

Natural Resources Conservation Service Watershed Listening Session September 30, 2019



The following is a transcript of the Natural Resources Conservation Service Listening Session conducted by the National Watershed Coalition (NWC) at the National Conservation Conference in Lexington, Kentucky on September 30, 2019.

The Listening Session was recorded and the following is a transcript developed from that recording. While we feel this is an accurate transcription, there may be some instances where a word or two may not have been transcribed correctly.

Dan Sebert, NWC Executive Director served as the facilitator for the session. Appearing on the NRCS panel was Jimmy Bramblett, NRCS Deputy Chief for Programs, Kevin Farmer NRCS Watershed Team Leader, Doris Washington, NRCS Director for the National Water Management Center and Ralph Smith, Tennessee NRCS Hydraulic Engineer.

Dan Sebert:

The next 45 minutes, we are conducting another historic advance in our NRCS listening sessions. It is not historic that NRCS is going to listen, they listen quite well, it is just they don't always do it in the same room with you. This is a unique opportunity to have this group of NRCS employees hear to listen to this group. We appreciate these folks being willing to do this.

Dan Sebert:

This has a little bit of an element of Let's Make a Deal and Family Feud and several other several other things where we have panels and people and ask questions.

But this is your opportunity to chat with in NRCS watershed program leadership. That's a big deal. And in order to capture some of the questions that if you're sitting on the backrow, I'll probably bring you this mic to let you let you ask question where everybody can hear.

If you're somebody that is not real wild about standing up and talking in front of the big group or asking questions, or if you're going to ask a really hard question that you don't want to associated with your name, Anyway, if you're that person, I'm some note cards, which be glad to share with you and you guys can fill those out. Give them to me and I will ask that question for you. I actually have solicited a few of these already. None of them are too terribly hard. But anyway, that's what we're doing for about 45 minutes. And I hope you'll take advantage of the opportunity to talk with these folks and see what answer any questions?

Dan Sebert:

Let me start off with a question submitted on a card. This person wants to know if there is a guidance document floating around out there that would outline the steps for a group or for an entity that wants to initiate a new watershed project. And if there is it done in layman's terms or is it full of the acronyms we all know and love? So is there a guidance document for a sponsor or first time sponsor that would get them started? Perfect? That's a great question.

Kevin Farmer:

So we do have a number of different publications and documents that are available. One of them is a document that just basically talks about the Watershed Program, I will say immediately that it is in need of update. We are working with our Public Affairs Division to update our watershed operations program guidance document. We also have resources on the program on our website that can be utilized by sponsors to get general information.

But to speak to the broader question, We are taking steps now to actually develop more documents for each of our programs. I know that we are not talking specially about EWP, but we're actually developing a sponsor guide for EWP that will go step by step on the procedures for use in emergency recovery with you as a sponsor what we will be responsible for and then procedures for how to actively gain NRCS assistance.

After that one we will do something very similar to a sponsor guide for other programs so that you can actually have that at your fingertips, something to actually guide you step by step on what needs to be done. In addition to that we are developing a guide for the new PNRG and PGR process. So after the new policies are released, one of the things we'll be doing is the guys supposed to provide a guidance document for planning for folks to look side by side and compare the existing guarantee process to the PNRG process and PGR and kind of get an understanding of what the differences are and got the planning process a little bit as well. So there are some resources that we are We both have in our development that will help in that regard.

Jimmy Bramblett:

Sometimes the state NRCS Public Affairs Specialist have a lot of good information as well. You might want to check with your NRCS state office and see if they have some information. Just quickly one think I want to add to what Kevin mentioned, On other thing in the works and this is particularly for EWP we are working with the University of Wisconsin on developing a short course for lack of a better phrase, it's something that will be on the web that people can go back to go to and look at over and over and over again. If that goes well, then we'll delve into the PL 566 Program and PL 472, the Rehab. Program

Question from audience:

On the budget process when can we expect to get watershed back as a line item in the budget? This is a big issue that we need to really work on? Can you explain that a little more?

