

June 5, 2025

Written Testimony of Dr. Dan Sebert

National Watershed Coalition

“Supporting Farmers, Strengthening Conservation, Sustaining Working Lands”

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and members of the Subcommittee.

I am Dan Sebert, an original charter member of the National Watershed Coalition. I served the coalition as Executive Director for over 20 years. To begin, I want you to understand that the watershed program, to which I will speak, touches me on personal level. I was raised on the banks of the Washita River, one of the original 11 upstream flood protection demonstration watersheds authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1944. I was raised by parents and grandparents that had personally experienced the ravages of the Dust Bowl and the subsequent flooding which decimated both farms and communities across western Oklahoma and the Nation. My youth and perspective were formed with knowledge of the catastrophic damage to communities and farms by the Washita River’s frequent floods and I witnessed the incremental improvements as one watershed dam after another was completed on those tributaries and creeks. Not huge, massive dams on the river, it was these smaller structures dotting the landscape, integrated into the private farms and ranches that shaped my views and passion for a lifetime of service in conservation.

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. I consider Chairman Lucas as the godfather of the program, an heir to a legacy of watershed leadership shaped by his family and community stalwarts in rural western Oklahoma. The reason behind this is clear and simple. Of the nearly 12,000 watershed structures, over 2000 of them are in the state of Oklahoma.

Building on the success of the Flood Control Act of 1944, the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations established through the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (Public Law 83-566) authorizes NRCS to work with local sponsors to install watershed protection and improvement projects. Projects can and do provide flood prevention, water quality and quantity protection, agricultural water management, municipal water supply management, fish and wildlife habitat protection, and public recreation development. The program has gained even more importance as a critical tool for helping rural communities adapt to increasing weather volatility and reducing risk against catastrophic weather events.

There are about 2,100 NRCS assisted watershed projects in the United States, covering 145 million acres, with projects in every state. In 1,271 of these projects, 11,845 flood control dams

have been constructed by local watershed sponsors with NRCS assistance. In most cases, a local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) serve as the local sponsors. In some cases, they are assisted by other co-sponsors such as watershed districts or county government.

The benefits of this program are significant and far reaching. The total average annual monetary benefits these projects produce is over \$2 billion. In addition, over 282,000 acres of wetlands and over nine-million acres of upland wildlife habitat have been created or enhanced by watershed projects. There are watershed project dams in 218 Congressional Districts across the nation. As of today, these projects are protecting more than 610,000 homes, 46,000 businesses, 180,000 farms and ranches, 61,000 bridges, and 28,000 domestic water supplies. As a result, more than 48 million people across the United States benefit from the Watershed Program every year.

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, managing agricultural water, 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.

Conservation practices within these approved project areas improve water quality and are also a vital part of all watershed projects. Practices such as terraces, waterways, grass buffers, strip cropping, and grade stabilization structures, are used to prevent soil erosion and reduce sediment. They also increase the service life of dams and their ability to provide flood damage reduction.

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. Coalition staff recently toured areas of Kentucky impacted by April/May 2025 floods where Watershed Program infrastructure reduced damage and provided significant protection of life and property.

Watershed Rehabilitation Program

I cannot understate the looming crisis facing rural America. Recognizing the aging watershed infrastructure, watershed dam rehabilitation is a critical component of the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program, authorized in 2000. Many dams today are in a far different setting than when they were constructed. Population has increased; residential and commercial development has occurred upstream and downstream from the dams; and land uses within many watersheds have changed. Many of these dams do not meet current State dam safety regulations that have been enacted and revised with more stringent requirements than when the dams were built resulting in higher dam hazard classifications, primarily due to population at risk. In addition, many of these structures built by NRCS had a design life of only 50 years. Since most of this construction occurred from the 1940's to the early 1970's, many of these dams are now past their design life and show the effects of aging with deteriorating metal and fractured concrete components.

The protection these structures afford our communities touch every aspect of our daily lives and have been so effective for over 60 years that many folks are unaware of their presence on the landscape. Chances are as you travel across western and southern Oklahoma highways or perhaps south on Interstate 35 through the heart of Texas some portion of the road receives flood protection from an upstream Watershed Program dam. The local economy that is driven in part by grain, cattle, oil and natural gas relies daily on this protection. The roads and bridges that carry our children to and from school are protected. In several cases the school itself along with other key elements of community are protected.

Many of our most productive farms and our healthiest soils are in these protected watersheds. There are many less obvious benefits that come in the form of the prosperity and opportunity made possible by these projects. The partnership between USDA and local sponsors that brought us this protection is extremely important in keeping it in place. Rehabilitation is necessary to ensure dams continue to protect lives, businesses and homes. Failure to provide for the rehabilitation of these dams could result in dam breaches which would have catastrophic consequences.

