



# Sustaining Our Locally Led Conservation Delivery System

*Urgent Action Needed to Address Funding Freezes,  
Bridge Staffing Gaps, and Preserve Partnerships*

*February 28, 2025*



National Association of  
Conservation Districts

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Cover photo: Holly Dyer, Laramie Rivers Conservation District, Wyoming

# Part 1: Executive Summary

## Background

On February 18, 2025, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) issued a survey to its members asking for their input on how producers, communities, and local staff are being impacted by recent Executive Orders and funding freezes. As of February 28, 2025, NACD received over 350 responses across 45 states and territories. Responses are anonymous. Thank you to all who submitted feedback.

There are three main themes:

1. The funding freeze has widespread impacts on producers, conservation, and local economies.
2. NRCS terminations and staffing shortages will have long-term impacts on the quality and timeliness of technical assistance and overall service.
3. We must act to protect partnerships and the future of the voluntary, locally led conservation delivery system.

The second part of this report includes anonymized quotes. Hearing directly from our members provides valuable insights into the real impacts of recent executive actions. Quotes were edited to remove potential identifiers, correct spelling errors, and in rare cases, to provide context. All edits are indicated by [...].

NACD appreciates feedback from respondents and encourages conservation districts and their associations to continue to share the latest impacts of executive actions with us. This document will be updated on a weekly basis.

Members may direct questions about this report to NACD leaders or the Government Affairs Team. All other questions may be directed to [info@nacdnet.org](mailto:info@nacdnet.org).

## Survey Questions

Producer & Customer Impacts:

- What are the impacts on producers and customers within your communities due to funding freezes?
- What are the impacts on producers and customers within your communities due to NRCS terminations and anticipated layoffs?

Operational Impacts (Conservation Districts & Associations)

- Has your organization had to furlough or lay off employees due to a freeze in payments?
- Has your access to office space, vehicles, or USDA systems been impacted?
- Do you request advance payments from the federal government?

Impacts on Grants or Agreements

- Have you received a letter or email formally terminating your grant or agreement?
- Please provide any additional comments relating to your grants or agreements.

Additional Information

- Would you like to be contacted by NACD staff?

- Please provide any additional information you would like to share with NACD.

## Survey Findings

### *Theme #1: Widespread Impacts of Funding Freeze on Producers, Conservation, and Local Economies*

Over the past several years, producers have grappled with high input costs, fluctuating commodity prices, and severe weather events (e.g., hurricanes, drought, wildfire). The recent funding freeze strains their already fragile economic situation.

Many producers who invested tens of thousands of dollars in cost-share contracts and practices now find themselves stuck, awaiting reimbursement. For some, this delay has pushed them into dire financial situations. Some rely on interest bearing lines of credit and struggle to pay bills as they await payment from USDA.

*Note: While the Prompt Payment Act requires the government to pay interest on overdue payments, this is not applicable to producer contracts (e.g., EQIP). High workload and insufficient staffing can create built-in lags between costs incurred and receiving payment for practices completed. For example, it could take NRCS several weeks (or more) to inspect practices for check-out or approval. Their approval is generally required before a producer is eligible for payment for services or costs incurred well in advance of their final practice approval. This means that producers may be liable for paying interest, unless USDA includes these calculations in their payments.*

The pause on funding continues to impact many producer payments and programs under the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) (e.g., Environmental Quality Initiatives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)), Infrastructure Improvement & Jobs Act (IIJA), and Partnerships for Climate Smart Commodities (PCSC).

The consequences extend far beyond individual producers. Local economies are also feeling the strain, as the impacts of the funding freeze ripples through communities. Examples include retailers selling cover crop seeds or building supplies, contractors and TSPs awaiting payment for work completed, and delayed or cancelled contracts for projects planned in the spring or summer.

Conservation practices, which help producers improve the health of their lands, also generate ecosystem services that benefit both their communities and the public. In one county with significant dairy production, the widespread adoption of conservation practices has led to an improvement in groundwater quality, significantly decreasing the number of *E. coli*-positive wells. There are many other examples across the country that highlight the interconnectedness of conservation and public health.

*“Our county had the most NRCS EQIP contracts in the state last year. We are in a sensitive ecological area, and cover crops and no-till have taken off in a big way as a way to continue dairy production in the area while also protecting our groundwater. Our e-coli positive wells have decreased significantly in recent years, in part due to large-scale practice shifts. I am deeply concerned about the effect that funding loss will have on our groundwater and public health; a hidden cost that doesn’t show up in a farm balance sheet.”*

The funding freeze and general uncertainty regarding the future administration of programs have major impacts on not only federal programs, but state, Tribal, and local projects and partnerships. It is important to recognize that state and local governments, and partners such as conservation districts' associations, contribute substantial matching funds for projects. A pause in federal funding puts significant strain on state, Tribal, and local governments. Some examples from our survey include:

- Wildfire mitigation efforts and post-fire recovery: Efforts to implement wildfire mitigation plans and address post-fire recovery on private lands are on hold, including implementation of Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP). CWPPs engage landowners and homeowners, particularly those in wildland-urban interfaces. Funding under these programs supports community outreach and technical assistance, including education to improve fire-resistance through fuel reduction, invasive species removal, and connecting landowners to programs that help protect homes (e.g., fire retardant roofing programs).
- Watershed rehabilitation: Projects reconstructing high hazard structures, failed reservoirs, and other systems are on hold.
- Culvert replacement: Replacement of aging culverts, vital for maintaining healthy ecosystems and clean water, have been delayed. For example, salmon populations are already threatened by habitat loss. Delayed projects impact not only species and habitats, but communities and fishers who rely on salmon economically and as a food source.
- Abandoned mine drainage and land reclamation: The freeze on IJA funding is jeopardizing critical remediation projects. The funding freeze results in layoffs at partner and contractor sites, as well as missed construction windows. The potential loss of funds means that states and local governments will be unable to implement remedial activities that will improve water quality for local communities and downstream areas.

With more than 60% of the nation's lands in private ownership, achieving landscape scale conservation goals relies on the cooperation of millions of landowners and operators. Our conservation delivery system provides local leadership, technical assistance, and funding opportunities for the voluntary implementation of conservation.

Among our members' most pressing concerns is the erosion of trust in the locally led conservation delivery system. Producers make land management decisions well before the planting season begins. Recent actions have led to widespread confusion and uncertainty among producers, likely resulting in to future reluctance to seek out federal programs and engage with conservation districts and other local partners. NACD applauds USDA's initial release of funding, but calls upon Congress and USDA to commit to funding future producer contracts and existing grants and agreements. USDA must also provide for the timely disbursement of technical and financial assistance provided through Congressionally authorized funds.

Producer demand for conservation is clear. In Fiscal Year 2024, NRCS received nearly 163,000 applications requesting \$8.7 billion. The demand for conservation is significant, with IRA investments allowing NRCS to fund 80% more than they would have otherwise been able to, but still only 35% of applications (\$3.7 billion).

## *Theme #2: NRCS Staffing Shortages and Program Instability Have Long-Term Impacts on the Quality and Timeliness of Service*

The impacts of funding freezes are further exacerbated by the February 14 round of NRCS terminations, future potential workforce reductions, and the uncertainty of future program budgets. The locally led conservation delivery system is strained, impacting their ability to provide quality and timely services to farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards across the country.

Conservation districts frequently report that local NRCS offices are chronically understaffed, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Hiring efforts over the last several years have allowed NRCS to backfill some vacant positions and create new positions to address high workloads and previously unmet producer demand. USDA's recent hiring freeze and terminations came just as NRCS was beginning to make progress to reduce backlogs in and provide much-needed support for conservation planning, technical assistance, and program enrollment. This is a major setback for NRCS and a blow to their ability to serve producers effectively.

Across the board cuts will do more harm than good. If reductions are necessary, NRCS should take a more targeted approach that incorporates State Conservationists' perspectives. There are many factors that impact staffing decisions, including performance, productivity, workload, and whether a unique skillset is required for the position. In particular, our members observed significant challenges hiring and retaining engineers, engineering technicians, and archaeologists to address the significant backlogs within their areas of expertise.

The impacts of NRCS staff terminations vary by office, with some losing one or several employees. However, NRCS already has an efficient staffing model. In some cases, one employee may service multiple counties and were stretched thin. This means that even losing one employee can have big impacts.

NACD estimates that thousands of producers and millions of acres will be impacted. Respondents observe:

- Offices are left with a **skeleton crew**; not sure how to tackle the **significant backlog of producers** needing technical assistance and conservation planning
- **Producers in limbo**; not enough qualified NRCS employees to inspect practices and complete check-out; they can't be paid without approval
- Exacerbates **existing backlogs for cultural resources, engineering, and HEL/wetland compliance** (e.g., 2+ years for cultural resources in some areas)
- **Delays or low producer interest** in signing up for conservation programs; terminations immediately impact thousands of conservation plans and applications will not be addressed in a timely manner (missed signups).

Many of the terminated positions are entry level (GS-5, 7, 9), including positions ranging from engineers, soil conservationists, technicians, and program assistants. NRCS relies on entry level positions to increase its capacity to serve landowners and operators across the country.

Key positions, such as District Conservationists, are typically filled via internal promotions as they require years of experience and training with the agency. As District Conservationists advance in their careers, there will not be a strong candidate pool to backfill their positions. Recent terminations are a major disruption to NRCS's workforce pipeline and will have long-term consequences on the agency's ability to deliver high-quality customer service. Our members have shared many examples where the

recent terminations are resulting in immediate, negative impacts on our ability to serve farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards. This will only get worse, especially as layoffs and attrition continue.