Jimmy Bramblett:

So you all have done a fantastic job as part of the 2018 Farm Bill development process. And as was mentioned several times this morning, It takes continual encouragement, visits, face time with people at the national level, meaning Congress, although I don't encourage you to advocate because that would be me stepping over the line. That's just how that process works. And so the good news in the Farm Bill is they have identified steady funding for watershed operations. And for watershed rehabilitation. As I mentioned, during the discussion I had, there are some folks that would like to see these programs grow to over a billion dollars a year. A big part of that is contingent on how well we work together and how well we deliver and how dirt we are moving out there on the ground. And then how impactful are the projects.

So all these things feed into each other? That's kind of the process. There are two opportunities, key opportunities every year through the appropriation cycle. Generally, there are fly ins from a variety groups in March and another groups in July. And so they have those conversations and come to our office, tell us what they're going to go say, come back and tell us what they said. The good news about that is once you go generally my phone rings and says, What if we did a, B and C and D.

And if we've had the conversation either as you're going or if you're coming back, And we're not caught flat footed in the agency, then we can kind of help reinforce the message and be prepared to have a more fruitful conversation. And then from there, basically it just becomes a matter of what Congress is willing to give the presidential budget associated with what presidents make a request for. So my job as a federal employee is to support the president. So that's another element of the process. I just want you to be aware of and watch, as you're having your conversations with those on the hill.

Question from audience:

Jimmy, you spoke to it that over the last couple of years. We have seen more interest in this program, that you're talking about groups asking for a billion dollars. We and the National Watershed Coalition have heard the saying groups and I think, you know, part of it is a cause of the magic appeal 566, it has amazing authorities that are incredibly flexible.

I mean, part of that is that it was written way back when you have about a page of legislative language instead of 20. How does NRCS balance those new groups who want to use the program in a different way, versus some of you know, the sponsors in this room that have projects that they've either a been, you know, trying to get off the ground for 10 years or have rehab? How do you balance those two things? Because, on one hand, I love it more people talking on the hill advocating for this program is undeniably a good thing.

But when I hear that people are asking for a billion dollars, It gets me worried about, you know, are they trying to use the program in maybe a way that is worrisome. So How do you balance the new versus kind of old requests.

Jimmy Bramblett:

So great question. And three initial reactions, not responses, this reaction is off the top of my head. And the first is the full agreement with you have always said with now, with now maybe lately a couple of exceptions, but we can do in PL 566, virtually anything else we can do in the agency. And so it is an extremely flexible program. And The second element associated with this is 2018 for Bill and particularly the way that they put the language for RCPP. Now that it is own, It is his own program. So as we've constructed the rules, we've tried to create a continuum of services around the RCPP to do PL 566 like activities.

My sense is that program is going to continue to grow. So as I was, As I was trying to articulate very quickly, Leveraging different programs, in NRCS in addition to leveraging other resources from matching funds and other non -federal resources, is going to be a key balancing act we're going to have to watch closely moving forward.

Because if we were very cognizant, when we broke the rules, that we didn't want our RCPP to being so flexible that it out competed PL 566 for the same type activities, and vice versa. So there is a, we think we've crafted a very complimentary nature of how those two programs reinforce each other. But some cases, groups that are interested in, you know, PL 566 going to a billion dollars really need to be looking at RCPP. And so that's one of the avenues and some pressure off of about looking into the future.

In other cases, we need both of those programs to continue to be wildly popular to the third point is that is the more folks that are talking about all these programs and the resources going to you all as partners and sponsors, the more everybody's going to benefit, it's that old adage that rising tide lifts all boats.

And then the fourth thing I mentioned that just occurs to me is that we were developed in the rules and so far, we've been ok in our debates with ONB, We've been very specific to say we want to minimize the rules this iteration of the farm bill and maximize policy. And so that gives them some prioritization techniques. And what that means is, if we're not getting it right, then you all can quickly come to us and we can adjust policy on a dime, rather than having to go back and reopen a rule, go for public comment and make sure everything follows that. So we're keenly aware that we, it catches our attention also, when someone says a billion dollars. And at the same time we just like you, all of you and your variations of manifestations here have a lot of competing demands. So try to satisfy so we are trying to make sure that we're balancing those to the extent possible. Good, good. Good question.

