides the restoration site without reimbursement.

To offer a conservation easement, the landowner must have owned the land for at least 1 year prior to enrolling the land in the program unless the land was inherited or the landowner can prove the land was not obtained for the purpose of enrolling it in the program. To participate in a restoration cost-share agreement, the landowner must show evidence of ownership.

The 1996 farm bill enacted several changes in the administration of the WRP. It authorizes the enrollment of land into the program until 2002, establishes a program cap at 975,000 acres, and provides that eligible land must maximize wildlife benefits and wetland functions and values. The 1996 Act also requires that, to the extent practicable, beginning October 1, 1996, one-third of the remaining program acres be enrolled through the use of permanent easements, one-third through the use of 30-year easements, and one-third through the use of restoration cost-share agreements. Further, after October 1, 1996, no new permanent easement can be enrolled until at least 75,000 acres of non-permanent easement are enrolled in the program.

In recognition that the NRCS must enroll lands that maximize wildlife benefits and other wetland functions and values, achieve cost-efficient restoration, and provide the three identified enrollment approaches, the NRCS will emphasize enrolling lands that have the least likelihood of being reconverted. The benefits of the program in terms of wetland functions and values include:

- providing fish and wildlife habitat;
- improving water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals;
- reducing flooding;
- recharging groundwater;
- protecting biological diversity; and
- furnishing educational, scientific, recreational, and esthetic benefits.

A landowner continues to control access to the land in WRP and may lease the land for hunting, fishing, and other undeveloped recreational activities. At any time, a landowner may request that additional activities be evaluated to determine if they are compatible uses for the site. This request may include such items as permission to cut hay, graze livestock or harvest wood products. Compatible uses are allowed if they are fully consistent with the protection and enhancement of the wetland.

Other Program Changes: The 1996 farm bill also established the **Farmland Protection Program** that will provide up to \$35 million to help farmers preserve their land in agriculture. The program provides assistance to states with existing farmland protection programs to purchase conservation easements.

Current **Swampbuster and wetlands provisions** from the 1985 and 1990 farm bills were modified to provide farmers with more flexibility to meet wetland conservation compliance requirements. Changes include expanding areas where mitigation can be used, allowing mitigation by restoration, enhancement or creation, and changing the abandonment clause. For example, the farm bill provided for:

- expansion of areas where mitigation can be used. This allows individuals to work with producers, conservation districts or other relevant entities to select the best area for mitigating wetlands.
- providing more options for mitigation, including restoration, enhancement, or creation as long as wetland functions and values are maintained.
- encouraging effective and timely use of “minimal effect” determinations. This change allows the NRCS, working with state technical committees, to identify practices that have a minimal effect on the environment and put them on a “fast track.”
- stipulating that wetland conversion activities, authorized by a permit issued under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, which make agriculture production possible, will be accepted for farm bill purposes if they were adequately mitigated.

The new **Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program** is a voluntary program for people who want to develop and improve fish and wildlife habitat on private lands. It provides both technical assistance and cost sharing to help establish and improve the habitat. WHIP is currently budgeted for \$50 million to the year 2002.

Participants who own or control land agree to prepare and implement a wildlife habitat development plan in consultation with the local conservation district. The plan describes the landowners goals for improving wildlife habitat, includes a list of practices and schedule for installing them, and details the steps necessary to maintain the habitat for the life of the agreement. The USDA provides technical and financial assistance for the initial establishment of wildlife habitat development practices. If the landowner agrees, State wildlife agencies or private organizations may also provide expertise or additional funding to help complete a project.

Conservation Compliance was changed to direct USDA employees who are providing on-site technical assistance to notify landowners if they observe potential compliance problems. Landowners will have up to one year to take corrective action. County Committees are authorized to provide relief in cases of economic hardship.

A **Flood Risk Reduction Program** was established that allows farmers who voluntarily enter into contracts to receive payments on lands with high flood potential. In return, participants agree to forego certain USDA program benefits. These contract payments provide incentives to move farming operations from frequently flooded land.

The **Emergency Watershed Protection Program** was amended to allow the purchase of floodplain easements.

The new **Conservation of Private Grazing Land** initiative offers landowners technical, educational and related assistance on the Nation’s 642 million acres of private grazing lands.

Membership in the State Technical Committees, the groups which provides guidance on technical standards for conservation programs, was broadened to include agricultural producers and others knowledgeable about conservation.