While NRCS is a technical agency, program and administrative assistants manage the considerable workload associated with contract (e.g., EQIP, CSP) management. Without these support roles, technical staff such as soil conservationists, conservation planners, and District Conservationists are left to manage administrative tasks in addition to their core responsibilities. This greatly reduces their capacity to be in the field, directly assisting producers and focusing on technical work. NRCS's goal should be to have these experts working with producers in the field, not burdened by office duties.

Recent terminations are a major setback, impacting good jobs that serve producers in local communities across the country. NRCS is challenged by slow, burdensome hiring processes and finding highly qualified candidates. Recruiting, fully onboarding, and training a new employee can take between 24-36 months, representing a substantial investment in both time and resources.

The recent terminations are a lost investment in communities across the country, reduce agency productivity, and diminish the quality and timeliness of service to producers. It could take NRCS years to achieve the staffing levels needed to deliver the quality and timeliness of service that producers deserve. NACD encourages NRCS to reconsider recent terminations, particularly those who provide important technical and enrollment assistance to producers.

*“Good, qualified employees were hired over the last year and were making a positive impact on our situation. These same employees were the ones that were fired in the first round [...]. Losing these valuable employees directly effects the ability of the agency to fulfill the existing contracts with our same producers that are struggling to exist.”*

### ***Theme #3: Protect the Future of the Locally Led Conservation Delivery System and Partnership***

Respondents expressed confidence in our locally, led conservation delivery system to continue serving producers and their communities. While there is some optimism around partners stepping up to fill USDA gaps, there is practical recognition that this is hindered by freeze/reduction of federal funds and impacts on local staff.

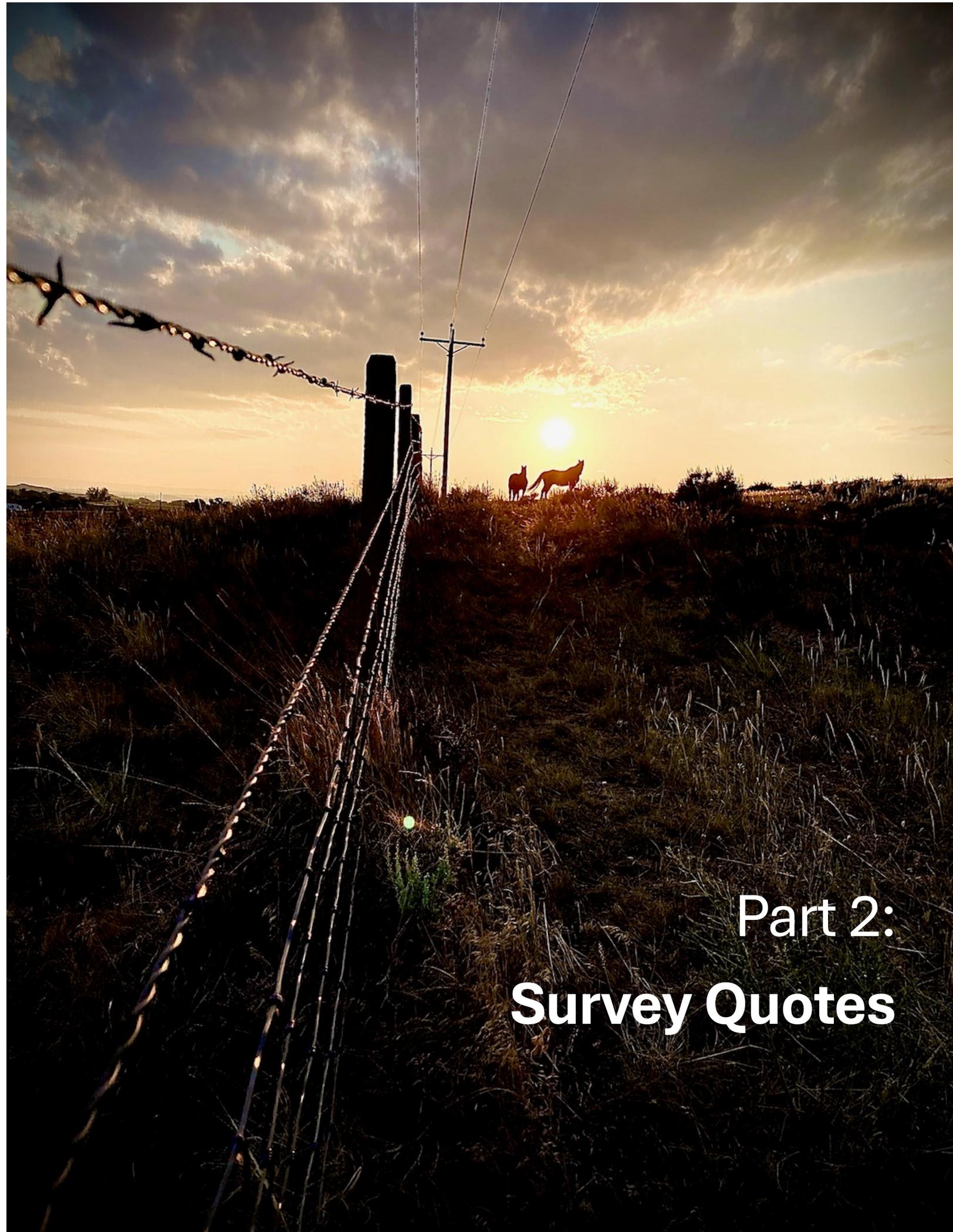
Since 1937, conservation districts have worked hand-in-hand with NRCS as core partners in the voluntary, locally led conservation delivery system. Although conservation districts are funded by a variety of sources, many also have cooperative or contribution agreements with NRCS to implement local programs. The freeze is impacting conservation district positions, further exacerbating the customer service issues caused by recent federal staff terminations.

Conservation districts and their associations are not receiving timely reimbursements for grants or agreements with NRCS. There has been a 30+ day delay in some payments, with an indefinite pause on IRA, IJJA, and PCSC payments. Some districts have yet to be reimbursed for work completed in Q1 of FY2025 (October – December 2024), which were submitted in January and frozen by January 20. To minimize impacts on their employees and communities, many are using savings accounts, state funds, and credit lines. However, without relief in sight, many will exhaust their funding or max out their lines of credit in the coming weeks and months. This creates ripple effects for partners, contractors, local economies and producers. Delays are also impacting costs incurred through Q2 of FY2025. USDA will not process new payment requests until previous ones are cleared.

Recent federal layoffs have increased the workload for the remaining federal employees and partners. This, along with potential further terminations, compounds the customer service challenges already mentioned. Additionally, members have emphasized that the locally led conservation delivery system depends on NRCS for certain activities (e.g., job approval authority, engineering approvals, inherently governmental functions). Reduced NRCS capacity creates backlogs, bottlenecks, and inefficiencies across federal, state, and local programs. Multi-organizational collaborations addressing watershed or landscape-scale conservation are delayed or on hold, resulting in significant inefficiencies (e.g., staff turnover, disrupted routines, and broken information flow).

NACD estimates that over 60% of conservation districts are collocated with their NRCS, and often FSA, partners. This strengthens local partnerships and offers producers a one-stop-shop for conservation and agricultural program assistance. Improved communication and collaboration allow each of the partners to serve more effectively.

As USDA contemplates its real estate footprint and leases, many conservation districts will be impacted. While there are impacts on some operating budgets, there could be even greater impacts on partnerships and services to the community. We urge USDA to carefully consider the broader implications of these decisions on local conservation efforts. It is essential to protect our historic, 88 year partnership with USDA and sustain opportunities for increased efficiency and collaboration. Continued support for our voluntary, locally led, conservation delivery system is vital for achieving long-term conservation goals and sustaining the health and productivity of our lands and waters.



Part 2:  
**Survey Quotes**

## Community & Economic Impacts

Our county had the most NRCS EQIP contracts in the state last year. We are in a sensitive ecological area, and cover crops and no-till have taken off in a big way as a way to continue dairy production in the area while also protecting our groundwater. **Our e-coli positive wells have decreased significantly in recent years, in part due to large-scale practice shifts.** That being said, more and more farmers are losing funding for these practices, and while some of them will continue for moral reasons, others will go back to plowing and chiseling. **I am deeply concerned about the effect that funding loss will have on our groundwater and public health; a hidden cost that doesn't show up in a farm balance sheet.**

These producers had a contract with NRCS and spent thousands of dollars in anticipation of reimbursement of some of those expenses through the contracts. Now they are waiting on payments, unsure of when they will arrive. **Suppliers won't wait for payments. If a producer defaults on a contract, they have to pay liquidated damages back to the Treasury upon cancellation of the contract. But there is no similar penalties from the other direction.**

Due to freezing of IRA funding, producers are unable to complete practices within the Monarch habitat planting in our area. **This affects [...] seed retail vendors for the producers and [...] contracted drill[ers].** Currently we have had to halt the orders that have already been ordered, shipped, and billed to producers. This has placed a stressor on my driller, as to moving seed, the seed vendor on having to talk to management as to if they can honor and take back seed that has been sent, and stress to producers who have already pre-paid or received thousands of dollars in invoices [...].

It has limited our livestock producers the most. They had applications for wells, water development, fences and trees. Now their projects, which are very needed, are on hold. Frustration as they were willing to make needed improvements to their operations due to the drought and the necessity of water for their livestock. [...] **This impact not only is hard on producers but makes an impact in small community with the businesses that were planning on constructing the projects. Several thousand acres will be impacted if IRA funding is pulled.**

I think this is very much a trickle down effect and we will not see full negative results until months later. For example, **the animal heavy use area owes local businesses for building supplies, as well as the contractors.**

Funding freezes have led to producer uncertainty concerning contracts for conservation practices that are funded with IRA dollars. [...] Some have already completed or at least started work, and are concerned they will not have the money to pay contractors. This makes it doubly concerning. **Producers are depending on funds, and only took on the project because they were able to reduce the risk, and now contractors are uncertain how or when they will be paid.** Since these are very local concerns, it will **spread to our local economies as producers and contractors both reduce or delay purchasing of goods and services,** so all around, this is a potentially huge impact on local economies.

