

NACD ANNUAL SPRING FLY-IN

Washington, D.C.

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REPORT

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This was the first Fly-In in which I have participated. The rest of the five member team included:

- Wade Troutman, NACD Executive Board member and 35 year supervisor with the Foster Creek CD;
- Michael Crowder, NACD 2nd Vice President and supervisor with the Benton CD;
- Mark Clark, Executive Director, Washington State Conservation Commission; and
- Roylene Rides at the Door, State Conservationist, NRCS (Spokane).

The day began with a NACD sponsored breakfast. The first speakers were House Ag Committee chair Frank Lucas of Oklahoma and the ranking Democrat on the committee, Marcia Fudge of Ohio. It was heartening to see two members who clearly like each other. Trivia note: Who knew that Ohio is the 12th largest farm production strategy in the country? Mr. Lucas shared that about 80% of the committee members have three years or less tenure on the committee and were not on the committee in 2014 when the last Farm Bill was passed. Mr. Lucas clearly supports locally led, voluntary conservation. He did indicate that it was a done deal that CSP would be rolled in to EQIP.

The next speaker was Pelham Straughn, a former House Ag Committee staffer (18 years) who provides NACD contracted expertise on Ag policy and sustainability. He shared these observations:

- 90% of all members of Congress do not serve for or seek publicity, but just want to do the work.
- March is typically the busiest month of the year for Congress. Doing the Fly-In is important.
- Keep the messaging simple. Technical Assistance is the backbone of programs.
- Key talking point - Don't cut conservation dollars.
- The House has been working on the Farm Bill for six months and is 99% done. The 1% is a problem – there is not agreement on how to address the SNAP program (food stamps). The key issue is over work requirements. This disagreement has effectively terminated further progress in the House. It is not clear in the least what work has been completed on the Farm Bill in the Senate. Best guess is that the current Farm Bill will be extended into 2019 before a new version is finally adopted and sent to the President.

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Coleman Garrison, NACD Director of Government Affairs, spoke next. He shared that Sen. Debbie Stabenow of Michigan was proposing to significantly expand RCPP, but fund it by increasing the amount transferred from CSP and EQIP from 7% to 20%. Coleman indicated that NACD's position was not to oppose expanding RCPP, but not at the expense of CSP and EQIP which are proven programs.

We left at each office a two page (back-to-back) document, Priorities for Voluntary Conservation and the Farm Bill. The information packet also included:

- FY 2029 Appropriations
- NRCS Hiring Freeze and FTE Cap for FY 2018¹
- 2018 Farm Bill Recommendations
- Natural Resource Health & Management
- Secure Rural Schools Act
- Firewise Program
- Shellfish Program
- Precision Conservation for Salmon and Water Quality in Puget Sound

If you would like a copy of any of these materials, let me know.

We were able to meet with just three of the ten members of our congressional delegation. I'm told this was the toughest year in many to get onto members' calendars.

1. Rep. Denny Heck – 10 Congressional District. He is supportive of the work of conservation districts and expressed an interest in the NACD Tribal Outreach and Partnerships Group. (NOTE: I have sent him a thank you note for his time and included a copy of the report I provided at the TOP meeting in Nashville in late January.)

On a personal note, it was nice to 'reconnect' with Denny. He goes back to my Senate Education Committee days, and his on the House Education Committee. He also was instrumental in establishing TVW, which ended up broadcasting several State Board of Education meetings during my tenure at that agency.

¹ There is no longer a hiring freeze per se on NRCS. However, a practical freeze is in place because OMB (Office of Management and Budget) has capped the total, national employee numbers at 10,300. Until that cap is raised or lifted entirely, NRCS cannot hire new staff throughout the country.

2. Rep. Dan Newhouse – 4th Congressional District. He, too, is supportive of conservation districts and recognizes the importance of the Farm Bill. (NOTE: He is a native of Sunnyside, as am I. It's nice to connect with shared roots. I sent him a thank you note and let him know that I appreciate his grace and civility in his role.)
3. Sen. Maria Cantwell. This was an unexpected visit as we were scheduled to just meet with some of her staff. She showed up and gave us an extraordinary 25'. During the conversation, Mark Clark mentioned the Sen. Stabenow effort to expand RCPP. Sen. Cantwell speed dialed her, got her on the line, put her on speaker, and handed off to Mark to chat. Bottom-line, Sen. Stabenow said that any expansion of RCPP would not come at the expense of CSP and EQIP. That meeting was as probably as surreal an experience as I can recall. (NOTE: I sent her a thank you note. We go back to Olympia days when she was in the House. One of her favorite state senators was Cliff Bailey, who was chair of the Senate Education Committee during my time on staff.)
4. Rep. Adam Smith – 9th Congressional District. It was not a visit per se, but when we dropped off the information packet at the office, his office door coincidentally opened. I caught his eyes, walked up and shook his hand, told him who I was and remarked on our shared time in Olympia when he served on the Senate Education Committee during my time on committee staff.

Right before lunch we were able to squeeze in a visit with Casey Katims, Director of Federal and Inter-State Affairs for Governor Inslee, and based in D.C. It was an excellent visit. Casey impressed me with his knowledge of issues and how Capitol Hill works.

We had lunch with Rich Innes (Meridian Institute) who also provides contracted policy support to the State Conservation Commission, primarily on Puget Sound salmon issues.

I left the following morning, so missed out on some additional meetings on Wednesday (though I'm not clear how many stayed scheduled as a snow storm was rolling in that day. My flight was one of the few that made it off the ground in the rapidly diminishing window of opportunity.

Since our return home, on March 23rd, Congress passed and the President signed into law an omnibus appropriations bill. NACD issued a press release highlighting the conservation measures in that funding bill. See attached.

If you have any questions, please let me know and I'll do my best to answer, or find the answer.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 23, 2018

**NACD Applauds Conservation Measures
in Omnibus Bill**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, Congress passed and President Donald Trump signed into law a Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 omnibus appropriations package that will improve conservation delivery across the United States.

“NACD is encouraged by the strong support for conservation programs in the omnibus,” **NACD President Brent Van Dyke said.** “These provisions provide both the staff and financial assistance essential to conservationists, and we hope to see similar funding in FY 2019 appropriations this fall.”

The omnibus includes strong funding levels for Conservation Operations at \$874 million, including conservation technical assistance, and maintains full funding levels for farm bill conservation programs. Additionally, the System for Award Management (SAM) and Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) requirements to participate in conservation programs were eliminated.

“NACD has supported eliminating these requirements for years,” **NACD CEO Jeremy Peters said.** “Removing the burdensome task of SAM/DUNS reporting allows landowners and operators to prioritize conservation program participation without hindrance.”

The omnibus maintains funding for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)’s 319 grants and provides continued financial support for the Watershed Operations and Watershed Rehabilitation programs. The package also includes \$335 million for the USDA Forest Service State and Private Forestry programs, which is an increase from FY 2017’s levels, with \$28 million dedicated to urban forestry efforts.

“From rural to urban lands, conservation matters on every acre,” **Peters said.** “These increases in programmatic funding, as well as the permanent wildfire funding fix laid out in the bill, enable natural disaster mitigation on a variety of landscapes.”

“Federal support for these programs is a significant win for landowners nationwide,” **said Van Dyke.** “There is still work to be done, but these funding levels provide conservationists with increased resources to deliver the best technical assistance