As previously alluded Mr. Lucas led the development of rehabilitation legislation in 2000 that ensured the nation's investment in the watershed program had the opportunity to continue into the future. Under the Dam Rehabilitation Program, dams are selected for rehabilitation through analysis and a rigorous assessment process. This commitment from state and local partners is necessary to ensure that sponsors are fully committed to a project. This legislation gave us the pathway and the procedure for reinvestment.

As the significantly invested local sponsors of watershed projects, state and local sponsors have felt that we have suffered from an inadequately funded federal partner for much of the past decade. Sponsors and state watershed program partners have responded with O&M dollars, rehabilitation matching funds, technical and financial assistance. **I cannot over emphasize the importance of Congress and the USDA-NRCS as full partners in the watershed program.** We hope these recent investments are a signal to USDA about the importance of these programs and the willingness of the state partners and local sponsors to share in protecting the local communities and agriculture producers in this ever-changing environment.

National Watershed Farm Bill Priorities

The National Watershed Coalition (NWC) has several suggestions for reforms for the watershed Program. The first is an increase of mandatory funding for the program. Increased funding will create certainty and stability to ensure valuable projects can flow from planning to implementation and meet the changing pressures placed on our watersheds and rural agriculture producers. The program largely survives on discretionary program funding but did receive \$50 million in annual funding through the 2018 Farm Bill. I would note that the program did receive this funding in the recent reconciliation bill passed by the House. This historic investment and commitment to our rural communities is appreciated and its importance cannot be overstated.

Second, NWC recommends increased flexibility in the program's authority use of program funds to repair and replace essential structural components. Many of the program constructed dams

now require significant repairs that go well beyond the routine Operation and Maintenance required of the local project sponsors but fall short of the threshold for full rehabilitation. This adjustment in authority preserves the previous investment in infrastructure and flood protection by providing federal funding for design and construction for repairs of the structural components thereby extending their performance life. Failure to repair and remediate common component and material deterioration on these dams could result in loss of life, loss of the investment in infrastructure and most certainly a loss of benefits to the nation.

Third, NWC recommends raising the federal cost share for rehabilitation as these structures are often high hazard. With few exceptions, these flood prevention structures were fully funded by federal funds. For decades, the local sponsors have assumed the responsibility for inspection, operation, and maintenance of these structures. With limited access to funding to provide the required local cost share to complete the cradle-to-grave planning, design and construction necessary for rehabilitation, Federal support is essential. The potentially catastrophic outcome of this cost-share requirement barrier is that many project sponsors will not initiate rehabilitation of aged, high hazard, high priority projects. Increasing the federal cost- share will alleviate this significant financial burden placed on local project sponsors.

Fourth, NWC believes it is crucial to reduce the regulatory and administrative barriers that adds years to project implementation timeline. The authorities in the watershed program provide for the planning and implementation at a smaller scale benefiting agriculture production and rural communities. The project scale is significantly smaller than the much larger public works of the Department of Interior and the U.S Army Corps of Engineers. This program is accomplished in partnership with local units of government, termed project sponsors. Yet, compliance with the OMB's Project Planning Principles and Guidelines, benefits thresholds, other federal Agency permitting requirements, and complicated procedures impair or negate project implementation and consume limited sponsor staff and financial resources. Providing a streamlined process with a system of checks and balances commensurate with the scale of the projects will accelerate project delivery and serve out rural communities well. In addition, several states have or can develop the capacity to deliver this program effectively with oversight from NRCS. Statutory clarity to provide authority and requisite funding to capable state agencies could streamline and promote more efficient delivery of the program.

Finally, NWC would like to see statutory language added to provide oversight and accountability mechanisms for program funds. Real-time transparency in all aspects of program delivery will ensure and support program integrity through the accountability for allocations, expenditures, and timeliness of delivered projects.

The National Watershed Coalition was pleased to see its full set of recommendations integrated into The Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024. We cannot thank Chairman Thompson and Subcommittee Chair Lucas enough for their support of these policies and look forward to working with them and other members to continue this work into the next farm bill.

Thank you for the opportunity and privilege to address the committee with respect to the watershed program. I would point the members and Committee staff to the Coalition's website www.watershedcoalition.org for additional history, facts, figures and multiple Watershed

Program success stories. I will conclude where I began. The implementation and successes of the watershed program shaped my life and the western Oklahoma communities that thrived under the umbrella of protection these structures provide. Similar stories can be found across the nation where in a blend of Federal, State and local partnership these projects have been successfully implemented. As we look to the challenges and the need for increased resiliency in our agriculture production and the communities, the watershed program is more important today than ever in history. Not only for new planning and implementation around flood protection, water supply and water conservation, but also taking action on the older structures needing attention to continue to protect populations and infrastructure expansion that has occurred in the decades following their initial construction...the result of the many benefits this program continues to provide.