Between the **funding freeze and the last few years of drought producers do not have the financial resources to address the issues they face** in their operations. We will likely see a lot **more soil erosion,** less capabilities to address **brush management issues** and vitally important issues like **water for livestock.** **Once those practices are not kept up it is more costly to fix things as the issues only get worse.** It has a ripple effect for the producers, our local economy and on a larger scale the **country's economy.** **Less efficient and productive farms equate to less income, which in turn means less money spent at all levels so producers can survive.**

We currently have four funded water exclusion projects with partnership with NRCS and two that were in the planning state but are on hold now to be approved for funding due to this uncertain time. Including these, NRCS has a total of 9 conservation projects in our county that have been currently told to pause. Our EPA grant funds have not been officially frozen, but the **hesitation to want to proceed with work on future projects with this funding source is legitimate due to the possibility that the district or worse yet the producer will be left holding the bill makes us weary**. We currently have 3 funded water exclusion projects in construction two of those will be finished by this summer, expecting payment. We have two projects in the works for this funding source.

Federal dollars for **reconstruction of a failed reservoir** are currently frozen **affecting 12,000 acres of irrigated ground that will have inconsistent flows to no water** unless the money comes through and the new dam is constructed. **This project impacts over 1,000 people and two communities that rely on the revenue generated from the farming practices in the area.**

\$1.2 million USFWS BIL National Fish Passage Program **culvert replacement project currently frozen** (for town, maple/forest producer [...]). [Conservation District] has paid \$65k and has not been able to draw down funds within our already approved Cooperative Agreement with USFWS. **We have also had to delay soliciting construction bids for 2025, which may drive up construction prices and/or delay construction until 2026.**

Our department [...] had to **pause an enormous stormwater construction project that was absolutely necessary to protect our lake**. We do not have the independent funding from tax dollars to pay for all of the water protection projects we need, and the lake will suffer. Farmers will suffer.

The BIL has shut down our infrastructure funding that has currently impacted one [watershed] rehabilitation planning project that has already begun. This specific **plan included 5 structures that are high hazard**. [...] currently has **5 more separate proposals in the works for rehabilitation planning and all structures are high hazard and most have exceeded their lifespan**, if not all. [...] is currently covering the \$100,000+ expenses that have occurred so far.

In [...], we primarily work on abandoned mine drainage (AMD) and abandoned mine land (AML) reclamation, agricultural BMP installation, streambank restoration. To do so, we rely on securing federal, state, and local grants. **We currently have \$3.3 million in federal grant funding under contract for work on 5 AMD/AML remediation projects and 1 for agricultural BMP installation. Most of the AMD and AML funding available to us now comes from the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. [...] The funding freeze caused us to pause all 6 projects currently underway. We could not risk incurring costs that we couldn't be sure we could pay for if reimbursements weren't being processed during the freeze.** This put **more than 20 jobs at risk** just associated with our projects. Some AMD consultants had to lay off employees with over 25 years of experience and other employees took pay cuts to survive during the freeze because so much of their business revenue relies on federal funding flowing through Conservation Districts and other partners receiving federal funding.

[...If projects] are delayed long enough, we could **miss out on this construction season**, meaning we won't be able to hire local contractors to build these projects, risking more jobs. If these funding programs are found to somehow not align with this administration's vague policies and are eliminated or defunded, this will drastically harm particularly the AMD and AML reclamation work that our community needs. [...] **County has the highest number of stream miles impaired by AMD and # of acres of AML. The problem is so extensive, without the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund in BIL, we will not be able to secure enough funding to [...improve...] the water quality in our communities.**

We have had to pause over \$20M in unexpended block grant funds that enable [...] CDs across the state **providing TA to farmers and ranchers** and doing vital work on **post fire recovery and wildfire resilience** work. We are very worried that the pause in this key work plus the firing of so many USFS workers will literally cost lives when the main fire season begins again. [...] we have **ZERO assurance that we can continue to work and expect reimbursement because of the ever-changing situation and the lack of information provided to our agency partners**, we have had to pause them rather than risk having [...]do work that we cannot reimburse because of non-payment by the funders. The uncertainty is very harmful, as is know that at least 17 [conservation districts] will most likely have to begin laying off staff in the next weeks and months if things don't change.

The [...] was awarded a \$1.2M USDA **Community Wildfire Defense Grant** last summer. This round 2 of the CWDG program was **funded through the bipartisan infrastructure law**. Due to delays in federal contracting, that award is still not under contract, and is **currently frozen**. We do not know if or when this program and our grant award will be reinstated. This grant was awarded to support our no-cost community chipping program which assists [...] living in the Wildland Urban Interface in creating and maintaining defensible space for wildfire preparedness. **This funding comes at a critical time when community demand for the chipping program is higher than ever. Last year, the program served over 400 households.**

[...]is managing [over \$16M] in federal funding across four agreements. **The largest of these grants “Community Wildfire Defense Grant” (CWDG) provides \$8 million dollars in funding towards wildfire restoration and fuels reduction for non-industrial private landowners** in [...]. These landowners are generally individuals who own between 5-40 acres of forest land. The CWDG is an extension of the “[...] Emergency Forest Restoration Team” (EFRT) launched in response to the 2021 [wildfire]. These grants provide the only reforestation program on private non-industrial lands in [...]. Other federal agreements support wildfire recovery and forest management on tribal lands, and also support wildfire recovery for larger industrial timberland owners [...].

We do have about \$1.4M awarded in an NRCS RCPP grant (Farm Bill) that NRCS will not execute the agreement on because of the freeze -- that RCPP project includes fire mitigation on 4000 acres in [...]. Agreements between NRCS and our landowners (EQIP), and agreements between [...] Conservation District and federal partners **directly total about \$21,000,000 to plan and execute wildfire mitigation and watershed protection projects over the next 5 years. [...] We also raise 30-50% non-federal match against that \$21M, and those non-federal sources will likely dry up as they plug holes elsewhere in their budgets because they (eg, States) are losing federal funding too.**

Freeze in USFS grant funds that supports work on **CRP and CREP** in [...]. We have stopped activity on this grant as a result.

NRCS funding through the **Mississippi River Basin Initiative** (MRBI) has been temporarily halted, creating uncertainty for all the parties involved.

Immediate loss of wildfire mitigation work -- both education, resident incentives/support, and on-the-ground community action -- due to frozen federal grants. [...] **Loss of approximately \$50,000 which would be/should be going to local contractors for on-the-ground wildfire mitigation work** this spring. Loss of on-the-ground **assistance to approximately 25-50 homes** this spring. ... **50 acres not hardened against wildfire/50 homes**. Lost educational/outreach to hundreds in wildfire-prone areas just ahead of wildfire season. Possible loss of staff who seem to be looking for employment elsewhere.

[...] we have agreements for about **\$2.5 million in forest health cost share** to tackle the wildfire challenge in [...] **All of that is on hold**. In total, [...] has \$5.7 million in USDA (USFS and NRCS) grants that are at risk with executive order actions.

The BIL has shut down our infrastructure funding that has currently impacted one [watershed] rehabilitation planning project that has already begun. This specific **plan included 5 structures that are high hazard**. [...] currently has **5 more separate proposals in the works for rehabilitation planning and all structures are high hazard and most have exceeded their lifespan**, if not all. [...] is currently covering the \$100,000+ expenses that have occurred so far.

Recent federal funding freezes have **significantly impacted both producers and consumers in [...], leading to disruptions across various sectors**. Local shrimpers are struggling as imported, farm-raised shrimp flood the market at lower prices, reducing the profitability of [...] shrimping industry and threatening the survival of many fishing operations. Small businesses are also at risk, with the Small Business Administration's disaster loan program facing potential depletion, leaving many without the financial support needed to recover from natural disasters. In the public health sector, proposed federal funding cuts have created uncertainty for the [...] Department of Public Health, which relies heavily on federal support. If these cuts proceed, essential health services, including disease prevention and health promotion programs, could be compromised. Additionally, temporary freezes on federal grants and loans have disrupted environmental initiatives, including pollution control and clean energy projects. While the freeze has been lifted, the uncertainty surrounding future funding continues to affect programs critical to environmental sustainability and public health. These challenges illustrate the far-reaching consequences of funding freezes on the economic stability and well-being of communities in [...].

## Producer Impacts

The **los[s] of trust** within the community is the **most valuable thing that is at stake**, as it **takes years to convince folks to try this once again**, if someone in our community is not able to collect on their reimbursement after completing a water project.

Our NRCS Service Center includes two counties [...]. [...] the majority of producers are currently working on the practices. # of producers: 23 # of acres: 3703.5 # of contracts: 25 Of these contracts, 6 are for upgrades to poultry operations. These poultry operations are broiler and turkey. **These upgrades are mandatory to meet integrator requirements. Many of these producers can't afford these upgrades without this funding.**

**Due to high input costs, low commodity prices, droughts, and severe weather events (esp Hurricane Helene), our agricultural producers were already struggling to survive.** Many of them have made substantial investments based on legal and binding contracts with NRCS from which they were to be reimbursed. Not releasing these payments to producers is making their survival even more difficult. It is most concerning that our federal government is not honoring their legal obligations.