Question from audience:

Regarding the earlier comments about the potential waiver for the plan, the watershed plan, and understanding that doesn't mean meet the requirements system, all the procedures that need to go through that. Have you thought about how that might roll out? Is that something that would go through the state? Or would it go through the office where all the plans are reviewed for that kind of determination or happiness that Have you looked at any of those steps on how that might be implemented.

Kevin Farmer:

So, in reality, we, we are now working to develop a decision to move from the chief and with guidance is we're getting from OGC. The guidance that we're getting from them, we're able to better make a decision as an agency on you know, how we can actually utilize those flexibilities. So, the decision will come from office of the Chief and then it will be provided to the states for the state conservationist is to be able to utilize in based on the Chief's decision to utilize the waiver authority from the Chief.

So, as I mentioned early we will have to put together clear guidelines on what it is that can and can't be done. And then the NEPA and other regulatory requirements that you have mentioned, are probably those things that, you know, we wouldn't have the flexibility to do. But there are the other things that I mentioned yesterday, whereas you look at leveraging prior work that others have done, where it is the Corps, Bureau of Rec. or even BIA or someone like that. And I think we were talking this morning about some projects that other states have had that they now recently submitted for watershed opers. and they were on the shelf, you know, then work had been done a substantial amount of work have been done. And planning those projects. Well, those are things you want to start from scratch on you want to do from what has been done, and then make it to develop a product that we can utilize and the Chief can authorize So to answer your question that obviously have to come from the Chief. And Then from there the ability because the state conservationists for them to be able to utilize those waivers.

Doris Washington:

My name is Doris Washington, Director for the National Water Management Center. And to your question, we are the office that reviews the plans that come through for the NEPA and PRNG. So from our perspective, we're simply the technical piece that goes in and access the technical expert for leadership, including the Chief and we make comments on those plans based on the NEPA laws and regulations and so those rules do not just apply to NRCS they apply to all agencies across the federal government. So when we're taking a look at those and making those comments, it's truly based on what the laws and the regulations are, and not so much of what our judgment is. So we just provide those comments back to leadership for them to be better informed on the decisions that they're going to make during that process and be the authorization or waiver.

Jimmy Bramblett:

And the only other thing I mentioned since you threw a lot of FEMA activities up in your bracket is they have the same a lot of times they'll have the same federal planning requirements. So anytime that you think you might be working with an NRCS associated, project that I just encourage you to take advantage of the cooperative agency status, Basically, that's where we work with each other at the federal agency level and review and concur with the other planning activities that the other federal agencies that helps hasten that process. And then, as I mentioned, Andy Dicker earlier, they're also looking at some of these things as well, they'll kind of as we make early decisions, they'll kind of evaluate those and see if we can continue to streamline and improve the efficiency in the way we deliver programs.

Dan Sebert asking question from audience:

I have three submitted questions and one of them fits nicely on the tail end of that. Regarding the stuff that Andy's doing and the visioning work group, so on and so forth. Deputy Chief Bramblett mentioned that group this morning, What is the group tasks to do? What is the desired or expected outcome? And will outside input be solicited, at some point if appropriate.

Jimmy Bramblett:

So someone must be listening to our lunch conversation. So, Andy, hopefully I'm not giving you heartburn as a part of this response here. But actually mentioned, we've got a T-shirt here somewhere with a target on it.

So one of the things that we talked about is the group is getting started. And I'm getting encouragement from our upper management, the department to kind of help hasten the process a little bit. We originally thought and gave the charge to the team just to look at the overall process and see how is it that we might be able to improve the efficiency and the way we're delivering the program.

Jimmy Emmons is a Regional Coordinator that reports directly to the undersecretary. He can attest to this that Secretary Purdue is really keen on customer service. He's made that very clear to the undersecretary made it clear to Jimmy, made it clear to the Chief, which in turn makes it clear to me and the continual presence of that desire is only increasing over time.

