

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

I'm Kevin Burns from Decatur, Texas. First, thank you all for the opportunity to speak today. I've had the privilege of serving the citizens of Wise County almost 15 years as County Commissioner. I've been a teacher, a volunteer fireman, small business owner, and small rancher prior to running for local office.

I serve the state of Texas on the Board of Directors for the conference of urban counties. Wise County is not considered an urban county having only about 70,000 people in 900 square miles, but our growth rate and proximity to the Dallas/Ft. Worth Metroplex qualify us to join that group.

I'm a past chair of the National Watershed Coalition, which supports Watershed sponsors with training through regional conferences, hands on training, and resource materials.

I still raise cattle and hay crops in rural Wise County near Decatur, TX. I've never thought of myself as a conservationist, but I was taught to maintain land that I owned or leased and to be conscious that the practices we do on the land affects its productivity in the future. That stewardship of our nation's resources is one of the things I wish to talk to you about today.

While the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) may be better known for providing a financial safety net for farmers and ranchers, USDA also provides an actual safety net for our rural communities. The Watershed and Flood Prevention Program (Watershed Program) is a vital, but often overlooked, infrastructure program within the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) portfolio.

The Watershed Program authorizes NRCS to work with local units of government, like conservation districts and city/county governments, to install watershed protection and improvement projects that provide communities with flood prevention, agriculture water management, municipal water supply management, fish and wildlife habitat enhancement, as well as public recreation development.

More than 11,800 flood control structures have been constructed in 2,000 watersheds nationwide and they represent nearly one third of all dams ever built by the federal government. Every project requires that a portion of the watershed must be covered with installed best management conservation practices. Every year this system of flood control lakes and conservation measures protects over 47 million Americans and saves an estimated \$2 billion through flood damage reduction. The importance of these programs has increased as population centers have grown near these projects. The recently passed FY2017 Appropriations bill acknowledges the need for this important infrastructure program and appropriated \$150 million for Watershed Operations. These projects create and protect vital infrastructure while conserving natural resources and contributing to local economies. The Watershed Program focuses on both the design and construction of structural water control measures and on land treatment measures. Watershed planning provides a basis for partnering at State and local levels to identify and co-invest in projects reflecting the highest priority needs.

Flood prevention and reliable water quality created by the Watershed Program are essential to developing and maintaining strong rural communities. Watershed projects not only protect lives, property and reduce flood damages, but also create economic growth and strengthen local economies. Flood protection is essential to prevent the unnecessary loss of infrastructure and capital to developing economies in rural America.

Investing in the Watershed Program expands opportunities for natural resource conservation and provides important national economic and environmental dividends for all Americans. There are countless successful examples that verify the value the Watershed Program brings to rural areas in the form of water supply, recreation, flood protection, and sustainable economic development. Watershed Program projects are an economic engine that make participating communities more productive places to live, work and play.

¹In a recent report to Congress, NRCS estimates that this program, by avoiding and reducing flood damages, annually provides more than \$352 million in benefits to agriculture and more than \$462 million in benefits to non-agricultural uses, such as roads, bridges, and homes. Other benefits, such as erosion control, water conservation, water quality improvement and irrigation efficiency, exceed \$441 million on agricultural lands and over \$957 million in recreation, fish and wildlife, rural water supply, and municipal and industrial water supply, annually.

In total, as a result of installed watershed projects made possible through the investment from NRCS and local sponsors, the Watershed Program provides an estimated \$2.2 billion in average annual benefits across the Nation. Another way to view these benefits is by the number of people and communities who benefit directly from watershed projects. The existing projects are protecting over 610,000 homes, 46,000 businesses, 180,000 farms and ranches, 61,000 bridges, and 28,000 domestic water supplies. As a result, over 48 million people across the United States benefit from the Watershed Program every year. Watershed projects also build resilience and reduce the risk and costs associated with the impacts of extreme weather. It is a proven, cost-effective program with thousands of success stories.

The Watershed Program also plays an important role in protecting resources vital to the agricultural economy as well. Agricultural water management includes measures that help to manage water supply for agriculture and rural communities. Measures include drainage water management, ground water recharge, irrigation management, water conservation, water quality improvement, and rural water supply.

The Watershed Program is federally-assisted, but locally planned and implemented. Local project sponsors use local resources to maintain constructed project measures which contribute directly to a stronger national economy and a responsible national environmental future.

Wise County has 108 flood control structures built under authority of Public Law 566 established by the United States Congress in the mid 1950's. We have 85 dams that normally contain a small pool of water and a larger pool with a slow controlled release during flood conditions. We have 23 grade stabilization structures that merely retard or direct water flow.

These dams protect our county roadways which is a major portion of my responsibilities. My county has 990 miles of road. I am responsible for the maintenance of 340 miles in Precinct 2. Forty-six of those 108 dams are in my Precinct.

¹ Report to Congress, USDA-NRCS, Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program Multi-Year Plan

I was lucky enough to be visited by the late former Wise County Judge Charles Wilhite during my first campaign. Judge Wilhite stressed the importance of the PL-566 program and gave me a short local history lesson that I would like to share with you. There was a regional/multi state drought from 1950 to 1957 that brought considerable hardship to our region. Our local economy was mostly agriculture based. It was tough to make a living, so a large portion of population moved from the area to find jobs in the city. That drought was relieved almost overnight in a flood in 1957.

What little commerce going on in the county was further hindered due to that 24-inch rainfall over a weekend in 1957 that washed out 85 bridges in my county alone. Even though the population had dwindled and revenues were low, the commissioner's court, the Wise County Water Control and Improvement District, and the Wise County Soil and Water Conservation District started investing local match funds and participating in the PL-566 programs, with our first project completed in 1961.

I am fortunate to live in an area in which there continues to be cooperation between those and other entities to maintain our flood control dams.

The importance of those dams was exemplified in the flooding in our locale in the spring of 2015. We received more than our yearly average of rainfall in the month of May that year. We had a 14 inch rainfall in one afternoon in a small area of Precinct 2 and only had nine road washouts that made roads impassable. Please note the difference here; we had nine spots that were impassable opposed to the 85 bridges that were washed out prior to the dams being built. All of those washouts were in watersheds not yet protected by PL-566 projects. All roads were passable in Precinct 2 in the drainage protected by PL-566 dams

I've heard arguments against funding the PL-566 program that claim that it should be funded with local dollars. Local project sponsors do provide their share of the cost of projects in providing easements, right of ways, the cost of installing conservation practices, cost of working with landowners and more. But the benefits of these projects are not all local. These projects provide benefits many miles downstream often in other counties or even other states. These projects provide not just local benefits, but state and national benefits. Many of the lakes formed by flood control dams provide recreational areas, water supplies and hunting and fishing opportunities that are utilized by people from many miles away.

Another benefit of the watershed program is the enhancement of water quality in urban areas. We recently developed a relationship with the Tarrant Regional Water District to help us maintain our dams and install conservation practices. The water district serves an area downstream from the watershed projects in Wise County that includes the majority of the population in Congressional District 12 and a small portion in District 13.

Watershed projects and conservation practices in Wise County help protect both water quantity and quality in two major lakes downstream managed by the water district. These lakes provide water supplies for the City of Fort Worth and other areas of Tarrant County.

My passion for the program was cultivated when first taking office by former Commissioner's Court members and conservation district members that lived through the floods in 1957, but now it is reinforced by the demonstrated benefits during my term in office. There are opportunities to provide benefits to many more citizens in this country through the PL566 program.

As Members of Congress you are key partners in extending the benefits of the Watershed Program. Your support for the program is vital. Thank you.