

**Testimony of  
Jimmy Emmons  
Dewey County Conservation District  
Taloga, Oklahoma**

**Presented to the  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY**

**of the  
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE  
UNITES STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

**MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:**

Good Morning, My name is Jimmy Emmons, I want to thank the Committee, Chairman Lucas and Ranking Member Fudge for the opportunity to speak to you today. It is an honor and an opportunity I do not take lightly.

I am a Farmer and Rancher from Dewey County in Western Oklahoma where my wife Ginger and I farm 2,000 acres of cropland and run cattle on 7,000 acres of rangeland. The Emmons home place has been in our family since 1926. I'm speaking to you this morning because I serve on the Dewey County Conservation District board. We are local sponsors of two USDA Watershed Program Projects (Barnitz Creek and Quartermaster Creek Watersheds) and the 22 project dams and the multiple land treatment practices associated with these watershed projects. I live and farm in and around these projects. There are more than 600 of these flood protection dams within a 75 mile radius of my farm. I am also deeply involved and committed to soil and water conservation issues at the local, state and national levels. I am heavily involved in the current Soil Health effort from the fields and pastures on our farm to the national public and private soil health efforts across the nation. I am passionate about stewardship and conservation as it relates to our soil and water resources. I also currently serve as President of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts.

**Watershed Rehabilitation Program**

Watershed Dam Rehabilitation is a critical component of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program. NRCS and its local sponsors are responsible for over 11,800 flood control structures nationwide. This flood control and conservation related

infrastructure affects 2,000 watersheds and they represent nearly one third of all dams ever built by the federal government. Every year this system protects over 47 million Americans and saves an estimated \$2 billion through flood damage prevention.

Many dams today are in a far different setting than when they were constructed. Population has increased; residential and commercial development has occurred upstream and downstream from the dams; land uses have changed; sediment pools have filled; and concrete and metal components have deteriorated. Many of these dams do not meet current State dam safety regulations that have been enacted and revised with more stringent requirements than when the dams were built. In addition, many of these structures built by NRCS had a design life of only 50 years. Since most of this construction occurred from the 1940's to the early 1970's, many of these dams are now past their design life and are in need of rehabilitation.

Congressman Lucas was instrumental in Congress authorizing this rehabilitation program that shares in the cost of rehabilitation with state and local sponsors. Rehabilitation is necessary to ensure dams continue to provide protection to lives, businesses and homes. Failure to provide rehabilitation of these dams could result in dam breaches which would have catastrophic consequences. The flooding crisis and potential failure of the Oroville Dam in California illustrates the need for infrastructure operation, maintenance and repair of dams. While Oroville Dam is not an NRCS dam its does show what happens when dams are not repaired. Under the Dam Rehabilitation Program, dams are selected for rehabilitation through a competitive grant process and federal are funds are limited to 65% of a project's cost. This commitment from state and local partners is necessary to ensure that sponsors are fully committed to a project.

Congress recognized the importance of the rehabilitation program in the Agricultural Act of 2014 by providing \$250 million for the rehabilitation of upstream flood control dams. That money funds projects that will protect lives and property as well as reducing damages from flooding. Projects across the Nation have provided damage reduction and natural resource conservation benefits valued well beyond the initial investment in this program.

### **The Present**

As the significantly invested local sponsors of watershed projects, state and local sponsors have felt that we have suffered from an inadequately funded federal partner for much of the past decade. As part of NRCS's recent report to Congress, the agency evaluated specific watershed protection and flood prevention project needs and associated costs. This included a review of the existing authorized but unfunded projects, existing projects needing remediation, and potential new projects. Through this process, 220 projects were identified addressing a variety of purposes from flood prevention and watershed protection to agricultural water management and municipal and industrial water supply.

The cost of these projects was estimated at nearly \$1.4 billion from FY 2016 through FY 2020. With your leadership on this issue, great strides can be made to keep the program a strong and effective water resource management tool for both rural and urban communities.

