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**Testimony of the  
Association of State Dam Safety Officials**

**on the Proposed Budget for Fiscal Year 2011  
for the United States Department of Agriculture  
before the  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,  
Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
U.S. House of Representatives  
March 19, 2010**

Dear Chairwoman DeLauro and Members of the Subcommittee:

The Association of State Dam Safety Officials (ASDSO) is pleased to offer this testimony on the President's proposed budget for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for Fiscal Year 2011. **ASDSO respectfully requests that this Subcommittee increase the Administration's proposed appropriation from \$40 million to \$65 million for the small watershed dam rehabilitation program.**

The Association of State Dam Safety Officials is a national non-profit organization of more than 2000 state, federal and local dam safety professionals and private sector individuals dedicated to improving dam safety through research, education and communications. Our goal simply is to save lives, prevent damage to property and to maintain the benefits of dams by preventing dam failures. Several dramatic dam failures in the United States called attention to the catastrophic consequences of failures. The failure of the federally-owned Teton Dam in 1976 caused 14 deaths and over \$1 billion in damages, and is a constant reminder of the potential consequences associated with dams and the obligations to assure that dams are properly constructed, operated and maintained.

The Administration's proposed FY 2011 budget includes \$40 million in discretionary appropriations to fund rehabilitation of unsafe and seriously deficient dams that were originally constructed under USDA Watershed Programs. Due to the funding freeze that has been instituted the appropriations request is the same as was appropriated by Congress in FY 2010 and slightly below the funding provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009, which supported more than two dozen projects across 11 states.

**ASDSO respectfully requests that this Subcommittee increase the Administration's proposed appropriation from \$40 million to \$65 million for the small watershed dam rehabilitation program. This amount is \$120 million less than the total \$185 million in authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill which includes both mandatory and discretionary funding for the Watershed Rehabilitation Program.**

Additionally, ASDSO has deep concerns with the Administration's proposed fiscal year 2011 budget for the USDA Watershed Program (Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program). The 2011 budget proposes to terminate all funding for this important program after supplying it with nearly \$300 million in the Recovery Act. The funds provided by the Recovery Act supported over 195 projects in 36 states and provided a countless number of jobs during a time when unemployment numbers are the highest they have been in decades.

The President's budget proposes \$0 for watershed planning, \$0 for watershed operations and only \$40 million for rehabilitation of aging dams. The Administration's recent funding requests are not in touch with the reality of the documented demand for the program. **ASDSO urges you to support adequate funding for the complete Watershed Program so that important work can continue that will protect our citizens and our natural resources.**

Of the 84,000 dams listed in the National Inventory of Dams, 89 percent are regulated by the states. Approximately 11,000 of these dams are small watershed structures built under the United States Department of Agriculture programs authorized by Congress beginning in the 1940s (primarily the Flood Control Act of 1944, PL78-534 and the Watershed Protection and Flood Control Act of 1953, PL83-566). By the year 2020, more than 85 percent of all dams in the United States will be more than 50 years old, the typical useful lifespan.

## **THE URGENT NEED FOR FEDERAL ACTION**

The benefits from the nation's improved watershed dams are enormous. The dams provide downstream flood protection, water quality, irrigation, local water supplies and needed recreation. Yet these benefits to lives and property are threatened. The small watershed dams are approaching the end of their useful lives as critical components deteriorate. The reservoirs become completely filled with sediment, downstream development increases the potential hazards and significantly changes the design standards, and many dams do not meet state dam safety standards.

Although these dams were constructed with technical and financial assistance from the Department of Agriculture, local sponsors were then responsible for operation and maintenance of the structures. Now these dams are approaching the end of their useful lives, yet the resource need is still great. The flood control benefits, the irrigation needs, the water supply, the recreation and the conservation demands do not end. In

fact, they are more necessary than ever as downstream development has dramatically increased the number of people, properties and infrastructure that are protected by the flood control functions of these dams. The Federal government has a critical leadership role in assuring that these dams continue to provide critical safety and resource needs.