So what we had originally started out with is a little more of a passive approach to try and look at the Watershed Program and our policies and procedures was just a checkpoint to see what can we do to improve the efficiency of it, given the legal requirements that we have to adhere to.

So we were thinking early on, that might be a two year process, we haven't decided exactly what that's going to be. But it's going to be something quicker than two years. And so as far as outside input, that's what we were having the lunch conversation about. We've got the five teams that we basically identified on the board real quick, can't remember those off the top of my head.

So maybe we'll get a chance to identify what goes on. But what we were talking about, because my distraction and decide to put on me is to get the rules for all the other programs out the door, him to finish out the delivery of the program for FY 2020. Now, I'm at a point where I can turn my attention back to this. And so we do want some outside input. We have several other teams, we have one associated with our traditional, called individual land or conservation plan. We have over 300 folks across the country that are working with us and we have a very structured governance structure associated with it. Part of that is an executive team. So at least initially, what we're thinking about the conversation we had at lunch was maybe have one representative from this group here be part of that executive team, As the work matures, and there might be other opportunities, but we definitely want you all to be part of the process and be able to make recommendations and suggestions and ground truth, a lot of the discussions that we're having and the things that we're hearing from my level and from state conservationists perspective as well.

Dan Sebert:

This just kind of fits back doors. This may be something that you want to tag team, but it fits with what you were talking about the various laws and so on yet, that you have to follow. Environmental assessments to update work plan should would look at project impacts and perhaps mitigation, The Corps will require that's the same assessment as per section for 404 permitting, why not combine two assessments and prevent the duplication.

Kevin Farmer:

Alright, so it kind of leads back to what we said earlier. When there is any kind of project federal waterworks project, we do encourage that both NRCS, and other USDA agencies work with other federal agencies as much as possible to cooperate in the planning efforts. So early coordination with the Corps, you know, as the project sponsor and the leader of the project, if you know that there's going to be an opportunity for that type of early coordination. We encourage that so that we can kind of gain some efficiencies, who not duplicating efforts to achieve the same goal.

And we've had projects for one instance, where the Corps is doing projects in northwest parts of Minnesota and in the Red River Valley of North Dakota. And they've done a lot of large studies out in that area. And a lot of significant work for their feasibility studies, and you know, much of the data that's been gathered can be helpful, and not only developing a watershed work plan for us, but also when it comes to permit the permitting process, having data that's necessary to streamline the permitting process. So the goal is that as the lead locally entity of the sponsor, we're encouraging that you work together to help us to make sure that we have worked cooperatively with all the regulatory as well as the funding agencies ensure that the work that we're doing for product that we need to authorize funding will also meet the needs for what you need to actually implement project is permitting, we do pass on as responsibility for local sponsor to make sure that permitting is, as you know, completed. So we want to work with you as a partner to make sure that we've covered enough bases in information in the planning process, or the design procedures, that we could actually move smoothly into the permitting phase together. So we should work cooperatively, as federal agencies and local partners as possible within NRCS.

Doris Washington:

And then from the technical aspect of it, the way we look at it from the center is really we encourage that sponsors and also even the state staff and NRCS are doing what we call the scoping period. In the planning process is that early on that you began to look at what we call secondary data, which are those things that other agencies have already done, whether it's federal, non-federal, whoever it may be, if there's already been data collected for watershed area in which you're wanting to do a project. And one of the things that we've been doing with states early on, is trying to identify those data pieces. And particularly if they are other agencies, particularly the CORPS, we're asking that the states really delve into that information and see how much of that that they can use that's already present. Because not only is it already verified and documented, but it also speeds up the process and the planning as well, because they've already gone out and met those same rules and regulations for NEPA, that we just talked about during their process, and you really don't have to do it twice, you can just choose what they have most of the time.

Dan Sebert:

There has been for a number of years two elephants in the room. One of them was funding and the other NRCS staff capacity. In our next question, Deals, we apparently have at least fired a warning shot on one of the elephants and that's the funding, we've got a little tap up and now got some funds coming that way. But the other one is linked to that and that is do we currently have the necessary staffing to implement the current needs and requirements? If not, how will the staffing needs to be met?

