

**Statement by  
Anthony “Tony” Kramer  
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Before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
Subcommittee on Water Resources and the Environment  
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Good Morning. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) and the role of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Voluntary private lands conservation is making a big difference in the Great Lakes region and demonstrating that we can sustain highly productive agriculture while making progress in protecting and improving the Nation’s natural resources.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service mission in brief is to “help people help the land”. The Agency has offices in nearly every county nationwide and natural resource professionals who assist producers to plan and implement conservation solutions that meet their environmental and operational objectives.

**Voluntary Conservation Works**

At NRCS, our conservationists work with State and local partners, as well as private organizations, to deliver conservation technical and financial assistance to private landowners. In FY 2014, NRCS provided technical assistance to over 135,000 customers nationwide to address natural resource objectives on almost 60 million acres of farm, ranch, and forest land.

NRCS technical and financial assistance is delivered to private landowners primarily through programs authorized in the Farm Bill. Through Farm Bill conservation programs, NRCS technical and financial assistance enables landowners to make conservation improvements to their land. This assistance helps them plan and implement a variety of conservation practices, such as planting cover crops, adopting no-till, removing invasive plants and restoring wetlands. These programs include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.

Voluntary conservation efforts are making a difference in the water quality of the Great Lakes. Through the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP), NRCS and other USDA agencies quantify the environmental effects of conservation practices and programs and develop the science base for managing the agricultural landscape for environmental quality. The NRCS

CEAP estimates that the GLRI contracts from 2010 thru 2013 have reduced nitrogen delivery by an average of 12 lbs. per acre and phosphorus delivery by 2.1 pounds per acre (at the edge-of-field). These estimated reductions total 3,596,000 lbs. of nitrogen and 635,500 lbs. of phosphorus, which means fewer nutrients available to feed harmful algal blooms and hypoxia in the lake.

### **The Great Lakes as a Critical National Resource**

Containing 20 percent of earth's fresh water and 95 percent of the United States' fresh surface water, the Great Lakes are a vital natural resource. Over 30 million Americans get their drinking water from the Great Lakes, which also support a \$62-billion dollar economy based on fishing, boating, and recreational activities. These vital waters of the Great Lakes are highly sensitive to biological and chemical stresses and many of the coastal areas have become impaired by sediment and nutrients. Wildlife in the Great Lakes region has also been impacted by habitat fragmentation and competition from invasive species.

In the Great Lakes, excess phosphorus has been identified as a significant issue where high levels of this nutrient contribute to algal blooms in Western Lake Erie, Saginaw Bay, and Green Bay. These parts of the lakes receive water and excess nutrients from watersheds and lands of the Maumee River in Ohio, Michigan and Indiana; the Saginaw River in Michigan; and the Lower Fox River in Wisconsin. NRCS is also helping producers and land managers to plan and implement activities to improve and protect the natural resources in watersheds throughout the eight states within the Great Lakes basin-- Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

### **Great Lakes Restoration Initiative – A Boost in Federal Funding**

GLRI complements the significant investment made by NRCS in the Great Lakes region. Since 2010, GLRI has provided an additional \$137 million in financial and technical assistance through Interagency Agreements with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Over \$59 million of this was used to fund over 1,575 contracts with producers committing to implement conservation practices on over 300,000 acres. During this same time period, NRCS planned and obligated 3,655 contracts to implement conservation on over 400,000 acres in the Great Lakes Basin, using over \$65 million in Farm Bill financial assistance funding.

NRCS has delivered these funds primarily through three conservation programs: Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (now repealed) and Conservation Technical Assistance. With GLRI funding, NRCS has accelerated work in the following priorities identified in the Great Lakes Action Plan: invasive terrestrial species control;

nearshore and non-point source pollution; habitat and wildlife protection and restoration; and accountability, education, monitoring, evaluation, communication and partnerships.

NRCS has further targeted funds into Phosphorus Priority Watersheds to maximize effectiveness and efficiency through the voluntary efforts of producers, particularly to reduce nutrient losses but also to accelerate wildlife habitat restoration and terrestrial invasive species control. Since 2012, producers have entered into about 400 contracts to implement critical conservation measures on nearly 80,000 acres in these important watersheds. These Phosphorus Priority Watersheds include:

- Subwatersheds of the Upper Blanchard River watershed in the Western Lake Erie Basin in Ohio
- Swartz, Kearsley, and subwatersheds of the Upper Shiawasee River watershed draining to Saginaw Bay.
- Subwatersheds of the Lower Fox River in Wisconsin
- Several additional Phosphorus Priority watersheds were added in Indiana, New York, and Michigan in fiscal year 2015.

### **Partnership is Key to Conservation**

NRCS works closely with partners across the country and in the Great Lakes to maximize the federal investment and leverage private investment. Nationwide, in FY 2014, non-Federal partners contributed an estimated \$77.9 million in in-kind goods and services along with nearly \$123 million in financial assistance to address local resource concerns that support the goal of getting conservation on the ground. These partnerships extend the effectiveness of the federal investment and enable more conservation work to be delivered on the ground.

Within the context of the GLRI, between 2010 and 2014, NRCS worked with 37 different entities including 18 local soil and water conservation districts, three state conservation districts associations, five Resource Conservation and Development Districts, one University, seven non-governmental organizations, and three State Departments of Natural Resources and Agriculture. During this time, 57 cooperative agreements were completed leveraging \$6.8 million of GLRI funds. These agreements varied in partner match from 10% to 50% and equaled at least \$2 million.

NRCS recognizes that some of the best partners and salesmen for conservation practices are farmers who are using conservation systems successfully and have benefitted from our programs. NRCS is supporting this strategy in GLRI by working with local partners and farmers to establish networks of demonstration farms. These are farms that have adopted conservation practices and are open for formalized tours to neighboring farmers. So far, demonstration farms

are established in the Lower Fox River watershed near Green Bay, Wisconsin, and we are working with partners to establish a similar network in sub-watersheds of the Maumee River in northwest Ohio, draining to western Lake Erie.

GLRI has also facilitated the cooperation between the federal partners in this initiative. NRCS has worked with USGS to establish edge-of-field monitoring with willing farmers in priority watersheds. The knowledge gained from these monitoring stations helps to quantify water quality improvements achieved based on practices that are implemented and provide valuable feedback to producers who are seeking to maximize the efficiency of their operations.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. Conservation continues to be a solid investment in our Nation's future. GLRI and other NRCS conservation programs and activities supported by Congress and the Administration have demonstrated success in helping farmers, ranchers, and private forest owners achieve their production and operational goals in balance with natural resource objectives, which provide benefits for rural communities and the nation as a whole. I would be happy to respond to any questions at this time. Thank you.