

## Testimony for PA House Environmental and Energy Committee

January 24, 2022

Good morning, my name is Mike Flinchbaugh. I own and operate a diversified farm in York County along with my brother and sister and mom and dad. We raise approximately 2000 acres of cash grain crops on both owned and leased land, 40 acres of orchard crops, operate a retail farm market and finish about 2000 head of hogs per year. I have served as a director on the York County conservation district since 2005 and currently am the treasurer of that organization. I also am a farmer director on the State Conservation Commission where I have served since 2014.

One of the goals of our farm operation is to be as good of stewards of the land and water resources that we are given as possible. As such, we have implemented many conservation practices on both the land we own and the rental land we farm over the years. These practices include the manure storage structure my mom and dad installed in 1993 when they expanded the hog operation on the farm, to grass buffers we have planted along waterways on farms we have purchased over the years, to grass waterways we install on new rental farms where they are needed. My family is not an anomaly in the state when it comes to striving to do what is best for our land and water resources. Most farmers across the state strive to do their best to protect these resources because in the end healthy soil that does not wash away and clean water are imperative for them to make a living.

Because of the nature of farming as a low margin industry, farmers are often not able to fund these conservation measures completely on their own. It is often necessary for farmers to have access to cost share funding to complete these projects as well as have access to technical assistance to design and make sure the projects are installed correctly. The manure storage on my family's farm was installed with the help of cost share from the original Chesapeake Bay program and a lot of help from the York Conservation District who helped both design the structure and line up the funding for it. We have also sought help from the district several times over the years to help install diversions and waterways. More recently we have worked with the ag staff at the district to access funding available through the Conservation Excellence Grant program to help with the cost of planting cover crops. And again, this is not unique to just my farm or York County. As a member of the State Conservation Commission I regularly get to hear from conservation districts from across the state who indicate the demand from farmers for their help is high.

In order to meet the needs of the ag community, conservation districts around the state need to have access to not just cost share dollars that they can supply to farmers to fund the conservation projects, but also funding to pay for the staff who work with farmers to help them apply for the funding, who go out in the field and design the waterways and manure storages, who administer the paperwork that is needed to meet the reporting requirements that come with every grant and source of cost share funds. Cost share dollars alone do not get conservation on the ground, some funding is also needed for the people who help get the projects done. Many of the line items in the state budget that help fund conservation district staff have for all intents and purposes been flat for close to 10 years. In most districts the funding is covering well less than 50% of the cost to employee these individuals, some places possibly as low as 20%. In many instances districts plug these funding gaps with funds from different grant sources that are often not predictable for more than a year or two. This makes it hard to build staff capacity when you are not certain how you will pay for them two years down the road. The Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program would help fill this gap by providing districts with a dedicated predictable source of funding for both cost share dollars and staffing needs. This predictability will enable districts to build capacity to better help farmers get conservation practices on the ground and ultimately improve the health of their soils and the quality of our waters.