

Testimony of Ms. Sarah Tunge,
North Dakota Conservation Districts Employee's Association
Senate Agriculture Committee
February 4, 2020

I write to you today on behalf of the North Dakota Conservation District Employees Association (NDCDEA) to provide testimony in opposition of Senate Bill 2342.

The NDCDEA represents employees from the 54 Soil Conservation Districts (SCDs) in the state. Our mission is to promote professionalism among SCD employees, to provide assistance for coordinating the efforts of the SCD Supervisors, employees, NDASCD, NDSU-SSCC and USDA Agencies in achieving their conservation goals and provide a means of communication for employees to effectively exchange information and ideas resulting in better coordination and effectiveness of district programs on a local, state, regional, and national level. We also work to provide the opportunity and the tools necessary for developing and maintaining an adequate education program to promote SCD employee development.

Soil Conservation Districts are founded on the values of conservation, soil health education and promotion; there has been much work done in our state to keep our soils productive and healthy and this continues to be a priority focus for districts across the state. This bill brings attention to that need, and we appreciate that. However, we believe that this bill would create an unnecessary duplication of effort that would be counterproductive in the long term.

Today, the SCD's conservation delivery system reaches into virtually every community with technical and financial assistance that is targeted to local resource concerns. SCDs play a crucial role in ensuring locally-led producer-driven stewardship of all land and natural resources in the state. Cooperating with partners ranging from other government organizations to non-profit conservation organizations to locally led workgroups, SCDs provide programs and services that address many aspects of conservation. In addition to education and outreach, SCDs are putting conservation on the ground in the form of cover crops, grassland planting, tanks, pipelines, soil testing and other practices. On a daily basis, employees are providing technical assistance to all residents in the county and helping them improve their operational goals through conservation.

The work being done at the local level by SCDs includes many of the tasks listed in this bill. Rather than creating a new healthy soil grant program, we believe increased support for the locally led, voluntary soil conservation programs already managed by SCDs is a more feasible option. An increase in funds allocated to the SSCC District Assistance Program, currently under consideration as part of Senate Bill 2020, would provide additional resources to improve soil health without changes to the Century Code or additional state programs. The District Assistance Program also already contains mechanisms for targeted allocation and accountability through the District Activity Reporting Tool (DART).

District Assistance Program funds allow SCDs to hire dedicated professionals who directly address soil health issues through soil testing, education, demonstrations, cost-share programs, and general technical assistance. These activities benefit all North Dakotans, and we believe that additional funds toward soil health would be best allocated toward these programs.

Today, the SCDs conservation delivery system reaches into virtually every community with technical and financial assistance that is targeted to local resource concerns. We encourage the Committee to

remember that SCDs play a crucial role in ensuring locally-led producer-driven stewardship of all land and natural resources in the state. We respectfully oppose SB2342 and encourage consideration for increased funding and support for the State Soil Conservation Committee and the District Assistance Program. This provides a cohesive mechanism for the continued delivery of critical conservation programs and most importantly, provide for the continued availability of the conservation education and practices that ensure clean water, healthy soils, and other vital benefits on which the public relies each day.

Thank you for your time and consideration.