

Good morning. My name is Dennis Sun. Again, welcome to Wyoming and thanks for the opportunity to speak with you. I have ranched in central Wyoming all my life and also publish a weekly agriculture newspaper based in Casper, Wyo. and serving all of Wyoming.

I am speaking to you about the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), an agency that has been a friend and partner to Wyoming for many years. We have been very fortunate in Wyoming to have some very dedicated people associated with NRCS and conservation. All across the state, NRCS staff and administration have always been in the front, assisting private landowners with their conservation practices by providing both technical and financial assistance.

As most of you realize, here in Wyoming our private and state lands only amount to about 58 percent of the state's land mass. Most of the private lands are in the eastern part of the state. In western Wyoming most of the private lands are along the rivers and creeks in the valleys or irrigated lands. Water, next to our people, is our most valuable resource and something we both manage and conserve. We are the headwaters for major rivers leaving all sides of our state. That water is vital to other parts of the west and America and we hear about it every day from those states. So our water and soil management in Wyoming is of great importance to those of us who live in Wyoming and across the region.

Like all government programs, NRCS has changed in recent years. Some changes are good, some not so good. Our late Senator Craig Thomas through his work helped create conservation programs to use on rangelands, programs that would work on our ranges intermingled with federal lands. We have utilized these programs very well and hope that they will continue as our rangelands and their condition are a very important resource to us.

We value the technical assistance we have received from our local and state NRCS staff. That technical assistance has diminished lately as the local NRCS found themselves tied down in their offices with a focus on writing contracts. While this does get money out on the ground, it may not be the best planned use of those dollars. With the current evaluations for both local offices and personnel tied to the number of contracts signed, there is no incentive for those resource professionals to leave the office. As a producer, our one on-one technical assistance spent on the ground with NRCS has really gone down. Technical assistance is the most critical element to the selection and adoption of conservation practices enhanced by participation in Farm Bill conservation programs.

Wyoming is a very diverse state, One size doesn't fit all. We utilize the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) program as our priority program. One could combine EQIP along with the Habitat Incentives Program, Forest Land Enhancement Program, and the Grasslands Reserve Program. With tight dollars these days, we need incentives, matching dollars and technical assistance to get the job done. We feel the focus should be maintaining and enhancing working lands programs.

We would like you to review and support the flexibility of the use of Technical Service Providers (TSP) or third party vendors to aid in the technical assistance and Farm Bill program implementation.

One could also restructure the easement programs into one program. The more one simplifies, provides flexibility and combines programs, helps ensure quality decisions are made and meaningful resource projects are carried out.

In summary, one should consolidate working land programs, consolidate easement and rental programs, consolidate stewardship/entitlement programs and clarify all program terms, policies and purposes earlier in the application process so landowners have a greater knowledge of the program right at the start of the process.

There is also the need to utilize local working groups to keep flexibility in decisions with improved communication and coordination among local, state and federal agencies. There has been a continued diminishment of the local working groups role in identifying priorities, having input on program implementation, etc. The recent Sage Grouse initiative is an example. We do appreciate the additional resources to our state to address this issue, but I feel there has been not enough input or involvement from local working groups or people on the ground.

Wyoming has a great partnership with NRCS and success in utilizing the Farm Bill conservation programs to maintain and enhance our natural resources. We hope that will continue through improved programs and opportunities for on-the-ground partnerships and discussions. Thank you.