

**Testimony in Support of House Bill 2800
to the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources
by Kelsey Olson, Deputy Secretary
Kansas Department of Agriculture
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Good afternoon, Chairman Rahjes and members of the committee. My name is Kelsey Olson and I serve as the Deputy Secretary for the Kansas Department of Agriculture. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 2800.

The Kansas Department of Agriculture Division of Conservation works with local Conservation Districts in all 105 counties. These districts are composed of 5 regions, each of which is represented by a commissioner on the State Conservation Commission. The districts create and execute programs that work to improve water quality, water conservation, soil erosion, and flood control, and to provide local water. The priorities of the Conservation Districts include delivery of local financial and technical assistance, reduction of sedimentation and nutrient and pesticide runoff, water quality protection and restoration in streams and above reservoirs, the protection and sustainability of the Ogallala and related aquifers, and the promotion of conservation practices that improve soil health.

The Conservation Districts also allow for local leadership to work with their constituents to address and support local natural resources through voluntary conservation efforts. Each Conservation District serves as the local government responsible for natural resources within the county. The elected citizens within the district serve as supervisors and provide communication between local and state agencies and the people in the local communities.

County Conservation Districts receive a portion of funding through the State Water Plan Fund which is administered by KDA. Districts submit a special request for conservation activities to the Division of Conservation. All requests up to \$25,000 are met. HB 2800 raises the current cap of \$25,000 to \$50,000 per district.

Over the years, counties have shown a willingness to dedicate more funding to the program than the funding that is currently provided by the state. The last time that the state contribution provided a full 1:1 contribution to the county allocations as prescribed in K.S.A. 2-1907(c) was in 2008, the same year the match level was raised from \$10,000 to \$25,000.

The proposed budget for FY 25 for state aid to Conservation Districts is \$3,502,706. This increase was proposed as a result of the increased funding in the State Water Plan Fund due to the passage of HB 2302 — but without any amendments to the current authorizing statute, the actual state match contribution can only be \$2,559,400 (total amount of allocations at or below \$25,000).

At the district level, these funds are used for operation expenses to carry out the functions of the district. The district offices employ one staff person. Currently, they are able to provide a low-paying salary without retirement or health benefits. Post COVID-19, there has been a high rate of turnover of managers within the districts. The high staff turnover is adversely affecting conservation program delivery at the state and federal levels.

With the match level raised to \$50,000, 89 counties would meet or exceed a full match and 16 counties would meet the full match but require less than \$50,000. By increasing the state's contribution, KDA believes that counties may feel encouraged to provide additional local funding to further support local Conservation Districts and the valuable work that they conduct locally.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2800. I'm happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.