### **The Future**

It would be easy for me to spend my time before you this morning talking about the rich history of the Watershed Program in my part of the world because Western Oklahoma and the Watershed Program go way back. I could recount the story my grandfather shared about a small drainage ditch across our farm that in 1933 became a gash in the landscape 40 feet wide and 25 feet deep literally overnight. That ditch turned out to be a warning sign. In the spring of 1934 a major flood followed a very similar path. Folks in the area still talk about the deadly Hammon Flood that killed 17 Oklahomans. That flood, that piece of our history, is just one of the reasons that Oklahoma is now covered with 2,107 Watershed Program Dams and countless conservation practices. The USDA Small Watershed Program changed the face of Western Oklahoma and when it did...it also changed our future.

When I became a grandfather it sure sharpened my thinking about the future. My four and a half year old grandson, a budding farmer and rancher in his own right, is my motivation to talk to you about the present and the future as it relates to the benefits the Watershed Program continues to bring to our Nation. The program represents an estimated 15 billion dollar investment in conservation infrastructure. As responsible citizens and local project sponsors it is essential that we are good stewards of this previous investment. This requires a robust federal, state and local partnership that brings administrative, technical and financial assistance to bear on matters relating to this infrastructure created by the Watershed Program. From routine operation, maintenance and repairs to full-fledged dam rehabilitation each of the partners has an important and specific role.

Chances are as you travel in my area whether on county roads, State Highways or Interstate 40 some portion of the road you travel receives flood protection from an upstream USDA Small Watershed Program Flood Control dam. The production inputs and the commodities they help produce in Western Oklahoma all come and go on these protected roads. The local economy that is driven in part by grain, cattle, oil and natural gas relies daily on this protection. The roads and bridges that carry our children to and from school are protected. In several cases the school itself along with other key elements of community are protected. Just as it is across much of the nation, the water that these flood control lakes collect is also essential to our economy and quality of life in Western Oklahoma.

Many of our most productive farms and our healthiest soils are located in these protected watersheds. There are many less obvious benefits that come in the form of the prosperity and opportunity made possible by these projects.

The partnership that brought us this protection is extremely important in keeping it in place. 2018 will be a milestone year for the Watershed Program when more than 50% of the 11,840 dams engineered and constructed by SCS/NRCS will have exceeded their original evaluated life.

Nine out of 10 Oklahomans live or work within 20 miles of a Watershed Program dam. These folks may be unaware of the Watershed Program, but if we let this investment in protection slip away it won't take long for them to be affected. I'm sure a similar statement could be made for our neighboring states. The Watershed Program and partnership needs Congressional attention if current and future Americans are to enjoy the same safety, protection, benefits, and productivity the Watershed Program has given us.

In the year 2000 Mr. Lucas led the development of rehabilitation legislation that ensured the Nation's investment in the watershed program had the opportunity to continue into the future. This legislation gave us the pathway and the procedure for reinvestment. In my opinion Congress has taken a step in the right direction by wisely investing through the 2014 Farm Bill and the 2017 Omnibus Budget bill. Local sponsors and state watershed program partners have responded with O&M dollars, rehabilitation matching funds, technical and financial assistance. I cannot over emphasize the importance of Congress and the USDA-NRCS as full partners in the watershed program.

Six of the 22 flood control dams in Dewey County are considered high hazard dams with the threat of loss of life if the dams were to fail. The Dewey County Conservation District with the assistance of NRCS has currently rehabilitated four of these dams. (Barnitz Creek Watershed Dams No. 1,5,11 and 14).

In closing, where I live there's something we call "Farm Sense". Farm sense is a good thing. Some folks have it, some don't. A day or two on the farm quickly reveals who has a good measure of farm sense. A person with farm sense wouldn't invest \$750,000 in a new tractor and tillage equipment and then refuse to grease the equipment every time it goes to the field, fail to change belts, hoses, filters and fluids regularly or leave it parked outside where the tires can dry rot in the sun and the mice and packrats can devour the wiring. Knowing they depend on that equipment and have lots of capital tied up in it they would take care of it and do everything they could to hold its value and protect the investment. A 15 billion dollar investment in conservation infrastructure is no different. Farm sense tells us its time for the partnership to reinvest.

As the Sub Committee moves toward the next Farm Bill and the 2018 budget bill comes into focus I encourage you to support and provide adequate funding for new watershed projects and for the rehabilitation of aging watershed dams. Thank you.