Our county has 1,355 CRP contracts totaling 8,660 acres, 19 active EQIP contracts, 9 active CSP contracts, and 3 active RCPP contracts. Due to the farm economy, some producers are going to need the payments for these contracts in order to stay afloat. **We have several complex livestock contracts who rely on government programs to be able to afford improvements that will keep them compliant with water quality rules designed to limit algal blooms in Lake [...].**

Morale is low at best throughout our community. People are worried their farming practices will not get done. That is a **terrible blow to our producers as they take soil conservation and preservation of our natural resources very seriously. It literally affects their livelihood.** Businesses know their bottom line will be affected. [...] **Producers need [to get] paid and contractors don't want to have to wait for their money as that affects their business as well.**

Due to the time of year, the impact of funding freezes for construction of wetlands, grassed waterways and manure storage facilities, the USDA practices that our district is most involved with, has not been felt yet. **As construction season approaches, this impact will increase and become a roadblock to getting more conservation on the land. A long-term funding freeze is going to affect future participation in any government conservation program.**

Since these [29] producers have their conservation practices in various stages of construction, freezing of funds will place unplanned financial burdens on farmers at a time when their financial needs are greatest for the upcoming planting season. **With a late season drought in 2024 causing low soybean yields and low market grain prices, farmers are feeling the financial pinch and may not have the funds to pay for planned and under construction conservation practices.**

Our farmers and ranchers are instrumental in our way of life here in [...]. **These farmers who have seen drought in the last few years will tell you that they couldn't have gotten the practice done, if it hadn't been for the [conservation] program that helped them.** I have personally had a producer in my office, crying her eyes out because she needed water for her cattle and was having to haul it. She was so distraught and thinking of selling her farm, but th[r]ough the state cost share program, we were able to help her get water to her cattle.

In our area, we were **seeing new farmers especially the younger generation** coming into our office for assistance whether that be technical assistance or financial assistance. With funding freezes, it limits the improvements these producers are trying to put on the land to reduce erosion, improve & protect water quality, and to protect grazing lands, etc. **They will continue to do these improvements, but without the funding they may opt for practices that do not always improve all of the natural resources.**

Producers are wondering if they will receive the money that they already have spent. **It decreased the amount of on the ground conservation projects by at least 75%.**

We have 40+ potential grassed waterway projects that could be stalled due to funding freezes. **Many of these projects have already been on a waiting list for several years.**

Contracts [are] being halted mid-project, with project completion status being unknown. **Hesitancy or disinterest from producers** in continuing on that project, or working on such projects in the future. **Loss of trust in the local staff who have brought federal funds as a resource/incentive** to a particular project, which was initially seen as a major benefit to the landowner, only to have that funding paused indefinitely, and now being seen by the landowner as a complication. Projects that would have improved productivity and decreased overhead costs for [...] producers while simultaneously conserving natural resources.

Agricultural producers feel that the **funding freezes halts the bigger picture of the initial plan that they had for their farm [...]** **They have limited income.** Their livelihoods are based [on] creating a product. Without these [conservation] programs that help agriculture producers to be able to operate, most of the producers will opt to move on to other avenues of income.

All producers who have completed a practice and are waiting for an [IRA] EQIP or CSP payment are not receiving them. **This is extremely problematic for smaller operations - I know of at least one producer who had to take out a private loan to complete their EQIP work, are paying on those loans, and are not getting reimbursed from NRCS.**

Our field office has 25 active IRA contracts that would put conservation on the ground of nearly 6000 acres, and positively impact the yields and operations of the producers who agreed to do the work. The funding from these contracts totals \$2,262,640. **Several of these farmers have already implemented practices at their own expense, expecting to be reimbursed at their contracted cost-share amounts, and are now told that we cannot make the payments.**

I personally know of **2 farmers that have declared bankruptcy and an additional 2 that have left holding a \$150,000 bill or higher**; we have \$50,000 worth of district projects that are on hold until funds are "unfrozen."

At this time, we do not know if federally (EPA) funded programs have been or will be affected, programs like the **Chesapeake Bay Program** and the **Nutrient Management Program**, as well as **Countywide Action Plan (CAP)** grant funds associated with the Chesapeake Bay. If they are, this will greatly impact the conservation district and our farmers.

I have had to pause multiple contracts that would have affected the implementation of cover crops and no-till on **hundreds to thousands of acres**.

The impact on our local community is huge. I work with farm producers who are in the transition of projects funded by grants and **many are potentially out thousands of dollars expecting a commitment to come forward paying for climate smart projects on their own farms (IRA, Climate Smart grants, etc).**

Several cooperators had turned in receipts and other documentation before the executive order and the practices have been certified. A freeze in funds means we have been unable to process payments for these producers. In addition, **we have been unable to accept documentation from producers on practices completed since the executive order was signed.**

Many of these producers [...] have already spent thousands, (tens-of thousands) on ongoing projects and are now being told we cannot currently (and may not ever) be reimbursed as per the contracted amount from USDA. **I personally have over \$50,000 in seeding and grazing system funding that is tied up** and not only have I spent thousands on this contract.

Our office has received numerous calls from producers in our service area expressing anxiety about the funding freezes, **afraid that their expensive in-progress projects** (designed to protect soil and water quality on their properties as well as for the entire area) **must be halted, and that they won't receive reimbursement.**

[...] producers expect and depend on the funding to be there if they meet the required practices. Applying for the programs require a [commitment] of time [...] with addition support from [...] SWCD and NRCS. When a producer applies for a program they expect to have a chance for their application to be funded. **Funding freezes or removal of funds results in harmful creditability of SWCD's (Board Members) and NRCS. The Locally led effort is very important and our creditability (SWCD Board Members) is an issue!** [...] SWCD work load is in the top 3 in the state [...]!

It impacts everything in their lives which then impacts the community. When one of our customers has a contract for over \$120,000.00 and they are expecting that, it impacts them financially and mentally. **Our producers are scared to continue working with us due to all of the uncertainty with funding right now.**

Freezes have affected the ability to get conservation on the ground, the ability to provide conservation education to children and adults, the ability to provide locally sourced healthy food to children, adults

and seniors. **The uncertainty created by [...] [the freeze is] devastating.** The amount of people losing their jobs and losing out on funds that they had contracted with the government will have long lasting effects on our economy. **How are we going to get producers to trust [...] again** when funds from already signed contracts are pulled out from under them.

Confusion and uncertainty around how to proceed with planned conservation projects. **Projects scheduled for 2025 may miss the window for construction and implementation,** resulting in missed opportunities to [...] improve conservation outcomes.

The freeze in the Inflation Reduction Act funds that are supplied to NRCS has had **immediate impacts to our Forestland management contracts.** Most of those conservation practices (especially Timber stand improvement) are conducted in the wintertime. So, here in the last month of this Freeze, 6 EQIP contract holders have not been paid for completed practices. [...] **In total, just our office has [nearly \$300,000] obligated for just this year alone. If this freeze goes on much longer, then we will more than likely be forced to cancel all of these contracts for undue financial hardship brought on by this freeze in federal funding. Those are dollars that will be taken away from farmers and landowners that [are] there to put conservation on the ground.**

Conservation practices have come to a standstill. Feb 7th & Feb 10th of this year, [...] made calls to farmers advising not to buy cover crops seed or invest in no-till drill equipment as well as to not have contractors start on any terraces or waterways because the funding has been frozen and they may not get a check per the contract. **Many of the farmers who had hoped to help with erosion and improving the topsoil have backed out, using pre Dust Bowl methods instead because they can't afford to pay out of pocket to implement erosion prevention practices.**

One producer is owed \$26,000, another is owed \$30,000, and yet another will be owed \$90,000. These, and more, will **not be receiving their payments.**

[...] **practices came to screeching halt!** producers can't afford to complete the practices without knowing when they will be reimbursed.

[...] currently has 30 IRA funded contracts that are now in limbo because funding is frozen. Of these, 4 already have construction underway, and several more were slated to begin in March. **Cooperators are unwilling to commit to their contractors at this point because of the possibility of losing funding.**

There are producers who have already spent money for their projects and aren't going to receive the funding for the money that they already spent. **They are now in thousands of dollars in debt that they were planning on receiving funding for.**

There are several producers that have been impacted by the funding freeze but one in particular stands out. They are a family farm producing soybeans, corn, and wheat. They have an EQIP contract through IRA for approximately 500 of their crop acres for cover crops. They got our office the info just prior to the freeze and now they are stuck in limbo not knowing if they will get reimbursed at all for the practice. While this may only impact one family farm in this way, the impact will be felt much farther into the farm community. **Years of work to build relationships may be damaged.** We hope that most will understand that this isn't the work or choice of us in the local service center and the damage will be minimal but **I'm sure that there are some that will not be willing to work with NRCS or the SWCD in the future due to this freezing of federal funds.**

Our funding assistance is complicated on the best day. Now, we are having to present everything we communicate to producer/operators with a huge caveat. **It causes the appearance that we are**

**making decisions based on something personal when in fact we have nothing to do with that part of the process.**

Producers who experience a problem on their land are not able to fix it on their own so **the problem gets worse, costing more in the long run.** Conservation that benefits EVERYONE does not get done.

From what I understand, farmers are concerned. They made a choice to invest in certain conservation practices on the understanding they would be reimbursed, tax credit, etc., and **now they don't know whether they will be receiving that much needed money. It's comes to trust and the [government] broke their word on promises made to them.** There are agricultural projects that got big grants to upgrade facilities, and some of them involve clearing land. If there's no money to stabilize that land, precious soil will be lost and siltation, sedimentation, etc. will go up as a result.

We have approximately 20 existing and new EQIP contracts that were to use IRA funds that are now on hold. Total of **approximately \$1.5 million in cost share funds.**

Most farmers **do not have extra funds to pay a TSP** without recouping that money shortly after they have paid for services.

