

Testimony to the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee

In Support of HB 2800

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Thank you, Chairman Rahjes and members of the committee for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 2800 on behalf of the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD). KACD represents the 105 conservation districts in Kansas, one in every county. Each conservation district is governed by an elected board of 5 volunteer supervisors, 525 statewide that provide leadership in addressing natural resource concerns at the local level.

Conservation Districts receive their base annual funding from the County Commission in their home county with a state match of up to \$25,000 per year. We have introduced HB 2800 because the current state match and funding cap makes it difficult for conservation districts to recruit and retain the quality staff needed to provide the resources necessary for Kansas citizens.

When a local resident is wanting assistance addressing a natural resource issue on their land, the local USDA service center is often their first stop and the conservation district manager is often their first contact. District managers can explain the various programs that are available and directs them to Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or conservation district technical staff to work with the client to listen to their concerns and provide alternatives to address their concerns. Districts have more than 40 technical positions, obtained through a variety of agreements with state agencies, NRCS and NGO's that provide funding for these positions working side by side with NRCS technical staff. These include technicians, agronomists and archeologists located throughout the state and an urban conservationist working with small farmers and homeowners in the Kansas City metropolitan area.

Districts are the primary local delivery system for conservation programs administered by the Kansas Department of Agriculture's Division of Conservation. The districts take the application, make approvals, coordinate the technical assistance needed to design and implement the practices and make the payment to the producer once the practice is completed. Districts are the primary delivery system for the Kansas Reservoir Protection Initiative, work closely with KDHE in implementing WRAPS projects across the state, and work with several private organizations helping to deliver climate smart programs to producers. Districts will also be playing a significant role with implementation of the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program project, bringing \$25,000,000 federal dollars to Kansas to improve irrigation technology and reduce water use in the High Plains aquifer. Along with those duties districts also provide administrative and technical support to NRCS delivering federal programs to Kansas landowners and operators.

Conservation Districts have a very extensive Education and Outreach program in many counties. Whether it be the Water Festival in Garden City, Conservation Roundup in Colby, A Slice of Ag in Overland Park or one of the many other events across the state, districts reach thousands of elementary and high school students each year. We also sponsor the Envirothon competitions for high school students across the state.

Adult education activities include workshops and field days addressing concerns such as soil health, range management, wetland restoration, irrigation management or topics like community gardens, pollinators, high tunnels and other events addressing the needs of our small scale and urban producers.

Now back to the point of why we need HB 2800. While districts are a sub-division of state government, conservation districts base funding comes from the county commissions. Current law allows for a match of county funding up to \$25,000. This cap has been in place for 17 years and during that span the cost of employment and operations has risen significantly. Forty two of the districts receive \$25,000 or less and six of those districts receive \$20,000 or less. The \$30,000 - \$50,000 budgets that these districts receive from combined county and state funding is simply not enough to fairly compensate staff and cover office operating expenses.

This has resulted in high turnover of district employees as they find better paying jobs with better benefits. The average pay for a district employee across the state is \$18.75 per hour. Only 14 districts provide full health insurance coverage with another 14 providing partial coverage. Seventy Seven districts do not provide any health insurance and this lack of health insurance is one of the leading reasons for staff turnover.

HB 2800 would provide the opportunity to provide an enhanced state match of county funding of up to 2:1, subject to appropriation, with a state cap of \$50,000. This enhanced match rate, with a cap to limit total state expenditures, will help lead to a more stable district workforce with the experience to effectively deliver programs to your constituents at the local level.

The Governor's FY 2025 budget recommends an increase of approximately \$1,000,000 for aid to conservation districts, however due to the current cap the Division of Conservation will be unable to allocate much of that without the passage of HB 2800.

I appreciate the opportunity to visit with the committee about the important role conservation districts play in natural resource conservation and encourage the passage of HB 2800 to support the important role of conservation districts in your communities.