The NRCS in the Department of Agriculture has estimated the cost of rehabilitating the small watershed dams at over \$500 million. While the average rehabilitation cost per dam is approximately \$242,000, the local sponsors typically do not have sufficient financial resources to complete these necessary repairs to assure the safety and critical functions of these dams. The Federal government must recognize the urgent need to provide assistance to maintain these dams. Congress should reinforce its earlier commitment to the goals of the Flood Control Acts of 1944 and 1953.

Since the program began, there have been 163 watershed rehabilitation projects initiated across the country, which include 77 completed rehabilitation projects and 81 projects either in the planning, design or construction phase. It is clear from these 163 projects how successful this USDA program is. For example, in Albuquerque, New Mexico the Piedra Liza Dam had shown deficiencies within the dam and if it failed would have adversely affected nearly 1,700 residents. The county applied to the NRCS Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program for assistance in 2005 and by 2007 the repairs has been completed.

## **EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM**

More than 4,000 deficient dams have been identified in this country and many of the owners do not have sufficient funding sources. Additionally, thousands more dams still need to be rehabilitated: 1,065 watershed dams have already exceeded their design life and by 2015 an additional 4,300 dams will have exceeded their design life. Finally, 1,000 dams need to be rehabilitated due to stricter dam safety standards as a result of downstream development greatly increasing the consequences of a dam failure.

More than 1,000 watershed dams across the nation will need rehabilitation in just the next five years at a cost of over \$570 million. These numbers will increase as dams get older and thousands of people and millions of dollars of property could be at risk if these dams should fail. That is why Congress authorized \$185 million for rehabilitation for 2008- 2012 in the last Farm Bill. With these funds the NRCS estimates performing 400 dam assessments, processing 250 local sponsor requests for assistance, developing 200 rehabilitation plans, completing 170 designs, and rehabilitating 120 watershed dams in FY 2009 – 2012. Local watershed project sponsors provide 35 percent of the cost of the rehabilitation projects and many have local cost-share funds ready for projects that could be lost if the federal money isn't made available.

Many of these urgent repairs and modifications are needed because of the following: downstream development within the dam failure flood zone, replacement of

critical dam components, inadequate spillway capacity due to significant watershed development and increased design criteria due to downstream development.

Many of the small watershed dams do not meet minimum state dam safety standards and many that are being counted on for flood protection can no longer provide flood protection due to excessive sedimentation and significant increases in runoff from development within the watershed. The dams suffer from cracked concrete spillways, failing spillways, inoperable lake drains and other problems that require major repairs that are beyond the capability of the local sponsors.

## THE COST OF NO ACTION

These small watershed dams have been a silent and beneficial part of the landscape. Small watershed dam projects have provided an estimated \$1.5 billion in annual benefits in reduced flooding and erosion damages, recreation, water supplies, and wildlife habitats. However, the failure to make the necessary upgrades, repairs and modifications will increase the likelihood of dam failures. Continued neglect of these structures may easily result in reduced flood control capacity causing increased downstream flooding. Failure of a dam providing water supply would result in a lack of drinking water or important irrigation water.

The recent dam failures in Hawaii and Missouri have brought into tragic focus for the public the impact aging and under-funded dams can have on a community. The failure to act quickly will clearly result in continued deterioration and a greater number of unsafe dams until a dam failure disaster occurs.

Completion of the needed repairs will result in safer dams, as well as continued benefits. Failure to establish a mechanism to reinvest in these structures will greatly increase the chances of dam failures and loss of benefits, both having significant economic and human consequences. Costs resulting from flood damage and dam failure damage are high and unnecessarily tap the Federal government through disaster relief funds or the National Flood Insurance Program.

## RECOMMENDATION

ASDSO asks that the Subcommittee view funding the Rehabilitation of Watershed Dams as a significant re-investment in the benefits of the program and an investment in the safety of these dams. **Therefore, ASDSO respectfully requests that this Subcommittee provide additional appropriations beyond the Administration's request of \$40 million for FY 2011 by appropriating \$65 million for the small watershed dam rehabilitation program.** Additionally, ASDSO requests that the Subcommittee support adequate funding for the complete Watershed Program so that important work can continue that will protect our citizens and our natural resources.

The condition of our nation's dams, specifically the need for watershed structure rehabilitation, should be a national priority before we have to clean up after dam failures that we know are likely to happen if nothing is done.