Jimmy Bramblett:

So Kevin wasn't here to hear me give him a lot of kudos about having almost single handedly manage either EWP, Rehab and Watershed Opers. Yeah, So too bad. So sad. So to the initial question, do we have the staffing capacity to do it? The answer is no. Obviously, the Secretary has been very clear that when we asked for staff, that we need to have data driven information to make that type of a request. And NRCS is unlike most other federal agencies in that we are not salary and expensed. We're actually paid for by bits and pieces of all these variations of programs that the agency is authorized to administer. And so when we have and I know, Kevin has shown this when we have funding and some years and zero funding the next two or three years, it makes it really difficult for state conservationists to have the assurance that that funding is going to be around to hire that particular type of expertise.

And it is a different expertise that's needed for watershed planning, as opposed to individual landowner planning. So, as I mentioned earlier in my discussion of our roughly 7,500, folks out there across the landscape, I can guess, than less than 10% of them had really good watershed planning, watershed design, watershed construction type experience out there. So as the hope the promise for more funding is coming down the road, This is something that we're looking at is this one of the things that we are asking the streamlining team to think about as well. And with you all being part of that we certainly welcome your input, What is clear is we are not likely to return to the way things always work, we not going to have watershed staffs in every state. There's been ideas that have been cast about maybe having a watershed staff at the technical center. There's pros and cons associated with that having certain staffing capabilities in different states There's pros and cons with that. So we'll look at all those options. Some of the best options most quickly, are to continue to stay engaged, and leverage your expertise that we don't have internally, and make sure that we're asking for more collecting it, or packaging it up or authorizing all the funding associated with it, according to the rules, regulations and statutes, and we have to, but in a way that can help us stay above the audit integrity threshold, as well as the financial Integrity threshold. But at the same time, make sure that we all have that technical prowess out there on the landscape that we're all interested in pursuing.

Kevin Farmer:

I don't want to say anything too quickly because I don't want to make any promises, So One of the things that we have noticed and I know we've heard this a lot from you all, and especially NRCS employees is that, you know, I'm being asked to provide for the engineering especially I'm being asked to provide engineering and technical services, I'm being asked to be a program manager. And I'm also being asked to be a project administrator and contract administrator. And, you know, some of those challenging, you know, workload issues that we're having, and we're seeing impacts, implementation and impacts the bottom line results in actually seeing that dirt moves.

So I think we recognize that there are those challenges that, you know, we have, and I think there's been some efforts done to help alleviate some of those challenges. One of the things is the IDDIQ that we put together this last year. What was put together last year, and in 2018, it was put together and then we start using 2019. And that will allow us to be able to provide quicker technical assistance in you know, services and contracts and administrative services, and it helps us. But you still faced with that one challenge of having people who are NRCS employees, who can actually provide direct oversight of the work of the IDDIQ firms are doing, and then providing training and guidance. So from a Watershed Program standpoint what we've realized is, if we're going to continue to use the A&E firms through IDDIQs, we have to provide training on what it is in NRCS is doing so that when plans are coming in, we can increase efficiencies on the work that is coming, we're noticing that a plan will come in from one state from one firm, and they may submit seven plans, and all of them have the same seven types of errors. And we review all seven, well let's just review one first, and then we'll correct it. And then going forward, the next 20 plans, you submit won't have those types of errors. So those are some efficiencies we've learned that will help to improve implementation, but we're still going to be faced with at some point, we're going to have to have NRCS staff who can work closely with those partners with sponsors, and with A&Es to actually get the work done quicker. And in a way that meets our agency's standards.

Doris Washington:

That means in the interim, we're going to try this year, Kevin has been so gracious, He and Jimmy to provide the Water Management Center with funds to actually contract out for what we're calling a secondary or a planning team assistance that will be given to a service contract. So we're been able to staff up at the Water Management Center enough to where we're able to put together another interdisciplinary team that will act for planning process, working with the states, and then also working with the consultants as well.