Finally, under the **Wetlands Memorandum of Agreement**, the definition of agricultural land was expanded to include not only cropland and pastureland, but also rangeland, native pastureland, other land used to support livestock production and tree farms.

Other Programs and Initiatives

There are a number of other programs and initiatives in NRCS that affect water resources in the West and particularly aquatic ecosystem resources. Some of these have been changed under the 1996 farm bill, some are fairly new initiatives, and others have been under way for several years.

Salmon Habitat Recovery: This is a special initiative within NRCS to balance the needs of both the developed and natural worlds within the Northwest and northern California. The goal is a healthy basin that supports both humans and fish and wildlife. Rather than a piecemeal species by species approach, the conservation partnerships of local, Federal, American Indian Tribes, and State entities are working towards a cooperative multi-species, watershed approach that will improve the salmon habitat and benefit other species as well.

For the Columbia River, the Northwest Power Planning Council has adopted a fish and wildlife plan that assigns the conservation districts of Idaho, Oregon, and Washington the task of working with the landowners to improve salmon and steelhead habitat in certain watersheds. These original model watersheds are tributaries to the Snake River. They are the Lemhi River in Idaho, the Grand Rhonde River in Oregon and Asotin Creek/Tucannon River Basins in Washington. In these states, other tributaries to the Snake and Columbia are attempting similar basin-wide and watershed specific planning processes.

In California and Oregon, coastal salmon initiatives are being organized to develop restoration plans which will address the dwindling runs of coho salmon, steelhead, sea-run cutthroat and many chinook runs. Currently, in these states, habitat improvement projects are being done for the benefit of the coastal runs of coho salmon. In California, major emphasis is being placed on watershed planning and implementation work as well as other specific measures within the Sacramento Valley to protect and restore habitat for the federally listed winter run chinook salmon and rapidly dwindling stocks of spring run chinook.

In all of these efforts, Federal, State, and local governments have become partners with private and public landowners and Indian Tribes. The utilization of conservation districts and their partners has proven to be the most effective method to successfully involve all important stakeholders in a mutually acceptable way.

Currently, the planning process in several of these watersheds has been completed and implementation is beginning. Private landowners through local conservation districts and government agencies have made commitments to each other based on availability of technical assistance and cost-share funds.

Snow Surveys and Water Supply Forecasting: This program acquires snow and other climatological information for assessing mountain snowpacks and to forecast the resultant annual seasonally variable streamflows. The automatic portion of this system is known as SNOTEL. The system supports emergency data needs such as to help minimize damages from extraordinary flooding.

The water supply forecasting program provides on-line historical official climate data from 25,000 National Weather Service climate stations with value added to remove known errors. This is a digital data base of average, monthly, seasonal, and annual precipitation at a 2 kilometer resolution. Similar analyses of average air temperature, snowpack and snow water equivalent will be available within the next year.

Rural Abandoned Mine Program (RAMP): NRCS provides technical and financial assistance through 5-10 year contracts with land users. The objective of RAMP is to work with local communities to improve the quality of the environment through the restoration of abandoned mines. To date, NRCS has signed a

total of 1,472 contracts for the reclamation of 18,240 acres, obligating \$132 million. Funds for the operation of RAMP are transferred to NRCS by the U.S. Department of the Interior from funds appropriated from the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Trust Fund. No RAMP funds were appropriated in fiscal years 1996 from the trust fund.

Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Implementation: USDA had separate authority for developing and implementing a voluntary and cooperative on-farm salinity control program. The program purpose was to reduce salt loading in order to enhance and protect the quality of water available in the Colorado River for use in the United States and Mexico. The emphasis was on irrigation water management. NRCS assistance included planning, application, and maintenance of wildlife habitat practices. The program authority and functions of the program are now carried out under EQIP. Current contracts will be completed and maintained but any new initiatives will be within the new EQIP procedures.

Water Quality: The USDA Water Quality Initiative (WQI) was implemented in 1990. NRCS, the Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service (CSREES), and Farm Service Agency (FSA) support the WQI through education, technical assistance, and financial assistance. NRCS provides technical assistance for nonpoint source hydrologic unit areas (HUA), water quality demonstration projects, and regional project initiatives. Cost-sharing for installation of practices was available for the first 5 years of the WQI. NRCS has continued to provide technical assistance for practices that producers apply at their own expense.

