

Conservation Districts of Iowa  
Testimony  
2012 Farm Bill Hearing  
Committee on Agriculture  
US House of Representatives  
Des Moines, Iowa  
April 30, 2010

My name is Darrell Weems. I am here today as interim executive director of CDI and as a lifelong farmer and agriculturist. Conservation Districts of Iowa—CDI—is a non-profit 501 (c)(3) organization focused on the conservation of soil, water, and other natural resources.

CDI was founded in 1947 to provide a unified voice for the individual county-based soil and water conservation districts. Since that time, CDI has been working with the 100 soil and water conservation districts in Iowa and their 500 elected soil and water commissioners and staff to promote sustainable agricultural practices for the protection of soil and water resources. Today, work is also being done in urban settings, promoting conservation practices for homeowners, developers, and communities.

While each soil and water conservation district maintains its own programs, CDI helps districts combine efforts to address regional, state, and national issues. CDI teams with public and private partner organizations, such as Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, State Soil Conservation Committee, Pheasants Forever, and others, to implement conservation practices on working lands.

CDI and the 100 Soil and Water Districts (SWCD) represent a key delivery mechanism for conservation practice. We are the middle organization between our partners and land owner/operators. Most conservation programming goes through the local SWCD office and its body of elected commissioners. We deliver conservation education and promotion. We allocate and deliver funds, local, state, and federal. We match people, process, and programs. CDI and SWCDs facilitate the placement of conservation practices on working lands.

To build on the significant conservation provisions of prior farm program legislation, especially those of 1985 and 2002, we would offer these comments in advance of the 2012 Farm Bill:

Technical Assistance

Technical assistance must be enhanced. Funding and training for technicians should be increased so that we are able to design and lay out more conservation practices and structures.

Farmers and/or their contractors own and operate large, sophisticated, technology-equipped machinery capable of placing conservation improvements on their land. Farmers, by nature, love to move dirt and build things. We should supply them with the technical guidance and planning necessary to do conservation work on their farms. In this time of tight funding, we believe there is considerable potential to put more conservation on working lands with less money.

#### Effects of Increasing Row Crop Intensity

Many factors, including but not limited to economic returns, technology, energy use, and food needs, have resulted in an increase in crop acres and a reduction in pasture/forage acres. Perhaps it is time to offer better farm program incentives for pasture/forage/small grain production than for row crop productivity. The farm bill should encourage protective seeding in sensitive areas.

#### Be Smart about Conservation and Water Quality

We must target funds and resources to the most sensitive areas first, where we can have the most impact and get the biggest “bang for our buck.” In many cases that will be with a total watershed approach. We must use and enhance programs that work, such as the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP, run by IDALS), prioritization of watersheds, EQIP, targeted CRP, working wetlands, and summer construction incentives. It is important to keep water quality improvement programs local and voluntary rather than mandated. Voluntary incentives work better than regulated directives.

#### Conservation Compliance Plans

All land in production, HEL and non-HEL, should be required to have a conservation plan to be eligible for USDA benefits. This would strongly encourage producers to create and follow that plan.

#### Successes

The nation’s farmers and private land owners have made significant progress in recent years in protecting the nation’s soil and water resources. From 1982 to 2007, soil erosion in the US has been reduced 43%, according to the USDA National Resources Inventory Report. The Iowa rural well water survey of 1988-1989 and 2006-2008 show lower detection of nitrates and herbicides in well water. A recent US Geological Service study reports declining levels of eleven herbicides and pesticides in Cornbelt waterways in 1996-2006. Several species of wildlife are thriving and repopulating in Iowa, and one DNR official reports the best fishing ever in Iowa. The use of conservation tillage and wetland reversion/construction is up. The use of better ag management practices and technology improvements like GPS systems and strategic placement have resulted in better use of fertilizer, nitrogen, and phosphorous.

But We Have More Work to Do

We still have too many nutrients and pesticides moving with the water and soil. We have too many producers and citizens who do not practice conservation methods and best management practices. In some cases, conservation gains are moderating. We are ill-equipped to deal with the biggest rain events. And funds are always short and we always have people who want to do more but are limited by resource availability. Sometimes other events and priorities rob us of conservation focus. We must guard against that. All groups, government and private, must rededicate themselves to working together and coordinating their conservation efforts.

And we must remember, "We didn't inherit this earth from our parents, we borrow it from our children." We must always strive to polish and adopt the conservation ethic. Our future depends on it.

On behalf of the Conservation Districts of Iowa and the 100 Iowa County Soil and Water Conservation Districts, thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Darrell Weems, Interim Executive Director  
Conservation Districts of Iowa  
Box 367  
Earlham, Iowa 50072  
Phone: 515.758.3880  
Cell: 515.229.6117