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April 17, 2023

Rep. Aisha Gomez
Chair, House Taxes Committee

Re: DE amendment for HF 1938 (Gomez), Omnibus Tax Bill

Chair Gomez and House Taxes Committee Members,

On behalf of the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD), I'd like to express our gratitude for the Soil and Water Conservation District Aid provisions included in the delete-everything amendment for HF 1938 (Gomez). SWCD Aid would establish a desperately needed standing, statutory appropriation of general funds from the Department of Revenue to Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) statewide, similar to state aids for other elected units of local government.

The \$22 million per year proposed for fiscal years 24-25 represents a strong step forward in more adequately addressing the state's share in funding our statewide conservation delivery system. As we noted earlier in session, the \$22 million per year we are seeking is not a bloated funding request. It's a result of a funding assessment we conducted in summer of 2022 in cooperation with the Board of Water and Soil Resources. House File 735, carried by Rep. Liz Reyer, with significant bipartisan support, includes that \$22 million funding level. And while that funding level still leaves us with significant unmet funding needs, at that level and if maintained, it would help us make real progress in enhancing our staffing capacity to meet local needs.

Unfortunately, the reduction in funding to \$14 million starting in aids payable 2025 (FY26) is concerning. In the absence of adequate ongoing funding, instead of hiring additional staff to accelerate our conservation work, SWCDs are unable to even retain the ones they have. Our SWCDs have turned into revolving doors, hiring and training staff only to see them move on to higher paying jobs elsewhere.

Minnesota SWCDs will be working hard to leverage federal funding from the Inflation Reduction Act and climate smart agriculture initiatives. At \$22 million per year ongoing, our SWCDs will have a chance to hire and retain the conservation professionals needed to compete for federal project dollars over the next five years, and work with interested private landowners on getting those projects implemented in our communities.

MASWCD represents the state's 88 soil and water conservation districts, including their 440 elected supervisors and their more than 460 employees. Soil and Water Conservation Districts are political subdivisions of the State established under Minnesota Statute Chapter 103C. Each SWCD is governed by a board of elected supervisors. SWCD law is implemented across 100% of the state.

As water quality and soil health issues are prioritized in Minnesota, SWCDs' roles have expanded and include helping landowners navigate programs and policies that are increasing in complexity. To face these challenges and increase our pace of progress toward cleaner water and healthier soils, SWCDs need not only more **predictable** and **sustained** state funding, but also more **adequate** state funding. At \$22 million per year ongoing, SWCD Aid will help us get closer to meeting those funding needs. As we've noted earlier in session, these are just a few examples of how SWCD Aid would benefit the state:



Benton SWCD would be able to hire an additional technician, which would allow the district to provide service on a timelier basis to feedlot owners and to producers interested in the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program.



Carver SWCD would expand upon two new programs: their Pollinator Cost-Share program and their Soil Health/Cover Crop program. SWCD aid would also enable the district to retain the qualified staff needed for providing these public services in a rapidly growing county.



Clay SWCD would be able to enhance staffing to meet landowner interest in soil health practices such as cover crops and purchase equipment for assisting with establishment of pollinator habitat.



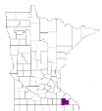
Crow Wing SWCD would be able to devote staff time and resources to projects like re-routing an ATV trail to mitigate soil erosion into a nearby lake, which they currently do not have the capacity to address in a timely fashion.



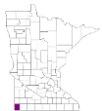
Dakota SWCD would be able to hire a technician for more landowner outreach and project implementation. Recent survey results have shown that SWCD staff are well respected and trusted, and that landowners prefer one-on-one discussions about conservation opportunities specific to their land rather than attending workshops and events.



Lake SWCD would be able to increase staff capacity to address critical water quality and soil erosion issues along Lake Superior and its tributaries, collaborating with neighboring SWCDs and other agencies on work as part of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.



Olmsted SWCD would be able to enhance staffing, expand technical services, and increase programming to the public to help meet the growing needs of their constituents in both urban and rural settings.



Rock SWCD would be able to train and retain qualified staff who have earned the trust of the agricultural producers in the county, providing these local cooperators with the technical services need to get needed conservation practices implemented on their farm fields.

These are just a few examples that showcase the important work that SWCDs could accomplish, but where we're currently falling short.

Thank you for including SWCD Aid in the DE amendment for the tax bill, and for your support of this important funding mechanism for Minnesota's statewide conservation delivery system. We urge you to reconsider the funding level in the outyears and to support \$22 million per year not just for FY24-25, but ongoing in future years.

Sincerely,

Chuck Rau

President, Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts