

**STATEMENT OF  
THE HON. JAMES R. LYONS  
UNDER SECRETARY  
NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

**BEFORE THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON OPERATIONS, OVERSIGHT, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY  
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
REGARDING  
THE URBAN RESOURCES PARTNERSHIP**

**September 20, 2000**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Urban Resources Partnership (URP). I am accompanied by Chief Pearlie Reed; Joan Comanor, Director, Resource Conservation and Community Development Division; Lloyd Wright of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); and Phil Janik, Robin Thompson, and Larry Payne, Chief Operating Officer; Associate Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry; and Director of Cooperative Forestry, respectively, of the USDA Forest Service (FS).

At the beginning of my tenure at USDA, I initiated the Urban Resources Partnership to explore how the federal government could better address urban natural resource concerns and better serve the needs of disadvantaged and minority communities in urban settings. The Urban Resources Partnership is one of the few initiatives to directly address inner-city natural resource issues. With a modest investment of \$4 million annually for each of the previous seven fiscal years – \$2 million from the Forest Service and \$2 million from the Natural Resources Conservation Service – the Urban Resources Partnership provides valuable technical and financial assistance to underserved communities. As such, it is one way to address environmental justice issues.

Both the Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service initiated urban programs in the past. The Urban Resources Partnership simply continued these efforts with added emphasis on serving minority communities and neighborhoods in and around major metropolitan areas. This is essential for several reasons.

First, 80 percent of all Americans – more than 190 million people – reside in urban areas, yet less than one-tenth of one percent of the budget for forestry and conservation programs is dedicated to serving urban residents. The social, psychological, and economic values of trees, open space, community gardens, waterfronts, and urban parklands are well-documented and improve the livability of communities and the quality of life for urban residents. Urban residents often have

little connection with agriculture, forestry, or conservation, resulting in an incomplete understanding of natural resources and their environment. Building a connection to conservation and natural resources for urban residents is essential since the views and opinions of urban residents and their representatives have a strong influence on national priorities. Without this connection, future support for agriculture, forestry, and conservation may be at risk. And, finally, given U.S. demographics, our nation's future leaders are more likely to grow up in urban areas. If they are to have an appreciation for agriculture, forestry, and the conservation of natural resources, exposure to these areas at an early age is critical.

### **An Overview of the Urban Resources Partnership (URP)**

The Urban Resources Partnership was initiated to improve the efficiency of federal agency efforts to provide conservation technical assistance and financial support to urban communities. A number of agencies in the Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Interior, and the Environmental Protection Agency were providing such assistance, but often with limited coordination and collaboration. Given the severe limits on funding and personnel working in urban forestry and conservation, the need existed to maximize the efficiency of these programs and their delivery systems. This innovative approach was recognized by the Innovations in American Government competition sponsored by the Ford Foundation and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University – the Urban Resources Partnership was a semi-finalist in 1997.

In 1994, limited funding was provided to four pilot cities – Atlanta, Chicago, New York, and Seattle – to explore a new delivery system for conservation assistance to urban residents. The initiative used a block grant model for the delivery of funds to each city, but stressed the need for interagency collaboration and local partnership to ensure the most efficient use of funds.

The rationale for selecting the cities for this initial effort was simple. Each provided geographic diversity. There existed strong political support for urban forestry and conservation activities as illustrated by ongoing projects and programs. Each city had strong local support for the initiative and provided different opportunities to explore how to improve the delivery of conservation and forestry services in urban environments.

For the first four years of the Urban Resources Partnership, all funds were invested in on the ground projects to the maximum extent possible. Overhead was provided by funds from other agencies or by donations from local governments and conservation partners. For example, local coordinators might secure office space, phone and clerical support from a mayor's office and salary and/or benefits from another agency.

The Urban Resources Partnership improved its delivery of financial and technical assistance by working with local governments, state agencies, community and neighborhood groups and nonprofit partners to identify opportunities for investing in projects. The Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Forest Service made better decisions regarding the projects to support because of the locally-led dialogue that occurred. Project funds were matched with local

resources, thus multiplying the benefits of limited federal investments. In addition, technical assistance and support to projects were provided by each of the agencies in a one-stop shopping manner. Thus, a community could make one request and receive tree planting advice from the Forest Service, soil conservation consultation from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and landscape design assistance from the National Park Service to complete a project.

