

MINUTES OF THE SENATE AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Derek Schmidt at 8:30 a.m. on March 10, 2004 in Room 423-S of the Capitol.

All members were present except:

- Senator David Corbin- excused
- Senator Mark Taddiken- excused

Committee staff present:

- Raney Gilliland, Legislative Research
- Lisa Montgomery, Office of the Revisor of Statutes
- Robert Myers, Committee Secretary

Conferees appearing before the committee:

- Harold Klaege - State Conservationist, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Salina

Others attending:

- See Attached List.

Harold Klaege appeared before the committee in order to give a briefing on the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). He explained that the mission of the NRCS is to provide leadership in helping people conserve, maintain, and improve natural resources and the environment. He also explained that, although the NRCS functions under the realm of the United States Department of Agriculture, one of their primary partners in the above-stated mission are the local conservation districts that exist throughout the state.

Harold provided the committee with an overview of what the operations of the NRCS are, listing the following as his primary examples:

- Conservation operations
 - ▶ Technical assistance to land owners, ranchers, producers, etc.
 - ▶ Soil surveys
 - ▶ Plant material inspection
- Watershed surveys and planning (i.e., working with watershed districts in order to control flooding)

Harold next turned the focus of his briefing to the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill). He explained that the Farm Bill devotes a sum of approximately eighteen billion dollars to be used for conservation purposes through the year 2007. Furthermore, he noted that the Farm Bill places a strong emphasis on the conservation of working lands, for example grazing lands, crop lands, and pasture lands.

Harold also listed to the committee some of the various specialized programs contained within the NRCS:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program
- Wetlands Reserve Program
- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program
- Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program
- Conservation Security Program

Harold then briefly turned his attention to the national funding by which the NRCS operates. He pointed out to the committee that a folder of information had been distributed to them containing, among various other documents, some printed slides on which are provided the millions of dollars allotted to each of the NRCS programs.

Harold proceeded to further describe the NRCS programs. He first looked at the Conservation Security Program (CSP), describing its basic function as addressing resource concerns. He also noted that the CSP is funded at a very low level, and thus, will not be very extensive this year. The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), on the other hand, was described as providing matching funds to State, local, or Tribal governments, as well as non-governmental organizations, in order to facilitate the purchase of

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conservation easements. He noted the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) as providing financial incentives to enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring land from agricultural use. He then mentioned the three enrollment options, as noted within the packet of information that he provided the committee with, that are offered by the WRP: Permanent Easement, 30-year Easement, and Restoration Cost-Share Agreement. With regard to the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), he informed the committee that it offers opportunities for landowners to protect the wildlife habitats on their private lands. He further reported that WHIP works very closely with the Department of Wildlife and Parks. The Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP), which was new last year, was described as a voluntary program whose aim is to help landowners protect grasslands. He listed the following enrollment options that are offered under this program: Permanent Easement, Thirty-year Easement, Rental Agreement, and Restoration Agreement. Finally, under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), states identify priority resource concerns, addressing them by way of providing financial and technical assistance.

The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, March 16, 2004.

