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February 6, 2023

Senator Ann Rest
Chair, Senate Taxes Committee

SUBJECT: SF 526 (Klein) Aid program establishment and appropriation for soil and water conservation districts

Chair Rest and Senate Taxes Committee Members:

On behalf of the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD), thank you for the opportunity to express support for the Soil and Water Conservation District Aid provisions included in SF 526 (Klein).

SWCD Aid would establish a standing, statutory appropriation of general funds from the Department of Revenue to Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) statewide, in the amount of \$22 million per year. It would be similar to state aids for other elected units of local government. This more stable and more sufficient form of state funding for SWCDs is critical for the long-term success of the work districts are doing across the state.

SWCDs are the technical experts and “boots on the ground.” Our staff and elected board members have the trust of their community members and are able to help landowners work through conservation programs from start to finish.

Funding for SWCDs is a shared obligation using both state and local resources. Counties are a strong local partner for the local share and we greatly appreciate their support. State funding over the past several years, however, has been a struggle.

We’re truly grateful for the past years of Clean Water Fund appropriations for funding our work across the state, but every two years we face challenges and uncertainty around that funding. The funding proposed in SWCD Aid would provide a more efficient, predictable and longer-term funding mechanism allowing SWCDs across the state to support implementation of conservation projects that protect and improve Minnesota’s natural resources. This new path would also allow us to more adequately leverage federal conservation resources, and it would allow more of the Clean Water Funds to go to on-the-ground implementation in the future. SWCD Aid would be distributed statewide to each of Minnesota’s 88 SWCDs, as well as to Hennepin and Ramsey Counties.

MASWCD represents the state’s 88 soil and water conservation districts, including their 440 elected supervisors and their more than 460 employees. Soil and Water Conservation Districts are political subdivisions of the State established under Minnesota Statute Chapter 103C. Each SWCD is governed by a board of elected supervisors. SWCD law is implemented across 100% of the state.

As water quality and soil health issues are prioritized in Minnesota, SWCDs' roles have expanded and now include helping landowners navigate programs and policies that are increasing in complexity. To face these challenges and increase our pace of progress toward cleaner water and healthier soils, SWCDs need more predictable and more adequate state funding. SWCD Aid will help meet those funding needs.

A few examples of how SWCD Aid would benefit districts across the state include:



Benton SWCD would be able to hire an additional technician, which would allow the district to provide service on a timelier basis to feedlot owners and to producers interested in the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program.



Carver SWCD would expand upon two new programs: their Pollinator Cost-Share program, and their Soil Health/Cover Crop program. SWCD aid would also enable the district to retain the qualified staff needed for providing these public services in a rapidly growing county.



Clay SWCD would be able to enhance staffing to meet landowner interest in soil health practices such as cover crops and purchase equipment for assisting with establishment of pollinator habitat.



Crow Wing SWCD would be able to devote technical expertise and resources to projects like re-routing an ATV trail to mitigate soil erosion into a nearby lake, which they currently do not have the capacity to address in a timely fashion.



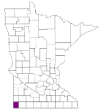
Dakota SWCD would be able to hire a conservation technician for one-on-one landowner outreach and project implementation. Recent survey results have shown that SWCD staff are well respected and trusted and that landowners prefer one-on-one discussions about conservation opportunities rather than larger workshops and events.



Lake SWCD would be able to enhance capacity to address critical water quality and soil erosion issues along Lake Superior and its tributaries, collaborating with neighboring SWCDs and other agencies on work as part of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.



Olmsted SWCD would be able to enhance staffing, expand technical services, and increase programming to the public to help meet the growing needs of their constituents in both urban and rural settings.



Rock SWCD would be able to train and retain qualified staff who have earned the trust of the agricultural producers in the county, providing these local cooperators with the technical services need to get needed conservation practices implemented on their farm fields.

These examples illustrate how SWCDs across the state would use this funding to boost their capacity in getting voluntary conservation projects implemented. They showcase the important work that could be accomplished, but where we're currently falling short.

Thank you for your consideration of SWCD Aid, and how important this funding mechanism is to Minnesota's statewide conservation delivery system.

Sincerely,

Chuck Rau
President
Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts