

Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts

25 North Front Street
Harrisburg, PA 17101
(717) 238-7223
www.PACD.org

Testimony Presented To:

House Appropriations Committee

Testimony Presented By:

MaryAnn Warren
Second Vice-President

Conservation District Budget
Requests

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Good Afternoon. My name is Mary Ann Warren and I am the Second Vice-President for the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts (PACD). I also serve as the County Commissioner director for the Susquehanna County Conservation District. I would like to thank the House Appropriations Committee for the opportunity to discuss the vital role conservation districts play in preserving Pennsylvania's natural resources, the worthwhile environmental activities districts perform on a daily basis, and the state appropriations earmarked for these services.

Pennsylvania's County Conservation districts were established in 1945 when the General Assembly passed the Soil Conservation District Act. For over 60 years the state's 66 conservation districts have served as leaders, addressing local natural resource concerns at the county level. Conservation districts were initially established to promote the value of conserving soil and water to farmers. Today's conservation districts have evolved to provide expertise in almost every area of natural resource conservation. Conservation districts continue to help people and communities manage the natural resources in their area.

In June 2005 the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee (LBFC) released a report on Conservation Districts. After review of the report, conservation districts quickly realized that the LBFC stated what they have been saying all along. Conservation districts have been doing more with less for quite some time. They provide landowners with the knowledge and the experience to successfully implement state law and regulatory requirements on their land and agricultural operations.

One of the largest programs conservation districts administer is the erosion and sedimentation control program. Conservation districts have a delegated agreement with the PA Department of Environmental Protection to review plans for earthmoving activities across the state. In some cases conservation districts can charge plan review fees for construction activities. However, this agreement will not allow conservation districts to charge for their services to state agencies such as the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, so districts cannot recoup the costs associated with these activities. To give you a better idea of the scope of programs conservation districts work with, I have delineated them below.

Key District Programs and Their Related State Agency

Department of Environmental Protection

Abandoned Mine Reclamation

Biosolids

Chesapeake Bay Program

Chesapeake Bay Financial Assistance Funding Program

Environmental Education

Erosion and Sedimentation (including National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System)

Storm Water Management

Watershed Management (including Growing Greener)

Waterway (stream encroachments) and Wetlands Protection

West Nile Virus

Department of Agriculture

Agricultural Conservation Technician

Agricultural Land Preservation

Agriculture Ombudsman Program

State Conservation Commission

Dirt and Gravel Road Maintenance Program

Nutrient and Odor Management Program

REAP

Department of Community and Economic Development

Floodplain Management

Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Forest Management

Parks and Public Land Management

As you can see, conservation districts are vital to environmental stewardship programs on the state and local level. Keep in mind that most of these programs do not have state funding associated with them. As a result, many districts are struggling for funds. The LBFC report refers to funding issues. These references include meeting the State Conservation Commission's (SCC) policy for 50% funding for the Conservation District Fund Allocation Program (CDFAP), which supplies financial support to partially staff conservation districts. In fact, it is the primary and most flexible source of conservation district funding. These funds are intended to cover 50% of the district manager's salary and benefits, 50% of a district's first technician, 50% of a district's second technician, and certain administrative expenses. Currently in Susquehanna County the state contributes 44 % of our district manager's salary and benefits, 38% of our first technician's salary and benefits, and only 14% of our second technician's salary and benefits. Unfortunately, other counties are experiencing similar county/state budget breakdowns. In Lehigh County, the state provides 32.6% of the manager's salary and benefits, 21% of the first technician's salary and benefits, and only 13.1% of the second technician's salary and benefits. The Westmoreland County operating budget consists of 76% funding from the county, 14% from the state, and 10% from other sources. Crawford County Conservation District operating budget consists of 67% county funds, 26% state funds, and 7% from other sources. The bottom line is that the SCC and LBFC recommendation to provide the 50% match between the county and the state has never been appropriated by the PA General Assembly. Consequently, conservation districts are not receiving the necessary state dollars to fully service their county residents and businesses. Adequate funding for this line item in the budget is PACD's top budgetary priority. Last year the state appropriated \$ 3,120,100, while a 50% match would have been \$5,515,823. Clearly, a deficiency in funding for this line item hinders the activities of local conservation districts.

Conservation District Fund Appropriation

The table below provides a summary of the funding for conservation districts in the Commonwealth budget identified as Local Soil and Water District Assistance in the budgets of the PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and PA Department of Agriculture (PDA). As a result of Act 110 of 2006, the funds appropriated in these line items were deposited into the Conservation District Fund.

The first column of the table below identifies the PACD priority of the item. The second column identifies the designated category of the funds. The third column provides the amounts allocated to conservation districts by the State Conservation Commission for FY 2007/08. The fourth column identifies the additional appropriation needed; and the last column provides the total appropriation needed for the Conservation District Fund for FY 2008/09. A detailed description of the FY 2008/09 request is provided in the attached Appendix.