In my county alone, [the funding freeze] **has a potential of affecting up to 50 producers.** This may not seem like a large number but **when you are dealing with a small county, that number can be detrimental.**

**Farmers in my county almost always rely on advance payments from the federal government contracts** to help get them started in implementing conservation practices.

Many calls from producers asking if they will receive reimbursement for the practices, they have contracts for. **They are ordering trees and seed they will be planting in the spring and early summer for practices in their contracts. They are wondering if they should purchase.**

Producers were hesitant to complete projects due to uncertainty about being reimbursed for work completed. **Producers and customers are often unsure about working with the government, but through education and outreach about the different NRCS programs new farmers had started to participate. When funds were frozen and it was unknown how the changes would affect their projects and NRCS programs, producers were more reluctant to participate.** Though the IRA funding has been released for existing contracts and it sounds like payments will start being made, the situation is very fluid and funding could be frozen again. Also, we were happy to learn this morning that payments for EQIP and CSP could also be made with IRA funds until further notice.

# Impacts on District Operations

## Staffing

District staff have **shifted their time away from projects funded through federal grants and can no longer provide assistance to producers**. Erosion of trust in public agencies as partners in natural resource conservation.

Many of our Districts have project technicians that help with the design and checkout of producer projects. Since the funding freezes, **these positions are no longer funded and our producers are suffering** because of this reduction [...].

For years, [...] NRCS has struggled with a low staff retention rate, and the current hiring freeze and anticipated layoffs will only worsen conservation delivery across the state. **The Association and Conservation Districts have long stepped in to fill this gap, providing certified technical assistance, but with funding now frozen, this critical support has come to a halt.** I have been informed that approximately 90% of contracts in [...] are tied to IRA funding in some way. **Two weeks ago, NRCS placed a "stop" on all IRA-funded work, leaving many producers waiting for certification and payment on work already completed in good faith under signed contracts. The ripple effects on local rural economies are significant, impacting not just producers but also suppliers and contractors who rely on these reimbursements.**

Despite these challenges, the Association and Conservation Districts remain committed to supporting NRCS as they navigate staff shortages. However, without the release of funding, conservation efforts in [...] will grind to a halt. The funding freeze must be lifted to ensure that work continues and that those who have upheld their end of the agreement are paid for their efforts. I encourage you to help amplify this message and push for immediate action. The longer this delay continues, the greater the harm to conservation efforts and the rural communities that depend on them.

There has been considerable impact on our collaborative conservation partners. In our District we have developed a strong conservation collaborative of Watershed Councils, Land Trust, the District and a public utility. This has enabled organizations to work together to elevate "on the ground" conservation to a regional concept for environmental education, urban conservation, floodplain restoration and working lands conservation. All of these organizations [have been impacted,] with the exception of the Conservation District, due to the district having a local tax base of structured funding. **These organizations have worked over the last several years to build this regional concept that enhances larger conservation projects for each program. Thus, the collaborative has been successful in obtaining multiple large federal grants for funding these larger projects. With the federal freeze, many activities have ceased.** Many employees are either leaving employment due to uncertainty or layoffs. Fortunately for our District we have a reduced risk level with our local funding.

**The unique thing about the Soil & Water Conservation Districts is the five-member Board that guides decisions. They know and see stuff that can't be seen on state or national level. However, we can't fill our mandate or address local needs without enough staff and funding. Efficiency is lost because of staff turnover, systemic routines are broken, information flow is interrupted, and morale is tanked.** Conservation work is critical in preserving our natural world. Aside from clean water and healthy soils there are benefits that are not yet known. For example, the discovery of a type of firefly in a cypress/tupelo swamp that does NOT exist anywhere else. Conservation work to mitigate runoff into that particular habitat matters.

We have **11 employees across the state** assisting producers, state, and federal agencies helping them put conservation on the ground and we **had to let all of them go because the federal agencies funding was a direct tie to the effort**. These jobs include crews planning and working on **defensible fire space, forest overgrowth clearing, invasive species encroachment and more**. The pause has made us unable to move forward on request of payment for work already done and stopped us from continuing work in the coming months.

We had two grants that helped people raise gardens, high tunnels, and gardens. The **intent was to make people healthier and to provide food to people in a food desert**. Now **funding is removed** and that is all lost. Progress was significant but not now.

We were recently recognized as an important partner with NRCS. We provide task order support for cultural resources, host a partner position, and have multiple agreements where we work very closely with NRCS field staff to provide support to our growers. **Because of these we have increased our support from 1FTE to 4 FTEs and are rolling out large scale programs being driven by grower feedback**.

We have two grants fully funded through IRA funds. We have been instructed by NRCS to cease spending within these grants unless we can fund them ourselves, which we cannot. The lack of information and constant change in circumstances makes it difficult to function as an association. **Our Executive Director is fully funded through one of these grants and it will make a hard hit on our association as a whole without her in place**.

Our SWCD has contracts for 4 current federal funding based projects that are impacted by the funding freeze. [...] Failure to receive currently contracted funding, all of which is done on a reimbursement basis, will **severely impact our viability since our District relies upon these projects for 1/3 of our operational costs**. Future funding that is halted or frozen will ensure that half of our staff will have to be let go due to lack of work or enough income to sustain them.

We have a Contribution Agreement to provide technical support for **CRP and EQIP** and the funds we receive **help the district to retain staff to provide that technical support, surveying, and designing grassed waterways and other conservation practices, and providing information to producers on other government programs**.

[...] funding freeze has held up our payment reimbursements that are covering all of the money up front. **We host a grant that implements USDA programs that involves 14 staff members directly in the field. We are covering those costs until further notice is given, and if funding is pulled we will have to release those employees**. We started a new urban conservation program based on the needs assessment for [...] and that has now been retracted. **It's hard to just walk away from the customers now**. We also have a Farm bill marketing program with all the NGO, state and federal programs that promote each others' conservation programs, events, webinars and program signups. A one stop shop for all landowners to connect with the correct agency for both technical and financial assistance.

We [...]put most of the above money right back out to farmers and municipalities for implementation projects. These funds created 6 FT positions, and the contract work was going to create dozens of jobs ( we are part of another \$8M IRA grant held by a partner), provide workforce development. **Our work is so intertwined with community, state, and federal agencies and the loss of public funds can't be made up from the private sector**.

## Office Space and Vehicles

The partnership that our **SWCD and local NRCS and FSA offices have nurtured for over thirty years in our current shared location has benefitted producers with a one-stop opportunity for conservation and agriculture program assistance.** This partnership goes much farther than a grant or agreement. It is a dedication to helping landowners protect our natural resources while producing crops and livestock to feed our nation and the world. **It means sharing information that helps us all do our jobs more efficiently.** The few staff members of our Soil & Water Conservation District, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Farm Service Agency do an amazing amount of work for the producers and residents of our county. It takes all three agencies working together every day to accomplish this. That comradery is more valuable than any grant or agreement, but of course we can't continue without adequate funding.

Also there is the non-financial and physical side of impacts [...] shared space impacts are put in place, **as communication and collaboration between agencies would cease and access to producers and customers would be dramatically reduced as well as foot traffic would be reduced.**

**Our SWCD employees have a good relationship with NRCS and FSA partners and provide additional support to producers who visit our co-located offices.** Our office is located in USDA rented space and most of our employees use the USDA computer network and phone system. These are critical to our operation.

Our county leases to USDA. The lease was not updated by the time the new administration took office. **Therefore, neither NRCS or FSA have a lease or are paying rent for county office.** So, County could force them out. This would be detrimental to our SWCD because we work so closely with USDA on programs. **Also, we have always been a one-stop-shop for producers. Now, if USDA is forced to leave, the producer will have to go to multipl[e] locations and possibly different counties for their services.** The county has emailed several times, but all communication from the USDA Management Services Division, Lease Acquisition Branch [has ceased].

Our current local USDA service center was [undergoing] the process of renewing its building lease and **producers are having to travel to neighboring offices for service.** The leasing process has now ground to a halt with funding confusion as well as layoffs of contracting staff and IT staff that install network infrastructure which has frustrated local producers and damaged program confidence.

[...] questions are being asked regarding office space, number of desks, chairs, etc. This is concerning because **the conservation district relies upon the office space budgetarily and if we had to find and pay for a new space or commute to a different space it would significantly impact our operating budget.**

[...] **has reported that the GSA has been instructed to terminate all lease contracts with agency buildings (more than 7,500).** If/when this happens, our district will no longer have an office space, along with the FSA, NRCS, and RD.

At an Area Office for NRCS, we have **extremely restrictive access and computer policies.** [...] access decisions have been further delayed, internet is unusable routinely, and Federal employees are unavailable [...]. **Furthermore, because we were recently relocated to new offices, we have no phones, no consistent wifi, and our printers remain routed through a neighboring county's servers!** Additionally, **portions of our office have not been finished** because of hold-ups at the ordering/approval/execution stages. We have **three offices completely unusable, and the Conference Room still has storage from office furniture installation.** This is completely dysfunctional environment is preventing meaningful work in our District [...].

The [...] **has some land tied up with the potential to build a new USDA building.** Until we hear a Nay or a Yes on the proposed bid submitted by the SWCD to build the new USDA Center, we are in limbo with the landowner. We cannot go forward with the purchase, until we find out if we were chosen or not. This deal also affects [...] Special Districts for funding as well, as they were [...] go to for funding the new building.

Our access to vehicles has be[en] hindered due to NRCS taking away our WEX pins **and not allowing us to gas up the vehicles** which impedes their use.

## Grants and Agreements

We were told the grant agreement was delayed due to a change in administration. It has not been cancelled yet, but we are anticipating it to be. **The \$180,000 is our portion of a \$350,000 multi-county grant.** We hold 2 other federal grants currently and were told to continue business as usual. Both grants are reimbursements, and payment has been delayed or not received.

