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*Preserving Today, Protecting Tomorrow*

**Testimony presented to Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Environmental Conservation  
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Thank you Chairmen DeFrancisco and Grisanti, and Chairmen Ferrell and Sweeney, for the opportunity to speak today. I am Judy Littrell, the Executive Director of the New York Association of Conservation Districts which is a nongovernmental organization who represents New York State's 58 Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), which includes the 5 boroughs of New York City.

SWCDs serve as primary, local natural resource management entities, are implementation based, and non-regulatory while serving urban, suburban, rural and agricultural landowners and their communities. Because of their diversity, Districts have unique opportunities to work in concert with a wide variety of coalitions, government agencies, local partner organizations and municipalities, promoting cooperative conservation.

***EPF Funding***

NYACD is pleased with the Governor's proposed funding of the EPF at a total of \$157 million. We are encouraged by this action, and urge the Senate and Assembly to meet and possibly exceed the funding levels the Governor has proposed. NYACD does ask that as the RETT fund balance continues to increase, that the amount of that fund dedicated to the EPF be brought back to the pre 2008 levels. The demand for EPF funds and protecting the environment is blatantly apparent, and in most program areas, the demand is not being met from a funding perspective.

***EPF Funding For Soil and Water Conservation Districts***

The 2012 Legislative Session resulted in Governor Cuomo signing the legislation that doubled the SWCD reimbursement cap from \$30,000 to \$60,000 annually per District. To fulfill this new statute, Governor Cuomo has proposed a \$1 million increase of funding to the SWCD EPF line item, which would be divided by the 58 Districts. Reimbursement and payment from the state would be made to each Conservation District under State SWCD Law Section 11a, b & c. NYACD fully supports the Governor's proposal to bring the funding level for Districts in line with the SWCD Law that was amended in 2012 and asks that the Senate and Assembly also fund the Districts at the \$4.5 million level.

Increase in District funding should be strongly considered, mainly due to the ever continuing growth in demand for services, which is becoming more diverse every year, and in turn, is allowing Districts to consolidate services at their local level. Districts are trying to meet these demands, while being faced with tighter budgets, particularly, funding from county sources which has been decreased in many localities, or flatlined. Just in the past 12 months, retirement payments into the state retirement fund that Districts are required to pay into, for District employees, has risen 18%. The proposed increase in EPF funding is needed not only statutorily, but from a practical standpoint because:

***SWCDs have implemented more than 1400 EPF funded projects from 2006 to 2012.***

- SWCDs expedite projects in short time periods, and proven to be effective.
- SWCDs spread Program dollars fairly equally across *all* regions of New York State, from Long Island to Buffalo.
- EPF funds are leveraged by Districts, many of them working together, to attract more money for resource conservation practices from various sources.

**All in all, in 2012, Conservation Districts in NYS conducted \$90 million in conservation projects and programs, which has benefited all New Yorkers.** However, without the \$ 1 million proposed increase in SWCD funding, the Districts will be unable to maintain their capacity, so as to be able to continue to deliver technical support and assistance needed to meet this type of demand for their services for their communities, and all of New York State.

### **Examples of District Accomplishments in 2012 (note: 2013 data still being collected)**

- protected and restored 7,900 feet of shoreline from erosion.
- 25% of Districts worked to protect and restore natural environments through the development of 146 Open Space Plans and 170 projects on public and private lands.
- aided municipalities and private landowners with the installation of 36 dry hydrants for rural fire protection
- Collectively, Districts completed 168 wildlife habitat improvement projects on 1,700 acres throughout the state.
- Conservation Districts engaged 600,000 NYS residents thru various educational programs, Backyard Conservation Programs, etc
- District staff provided 368 pond consultations on public and private land and sold nearly 100,000 fish fingerlings and grass carp for recreation and aquatic invasive species control
- Districts treated over 6,500 acres of land for invasive weeds in 2012 to the tune of \$1.9 million. The Franklin SWCD worked with volunteers and partner organizations to harvest 12 tons of Eurasian Watermilfoil from Mountain View and Indian Lakes.
- Onondaga SWCD is working to combat the Emerald Ash Borer by taking inventory and monitoring all ash trees within the county.
- 88 percent of Districts were involved in creating or updating Watershed Management Plans.
- Host recycling events for tires, agricultural plastics, worked with 207 farmers to collect and bale 481,000 pounds of silage bags, bunker covers, bale wrap, and many other types of Ag plastics for recycling.
- Worked with farmers to install BMPs (Best Management Practices) to mitigate greenhouse gases.
- Districts provided \$1.2 million in stormwater management services to municipalities and contractors. In addition to assessing 1,054 sites for runoff issues, developing or reviewing 185 Stormwater Management Plans, Districts provided the Department of Environmental Conservation endorsed contractor erosion and sediment control training to 2,348 professionals.
- Over 1,500 Streamside Conservation projects were completed throughout the state in 2012 including 140,000 ft. of riparian buffer plantings, 900 acres of wetlands restored, equivalent to the size of Central Park, and 286,000 ft. of streambank stabilized