And a couple of things that we're looking at right now is strategy, first of all, getting in on the front end of those proposals, and then also working towards the planning portion, and helping states as much as we can. The thought process behind that is definitely what Kevin said is, is if we can be involved in the proposals, and the planning process, help states to put together a good plan, then the review process, we already know what we're working with. And we can most definitely become more efficient in that standpoint. Because hopefully, we'll have a good plan starting. So that's the idea.

Jimmy Bramblett:

So one other thing that I'll mention here that is I use the phrase annual program delivery cycle. That is were more and more programs are getting more complicated. We're going to have to bring the watershed programs back into that same discussion. So It used to be that when we were really running our POINTS database, I don't know how many of you know about POINYS. We basically would make request for funding In May for the upcoming fiscal year, which from a state program managers perspective. In my case, at that day in time, It helped me manage the conversations with partners on projects and get those lined up in such a fashion that we could have, have them fit systematically through the funding request stream and know what we're up against it certain key timely parts of the fiscal year, so will be because of all the other program growth since we really use that model.

We've been asked to go back and revisit during your program delivery cycle and bring watersheds into some that discussion as well.

Question from audience member:

Yeah. When you just said you were you thinking about requests In May I think that most states are on a July one fiscal year. Are you thinking of needing their help to lead programs or thinking in response to programs from the previous year of state funding?

Jimmy Bramblett:

So when I mentioned May, that's basically what we have done in the past doesn't mean that's what we need to do in the future. That can be part of some of our discussion with watershed streamlining thing. And some of the input that you all can give us as to what makes the most sense, We do have to keep in mind that we get money on our fiscal year, which gentlemen is going to be October. And sometimes because some elements of the watershed programs are still discretionary, they're subject to continue resolutions, and the 30 years up in with the federal government, I think there's only been two fiscal years, we haven't had a continuing resolution. But so with all of those type of factors just need to agree on what makes sense, to be able to say this is what NRCS should make the solicitation This is how state program managers can work with partners out there on the various planning or design or construction projects. And maybe it's different for different types of programs for different What was the chip thing, phrase check us early phase, A lot of folks don't like phase, we are kind of okay with phase as long as it moves to the next phase. And So, but those are all open to discussion to see what makes sense.

Kevin Farmer:

One thing that you can think about too, is that, depending on what project phase you're in, and if it's planning or design, You know, there may not be any local match necessary. So we're still able to work with our sponsors to move forward with funding decisions, because there's going to be 100% NRCS funding.

So one of the biggest challenges, I think, is when you get to construction, obviously. But prior to that, you know, we want to do that. Yesterday I had mentioned that we were going to put we were going to have a five year plan, a five year strategy, so that we can be prepared to make those requests earlier. And that's leads into what Jimmy was talking about. If our states are working close our state offices working closely with you, as sponsors, you can provide us up front on year one, what's your five year strategy is and then early the fiscal year like Jimmy was saying you can make your request against that strategy. And then let us know immediately what the need is. And if funding is made available, immediately there's a line item for Watershed Ops, you know, obviously, the money can go extremely quickly at that point. But you know, big challenge we find is we don't receive an appropriation and many times until maybe March April. And then that one, you have to make a decision for funding and three different programs trying to stagger some of those applications. And that's where you kind of balance.

Doris Washington:

Just one key point for the strategy and the funding. One of the things from a review process that we've seen the most successful are those states that spend the time to actually look at the bigger picture, so to speak.

So if you're able to go in and do an assessment of an entire area, whether it's, you know, going to be over the 250,000 acre rule or not, it's better to go ahead and look at the big picture, so to speak, and then be able to break that down in different phases on how you would fund it. Because if they're able to stand independently of themselves, Then you have the big picture. But as funding becomes available, you're able to pick and choose your priorities From that big picture for funding. Because I think someone had mentioned earlier about concerns of some states requesting a billion dollars. Well, the total plan for whatever watershed or your entire state could be that billion dollars, but you may not want to ask for that right off, because you may not be shovel ready to go. But it's good to have that in your back pocket as a strategy to begin phasing towards that 1 billion based on the funding that's going to be available that year.