NRCS owes us over **\$23,000!**

We submitted a request for **reimbursement through the Contribution Agreement in September 2024 for over \$49,000, which we have not received yet.** We were able to meet our budget last year without those funds, but a long-term freeze in funding will have an impact on our 2025 and 2026 budgets.

The [...] has provided **474 hours** of employee time over the past six months, assisting NRCS in conservation planning, infrastructure support, and resource management across thousands of acres. However, we **have not received government reimbursement since November 27, 2024,** depleting our general funds and putting our employee's position at risk.

**We have a huge workload and are paying our two district employees out of our own reserves to keep working.** The federal grant reimbursement system is slow and cumbersome, and we have had **two payrolls where we have had to borrow money from another conservation district** to make payroll. EZ-FED grants is very difficult to navigate and now there is no certainty we will ever receive our money that we have already paid out to our employees.

We operate on a reimbursement basis with our federally funded contribution agreements. **We have already done the work for approximately \$170,000 worth of labor and supplies from 2024.** This constitutes a large percentage of our funds. **Without being reimbursed** for the work we already did, the clock is ticking on how long we will be able to support the employees who are the boots on the ground, the people who actually get things accomplished.

I work on a cooperative agreement for **urban and small farms** for our district. [...] My work has helped producers test their soil, learn about cover crops, provide them with free seed to try it out so it doesn't impact their bottom line while trying a new practice. We also help [...] communities manage their manure by providing manure tests so they know the amount of nutrients to put back onto their fields which helps ecosystems in our watershed. I have conducted many workshops for the community and have four planned for the future. **We are proceeding as usual, but if we were reimbursed I could plan for a more complex event for our small farm field day that would reach more people and provide more opportunities for networking and community building on conservation.** We also have educational programming for events, fairs, and schools. Last week, a working group partner and I educated 140 kindergartens and fourth graders on soil health, watersheds, and plants.

Currently, the Association and their Conservation Districts have over \$[...] million in conservation funding, **70% is on hold in [...]**, including agreements that are not IRA-funded. Every agency has indicated they are reviewing these agreements for consistency with the President's Executive Orders. **In the meantime, end-of-fiscal-year reimbursements in the amount of over \$2.5 million are not being paid, creating a ripple effect that is directly impacting producers, suppliers, and contractors throughout rural [...].**

**TA funds from all existing Federal contracts are frozen**, so we are not spending staff hours on those contracts (including NACD), which **severely limits our ability to provide assistance to producers**. So people applying to EQIP or CSP are unable to work with us on conservation plans, planting plans, etc. **Currently this affects approximately 20 conservation plans/producers on around 1,000 acres.**

[...] we are currently unable to offer contracted services to producers and education / outreach to the community. In the case of both cooperative agreements and contribution agreements, we have completed contracted work (or have reimbursed other counties for the work they were contracted by the same agreement) to complete. We have paid out (and produced receipts for) [over \$155,000] and the Federal government has paid nothing on these invoices since inauguration. We have an additional \$110,000 to submit for additional services, supplies, salaries/fringe, and reimbursements for yet another agreement. **As a result of these unpaid contracts, our bank account has been drained, we are relying on long-term savings that is to be used to purchase more cost-share and rental equipment for producers.** The situation for our producers is bleak.

**Our not being able to receive payment for work already done has cost our state association \$150,000 or more of request for reimbursements.** Two RCPP contracts awarded within the state totaling over \$30 million have been paused. These nationally competitive awards were to reduce invasive species increase wildlife habitat and protect landscapes from being fragmented from development. The area in the award for preventing fragmentation would have also benefited the US military mission of an open airspace to do maneuvers in southern [...].

## NRCS Staffing Impacts

### Customer Service and Conservation Outcomes

The **producers that I have spoken to are on both sides of the fence**. Some understand why cuts are being made, while others are upset due to their planners being let go and now having to start over new with a different planner.

Producers are stating there isn't enough staff now. **Currently we have 89 on the planning list**. How will all of the customers be serviced?

Producers and customers will receive far less assistance and this **workload will simply be too much for the employees left**.

**It has been more difficult for producers to reach people at FSA/NRCS/RD offices, even when those people have not been fired.** Our local office had 2 of 3 FSA employees on probationary status, so we are back down to 1 person. State office people have been impossible to reach from FSA and NRCS in the past week, and we are already seeing applications for a CD job posting we just opened from federal workers who were recently fired.

People go to work and wonder who's next and how that affects the work they can or can't get done. **Especially in small rural communities, there are not a lot of options for jobs when you so abruptly just lost yours.** The workflow in many offices especially Conservation and NRCS will be slow at best.

We were hoping to get a Team leader and District Conservationist in our office and for our team. Now we only have 2 full time NRCS employees. The sole Conservationist is only in her 2nd year and is still learning. **Our resource specialist is bombarded with field visits for inspections for completed, planned practices.**

Staffing has been low in our office for a little while and the workload keeps growing. **It is hard to provide great service when you have little staff.** They had finally hired an energetic, excited and educated individual that was catching on quick and showed great potential in the short amount of time they were here. To receive her termination letter and for the reason listed was a punch to the gut that everyone in the office felt. Time was spent introducing her to producers and landowners, who were excited to have a face in the office that they could work with and know that there would be a regular local presence. that is all gone. We are in a very high workload office/Management Unit. **There is no way one NRCS employee can handle 3 high workload counties, provide technical assistance to FSA and conservation districts, and be around to talk to and work with local producers.**

The [...] Conservation District serves as a NRCS Partner for conservation practices and conservation work within [...]. At the present, producers and landowners have 56 Environmental Quality Incentives Program 2025 applications and 48 Conservation Stewardship Program 2025 applications submitted to address conservation concerns locally. **Without adequate NRCS personnel to service these applications, 108 producers and landowners will have a negative impact because conservations needs are not being addressed in our community.**

In our **community which has been hit by Hurricane after hurricane in less time than it takes to properly see an orange tree reach full potential, it has put several contracts on hold.** [...] the DC and/or Soil Con cannot continue working or use hours to perform check-outs in anticipation of paying the farmer/producer (if/when things settle down), so there are many customers that did what they were supposed to do using all of their resources -maybe stretching their already tight budgets without hope for reimbursement now, especially for Hurricane Disaster EQIP and other type of CSPs - we have around 28 just in this office, servicing two counties.

We have **one NRCS employee for 3 counties** that account for a good portion of CSP contracts. **Field checkouts are not getting completed to make payments.** NRCS is **unable to provide technical assistance to FSA and in some cases the Conservation Districts.** Without adequate staff it hard to take the time and provide good numbers on these effects.

Our four county service area **went from having 1 NRCS technician in each office to having 1 NRCS technician in total for the 4 counties.** This will greatly hamper the conservation districts in trying to service their customers and **create much longer wait times for services.** Most SWCD staff are new and do not have the needed NRCS job approval to sign off on structural practices, nor even being able to certify completed jobs as meeting standards and specifications. **Therefore, the districts will not be able to get jobs into contractor and landowner hands for construction and create much longer lag times for landowners to be paid for completed projects.** Additionally, the Area NRCS technician position that is in [...] has been frozen. This position focuses on training new staff and working on more difficult and complex jobs. Without someone in that position, landowners with more difficult jobs will be turned down, due to existing staff lacking the experience to service these types of requests. NRCS has also informed the District Boards that they must work on Farm Bill Programs, such as EQIP first and that assisting the districts with state cost share programs will have to come after that, and to expect very limited help now.

As we are a co-located office, this has a big impact on our ability to serve local farmers. This action has left us with **our DC being the lone NRCS employee and he is shared with a neighboring county, so we only have him 50% of the time**. Historically, we have had a minimum of 3 NRCS employees in office. Due to a retirement and the lengthy process to re-hire NRCS employees, we now have no NRCS field staff for our County.

We have one Soil Conservationist that was a relatively new employee that has been terminated. While they were new to NRCS, they did have experience as a planner as a state planner prior to changing to the federal government. So, we lost one fully trained and productive staff member that assisted the DC with EQIP contracts. **The termination of the position will result in at least 24 conservation plans not being written on 1500 acres.**

Our field office lost our NRCS conservation technician. **Our technician was one of four terminated from within our six county management unit. We are now left with no technical field staff to complete surveys or designs in the field.** Loss of field staff will create a major delay in workload and contract delivery not only of federal farm bill programs, but also on state funded cost share programs.

Our office does not have an NRCS presence and **relies heavily on NRCS personnel located in neighboring counties for farm visits, inspections, approvals, etc. Losing their technical guidance and input would create a hardship for our district as well as the farming community we serve.**

**One third of NRCS field office staff in [...] have been terminated.** This impacts producers and farmers because with office support eliminated, farmers and producers will not have the expertise to perform conservation practices. IRA funding freeze is 40% of the budget. *[This impacts approximately \$6.9 million dollars of allocated and 60,000 acres].*

Due to the **removal of technician** through National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) our local state cost share assistance cannot be completed in a timely manner. **Producers lose assistance that would cover some of the cost of these programs of wanting to improve their land for better conservation.** As I write this, I have 21 cost share contracts that cover assistance for my county at a total of [over \$120,000. Those are] producers who care enough about the land they stand on and plan to hand down to the next generation that they ask for assistance to improve it.

The **workload in our county is heavy with conservation contracts and applications.** [...] We lost a valuable worker in the NRCS office. One who was very knowledgeable and was only a few days shy of her one year with NRCS. We now have only one NRCS employee to service our heavy conservation workload. **The impact that the layoff and the freezing of funding will be frustrating for producers in our county.** Livestock watering systems, grass waterways, salinity issues, wells, fencing, trees, riparian buffers, rock crossings, cover crops and nutrient management systems.... which have all been halted. If cuts need to be implemented, please let the State handle it as they know their workers and staffing needs.

