

**Testimony of
MaryAnn Warren, President
Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts
before the Senate Environmental Resources and Energy Committee and the
Senate Majority Policy Committee
Wednesday, November 16, 2011**

Madam Chairman, Senator Erickson, Senator Yudichak, and distinguished members of the committee, it is an honor for me to appear before you to discuss the role of the Pennsylvania County Conservation Districts during times of flooding and how our services impact the ability for the agricultural community to quickly get back on its feet following this type of natural disaster.

Everyday, we take for granted our water resources. We are lucky to live in a state where laws have been passed, regulations put in place and rules implemented to make sure that our water is clean to drink and readily available.

Pennsylvania's abundance of water resources provide an exceptional quality of life for our residents, an opportunity for outdoor enthusiasts, an attraction for visitors, unparalleled natural beauty, thriving ecosystems, agriculture prominence, and economic prosperity throughout the commonwealth.

But with this great fortune can also come with a price. Flood waters, as we know and have recently witnessed, can be destructive and devastating. Water can wreak havoc on homeowners, businesses, and entire communities when flood protection measures are overcome by an unrelenting mother nature. And when we think about this devastation, we often think of the damage caused to homes, businesses and utilities, but what about Pennsylvania's valuable agricultural industry. What about the crops? The land? The livestock? The nearby streams that can be polluted from runoff from the storm and damage caused by the flooding?

Members of our Association were quick to respond to the recent flooding caused in areas throughout the commonwealth. Our members were called upon to help our agricultural industry move quickly in the aftermath of the storm. As always, our members dutifully responded. Quickly, our members assembled and were on route to provide their expertise and resources where needed.

In Susquehanna County, the conservation district acknowledged and provided technical assistance for approximately 100 general permits for gravel bar removal and pipe replacement, assessed crop and agriculture damage, held 'town meetings' to inform the community about permits, compiled a list of tree debris and even volunteered with the Red Cross to provide needed supplies to affected communities.

In Dauphin County, the conservation district provided 10 staff members and volunteers to help assess the flood damage for about seven days. The district responded to a request by the county emergency management team to quickly assess crop and agricultural damage. Teams were assembled and surveyed the entire county. I do want to be sure to note that our conservation district members are experts in the crop and agricultural disciplines, but not in structural damage.

In Bradford County, the conservation district for 800 hours over more than a three week period performed triage emergency response work that included surveying the damage and reporting to DEP any emergency permits needed.

Shifting from what the districts did, PACD surveyed all our districts that respond to flooding emergencies in our agricultural communities, we were provided with feedback that would help expedite and make more efficient this process and I wanted to bring a few of those to your attention today. Suggestions from the conservation districts include:

- Districts should have the authority to issue emergency permits, as well as the authority for debris and stream emergency permits;
- Districts should be on the county emergency services listserves to get the most current and up-to-date information.
- Districts should automatically be part of any emergency response with PEMA in all counties to look at stream damage, document agricultural loss, and floodplain management. As it currently stands, some districts are in the loop and some are not.
- Farmland restoration should be a priority with emergency response coordinators.
- Emergency plans should be in place for dead animals lost due to natural disasters, i.e. what to do with the carcass following these disasters.
- As preventative measures, emphasis should be given to environmentally managing a stream, addressing sources of sediment, streambank erosion, and stabilizing sources of sediment to stabilize the hydrology to minimize flooding. After a stream channel is stabilized riparian planning can be accomplished.
- Even though counties are supposed to have 167 plans, some do not, which adds to the possibility of flood damage.

These are just a few of the ideas that our membership has brought to our attention and I believe it's important for this information to be passed onto each of you on this committee. In addition, we will be providing this list of suggestions to our partners at DEP, PEMA, FEMA and the Department of Agriculture.

PACD would like to prioritize the recommendations from conservation districts and respectfully request that this committee review and carefully consider. In regards to policy, we echo the suggestion that the county conservation districts, determined by DEP on a case by case basis, be granted the authority to sign and distribute emergency permits when major flooding events occur. This will not only free up state resources, but allows the conservation districts, who are local and can be deployed almost immediately, to begin the process of helping farmers and quickly address any environmental issues.

On the regulatory side, we suggest and advocate that the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency begin listing the destruction/damage of farm lands as one of their priorities in an emergency situation. Even if this is listed at a lower level priority, this would provide the districts with the official ability to begin assisting the agricultural community in any way determined by FEMA or PEMA.

The districts are an asset and stand ready to help their community; therefore we suggest these two changes, one policy and one regulatory, so that the state can utilize the districts local knowledge and skills during flooding events.

In closing, for more than six decades the county conservation districts have provided leadership, skill, expertise and advocacy on the premise that protecting our natural resources now will

provide for long-term sustainability for not only our families and communities, but for our economy as well. When disaster strikes, our districts are prepared and ready to be deployed to wherever deemed necessary to provide the greatest support. Our county officials and local governments call upon our districts daily for assistance, guidance and their technical expertise. Our members are trusted entities within the county and go above and beyond to serve the counties, communities and protect our natural resources. Our assistance with flood emergencies is just one more example of the districts dedication and commitment to fulfilling our mission.