Question from the audience:

We've talked about big picture. And we've heard in this meeting and also the NACSA meeting about not doing things the way we always have done them. And we talked about the RCPP vs watershed and the chance for a billion dollars. We look at the big picture and make policy decisions on what the watershed programs going to do. You know, hear things about well, the worship program doesn't do O&M or do remedial for these things are the big policy decisions. Are those being made from congressional language? Are those being made at the agency level? Or is there a place for groups like this and partners to have influence on maybe changing the direction or modifying the direction? Because I think there's some fear that we're going to completely change the program, If we make a policy change that puts in NRCS doing something they haven't done in the past in the Watershed Program.

Kevin Farmer:

So it is a combination of all of these. As far as policy even with the streamlining efforts that we're doing now, we have been evaluating our policies to see where there may be room for us to be more flexible and creative, and how we're approaching the implementation of the Watershed Program. So some of those decisions that are strictly policy are made at the agency level, in cooperation with our partners, and in in our NRCS staff, you know, but when you start talking about those statutory limits, such as we had a limitation where there was a \$5,000 \$5 million limit on what project plans had to be submitted to Congress for approval, prior to NRCS being able to authorize them. That's not something we can change in policy. So we've had a lot of feedback from sponsors. And we as we as an agency realized that that was an outdated statutory requirement. So as a result of that those partners were able to work from the information we were able to provide, as far as how this program actually functions today, They were able to then take and have regulatory changes, legislative changes made, it may, excuse me, that will be an impact. The bottom line as far as what the regulation now say is, so now we're doing 25 million, But in NRCS didn't necessarily do that. You know, that's something that you working with your elected officials are able to accomplish for us and make those changes. But had you not talked to us and realize that yeah, this does make more sense, you know, we, as a partnership, made that decision.

Jimmy Bramblett:

So I agree with everything that Kevin said, I want to circle back to the billion dollars that has come up a few times.

Because just put this in perspective. NRCS gets \$1.75 billion dollars every year for EQIP. Another 725 million, this year for CSP, it'll grow to another billion dollars. So we'll have almost \$3 billion just in those two programs. So billion dollars in PL 566 doesn't really bother me? Because we have what \$2.6 billion in backlog that we know. Yeah. So the key is the staff and being able to deliver quickly. I've been pushing a lot of our folks on the individual land side for efficiency for the past several months to the point where at the end of August, I didn't know if I was going to have a job in Norman, Oklahoma of all places. But the group realized that he said, you know, we got to step up to the plate and take the challenge.

And one of the individuals that was the state resource conservationist in Montana came up to me at the end of that meeting and said, You know what, Jimmy, NRCS/SCS has had to take on a lot of different challenges over the years. And we have a 100% success rate of stepping up to the plate meeting the challenges. So I wouldn't be concerned if all of a sudden you all are overly successful in money, we will work good together will work your way to figure it out and make it happen. But I just wanted to put in perspective that there's a lot of money that Congress is happy today, authorized taxpayer investments for conservation. And we've talked about this particular program, the flexibility that programs, the public benefits associated with this program, which are gentlemen, much more readily documentable, something we probably need to be a better or quickly tangibly put in everybody's hands. This, the future of this program can be as I've said, in my last slide, this sky can be the limit. So don't be concerned. I do think you bring up a good point Trey about the O&M and some of the other manifestations of this program that are more congressionally driven, If you will say, hey, we want this to be a priority and you're successful in your communication with Congress, if they could then in the language force to do we'll make sure that that's delivered the way that you are, they are.

Dan Sebert:

All right, I've three more card questions. And I'd like to ask are pretty nuts and bolts questions? And I'm going to ask the one with the impeccable handwriting first.

In relation to PL 566. How do you measure ag benefits in a typical Appalachian region, community, in other words, rural economically depressed, but very little, if any production ag.