Without funding, not only does the employee lose wages, but **essential conservation work—including nutrient management on 2,236.5 acres, irrigation land leveling on 17,414.1 acres, cover crops on 1,855 acres, and infrastructure improvements like fencing, pipelines, and water management structures—will be delayed or halted.** Producers depend on these programs for soil health, water conservation, and farm efficiency, and without technical support, they risk missing planting windows, losing cost-share funding, and facing operational setbacks. If layoffs occur, the impact will be severe, delaying conservation plans, preventing producers from accessing financial incentives, and stalling ongoing projects across [...] County.

Our **office is ok** - with one less hire, especially if the programs are cut back. **If the IRA funding continues, we will need someone additional for the workload.** Our county is very busy. We service many farmers.

The **workload increases each fiscal year** for Farm Bill Programs. Placing hiring freezes really hurts the efficiency in assisting all of our customers.

The additional workload on remaining employees will increase. Potential could be significant. However, point being in the first question, **if people no longer can trust a contract with the federal government to be good, there may not be as much workload. Water quality and air quality would certainly take a big hit though.**

A lot of **EQIP/CSP applications are in flux and waiting to be ranked/funded.** Without a fully staffed office, I anticipate that programs like EQIP or CSP will either get even much slower than usual, or disappear entirely for a while.

## Historical Vacancies

We need more staff for NRCS rather than less. NRCS has struggled with hiring anyone that is truly qualified and being able to do it in a timely manner. **This recent event has really set them back.**

The [...] office serves two counties [...]. **We serve 15 % of the population of [...] with zero NRCS employees in our field office except for a soil conservationist on loan from another field office.** We were supposed to get a soil con and soil con tech [...] two years ago. Snafus in the federal hiring process prevented that. Our DC left for a job [...], and we now have \$1.5 million in contracted farm bill dollars with no federal employees to carry out the work. Our cooperative agreement tech and NACD tech are doing all the work.

In [...] we **have historically been down key staff members for NRCS since COVID and have never been able to fully restaff.** NRCS was able to begin filling empty positions specifically [in ...] and they have now all be terminated with more significant positions being cut if they move towards employees that have been with NRCS under five years.

In [...], **we have been working for the past four years to fill vacancies due to attrition during the covid-19 pandemic from retiring employees.** The USA Jobs hiring process made it difficult to fill these positions from a national pool of applicants rather than a local pool of applicants. **As of December our office finally returned to a fully staffed status from before 2020. Last week, the long empty positions were once again vacated due to the firings. This leaves our county with no technical staff to help producers with planning for or checking out contracts.**

This affects the entire workload for our office, which has 14 active EQIP contracts, 5 active CSP contracts, and 29 EQIP applications and 2 CSP applications, as well as 13 current state cost share contracts that will need to be checked out before May 1 of this year in order to be paid according to the state cost share guidelines. We are uncertain how we are going to be able to service these requests from our landowners and producers with only an SDC and a Conservation District Manager. As a district manager, I am going to undergo TA CART training so I can assist our SDC with our county cost-share program this coming spring. It is the only way we will be able to move forward, This will mean other outreach and education efforts will need to be adjusted in order to do the best we can under the circumstances. At the same time, support from [...] is uncertain after the state fiscal year, as it is also grant funded.

Our local USDA field office service area was understaffed with 3 vacant NRCS positions waiting to be filled, but also had 3 Conservation District vacancies and 1 state private land vacancy affecting services to producers. **The recent layoffs have also eliminated 3 more NRCS employees leaving offices with a skeleton crew to work with.** There are not only concerns with offices closing due to lack of staff much less the damages wrought to programs that have taken decades to build trust with farmers.

Less funding able to be implemented in the community. NRCS already has a backlog in my District and now that they are down to 1 employee it will be much worse. **Contract management is the priority so new applications get pushed.**

Due to NRCS terminations **nearby service centers have become spread thin as many of the terminations have been for recently hired individuals filling positions that had been vacant.** Due to this even more NRCS employees are acting for different positions and locations, sometimes taking on multiple jobs. **This has caused service to drop in quality and availability with more repercussions to manifest in the near future as impacts become more apparent.**

The other concern is **not being able to replace retirement** folks. We had our local soil con of 20 years retire last month and they cannot replace her. The short term fix was going to be a TSP contract with the local CD office who has staff that are certified to do the work, **but they cannot start new contracts nor can they rehire.** She was the only person in the office (our county) to write plans for EQIP funding.

The NRCS terminations and layoffs only serve to **further diminish an understaffed workforce.** The district conservation technicians have already taken on a lot of the NRCS work but now **with even less staff and fast approaching deadlines there is a very high possibility that not all the work will be able to be completed.** **This has forced us to prioritize producers that we think at a glance have the best chance of obtaining a contract putting those with more complicated or time-consuming applications on the back burner.** We will now have to tell some producers that their application didn't get processed due to being understaffed and their **conservation plans are going to get pushed back by a year at least.**

## Archaeological and Engineering Impacts

There are **always delays with archaeological clearances** [...] We are concerned that now, what is already a 2-3 year wait, will now take even longer. **When producers and customers are waiting 4+ years for emergency funding, there is really no point in even applying for it.** They cannot wait that long.

There was also **already a 2 year backlog due to cultural resources requirements** and recently to address that concern the State of [...] hired archeologists to try to handle it and 6 of the 8 were fired for employed less than a year handicapping the whole state as those jobs have a turnover rate of 4-8 months. **Soil techs take several years to hire too due to the poor pay** and the farmers were upset that newly hired soil techs that are so hard to come by were fired as well.

We **have always struggled** with having enough manpower help **from NRCS to complete design, engineering and checkout work** for our producers who have state cost-share for projects. The current terminations have made this an even more desperate situation.

NRCS is **lacking in their engineering staff.** [...] We had 30 customers on the waitlist for engineering staff. Skilled engineers are hard to get for the price they are paying them.

NRCS offices were severely understaffed, with only 2 engineers in the state. **Current lack of engineering staff in [,,] has created a large backlog of projects.** Our contract added a third engineer

to the help with engineering backlog, filling staffing gaps throughout the state. [...] The funding freeze will result in the 28 projects not being completed for [...] producers. [...] Likely the projects remaining on the contract will not get done.

[...] have requested an increase in engineering staff for many years. **Our area lost an engineering technician, which will result in a significant time increase to deliver designs on erosion during an application window which changes the cost analysis and by the time we get a design, engineers have to start all over because the erosion has significantly changed from the initial assessment.** This is also a large waste of employee time in repeating a process and a disservice to the landowner taxpayer.; Decrease in staffing will result and lower efficiency for servicing existing contracts that were approved and contracted during the last several years. Also, processing an abundance of applications each year with added practices (composting, high tunnels, Urban Ag incentives, wildlife and forestry practice focuses).

We had one person, engineer tech, from our office that was terminated. I believe that most of our customers have no idea he was let go. **The impact would be that field visits, engineering practices will not be done as quickly as before his termination. With the one termination, that leaves only one person to do all the engineering practices for a contract.** This person also is now the only one in [...] to do this job.

So far, our local NRCS office has lost one employee. **This employee was one of the only area-wide engineers available to staff and producers** -- she was recently hired to work through a very large backlog of required engineering and to ensure compliance for ongoing and newly planned irrigation and water storage projects in [...]. **With this loss, and the inability to fill this position for the foreseeable future, irrigation projects will stall as fewer qualified employees will be forced to pick up an ever-growing engineering load.**

[...] termination of employees that handle 1026 applications for HEL & Wetland compliance - backlog will continue to grow, delaying tiling projects or other land improvement projects. **There is already a 6 to 9 month backlog (that was getting caught up).**

## Impacts on Partnerships

**The cooperation and support that we share with our Federal NRCS partners has been reduced to minimal interaction.** All of our county Producers that have a current project approved with NRCS funds have been contacted by them to inform them to hold on all work for an undetermined amount of time. Federal staff have not been able to participate in our planned outreach events. **Anticipated layoffs would be detrimental in our rural area as we already have a small federal staff to cover a large multi county service area. We count on each other for measuring bigger projects, doing surveys of farm projects, and engineering problem solving no matter what funding source is paying for the project.** To lose even one member of this small team would be difficult for our area. I have data for our county and can say that we have over 45 conservation projects funded or in the final planning stages that could be negatively impacted due to knowledgeable staff terminations.

Our area lost 3 staff in the termination of probationary employees. We also have had at least 1 employee leave for other reasons bringing the total to 4 staff lost in the last month. **Producer contracts are going to be slow or non-existent, support for our RCPP program will take a long time to reinvigorate, and all of our work building up interest in NRCS funded programs will fade.** We are currently working with 12 different producers in coordination with NRCS focusing on conservation practices on orchards.

## Other Comments

The anticipated mass layoff of the NRCS staff will have a major impact on conservation. **The [fewer] hands we have to support the mission of "helping people help the land," the harder it will be to support the farmers in our community not only conserve their natural resources, but make them as profitable as they can be as well.** There are countless studies that show how conservation practices help in the long term financial sustainability of a farm. Without the NRCS's support, both technically and financially, farmers will more than likely be forced to take no action on the resource concerns they have on their farm. **Which in turn will lead to further degradation of natural resources.**

An 8-month resource specialist who was a meeting with producers, unafraid to tackle new resource concerns, and always willing to assist others was terminated while an employee with 1-1/2 years of training who continues to have disciplinary issues, does his best to not to work and has never done a complete plan on his own (at a higher pay grade) continues to be employed and causes issues daily. This has caused low morale, instability in the office, and delays in important planning for [...] producers putting a **strain on other employees with the high-volume workload.** [...] **Producers had to be rescheduled due to termination and waiting longer for other employees to availability.** Advocate for **accountability** of federal employees and **termination of employees not performing over random terminations!** [...] **One good employee can do the work of 3 underperforming employees.**

Loss of trusted friendships and reliable service. **Our producers often come in the office just to visit with our NRCS staff because they have worked with them for so long. There is a now lack of staff and lack of knowledge of programs and processes.** Many counties now have no to very little NRCS staff, so that negatively impacts the producers, the Soil & Water Districts, and NRCS.

