

A VISIT TO THE NATION'S CAPITAL



MONTANA'S CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

in

WASHINGTON, D.C.

July 2011

The National Association of Conservation Districts Annual Legislative Conference



Conservation leaders from across the country gathered in Washington, D.C. to discuss legislative initiatives and regulatory programs that affect our nation's land, air and water. Past President and NACD Board Member Steve Hedstrom, as well as Executive Director Jeff Tiberi, represented Montana at the conference.

NACD's 2011 Legislative Conference, which started July 18, featured leading experts from several federal agencies, including USDA Under

Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment Harris Sherman (seen in center of photograph). Sherman spoke about the importance of educating lawmakers and stakeholders on conservation issues. "Nothing can be more important for you than to communicate your passion and the importance of what you're doing to those who are up on the Hill and who are going to have a big stake in the outcome of these conservation programs," Sherman said. "If we can do that, your efforts and our efforts will truly make a difference."

Sherman also said:

1. There will be 9 billion people on Earth by 2050, and we have to feed them.
2. We need conservation to be able to produce that food.
3. 70% of the land in the USA is in private hands, 30% government.
4. The last 100 years in the USA has been focused on conservation on public lands. He thinks that the next 100 years will see a focus on conservation on private lands. *(NB: He knows Districts have been doing this for 75 years...but the next 75 years could see many more eyes and dollars upon us.)*
5. He wants to find innovative programs to further conservation.
6. He wants to explore alternatives to current water quality and air quality controls. *(NB: This idea has been heard by MACD from sources in EPA also.)*
7. We need to demonstrate the results of our good work and show others.
8. We need to pay attention to environmental markets.

If we were to sum up the meeting, in two words, they would be "**budget cuts.**" Word is that the debt debate likely will end with spending limits set for both the 2012 and 2013 federal fiscal years (FY2012 begins 1st October 2011). With these ceilings in place, existing programs will compete at the committee level for the limited dollars. Those programs that show credibility, provide value for the dollar, focus on problem solving, and have wide national support will fare the best. Conservation programs will suffer cuts, but there was hope that the cuts would be similar across the board so all programs equally bear the changes. There is a concerted push to equalize cuts among the Farm Bill titles.

General comments and observations, in no particular order, include:

1. Even with cuts in the Farm Bill, Congress will honor existing multi-year contracts.

2. NACD has a new CEO. John Larson from Washington will start his new job in August. Details about John were sent to Districts under separate cover.
3. NRCS is looking at a cut of 1,000 positions nationally, as well as the loss of 3,000 vehicles.
4. Dave White is focused on what he is calling the “90% solution,” whereby 90% of all NRCS staff would be “boots on the ground.” Each state has been asked to tell Dave how they plan to reach the 90% solution.
5. RC&D will be making an attempt to have \$50 million restored to their program. That would mean that some other program(s) would have to be cut to make RC&D whole again.
6. In June of this year the White House announced an initiative to address rural needs through an [Executive Order](#) establishing the White House Rural Council. This announcement was seen as a recognition of the importance and value of rural areas to America. Note that there was concern expressed by Kansas delegates that some of the duties and responsibilities of the RC&D program could be seen in this new initiative.
7. NACD has released Farm Bill Principles. They may be seen at the end of this report.
8. NRCS Water Management Center may be able to help Districts identify potential reservoir storage sites in Montana. You may recall that we had a resolution asking MACD to encourage the identification of such locations in Montana. This idea fits with ideas expressed in workshops some communities are having regarding climate issues.
9. The Western Coalition, based in part on the good work of Yenie Tran covering Western issues with great detail and interest, may be losing enthusiasm. Months ago the MACD Board of Directors had voted to join the Coalition, and we may be asking them to review that vote given today’s circumstances.
10. The Northern Plains Region Board sent a letter supporting Brian Lovett from Wyoming to be appointed as one of the Conservation Districts representative to MRRIC.
11. The Chief of the USDA Forest Service, Tom Tidwell, addressed the audience, giving a background about the Forest Service. In the Q&A following Steve Hedstrom described the wet spring and resultant tall grasses in the West. He asked if the FS would allow ranchers to harvest tall grasses in meadows on FS lands. Mr. Tidwell said that they had flexibility to alter grazing plans in these circumstances, and this could be a win-win-win for ranchers, the FS, and fuel removal.

12. The 319 grant program at EPA has been cut significantly. The Administration, in their budget submission, cut the program hard, thinking that Congress, acting under pressure from constituents, would restore the funds. However, "*The old rules do not apply anymore.*" Congress took those cuts and cut deeper. The current House budget bill includes a cut of 25% to 319 dollars. See the related NACD PDF under # 19 below.
13. The House of Representatives is eliminating all or most proposals that include land acquisition.
14. The State of Florida spent \$20 million trying to establish numeric nutrient standards for their waters. Some entities thought that it was taking too long and went to court. The court told EPA to set the standards. There are currently many lawsuits in Florida ref this issue.
15. Some states reported that there seems to be an increase in apathy from producers reference conservation in the Farm Bill, as prices have been high.
16. Every year the Farm Bill spends \$100 billion, 80% of which is nutrition related.
17. Both individual Democrats and Republicans will oppose the Farm Bill, but both parties will eventually vote to support it. In past years it succeeds with an unusual coalition.
18. BLM is working on a special lands initiative. The report is due to Congress on 15th October.
19. BLM controls 50% of the sage grouse habitat in the West. The success of conservation efforts for this bird, to a large extent, rests with them and those private landowners who manage sections of BLM lands.
20. It is hoped that BLM will accept NRCS grazing practices for sage-grouse.
21. NACD has developed specific positions, including budget recommendations, on a variety of topics. These may be seen on the NACD website:

2012 Farm Bill Implementation | [PDF](#) |
319 Non-Point Source Program | [PDF](#) |
Conservation Technical Assistance | [PDF](#) |

State and Private Forestry | [PDF](#) |
Energy/Climate Change | [PDF](#) |
Clean Water Restoration Act | [PDF](#) |
Equal Access to Justice Act | [PDF](#) |
See <http://www.nacdnet.org/policy/issues/> for details.



BLM Deputy Director Burke with members

BLM Deputy Director Marcilynn Burke poses with NACD members, including two from Montana.

As part of the NACD meeting, we were encouraged to meet with Congressional delegates. This included meetings with:

1. John Lange, Legislative Aide to Representative Denny Rehberg
2. Nathan Taylor, Legislative Assistant to Senator Jon Tester
3. Alexis Taylor, Legislative Assistant to Senator Max Baucus

Additional meetings were held with Astor Boozer and Diane Gelburd in Dave White's office.

Topics covered at these meetings included:

1. Presentation and discussion of the NACD position papers as seen in #19 above.
2. Montana's DRAFT Nutrient Trading Policy
3. Irrigation Water Management program with NRCS
4. AFO/CAFO issues
5. Climate Workshops
6. Big Sky Watershed Corps
7. Aquatic Invasive Species
8. Sage-grouse Conservation

In June of this year the MACD Board of Directors had a serious discussion about the need to send representatives to this meeting. After many viewpoints were heard, it was decided to expend the funds for this travel so that we bring Montana's issues to the forefront, Montana operates at the national level to influence conservation, and we reinforce the relationships we have with policy makers at the national level.

Thanks to NACD for several quotes in this document, as well as the photographs.

If you have any questions or wish to discuss any topic in more detail, pls let me know.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffrey Tiberi
Executive Director
Montana Association of Conservation Districts

NACD FARM BILL PRINCIPLES

NACD's mission is to serve conservation districts by providing national leadership and a unified voice for natural resource conservation. To that end, NACD has developed the following principles to guide our 2012 Farm Bill work.

Principle 1 – Resource-driven and locally-led

NACD believes agriculture operations must be economically viable. The installation of conservation practices depend on that viability. We support a strong agriculture base across the country, U.S. territories, and insular areas. All landowners and operators should apply conservation practices appropriate for their operations and resource needs.

Farm Bill conservation programs should be resource-driven and locally-led with sufficient flexibility to direct funding to local priorities and concerns. Program delivery must be tailored to the natural resource needs in the states and local areas. Local Conservation District Boards, Local Working Groups and State Technical Committees must help identify local needs, apply limited financial assistance, and maximize conservation benefits.

Principle 2 – Fully fund technical assistance needs for planning and program implementation

Planning is fundamental to good resource management. Therefore, a resource management plan should be required in order to receive Farm Bill conservation program funding. Farmers, ranchers, producers who manage rangelands and grasslands, forest landowners, small acreage owners, and new landowners are requesting technical assistance. Technical assistance funding must be provided to generate a wide range of soil, water, air, and habitat benefits. The Conservation Technical Assistance Program and each of the Farm Bill conservation programs are necessary to implement conservation practices that effect proper land and water management.

