

Natural Resources and Environment
Statement of Ann Mills, Acting Under Secretary
Before the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and
Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to appear before you today to present the fiscal year 2014 budget and program proposals for the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. I appreciate the ongoing support of the Chairman and members of this Subcommittee for voluntary, private lands conservation.

USDA, through NRCS, remains committed to helping the nation's farmers meet their conservation goals as they respond to the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

The President's 2014 budget requests a total of \$4 billion for NRCS programs; approximately \$3 billion in mandatory funding and \$808 million in discretionary funding. Today I will highlight just a few examples of how USDA, through NRCS, is **coupling its traditional strengths of site-specific** technical and financial assistance with a new generation of **conservation approaches** that will help America's farmers continue to be the most productive in the world.

Under the 2008 Farm Bill, NRCS and its customers have benefitted from historic levels of conservation funding that has enabled the agency to

maintain its nationwide conservation support while giving us the opportunity to target funding towards some of the country's most critical natural resource challenges.

Our Conservation Effects Assessment Project, or CEAP, has showed us that targeting the right practices in the right places can significantly improve the **cost-effectiveness** of **producers' efforts to reduce** nutrient and sediment loadings. NRCS has implemented a number of landscape initiatives including in the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River Basin, the California Bay Delta, the Everglades and the Great Lakes. Across these landscapes, we are leveraging producer and partner funds to improve water quality and wildlife habitat for at-risk species.

Two other forward-thinking priorities for Secretary Vilsack are agricultural certainty programs and environmental markets. Both create non-regulatory incentives for producers to voluntarily scale up conservation practices. And markets attract private dollars into the farm economy. Given its technical experts, science-based conservation practice standards, and trusted relationships with landowners, NRCS is uniquely positioned to play a leading role in supporting States and other stakeholders as they develop certainty programs and environmental markets.

NRCS is developing computer applications that can quantify the carbon and nutrient reduction benefits of producers' conservation activities, which can

help farmers and ranchers decide whether to engage in emerging environmental markets.

In a back to the future move, NRCS has launched a soil health campaign. NRCS was borne out of the dust bowl 77 years ago. Soil health is in its DNA. Today, the Agency is re-emphasizing its commitment, using the latest knowledge & tools to help farmers improve what is their most valuable asset. Doing so can lead to productivity increases, reductions in input costs, and, importantly, increased resilience to extreme weather events.

And when those extreme events do occur, NRCS is there to help. During the record drought of 2012, NRCS moved quickly to get technical and financial assistance to farmers in 22 states, helping them plant cover crops and install livestock watering facilities and more efficient irrigation systems. NRCS has played a leadership role in emergency responses to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and Hurricane Sandy. And right now the agency is positioning emergency response funding in midwestern states experiencing flooding.

NRCS is also assisting USDA with addressing poverty issues in rural America. One in six Americans is living in poverty and 90 percent of the highest poverty rate counties are in rural America. NRCS launched an effort as part of USDA's StrikeForce Initiative, to accelerate assistance to historically underserved groups. Using our financial and technical resources, we can help underserved farmers and ranchers in these communities. We're not just investing in conservation practices – we're investing in families, communities and future

generations. Last year program application by underserved producers increased an average of 82 percent in StrikeForce areas.

In the President's 2014 budget we propose difficult cuts. But we also propose strategic investments. They include investments in significant business process improvements, and in restructuring the Budget and Financial Management, Property and Procurement, and Human Resources functions —with the objective of lowering costs and improving service.

These steps are helping us weather budget cuts while maintaining a robust level of service to farmers and ranchers. NRCS employees are setting a tremendous example, delivering record levels of service to their customers with fewer resources.

Secretary Vilsack recently testified that under President Obama's leadership, USDA has taken significant steps to strengthen rural America and provide a foundation for continued growth and prosperity. With changing climate patterns and high commodity prices, producers need NRCS's help now more than ever to maintain the Nation's natural resource base.

I would like to thank the members of this Subcommittee **for supporting NRCS** in those efforts.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.