**The fact is that local FSA, NRCS, and SWCD employees work hard day after day to provide education, information, services, and funding to our producers and farmers.** We are a family and our producers are our family. **Hearing and seeing our local or state "family members" just randomly "disappear" is heartbreaking and has left gaps in service.** Agriculture is our #1 industry [...].

In addition to serving as board chair in [...], I work as a [...] tech for [...] and as an NRCS contracted non-federal partner with JAA for all nutrient and pest management contracts coming through the [...] watershed. I work in about 7 counties, and it is the same everywhere. They fired our soil con in [...] on Valentine's day. We also lost our soil con techs in [...] and [...] County. **I don't even get compensated for the NRCS work I do, and now that workload just tripled.** I am [...], but I refuse to retire and let this whole mess get handed to someone else.

We will not have the wonderful help that we have in our county to help producers with problems or ideas to help with their farms. Our **NRCS personnel is very knowledgeable** and has worked with [...] for many years, **they are an asset to our county and has helped many producers with issues or ideas to help with their farms. I don't know what we would do without them.** We work together with NRCS on many projects and community days to get conservation and natural resources out to the producers.

Our NRCS that we are co-located is a VERY busy office with **a significant number of contracts and lots new application incoming that will be greatly impacted and the process will be slower** for filing and payouts. [...] If we lose our District Conservation Technician we would have to rely on NRCS staff to assist with programming for grants that are still ongoing for pipeline, tank designs, solar pump designs, windbreak/shelterbelt designs for trees, mapping of projects and support. **With the cuts to NRCS...they will not be able to assist the conservation district with our current projects or programming.**

The loss of technical expertise **halts a number of projects upon which producers were relying.** Specifically in our Service Center, the **inability to rely on tasks, to receive answers, and to depend upon our leaders** have been staggering. The fact that the Leadership is scrambling to deal with the chaos means that the actual WORK of the Districts can not continue. Every activity within the Service Center is impacted. Because our county hosts enormous numbers of farms, the support work that the District conducts for NRCS is stymied. **Spring is almost here, and we will be unable to recover to meet the demands of 100s of producers.**

In an agriculturally based rural area such as [...], it is especially hard if NRCS loses staff because the producers/customers need these people in their positions working hard (and happily) to continue with BMPs and CSPs program assessments, distribution of information, conducting research, and sometimes out in the field beside the farmer/rancher to **reassure them that this land and what it can give us is worth every penny, pound of flesh, and drop of sweat they put into it!**

Last month our District Conservationist left to take a NRCS position in [...]. Then NRCS found out hiring was frozen just as they were about to fill her position. Another NRCS employee was shifted into the position of Acting DC. On Friday February 14, two of NRCS Conservation Planners (half of their staff) were fired because they were probationary. **They had been hired in June 2024 and they were the staff that carried out all the work.** Our office has high participation in conservation programs and a large number of contracts. I don't know how many conservation planning activities were affected, but these two staff were 1/2 of the NRCS Conservation Planning team.

Our NRCS field office has never had more than 2-3 staff members to carry out the conservation work of the Farm Bill. Our Natural Resource Conservationist was terminated on Friday, February 14, 2025 due to his probationary status. The **leaves only the District Conservationist to carry out all of the workload by herself.**

Our soil conservation technician was terminated due to being in probationary period. **She was 2 weeks from permanent status, and had 3 prior years of experience working with our producers.** Losing this kind of employee is **a huge setback for our office, and especially our community.** The rapport that is built with landowners over the course of just a few years cannot be replaced. Our field office services about 500 farms, with an average of 650 acres each. We have over 100 active conservation program contracts and another 100 pending applications to process, with more coming in every day. **With only 1 full time & 1 part time NRCS employee in our office now, we simply do not have sufficient staff to maintain the workload.**

Our county has a vacant Resource Conservationist position due to an employee move in July 2024. That position had not been filled when the District Conservationist covering our county and a neighboring county retired in December 2024. We have a full-time Natural Resource Specialist and a shared Resource Conservationist from a neighboring county who is Acting District Conservationist until that position is filled. Obviously, the hiring freeze is slowing down the process of filling both the Resource Conservationist and District Conservationist positions. In the meantime, we only have the Acting District Conservationist in our office one or two partial days per week. We are fortunate to have an excellent Natural Resource Specialist who is servicing producers in our county every day. **When NRCS does not have adequate staff coverage for the county, SWCD employees try to assist as much as possible. A long-term vacancy can have a huge impact on the future enrollment in conservation programs to protect our soil and water, creating a backlog of work and producers frustrated with delays.**

Terminations have taken out vital employees who have been dedicated to the cause of soil and water conservation. **Some have been caught in the crossfire who have many years of experience...** transferring from one agency to another at the wrong time.

Impacts are significant. We have lost great partners due to [...] letters of termination and other partners have taken the early-retirement/buy-out option. **NRCS is not planning on backfilling the partners who have left--much needed positions in our area.**

Over time our producers get to know us from working with us so much if they have a contract. It could be casual, or you could meet the next person who is going to actually listen to you about your farm. Someone who will come out to your land and walk around with you, they become family and friends to us. We had the pleasure of someone who was quickly becoming a vital key staff member to us in team 3 but lost him due to the new policy of terminating probation employees. **That now leaves [...] office with zero NRCS employees working there as well as takes away trust and that understanding between the customer and the employee.**

We are a very rural area and were already short staffed. **We as the Conservation District utilize the partnership programs of bringing in District Conservation Technicians to help NRCS, however there is a good possibility these too will be going away.**

While this is a very difficult time for many USDA employees, we at the SWCDs are dealing with it as well. **We care about our co-workers and our clients [...]**

Our **office is short staffed.** [...] now with the funding freeze **we will continue to hurt for help.** There was an opportunity to fill it, but with NRCS and HR, it is still not filled. I'm worried about losing our veteran help if they make them retire. Therefore, **we are having trouble getting our producers serviced in a timely manner.**

It is early days, and the **impacts remain to be seen.** Our DC took the buyout and NRCS will appoint an acting DC from a neighboring county, and we lost one Soil Conservationist who was a recent hire and still on probationary status. That said, **our county has a very strong SWCD that should be able to take up most of the slack,** and so I do not foresee a significant negative impact in the short term.

No, however the **farmers in my county almost always rely on advance payments from the federal government contracts** to help get them started in implementing conservation practices. The NRCS terminated the only Natural Resource Specialist within [...] County. The SWCD was able to have a special meeting and hire her back with RCPP money that is not tied to IRA funding. Without the SWCD doing that **it is predicted that 1/2 or more of the 2025 contracts would have not been completed.**

The NRCS terminations and layoffs only serve to **further diminish an understaffed workforce.** The district conservation technicians have already taken on a lot of the NRCS work but now **with even less staff and fast approaching deadlines there is a very high possibility that not all the work will be able to be completed. This has forced us to prioritize producers that we think at a glance have the best chance of obtaining a contract putting those with more complicated or time-consuming applications on the back burner.** We will now have to tell some producers that their application didn't get processed due to being understaffed and their **conservation plans are going to get pushed back by a year at least.**

There are been 33 terminations so far, that I know of [...]. **There are projects that were in process that are now on hold because NRCS employee positions were eliminated.** This increases the workload, stress level, and responsibility of our conservation districts that are already stretched thin.

Advocate for accountability of federal employees and termination of employees not performing over random terminations! Currently there is no way to hold an underperforming employee accountable

because all systems are inoperable, or it takes 5-10 years of documentation before finally leading to a termination. One good employee can do the work of 3 underperforming employees.[In ...] NRCS has been struggling for more than a decade to provide landowners the support that they deserve. [...] We [...] were starting to get things turned around. **Good, qualified employees were hired over the last year and were making a positive impact on our situation. These same employees were the ones that were fired in the first round [...].** Losing these valuable employees directly effects the ability of the agency to fulfill the existing contracts with our same producers that are struggling to exist.

Conservation delivery **programs and systems have become very complex, to the extent that we have a hard time getting farmers signed up for them.** Conservation used to be about relationships. NRCS and SWCD staff were out and about on the farms and in the coffee shops forging relationships, challenging farmers to try something new, demonstrating new technologies and techniques, offering technical assistance, and letting the farmers do the work. We used to be able to drive up to a field, do some survey work, design a structure on graph paper on the hood of the pickup, hand the design to the farmer, and return to the field in a couple of months for a post-construction checkout. **It now takes a federal contract, a highly complex GIS system (that changes every other year), and a small army of contract managers, engineers, soil conservationists, IT staff, and others just to plant a few acres of cover crops! Surely we can do better than that.** Perhaps we ought to view the current situation as an opportunity to evaluate not just how we do things, which we certainly need to do, but also to evaluate what we are doing.

NRCS personnel have recently been extremely busy in our service area enhancing producer efficiency and mitigating problems. One recent focus has been the woolly adelgid, an invasive aphid-like insect which destroys hemlock trees, thereby damaging both forest (in this case largely Daniel Boone National Forest) and stream health. **NRCS personnel here have been helping landowners eradicate the woolly adelgid and other invasive species from their properties, which is a vital service for ecosystem health, longevity, and commercial sustainability.**