The Urban Resources Partnership pilots were so successful that in 1995, a number of cities made unsolicited requests to be designated Urban Resources Partnership cities. As a result, the Urban Resources Partnership expanded to include Denver, East St. Louis, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. Of the cities that expressed an interest in joining the partnership, these four cities seemed the best prepared to implement the initiative. In 1997, an application process was established and San Francisco, Las Vegas, South Florida, Buffalo, and Boston were added to the Urban Resources Partnership under the guidance of a national steering committee.

It is important to note that while the number of Urban Resources Partnership cities expanded, the funds allocated to the initiative did not increase. That is, the \$4 million provided annually by the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Forest Service to the Urban Resources Partnership was allocated among the partnership cities, with each receiving a smaller share as the number of partners increased. Although other cities sought to join the Urban Resources Partnership, this self-imposed funding limit precluded expanding the partnership after 1997.

### **Urban Resources Partnership Administration**

Federal agencies provide overall guidance to Urban Resources Partnership grant recipients and technical and financial assistance to the extent authorized. Forest Service authority to provide this assistance derives from the urban and community forestry assistance section of the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act (16 USC 2105). Natural Resource Conservation Service authority to provide assistance to the Urban Resources Partnership initiative is based on the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act [16 U.S.C. 590 (a) - (f)]. Partnership projects funded by the Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service focus on open space enhancement, water quality improvement, prevention of soil erosion, creation of urban habitat, environmental education and land stewardship. Whether it is helping residents to plant trees, teaching young people life skills through the creation of interpretive nature trails, or restoring wildlife habitats, the Urban Resources Partnership represents a commitment by federal agencies to work collaboratively with local residents to address their communities' environmental needs.

Initial guidance was provided to the first four pilot Urban Resources Partnership cities under the direction of the Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service. In 1996, a summary report highlighted Urban Resources Partnership projects, goals, and objectives in participating cities. Urban Resources Partnership coordinators, federal agencies, and local partners began meeting annually in 1995 to address administrative issues and share information. The Urban Resources Partnership coordinators also continue to participate in monthly conference calls.

The Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service initiated a management

review of the Urban Resources Partnership in 1998 to ensure that each of the 13 cities was in full compliance with all federal rules and procedures. The Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service management directed their State Conservationists and Regional Foresters, respectively, to complete a number of tasks to ensure the fiscal accountability of the Urban Resources Partnership, including:

- Ensure that all on-going Urban Resources Partnership project funds are used in line with existing legislative authorities.
- Develop and approve work plans for all on-going projects and ensuring that all new projects have an approved work plan before a grant or agreement is signed.
- Establish and maintain official project files in the Regional or State offices of the agency with the lead in overseeing each city.

State Conservationists and Regional Foresters reported that each of the above tasks was completed, bringing the original eight cities into compliance with agency regulations and authorities. The Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Forest Service ensured that the five cities added in 1997 designed their efforts in full compliance with agency regulations and authorities.

More recently, a National Guidance Document was prepared to update and expand the original guidance provided in 1994. The Inspector General's office reviewed the guidance before it was finalized. An Accomplishments Report was also recently completed and is included in this testimony.

### **Office of the Inspector General's Audit**

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) completed an audit of the Urban Resources Partnership in November, 1999. The audit identified four main issues of concern regarding implementation of the Urban Resources Partnership. USDA continues to take the findings and recommendations of the Inspector General very seriously and are making every effort to comply to their satisfaction. Where the Inspector General has indicated that the agencies' response is inadequate, a dialogue continues to ensure that appropriate and necessary corrective actions are taken. Our responses to date are detailed below.

#### **Issue 1: Administrative Procedures**

As stated earlier, USDA initiated a management review of the Urban Resource Partnership cities prior to the Inspector General's report. The review brought each of the cities into compliance with agency rules and regulations.

The Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service took additional corrective actions to address the recommendations from the Inspector General's audit:

- The agencies worked with field offices to develop a National Guidance Document to ensure that no administrative lapses occur in the future. Both the office of General Counsel and the Inspector General's office reviewed the National Guidance Document before it was distributed to field offices. The National Guidance Document updates the original guidance sent to each of the first four Urban Resources Partnership pilot cities in 1994.
- Project reviews are conducted annually in each Urban Resources Partnership city by the Forest Service regional Urban and Community Forestry coordinator and regional grant administrator. They review a selection of Urban Resources Partnership grant records, visit project sites and meet with grant recipients. Natural Resources Conservation Service State Conservationists and their State contracting staff are conducting similar reviews.
- All Forest Service regional coordinators, Natural Resources Conservation Service local Urban Resources Partnership coordinators, and many federal steering team members received training in managing federal financial assistance grants at the Urban Resources Partnership national meeting in January 2000. They and their regional grants management staffs are continuing their oversight of the initiative through site visits, yearly meetings with grant recipients, and functional assistance trips. The Natural Resources Conservation Service held a national grants and agreements workshop in February 2000 attended by more than 300 procurement, financial and contracting specialists and program staff.
- The Forest Service developed updated program direction for the Urban and Community Forestry Program and a list of appropriate Urban and Community Forestry Program activities and criteria for project selection.

## **Issue 2: Legal Authority**

The Inspector General questioned the legal authority of the Natural Resources Conservation Service to work in urban areas. We believe that the legal authority for the Urban Resources Partnership is well documented. The Office of General Counsel, after a comprehensive review of both the language in the Conservation Operations appropriations and the legislative history for the appropriations acts "confirms the Secretary's broad authority under the 1935 Act to undertake soil and water conservation measures relating to soil erosion to achieve the policies and purposes of the 1935 [Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment] Act."

In 1994, prior to the implementation of the Urban Resources Partnership, a number of offices, including the Office of General Counsel, Strategic Planning and Budget Analysis, Accounting and Grants, Fiscal Operations and Administrative Services, reviewed the operating procedures for the Urban Resources Partnership initiative. The attached memo, dated April 5, 1994, reflects the review and consultation of these officials in response to a request from Lloyd Wright, the Natural Resources Conservation Service official who provided initial oversight and guidance in developing the Urban Resources Partnership.

The Urban Resources Partnership funding, authorities, and activities have been detailed for Congress on several occasions. In December, 1997, USDA provided a report to the House Appropriations Agriculture Subcommittee, detailing activities of the Partnership, including inner-city beautification and creation of outdoor learning centers. The Subcommittee stated that there was no objection to the allocation of funds for these activities.

In addition, the Fiscal Year 1999 Report from the House Committee on Appropriations stated, "The Committee recognizes the participation of the NRCS in the Urban Resources Partnership. The Urban Resources Partnership (URP) is a multi-agency effort to assist urban and suburban communities to improve management and conservation of their natural resources. It has served as a catalyst to encourage local communities to participate in conservation activities. The Committee expects that the NRCS will continue their participation in URP."

### **Issue 3: Recovery of Funds**

The Inspector General recommended that action to recover funds or waive improper payments for any grants made without proper legal authority be made. USDA continues to disagree that the legal authority is lacking for the Urban Resources Partnership. The Chiefs of the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Forest Service, in a memo dated February 16, 1999, estimated that it would "require a minimum of 18 months and a number of staff to complete the recommended review of all projects completed between FY 1994 and FY 1998. This would severely reduce the availability of key staff needed to provide appropriate administrative oversight to the ongoing work of the agencies in ensuring current projects are consistent with appropriate procedures and guidelines. Further, it is not in the public interest to attempt recovery of funds from grass-roots organizations that completed project activities accepted by the local URP steering team."

Furthermore, as the Chiefs stated in their memo, grants made from FY98 and FY99 were made within applicable statutes and controls are in place to ensure that all future grants are similarly made.

### **Issue 4: Publication of Rules and Regulations**

The Inspector General recommended that rules and regulations for the Urban Resources Partnership be published in the Federal Register. The Urban Resources Partnership is not a program, but simply a continuation of ongoing urban forestry and conservation activities. I should point out that many agency initiatives and programs function without the issuance of rules or regulations. For example, the Urban and Community Forestry program has functioned for ten years with national guidance, but no formal rules. The "America the Beautiful" initiative, developed by the Bush Administration, was not subject to rulemaking procedures. Finally, many of the programs that are critical to our national strategy for reducing wildfire risk – for which we are seeking additional funding today – are not being implemented through formal rules. Examples include the Fire Wise program; the State Fire Assistance program; the Volunteer Fire Assistance program; and the Forest Health Management and Economic Action programs.