- We support full funding for NRCS to meet the growing need for technical assistance to deliver Farm Bill conservation programs, acting in concert with conservation districts, technical service providers (TSPs), and other partners.
- An increased investment in and demand for conservation programs has not generated a corresponding increase in staff needed to deliver sufficient assistance to utilize all Farm Bill funds awarded to NRCS. The full return on our conservation investment will be achieved only with additional technical assistance resources.
- Currently, Conservation Technical Assistance funding is used for pre-contract work, while program dollars for technical assistance are available only after a contract is signed. We support the allocation of Farm Bill program technical assistance and financial assistance funding to more accurately reflect the true cost of implementing Farm Bill conservation programs.
- We urge the Authorizing Committees and the Appropriations Committees to work together to address this long-term shortfall in technical assistance. We conservation leaders are very concerned that adequate conservation planning is not being provided to ensure these important programs reach their full potential. As planning services continue to decline, we are concerned that public support for these important resource protection programs will also decline.
- Technical service providers are an important component of the conservation delivery system and an important tool to implement conservation programs. The TSP program should be expanded to help meet the significant workload needed to implement Farm Bill programs.

Expanding the use of TSPs in states lacking sufficient NRCS personnel to fully apply the conservation program resources available to them is particularly important.

- The program should provide expanded opportunities for TSPs to do conservation planning.

Currently, TSPs only provide post-contract, implementation assistance.

- An increase in conservation delivery system capacity can be realized if NRCS expands the use of funding agreements with conservation districts.
- Establish resource management planning as a distinct practice eligible for financial assistance cost share funding.

Principle 3 – Farm Bill conservation program funding

The 2012 Farm Bill conservation programs should be funded at or above 2008 Farm Bill levels, including the Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program. Regional equity should be maintained. Opportunities to streamline and improve efficiency within the program options should be identified.

Principle 4 – Easily accessible conservation program delivery system

The conservation program delivery system must be easily accessed by conservation program customers. The signup process must be simple, easy to understand, completed with reasonable effort, and reach a broad customer audience.

- Conservation programs should be sufficiently flexible so they can be tailored to meet local resource needs and concerns.
- NACD supports continuous signup for USDA conservation programs.
- NACD supports consolidating NRCS Farm Bill conservation programs to improve efficiency, simplify the application process, and better utilize available program funding. The preferred outcome of this consolidation is one working lands program and one easement program.

Consolidation should:

- o Be used as a tool to deliver more conservation.
- o Result in increased simplicity and efficiency for both program staff and customers. The time savings resulting from fewer programs should be directed to providing more boots on the ground.
- o Result in a more customer friendly process, including contracts and signups.
- o Improve and strengthen the locally-led process across the country, resulting in more flexibility within and between programs to address local resource concerns.
- o Include an increased effort to document the value of conservation practices to help set priorities.
- o Include an increased commitment to providing technical assistance.

Principle 5 – Commitment to working lands

Conservation programs address resource needs on various landscapes. They must provide a balance of support for both those that set land aside for conservation priorities and those that provide incentives and cost share for working lands. Given the projected increase in world population, programs must provide assistance to implement or maintain conservation practices on working lands that produce much-needed food, feed, fuel, and fiber.

Principle 6 – Education and outreach

Successful delivery of the Conservation Title of the 2012 Farm Bill requires educating and reaching out to landowners, producers, and the general public. Landmark legislation in the 1930s assigned local conservation districts responsibility to lead the nation's conservation education, outreach, and demonstration processes. Farm Bill Conservation Title funds should supplement these important conservation district efforts.

Principle 7 – Sustainable and renewable energy from agriculture and forestry

Reducing on-farm energy consumption and developing renewable energy production is critically important for American agriculture and forestry. Energy conservation and production can be achieved through technologies such as wind, solar, anaerobic digestion, biomass, cellulosic biofuels, ethanol, biodiesel, as well as yet-to-be-developed technologies. Incentives should encourage agriculture to implement new and sustainable energy production. An approved conservation, forest stewardship, or similar plan to protect soil and water quality and preserve land productivity into the future should be encouraged for all Farm Bill energy production projects.

- USDA energy policy should include practices both to generate and conserve energy.
- No adverse effects on production shall result from energy programs.

Principle 8 – Support Forestry Title

NACD continues to support a Forestry Title to address the unique complexities of forestry on non-industrial, private forest land.

- Expand capacity to provide technical assistance and outreach to non-industrial private forest owners, especially landowners not currently engaged in conservation or managing their lands. Government entities, non-government organizations, and TSPs should be utilized to deliver program assistance to underserved forest landowners.
- Maximize program capabilities to address forest issues, especially those identified by state forest resource assessments and strategies, and state wildlife action plans. Continued support for regular updates to these state-level efforts should be given.
- Increased participation by forest owners in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) should be allowed.

Principle 9 – Develop new approaches to deliver conservation

The Farm Bill should promote and facilitate developing new and alternative approaches, such as ecosystems services, to deliver conservation practices and programs on privately-owned rural, urban, and forest lands.

Principle 10 – Support new conservation technologies

NACD supports both new and proven technologies in all conservation programs. NACD supports research to develop new technologies.