Opposition Testimony to HB 2686 by the Kansas Corn Growers Association

House Water Committee

Brent Rogers, President, Kansas Corn Growers Association

Good morning Chairman Highland and members of the committee, my name is Brent Rogers, I am a farmer from Hoxie and serve as the President of the Kansas Corn Growers Association (KCGA). KCGA represents more than 1,100 members on state and national legislative and regulatory issues and actively works with other organizations to maximize the voice of Kansas corn producers. While we are devoted to voluntary measures to conserve and protect our water resources, KCGA stands in opposition to HB 2686.

As part of my farming operations and leadership within Groundwater Management District #4 (GMD4) I am proud to have served a pivotal role in the development of the Sheridan 6 Local Enhanced Management Area (LEMA) and the GMD4 LEMA. Both efforts were the first of their kind in the state, sending a signal that we are committed to the long-term availability of our water resources. Kansas Corn has also been the top non-governmental sponsor of Water Technology Farms across the state, providing more than $150,000 in direct financial support and staff time. KCGA also played a pivotal role in connecting board of GMD5 with access to federal resources that will allow locally driven solutions to the Quivira Wildlife Refuge impairment issue without the need for legal action.

While there is always room for improvement in how the state manages water operations, creating another governmental agency to manage water resources is unnecessary. The water agencies within the state each have clearly stated responsibilities which define their roles and allow them to better serve Kansans within their specialties.

Regarding new water rights fees for irrigators and stockwater users, I would like to remind the committee of the ever-increasing costs of farming and livestock production. While the price of commodities is relatively high in nominal terms, Kansas farmers are currently facing record input prices, skyrocketing use values that are increasing property taxes and additional supply chain issues. Farmers within GMD boundaries and irrigation districts already pay additional assessments. Farmers have also contributed significantly to the State Water Plan Fund through fees levied on fertilizer and crop health products. While we are pleased to see the State Water Plan recommended for full funding for the first time in fifteen years, it is worth noting that farmers continued to pay their full share into the fund while the state was significantly cutting its contribution. We believe that the Water Plan Fund should operate at this fully funded level and see what can be accomplished before adding additional funds from producers who are already squeezed with high costs.

Regarding significant changes to the GMD election procedure and board composition, we believe that GMDs should be allowed to operate under local control to account for area differences, not by a top-down, one size fits all approach as proposed in this bill. Changes to the election procedure and board makeup as proposed will be costly and difficult to implement by local GMD boards and county election officials. GMDs are also aware of the areas in greatest need of conservation within their borders and make significant investments in these areas. While well intended, we feel that the conservation and stabilization plans in this legislation create a bureaucratic, likely repetitive, process that will provide limited additional value.

In conclusion, while we are opposed to this piece of legislation, KCGA continues its long commitment to conserving and protecting our water resources. Our strong history of participation in water policy and education will only continue to grow in the future. As a farmer and grower leader I stand at the ready now and in the future to ensure that our water resources are available for generations to come. Thank you for allowing me to present this testimony and I will stand for questions at the appropriate time.