November 25, 2015

Mr. David Feilke

Chairman, Arkansas Natural Resources Commission

C/O J. Randy Young, Executive Director

101 East Capitol, Suite 350

Little Rock, AR 72201

Re: Commission Funding of Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts

Dear Mr. Feilke,

The Washington County Soil and Water Conservation District board of directors is writing the commission to express our opinions concerning the way the commission currently funds the Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts (AACD). The AACD is an organization composed mostly of the conservation districts that is supposed to represent the districts collectively when dealing with the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission (the Commission), legislature, etc. As you are aware, the AACD sets the rate of annual dues, which are currently $1,200 per year for state dues and $750 for National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) dues. As it stands now, each year the AACD bypasses the individual districts receiving from the Commission lump sum dues in the name of every district.

We believe this direct-funding arrangement has inadvertently created both accountability and autonomy problems for AACD. First, the Association does not have to worry about any individual district’s concerns since no district can opt out of funding their group. Second, the Association is now presumably more interested in placating the Commission who pays all their dues. Oddly, AACD seems more concerned with the interests of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) than either the Districts or the Commission. This relationship is a direct result of National Association of Conservation Districts who lobby for NRCS and the farm bill. But NRCS goals and District/Commission goals are not always the same, but we have no say because the NACD lobbyists are paid by us whether we like it or not.

As an example of the Association’s disregard for individual districts, our district board was forced to obtain an attorney to file Freedom of Information requests to obtain simple AACD financial information. After four months, we have yet to receive all the information we asked for even with the threat of a lawsuit. We have been informed by the Association that they did not have to comply with FOIA and they told us they would not divulge financial details about any financial dealings that were not directly associated with our dues. This assertion is absurd and indicates an organization that has grown arrogant. We believe that the AACD has become focused primarily on itself utilizing our dues at will, seeking grants that benefit AACD, and enjoying board member travel and perks for even their spouses. In our recent FOIA-based inquiries, we have discovered that the AACD failed to file its taxes for several years and as a result lost its 501-C3 exemption three years ago. We question the legality of sending taxpayer money to any private organization that not only fails to identify details of its finances and spending but also has become a private company with tax liabilities.

We understand that it is in the best interests of the conservation districts throughout the state to have a healthy AACD, but we question how well the AACD can continue to function when it literally has guaranteed district funding regardless of how poorly they choose to interact with their membership, the Commission staff and their other partners. We urge the Commission to stop directly funding the AACD as soon as possible and return the power of the purse to the districts-this the fair and democratic thing to do.

Please feel free to contact me at 479-841-1843 if you wish to discuss this matter with me.

Sincerely,

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Norman Findahl, WCCD Chairman

Cc: File, ANRC, R. Young, AACD