HUA projects focus on remediation of documented water quality problems in areas where impairment of surface or ground water quality by agricultural nonpoint sources is significant. The projects are coordinated with state management programs developed under Section 319 of the Water Quality Act of 1987. NRCS, FSA and CSREES in cooperation with state water quality agencies, local units of government, and private interest groups develop detailed plans of work. A total of 74 areas were originally selected in 1990 and 1991 for implementation. Eleven projects have met their objectives and completed their work. Activities in sixty-three projects will continue, with about half that number concluding their work by the end of 1998 and the rest expected to be closing out by the end of 1999.

NRCS water quality specialists and other field office staff deliver planning and application assistance to farm and ranch operators. NRCS delivers new water quality technology and information to cooperators as it becomes available. Examples of such new technology include using polymers to control irrigation induced erosion and utilizing composters for disposal of dead poultry and swine. EQIP has been phased in as the vehicle for meeting ongoing financial assistance needs of these landusers.

The Water Quality Demonstration Projects represent geographic areas with specific combinations of agricultural activities and water resource conditions that impact water quality. Treatment practices are developed to remedy water quality problems, and through the farm demonstration process, these practices are expanded to other areas with similar agricultural and water quality conditions. NRCS, in cooperation with CSREES, ARS, and FSA developed comprehensive plans of work for the projects. Sixteen projects were implemented, comprising 17.9 million acres. The areas range from 5,950 acres to 2 million acres. Two projects have completed their work and the remaining fourteen are expected to wrap-up their activities in 1998 and 1999. FSA provided the initial cost-share assistance to operators in these project areas and EQIP is now being phased in to meet ongoing financial assistance needs.

Regional Project Initiatives include the Chesapeake Bay, Puget Sound, Long Island Sound, Gulf of Mexico, Great Lakes, Lake Champlain, the Coastal Zone Management Program, and the National Estuaries Program. USDA assists in these projects in reducing agricultural nonpoint source pollution through ongoing programs that provide education, technical assistance, and financial assistance to individual farmers, ranchers, and communities. A coordinated approach to monitoring and evaluation has been undertaken to determine the level of success of ongoing programs and to improve future efforts.

NRCS participates with state and local water quality agencies, other Federal agencies, and international representatives in developing overall plans of action to meet the nonpoint source water quality goals in the project areas and provides technical standards and specifications for state cost-share programs. NRCS also provides technical supervision and training for technicians employed by conservation districts and encourages landusers in critical areas to participate in nonpoint source implementation, nutrient reduction, and erosion control.

Urban and Community Assistance Program: The agency's commitment to urban and community assistance has increased from ten urban pilot offices established in 1993 to approximately 30 field offices dedicated to working in major metropolitan areas across the country. These offices are charged with integrating the conservation techniques learned from the agency's agricultural experiences into the urban environment. The success stories include protecting and enhancing urban ecosystems, deterring future degradation, and reclaiming portions of the degraded environment. Each urban field office creates a flexible conservation program that addresses the unique requirements and requests of their local partners and customers.

Urban Resources Partnership: Eight cities currently participate in this Partnership to make government more effective and responsive to the environmental needs of urban communities. Each city receives partial funding by a USDA grant of \$500,000 to accomplish its goals by making more efficient use of our limited federal resources, both financial and technical, through an integrated cooperative effort.

Each city has established a steering committee consisting of Federal partners, local and State agencies, local businesses, foundations, and non-profit organizations. The steering committees establish the local partnership's mission, investigate the community's natural resources needs, and establishes a grant application process. The steering committees assemble technical assistance teams, drawn from government agencies, and local partners that work on-site with community members and their projects.

Communities match each dollar of Federal funding with labor, in-kind donations, and funding from local sources. The Urban Resources Partnership helps recipients to meet this matching requirement by facilitating introductions to community groups, not-for-profit organizations, foundations, and local government agencies.

Resource Conservation and Development: The RC&D program encourages and improve the capability of State and local units of government and local nonprofit organizations in rural areas to plan, develop, and carry out programs for resource conservation and development. The program also establishes or improves coordination systems in rural communities to effectively utilize Federal, State, and local programs for the communities benefit. Program administration is provided by the NRCS. Additional USDA agencies participate in development of program policy and guidance and provide technical, financial, and loan assistance to local sponsors.

Presently, there are 289 RC&D areas serving 2,092 counties in all 50 states, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Basin. An RC&D area is a multi-county area locally defined, sponsored, and directed to carry out a program that encourages land conservation and utilization, accelerated economic development and improvement of social conditions, where needed, to foster a sound local economy. Each RC&D establishes an area plan which provides direction to a council. The council consists of 14 or more sponsors that include county governments, soil and water conservation districts, and may include cities, substate districts, tribal governments, and other organizations in the area. The goal is an empowered, self-sufficient council that has the capacity to build affective public/private partnerships, resulting in strong rural communities.

