



46

414 Autumn Lane
Hays, KS 67601

December 6, 2021

To: Representative Ken Rahjes, Chairman
Special Committee on the 30x30 Initiative

Chairman Rahjes and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony representing the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD) and the 105 conservation districts in Kansas. KACD and its member districts are represented at the national level by the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) which represents nearly 3000 conservation districts across the country. Please find comments from NACD to the Biden Administration on the 30x30 initiative attached.

Conservation Districts are the primary local unit of government responsible for the conservation of soil, water and related natural resources within their respective county. The Conservation District's governing board is comprised of five elected local citizens that serve without pay. They establish local priorities, set policy and administer non-regulatory conservation programs. Because Conservation Districts are citizen-directed organizations, they are ideal and practical partners to coordinate local, state and federal initiatives to protect natural resources, improve soil health and enhance water quality. Districts annually convene and chair local workgroup meetings, where input on natural resource issues is received from citizens, organizations and agencies. This collaborative effort gathers necessary information used to recommend priorities needed to address the natural resource concerns at the local level.

Conservation Districts administer state cost-share programs which provide financial assistance to landowners to install conservation practices. Districts also have technical staff in certain counties across the state to provide needed technical assistance to apply these practices. Conservation districts are co-located with the USDA- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in the 95 counties where NRCS has offices and provide administrative and technical support to assist NRCS with the delivery of voluntary federal programs. These programs provide both technical and financial assistance to farmers and ranchers across the state.

Farmers and ranchers are true stewards of our nation's natural resources. Since 1937 conservation districts have used locally led efforts working in partnership with other local, state and federal agencies to provide technical and financial assistance to help these farmers and ranchers with their conservation efforts. Because of these efforts millions of acres of Kansas working lands are managed sustainably.

Ever since the 30 x 30 initiative (now called Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful) was announced there have been many questions and concerns regarding the intent of the executive order and how it might impact private land rights and conservation efforts.

Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful has eight core principles which do support the locally led and voluntary stewardship efforts. It also talks about incentivizing and rewarding

conservation efforts. The document as written is broad in scope and basically supports numerous initiatives and programs that are currently in place.

Many existing federal programs address the principles and recommendations of the report. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Regional Conservation Partnership Programs (RCPP), Conservation Reserve Programs (CSP) and others provide technical and financial assistance to protect and preserve our precious natural resources.

Many landowners choose to implement conservation measures on their land without financial assistance. However they do look for technical assistance, advice and guidance from conservation professionals working for local, state and federal agencies. Conservation districts, in partnership with NRCS, state agencies and non-governmental organizations lead this conservation planning effort at the local level.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this important issue and share significant achievements already made by landowners implementing conservation plans on their land. KACD will continue to promote the need for locally led conservation efforts. It is our hope that any future movement of the Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful Initiative will build on the proven delivery system that is already in place across the state and country.

Daniel H. Meyerhoff, Executive Director
Kansas Association of Conservation Districts



National Association of Conservation Districts

May 06, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Re: Executive Order 14008, Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, Sec. 216 –
Conserving Our Nation's Land and Waters

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) represents America's nearly 3,000 conservation districts and the more than 17,000 men and women who serve on their governing boards. Conservation districts are local units of government established under state law to carry out natural resource management programs at the local level. Conservation districts work with millions of cooperating landowners and operators to help them manage and protect land and water resources on private and public lands in the United States.

Executive Order 14008 *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, Sec. 216 – Conserving Our Nation's Land and Waters* announced the goal of conserving 30 percent of our nation's lands and waters by 2030, more commonly referred to as 30x30. For more than 75 years, conservation districts have been leaders in locally-led efforts to protect our nation's natural resources by working with private landowners to implement voluntary conservation practices on the ground and working with federal land management agencies to carry out natural resource management on public lands. NACD appreciates the opportunity to provide input on the executive order and looks forward to continued dialogue as this new initiative is implemented.

NACD's key message to the agencies tasked with implementing this executive order is that multiple-use management requirements on federal lands and the voluntary conservation activities of farmers, ranchers and foresters on private lands should be recognized and included in the Administration's goals of conserving 30 percent of lands. We note that while the executive order itself only says "conserving at least 30 of our lands" by 2030, the Department of the Interior (DOI)'s Fact Sheet on the effort cites a U.S. Geological Survey report "that only 12% of lands are *permanently* protected." (emphasis added).¹

It is crucial in this effort that federal agencies define what the goal of "conserve" is and how lands could be defined as conserved. "Conserve" and "permanently protected" can be two very different efforts with drastically different outcomes for private landowners and public lands users. NACD appreciated USDA Secretary Vilsack's comments recently that this effort is not a land grab, and that it would support private, working lands through voluntary conservation programs. NACD requests once the 30x30 program report is released that a formal comment period is posted through the Federal Register to ensure all interested stakeholders have an opportunity to provide comments and to formally clarify the purpose, scope and definitions of the 30x30 goal.