Kevin Farmer:

So One of the things that we have mentioned, even in my last presentation was that you have to start looking at what is agriculture enterprise? When I worked in the New England states, One of the things that we had to realize was a nonindustrial profit forestland is an agriculture enterprise. You know, so we took a creative approach to being able to implement certain watershed projects, and that region because you don't have as much row crop, you don't have livestock operations in traditional agriculture. But you still needed the flood protection benefits or whatever the purpose was. So we just have to work together and identify what are those agriculture enterprises that may be present, that are not necessarily that normally big enough, it may not be for crop operations, it may be urban agriculture, even, you know, so and we have to identify, you know, what those different enterprises may be?

We can't neglect looking at the actual homestead even though you know, the entire operation of an agriculture enterprise, you know, we have to include incorporate everything, just not just a production agricultural land, but the entire enterprise that may be impacted affected, markets, things that nature, you know, farmers market, whatever it is, that actually facilitates you being able to have an agricultural production enterprise.

Doris Washington:

And from the more technical side, I think Kevin mentioned this yesterday as well incremental analysis. So for those unique and special cases, which most watershed projects that we review, have that special component in it that probably is not present in another. So because of that uniqueness, we do take a special look at each one of these for the incremental analysis, as Kevin mentioned, to find out what exactly is there locally that we can use to help do that benefits model and to show how that flood protection or land treatment that's going to be applied is going to be a benefit for that community.

Dan Sebert reading question from card:

Since NRCS, and backed away from doing annual dam inspections, are there any funds that partners can utilize to ensure that inspections are being completed in a timely and adequate manner.

Kevin Farmer:

We haven't backed away from doing annual inspections, obviously, that's something that you working with your state conservationists are able to accomplish? We have in our state resource assessment, an equation or value that we provide for O&M type activities, that each state is provided each state through this CTA allocation. for that type of work, you know, doing inspections and doing O&M type engineering work,

We actually have hired supposed to be 10 dam safety engineers for the agency who are specific to doing that exact work. That's their purpose. I think we've hired of those ten, maybe six or seven of them, I think they've actually been hired here recently. So we haven't backed away. What I would encourage is that we make sure that we're working closely with our states, state conservationists is to make sure that the need is something that's within the confines of what they're able to do with their CTA budget. You know, if it gets if it began to exceed what they're able to do, then you may have a challenge if they're not able to provide certain levels of O&M work,

Dan Sebert reading question on card:

Okay. Last one, Please define 50 year life is a service life, design Life, program life or economic life?

Kevin Farmer:

Alright, so for the end of life, is the actual service life, what is the value of that we look at to determine what measures what components of this measure are expected to be able to last and function properly for 50 years. One of the key components of there is the flood protection reservoir type of measure is the sediment storage.

I mean, how many years of estimated yield would you have on a watershed that you'd be able to contain within 50 years, you know, so that's one of the key components, obviously 50 years evaluated life and the service life is still identified in what you we have designed as a measure.

So it involves the hydraulic analysis that we use to design the project to determine that if there aren't any additional, I guess I'm going to use it. If there are any additional land use changes, or if the structure doesn't have a reclassification from lower or significant, to high hazard, then obviously all those things go out the window, because at that point the structure is still functioning, but it can't function and provide service at the level that it now needs to. So it still may have a 50 service life. But all of a sudden, we've learned that life almost useless because it's now a high hazard structure. So all those things we have to look at. But the actual 50 years is based on the value of life that we look at for the purposes of the design and the measures that you're looking at for the final constructed product.

Jimmy Bramblett:

Kevin is right, it is dependent on what we're looking at, each one could be a little bit different. A big part of the request we get into as far as justifying the economics is either 100 year, or average annual benefits. But then the other thing is all the time we have sponsors that say, Hey, we would like to that divest our interest of the federal government associated with the structure. So we'll go back and we'll look at the economics of that situation, too. So That's why I say it's a little bit Yes, Good. Kevin brought up a good example for rehab when we're looking at the sediment storage. We're looking now at the hundred years out to make sure that that's the evaluated life for sediment storage. And so it depends on what aspect of the project we're looking at, as far as the quote unquote, service life.

Dan Sebert:

All right. Are you wonderful folks willing to hang out mix and mingle and chat with people who have questions that didn't get the opportunity to ask?

Dan Sebert:

Let's give the panel a hand.