The RC&D councils hold community meetings to identify concerns, needs, and problems within the area.

The Council's resource committees, with assistance from agencies, collect information about identified problems, develop alternatives, and recommend solutions to achieve goals and objectives of the council. Councils implement projects and conduct activities that achieve the goals of their area plan. Each council

as a review and approval process that assures that projects undertaken meet their communities' needs. The implementation of a project may include one step or a full range of steps, such as problem identification, development of alternatives, plan development, funding, and coordination of the implementation process.

RC&D program funds provide an RC&D coordinator to the Council. The coordinator is a motivator for the local people to build and implement their individualized program. Coordinators work closely with councils to plan, develop, and carry through their goals and expectations. The coordinator acts as a team coach, grantsperson, and administrator to assist the council in its activities.

**NRCS Fiscal Years 1996 and 1997 Appropriations
(thousands of dollars)**

	<u>1996</u>	<u>1997</u>
Conservation Operations:		
1. Technical Assistance	\$538,631	\$528,673
2. Soil Surveys	76,735	76,409
3. Snow Surveys and Water Forecasting	5,852	5,835
4. Operations of Plant Material Centers	<u>8,875</u>	<u>8,825</u>
Total, Conservation Operations	630,093	619,742
Wetlands Reserve Program	77,000	0 (a)
Watershed Surveys and Planning:	14,000	12,381
Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations:		
1. Flood Prevention (P.L. - 534)	15,000	0
2. Emergency Watershed Operations	0 (b)	0 (b)
3. Watershed Operations	<u>85,000</u>	<u>101,036</u>
Total, Watershed and Flood Prevention	100,000	101,036 (c)
Colorado River Basin Salinity Control	2,681	0
Forestry Incentives Program	6,325	6,325
Resource Conservation and Development	<u>29,000</u>	<u>29,377</u>
TOTAL, NRCS Appropriation	859,099	768,861
Water Bank Program	0	0
Great Plains Conservation Program	0 (d)	0
Rural Abandoned Mine Program	0 (e)	0
Wetlands Reserve Program	0	67,877
Wildlife Habitat and Improvement Program	0	N/A (f)
Environmental Quality Incentives Program	0	200,000
Conservation Farm Option	0	2,000
Farmland Protection Program	0	2,000
Trust Funds	<u>447</u>	<u>403</u>
TOTAL, NRCS Direct Funding	\$859,546	\$1,041,141

- (a) The 1996 Act capped the WRP at 130,000 acres for federal dollars (Commodity Credit Corporation funds), but allows more acres with non-federal funds.
- (b) The Emergency Watershed Program receives funds by supplemental appropriations as disasters occur.
- (c) Provides that up to \$15 million may be available for flood prevention projects (P.L. - 534).
- (d) The Great Plains Conservation Program received no direct appropriation in fiscal year 1996. However, the passage of the 1996 Act provided an interim EQIP allocation of \$18.63 million for cost sharing of long-term contracts.
- (e) No funds were appropriated in FY 1996 for the Rural Abandoned Mine Program from the abandoned mine reclamation trust fund.
- (f) Removed cap set in House for WHIP (\$50 million over 6 years).

**NRCS FY 1996 Obligations
for the 19 Western States and the Pacific Basin
(thousands of dollars)**

Conservation Operations:	
1. Technical Assistance	\$195,977
2. Soil Surveys	25,347
3. Snow Surveys and Water Forecasting	3,178
4. Operations of Plant Material Centers	<u>3,941</u>
Total, Conservation Operations	228,443
Wetlands Reserve Program	38,794
Watershed Surveys and Planning:	5,084
Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations:	
1. Watershed Operations (P.L. - 534)	4,445
2. Emergency Watershed Protection	38,964
3. Small Watersheds	<u>31,700</u>
Total, Watershed and Flood Prevention	75,109
Colorado River Basin Salinity Control	3,506
Forestry Incentives Program	1,313
Resource Conservation and Development	<u>1,031</u>
TOTAL, From NRCS Appropriations	362,180
Water Bank Program	822
Great Plains Conservation Program	1,006
Rural Abandoned Mine Program	<u>4,087</u>
TOTAL, From NRCS Direct Funding	\$368,095