### **Weather, Flood Recovery and Future Natural Disasters**

Frequent extreme weather events continue to place more demands for District services, esp when flooding occurs. Not only do farmers depend on District staff to assist in evaluating storm damage to their farmsteads, municipalities are depending more on Districts to assist with mitigation and prevention of future floods. In a direct response to Hurricane Irene, the Delaware County SWCD developed a DEC approved training program to help municipal officials, contractors and machine operators respond to flood damage. The training is based on sound stream science by working with the stream's natural tendencies for post-flood corrective action. Following the guidelines and recommended procedures, the need for communities to go back and repair mistakes, can be eliminated, saving time, money and resources, also with intentions of preventing extreme flooding in the future. In 2013, more than 400 municipal workers, machine operators, contractors, statewide District employees, have been trained thru this program. Districts completed flood mitigation projects restoring 77,000 acres of public and private land protecting people, property, and the environment

Upon reviewing the diversity and scope of District programs, ultimately, increased EPF dollars is necessary to meet the statute of the law, and so as to carry out the intent of SWCD law where it states, "to protect and promote the health, safety and general welfare of the people of this state".

(more)

### ***Agricultural Non Point Source Program (AgNPS)***

The Executive Budget has proposed to fund the Ag Non Point Source program at a level of \$14.2 million. While supportive of the level funding, more funding is needed to meet the constant demand of the program. The goal of the Ag NPS Program is to support NY's diverse agricultural community in their efforts to reduce potential sources of surface and groundwater contamination while maintaining the economic viability of the farming community. It is a competitive grant program that is locally led, and implemented by the Conservation Districts.

- ***As a result of the 2012 Ag NPS RFP, 76 proposals were received, state funds requested totaled \$21.5 million for 296 farms, only \$12 million of funds were available.***
- For the past 4 grant cycles, more than \$20 million in requests for project funding are applied for, demand is expected to remain above the \$20 million level as many CAFO sized operations continue to implement Best Management Practices (BMPs), and as medium sized farms are now mandated to become CAFO compliant under the State's mandated CAFO regulations.
- Current EPF funding barely meets the needs of only half of the RFPs that are submitted.
- Federal conservation funds distributed via NRCS (Natural Resource Conservation Service) are being drastically cut due to the federal budget deficit. These funds, that were utilized in conjunction with Ag NPS dollars, will be reduced to farmers and SWCDs, resulting in a greater financial burden to producers.

Included in the Ag NPS program, is the Ag Environmental Management Program, or AEM which continues to be a critical piece in growing the agricultural industry in NYS, as it provides a framework for all types of farms, from dairy, to vineyards, to equine operations, to protect and enhance the environment while maintaining economic viability. Currently, over 12,000 farms are participating in AEM in NYS.

- During its 7<sup>th</sup> year, AEM Base Funding Program provided nearly 5,300 hours of technical assistance to farmers by Conservation District staff, the equivalency of 32 full-time positions. The 52 participating Districts added 605 new farms to the AEM Program.

The AEM and Ag NPS Programs have been recognized by the EPA and DEC to be the leading mechanism in NYS to reduce agricultural stormwater pollution, while also being identified as a significant element to the federal mandated Non Point Source Management Program. In addition, the AgNPS Program has been recognized as an important initiative to meeting the goals of nationally significant pollution reduction strategies in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.

If the Ag NPS Program along with the AEM program, are not appropriately funded, environmental stewardship on our farms will not progress forward, water quality will decrease, and farm profitability will suffer, as well as our local communities. The Ag NPS program has a NYS Health and Safety designation and as such, should be given a high priority for funding. ***NYACD respectfully requests that the Assembly and Senate maintain the funding of the program at the \$14.2 million level, with consideration of funding increases in the future based on demand for the program.***

In closing, Conservation Districts promote cooperative conservation, and the programs they implement play a vital role in local communities across all of NYS. ***Increased funding is necessary to continue to build capacity at the local level within the SWCDs, to support program goals that keep New York's waterways and land resources clean and viable which benefits local food production, tourism and recreation for all New Yorkers.***

