To: Chairman Virgil Peck, Senate Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee

From: Sean Miller, Kansas Association of Conservation Districts

Date: March 10, 2025

RE: Proponent of HB 2113

Thank you Chairman Peck and members of the committee for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 2113 on behalf of the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD). KACD represents the 105 conservation districts in Kansas, one in every county. Each conservation district is governed by an elected board of 5 volunteer supervisors, resulting in 525 citizens serving statewide that provide leadership in addressing natural resource concerns at the local level.

Districts are the primary local delivery system for conservation programs administered by the Kansas Department of Agriculture's Division of Conservation. The districts take the application, make approvals, coordinate the technical assistance needed to design and implement the practices and make the payment to the producer once the practice is completed. Districts are the primary delivery system for the Kansas Reservoir Protection Initiative, work closely with KDHE in implementing WRAPS projects across the state, and work with several private organizations helping to deliver climate smart programs to producers. Districts will also be playing a significant role with implementation of a Regional Conservation Partnership Program project, bringing $25,000,000 federal dollars to Kansas to improve irrigation technology and reduce water use in the High Plains aquifer. Along with all of those duties districts also provide administrative and technical support to NRCS delivering federal programs to Kansas landowners and operators.

Districts have a very extensive Education and Outreach program in many counties. Whether it be the Water Festival in Garden City, Conservation Roundup in Colby, A Slice of Ag in Overland Park or one of the many other events across the state, districts reach thousands of elementary and high school students each year. We also sponsor the Envirothon competitions for high school students across the state.

Adult education activities include workshops and field days addressing concerns such as soil health, range management, wetland restoration, irrigation management or topics like community gardens, pollinators, high tunnels and other events addressing the needs of our small scale and urban producers.

While districts are a sub-division of state government, conservation districts base funding comes from the county commissions. Current law allows for a match of county funding up to $25,000. This cap has been in place for 18 years and during that span the cost of employment and operations has risen significantly. The combined county and state funding is simply not enough to fairly compensate staff and cover office operating expenses. This has resulted in high turnover of district employees as they find better paying jobs with better benefits. The last data

received from the Division of Conservation is that average pay for a district employee across the state is $20.79 per hour. Only 21 districts provide full health insurance coverage with another 15 providing partial coverage. Sixty nine districts do not provide any health insurance and this lack of health insurance is one of the leading reasons for staff turnover.

HB 2113 will provide the opportunity to provide a match of state moneys on the basis of $2 of state funds to $1 of non-state funds. This enhanced match rate, with a cap to limit total state expenditures, will help lead to a more stable district workforce with the experience to effectively deliver programs to your constituents at the local level. This issue passed the House late in 2024 by a vote of 120-3 (as HB 2800) and was ultimately enacted as a budget proviso last year. The Senate has now passed similar formulaic legislation in SB 36 which passed the Senate 39-0 and is awaiting action in the House committee at this time. We hope to make this match permanent this year with the passage of HB 2113 or similar legislation.

Additionally, HB 2113 provides $2.5 million in state funding to help match county funding at the 2:1 level. This money ($1.75 million from the state water plan fund) was also included in the Kansas Department of Agriculture budget, but that funding was removed in budget action by this committee last Thursday. We would respectfully ask the Senate to pass HB 2113, or restore the funding in the Kansas Department of Agriculture's budget to ensure that we can continue to staff and operate the county conservation districts.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide written testimony to the committee about the important role conservation districts play in natural resource conservation and encourage the passage of HB 2113 to support the important role of conservation districts in your communities.