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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION, MARKETING,
AND STABILIZATION OF PRICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, it is a privilege to appear before you to discuss the operations of the Soil Conservation Service as related to the Rural Environmental Assistance Program and the Rural Environmental Conservation Program.

Whereas the Soil Conservation Service administers a number of conservation programs including Watershed Planning, Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations, River Basin Survey and Investigation, Great Plains Conservation Program, and the Resource Conservation and Development Program the one most closely associated with the REAP and RECP cost-sharing programs of the Department is Conservation Operations.

Through Conservation Operations, the Service provides technical assistance to land owners and operators in carrying out locally adapted soil and water conservation programs primarily through conservation districts. There are about 3,000 conservation districts, all of which are locally controlled and function as legal entities of state government. Districts cover about 97 percent of the Nation's farm and ranch land. Service technicians provide onsite technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, and other land users to help them develop and apply conservation plans for their individual units of land.

Activities in the Conservation Operations Program include:

1. Soil Survey

Soil Surveys provide the basic soil resource information on which sound land use and treatment decisions can be made. This information is used by farmers, ranchers, other federal agencies and state and local units of government.

As of June 30, 1973, detailed, reconnaissance, and exploratory soil survey mapping had been completed on 1.2 billion acres of the 2.3 billion acres of land in the United States and the Caribbean Area for which such surveys are needed. About 46,000,000 acres were mapped during fiscal year 1973. The major part of this work is financed through the Conservation Operations Program with some inputs from other phases of the SCS program and from cooperating federal, state and local agencies and state agricultural experiment stations.

2. Technical Assistance

Technical assistance is provided conservation district cooperators and other land users to develop conservation plans which provide for the needed soil and water conservation practices on the land. Technical assistance is also provided for the application of conservation practices as called for in the conservation plan. Conservation plans when applied provide the erosion control and water conservation necessary to maintain our food producing capability that is so vital to the Nation. During fiscal year 1973, technical assistance provided by the Conservation Operations Program was used to assist about 94,000 district cooperators to develop or revise conservation plans for their lands and to assist about 600,000 district cooperators to install one or more conservation practices.

3. Plant Materials

At 20 strategically located plant materials centers across the nation, plants are assembled, tested and evaluated for the use in solving critical soil and water conservation problems. Each center serves a major land resource area.

4. Snow Survey

Snow surveys are made to measure snow packs in the high mountain regions of the west as a basis for developing water supply forecasts. The forecasts are most helpful to water management groups that have responsibility for distribution and use of water resources. They are highly important to farm or ranch operators in developing cropping plans consistent with forecast water supplies. The depth and water content of snow and other related data are systematically collected from 1600 high mountain snow courses on a regular basis. In addition to snow data, soil moisture data are collected at 200 locations and precipitation at 300 locations.

5. Technical Services

Technical services are currently being provided to participants in both the 1973 Rural Environmental Assistance Program and the 1974 Rural Environmental Conservation Program. This assistance includes the servicing of referrals for conservation practices included in these programs. It involves the determination of need and practicability, site selection and layout, supervision of installation and certification of practice performance. In addition, in the 1974 Rural Environmental Conservation Program the Service provides technical planning assistance to program participants to help them develop conservation plans which serve as a basis for long-term agreements between the landowner and the Department through the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service.

The technical assistance provided by the Soil Conservation Service to the Agricultural Conservation Program is primarily through conservation operations. Reimbursement agreements are negotiated at the county level. Under these agreements up to 5% of the funds appropriated for ACP may be transferred to the Soil Conservation Service. Originally, the Service absorbed about 30% of the cost of servicing ACP referrals due to anticipated benefits to ongoing conservation work. Over the years this absorption rate has increased to over 50%. Technical assistance is provided to Emergency Conservation Measures under reimbursement agreements. Up to 10% of these funds may be transferred to the SCS under reimbursement agreements negotiated at the county level.

In FY 1972, the last year of a full REAP (ACP) the Soil Conservation Service employed 666 man-years of technical assistance through the funds provided through reimbursement agreements.

FY 1973 Rural Environmental Assistance Program (REAP)

The 1973 REAP was terminated on December 22, 1972. The FY 1974 budget contained REAP reimbursement of \$1.3 million to liquidate technical assistance commitments incurred in the 1972 and 1973 programs. This would finance 142 man-years. The 1973 REAP was reinstated in March 1974.

FY 1974 Rural Environmental Conservation Program (RECP)

The maximum reimbursement for technical assistance for the \$90 million program being carried out in 1974 is \$4.5 million. This would provide about 345 man-years of employment.

The reinstatement of the REAP includes cost-sharing for pollution control practices. These measures are more complex to plan and design, and more costly to install. Frequently, they are beyond the capabilities of the local field office personnel and require services of area and state office personnel. State laws imposing review and permit requirements add to the workload. The cost-sharing funds used for these practices have been increasing each year. To the extent the increase continues, SCS is required to absorb most of these additional costs.

The reinstated 1973 REAP of \$210.5 million would normally provide reimbursement of about \$9.9 million which would fund about 764 man-years of technical assistance. About 30% of the program is expected to be carried out in FY 1974. Therefore, a significant part of this program will add to the workload in 1975.

We are pleased to report that the 1974 and 1975 employment ceilings for the Soil Conservation Service were recently increased by 200 permanent full-time and 370 other types of employment. The increase is based in part on the added workload connected with the 1973 and 1974 cost-sharing programs.

1975 Rural Environmental Program (REP)

The 1975 budget proposed a Rural Environmental Program. Technical assistance for this program was proposed to be funded through an increase of \$11.2 million for Conservation Operations. Part of the employment previously related to the cost-share programs merged to form REP was reprogrammed to Conservation Operations, a total of 411 man-years.