CONSERVATION DISTRICT FUND APPROPRIATION

Priority	Category	FY 2007/08 Allocation	Additional Funding Needed	FY 2008/09 Total Needed
1	50% Cost-Share District Managers, First Technicians, and Second Technicians	\$3,120,100	\$2,395,723	\$5,515,823
2	Administrative Assistance	534,600	1,659,900	2,194,500
3	50% Cost-Share Third Technicians	0	1,650,000	1,650,000
4	ACT (Technicians, Engineers, and Training)	1,005,000	55,000	1,060,000
5	Farmland Preservation Program Support	387,000	358,000	745,000
6	Leadership Development	64,500	135,500	200,000
7	Ombudsman Program	148,800	101,200	250,000
TOTAL		\$5,260,000	\$6,355,323	\$11,615,323

Attached to my testimony is the entire PACD budget request. This complete report will give you a more detailed explanation of each line item in the budget request.

The 2005 LBFC report also stated that future consideration should be given to providing districts with a dedicated source of funding. Dedicated funding would greatly simplify district annual budgeting processes. In addition, any new delegated and/or contracted programs that the conservation districts are asked to administer on behalf of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania must be accompanied by sufficient funding to cover the costs of administration and delivery. PACD has researched other state funding sources for conservation district activities and possible avenues Pennsylvania could consider. One such idea is to add a surcharge onto DEP environmental fines and penalties to partially fund conservation district activities. This fund, similar to the CAT fund assessed to those who violate speeding limits on Pennsylvania roadways, would not diminish the fines/penalties collected by DEP. It would be an additional charge to those who violate environmental laws and regulations. Representative Ron Miller plans on introducing legislation to provide the mechanism needed for implementation of this program. While this funding source would not be sufficient for all conservation district activities, it is estimated that that it would provide approximately \$1.8 million in new funds per year.

Recently PACD has distributed a paper entitled, "Achieving Pennsylvania's Energy Independence Goals While Strengthening Conservation in Pennsylvania; The Critical Role of Pennsylvania's Conservation Districts." The report is attached to my testimony. In essence, the paper shows that Conservation District services will be increasingly necessary as emphasis on bio-fuel production alters farm operations and the need for updated and improved conservation plans. Technical assistance will be needed to keep pace with increased biofuel crop production including training and assistance pertaining to conservation practices. Additionally, new technologies to generate energy from combustion, digestion and gasification from manure and other feedstocks need to be accompanied by proper nutrient management. Increased biofuel crop production will add to nutrient pollution if not accompanied by conservation measures, and should be seen as an opportunity to greatly expand cover crops and support for other agricultural best management practices.

Renewable resources in Pennsylvania are not limited to field crop production. Pennsylvania's forests hold the potential to provide significant biomass for methanol production from currently non-utilized portions of the harvested wood products. Conservation districts can provide the oversight of these harvesting activities and encourage fast growing tree species to provide landowners income and protect the resource base.

Alternative energy sources such as the development of geothermal systems, wind and solar power, and the development of small scale hydropower will necessitate consideration of additional environmental impacts such as erosion and sedimentation control. Conservation districts can provide assistance in the earthmoving activities associated with the construction of these needed energy sources.

To accomplish the technical assistance necessary to implement renewable energy programs in PA, PACD recommends the following budget:

Conservation Planning:

- Idaho has a successful website technical assistance system designed to assist farmers in meeting their “core” natural resource planning requirements for state and federal programs through web based conservation planning tool. PA could emulate the Idaho program focusing on a website allowing PA farmers to develop conservation plan components consistent with conservation planning requirements. A Conservation website to produce and maintain an online conservation planning tool will cost approximately \$ 1 million over a 5 year period.

Website construction and maintenance **\$200,000 a year for 5 years**

- Technical assistance to complete conservation plans begun with Web-based tool (40 conservation planners needed) **\$2 million a year for 5 years**

Conservation Planning Total **\$2.2 million a year for 5 years**

Other Technical Assistance:

- Deliver technical assistance to producers to improve the energy efficiency of their operations, including field and machinery operations, crop and livestock production inputs, and heating, cooling and lighting of buildings; requires hiring of new multi-county staff.
- Assist producers in adopting sound cropping systems including crop production on marginal farmland to provide feedstocks for biofuel production, such as switchgrass for cellulosic ethanol production and other crops for the manufacture of biodiesel fuels.
- Oversight of forest harvesting activities for methanol production.
- Aid landowners and local governments as they develop alternative energy sources which necessitate consideration of additional environmental impacts such as erosion and sedimentation control.
- Technical assistance and educational programs for conservation and nutrient management for the farming community.

Other Technical Assistance Total **\$ 6.8 million a year For 5 years**

Statewide Tillage Program

- Increase adoption of conservation tillage on cropland, with the goal of at least 50% of producers transitioning to no-till and a cover crop program by 2012. This new program would be administered by the State Conservation Commission through conservation districts.

Program Total

**\$ 1,000,000 a year
for 5 years**

TOTAL

\$ 10 M per year for 5 years

In conclusion, the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts appreciates every cent the state provides for conservation district appropriations. We are hopeful that you will consider the information I discussed today and significantly increase the state portion of our 66 county conservation district budgets. Thank you for your consideration. I will be happy to answer any questions you have at this time.