¹ <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/fact-sheet-president-biden-take-action-uphold-commitment-restore-balance-public-lands>



National Association of Conservation Districts

Conservation on Public Land

The federal government currently holds over 640 million acres, or 28 percent of all acreage in the United States; much, if not all, currently under some sort of management or conservation plan.² The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the United States Forest Service (USFS), two of the largest federal land management agencies, are required by law to manage these lands for multiple use, which means that uses such as recreation, livestock grazing and timber activities are allowed and must be planned. NACD supports the multiple use of public lands, because these lands play an essential role in the success of local economies, and these uses are conducted under active conservation management.

NACD has previously engaged with federal agencies to ensure multiple use is able to take place on public lands and a full set of management tools is available for land management and sent comments in June 2020 to the BLM responding to the agency's Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for Fuels Reduction and Rangeland Restoration in the Great Basin. While designing the 30x30 program, land management agencies must consider multiple use and ensure local government entities, including conservation districts, are involved in the development of 30x30 related conservation activities on public lands.

Congress has already passed laws to protect the environment, including the National Environmental Policy Act and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, in order to ensure that our public lands are being managed to conserve their natural resources. Improvements to these federal land management laws could improve the active management of public lands, and the DOI and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) should continue to engage with local stakeholders on these improvements to streamline review processes which will help more quickly put active conservation on the landscape. Multiple use on public lands has become increasingly important to the American public, and we look forward to continued dialogue on how public lands can be properly managed and conserved while continuing to follow multiple use. While there are many opportunities to improve conservation on public lands, the opportunities are many times greater to increase conservation on private lands.

Conservation on Private Lands

Agricultural producers and foresters are the original conservationists, and conservation districts were created to work directly with these landowners to protect our nation's natural resources. While many producers and foresters are actively conserving their operations without assistance, USDA also implements many conservation programs that provide financial assistance. There are well over 100 million acres of land currently enrolled in federal conservation programs at USDA, including over 5 million acres under permanent easement, and up to 27 million acres eligible for the Conservation Reserve Program. Millions of additional acres have previously been in a conservation program, and many of those producers and foresters are continuing to implement conservation practices on their operation that ensure improvements in water quality and quantity, soil health, wildlife habitat, and ultimately aid in sequestering carbon from the

² <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42346.pdf>



National Association of Conservation Districts

atmosphere in the soil. Additional funding for these working lands programs should be requested by the Administration and provided by Congress, whether through the recently proposed American Jobs Plan or the next farm bill, to increase this direct investment in conservation on agricultural operations.

However, not every landowner needs or wants direct financial assistance provided through the farm bill conservation programs. In fiscal year (FY) 2020, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), in partnership with local conservation districts and state conservation agencies, completed more than 120,000 conservation plans on over 50 million acres. These plans help landowners proactively protect the natural resources on their operations and should be considered when determining the level of conservation currently being adopted on private lands to meet the overall 30 percent goal.

Since 2015, NACD has partnered with NRCS, the National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA), the National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA) and the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Councils to “emphasize the critical role that conservation planning plays in advancing voluntary conservation efforts on private lands.”³ NACD appreciates the federal government’s role in this partnership effort and we believe additional Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) funds will help increase the number of acres under an active conservation plan. Opportunities to voluntarily increase conservation on private lands through delivery of technical and financial assistance will play a critical role in the 30x30 efforts. We believe success of this initiative will depend on local engagement, utilizing the leadership and expertise of the 3,000 conservation districts that exist in communities across the country, so that local views and concerns are heard and recognized.

We believe that the goal of conserving 30 percent of our nation’s land represents a significant opportunity to advance conservation on the nation’s private working lands. Conservation districts were formed specifically to support landowners conserve our natural resources and stand ready to help advance locally-led conservation in their communities.

We look forward to working with you and the Administration as the 30x30 goals are further defined, to ensure private voluntary efforts are recognized, and to conduct effective stakeholder engagement at the local level.

Sincerely,

Michael Crowder
President
National Association of Conservation Districts

³ <https://www.nationalconservationplanningpartnership.com/about/>