Despite the fact that the Department believes that no formal rules are necessary, to be responsive to the Inspector General's concerns, an interim rule governing the Urban and Community Forestry program and the Urban Resources Partnership will be published within the next week.

### **Urban Resources Partnership: The Benefits**

The Urban Resources Partnership successfully works with inner city residents to improve their lives and surroundings. This is critically important if we are to meet the challenges facing the stewardship of our natural resources in the future and ensure that all Americans realize the benefits of good conservation practices. The Urban Resources Partnership projects reduce soil erosion by supporting efforts to restore wetlands, plant trees, and revegetate vacant lots through the creation of parks, community gardens, and other open spaces. These activities also increase public awareness about natural resource issues, highlighting the need for soil conservation not only in urban areas, but rural communities as well. For example, a community group in Chicago was concerned about soil erosion on a vacant lot. The Natural Resources Conservation Service soil conservationists educated the community about how to conserve the soil and build raised beds to plant vegetables. Neighbors realized that a larger site, along the Chicago River, was also in need of soil conservation. A subsequent project, also supported by the Urban Resources Partnership, trained at-risk teenagers to build streambank terraces along the River and create a much-needed park for the community.

This is one example, but the larger benefits of tree planting and soil conservation are well-documented. Trees, forests, and related natural resources in cities are the living filter of the urban ecosystem. They clean our air, cool our cities, and conserve energy. They are a 69 million acre major economic and environmental asset to cities nationwide: a resource larger than the size of the State of Colorado, bigger than any one National Forest, and closer to all citizens. Through cooling of the "urban heat island," our urban forests currently save U.S. consumers over \$2 billion each year in energy costs alone. In short, they are the buffer that makes for sustained, viable, and livable cities. A healthy urban forest indicates a healthy, viable community. A deteriorating urban forest is one of the first indicators of a community in decay and decline.

There are important social and economic benefits as well, as parks and natural areas reduce crime and health-related costs, and increase property values and tourism.

In Philadelphia, after police helped neighborhood volunteers clean up vacant lots and plant gardens, burglaries and thefts in the precinct dropped 90 percent—from about 40 crimes each month before the cleanup to an average of only four per month. Numerous studies have shown that parks, recreation and physical fitness and sports programs play a powerful role in helping youth stay out of trouble by improving academic performance and self-concept, making experimentation with drugs less likely. Parks and recreational programs reduce juvenile crime and curfew violations.

In New York, a hospital in Harlem credits the creation of neighborhoods parks and playgrounds in a reduction in emergency room visits by children. The Surgeon General estimates the nation

could save \$20 billion per year if every sedentary American walked an hour a day.

Economically, parks increase property values, reduce health care costs, improve productivity and create stimuli for tourism. The purchase of open space to create parks enhances property values on adjacent lands and increases property tax revenues. It also generates economic activity in adjacent neighborhoods. For example, studies in Philadelphia, Columbus, and Minneapolis show the correlation of increases in property value with proximity to urban parks with anywhere from a seven percent to 33 percent increase in the value of those properties closest to the park.

The Urban Resources Partnership makes a difference for hundreds of thousands of people – taxpaying citizens who have not been traditionally served by natural resource agencies. Following are some examples of the value of the Urban Resources Partnership:

**In Philadelphia:**

For decades, the Northern Liberties part of Philadelphia was the only zip code area in the entire city that did not have a single patch of community greenspace or a city owned park. Using Urban Resources Partnership seed monies, the Northern Liberties Neighbors Association, together with volunteers and a rainbow of community support and partnerships with various agencies and organizations all rallied together to create a remarkable 2-acre community park, garden, and multi-use educational resource from what was once a Superfund site.

**In Denver:**

Through an Urban Resources Partnership grant, 300 of Denver's Oberon Middle School students rolled up their sleeves and transformed their neighborhood's dilapidated bus parking lot into a living, pollution filtering wetland. This student-run project created a retention pond and wetland to collect, filter, and purify storm water runoff from their school's grounds. The students also planted native trees and shrubs and installed a footbridge. They continue to maintain the wetland and use it as an outdoor classroom.

**In Boston:**

Two of the Greater Boston area's most diverse communities, East Boston and Chelsea, border a narrow strip of water known as Chelsea Creek. Both communities are burdened with above-average unemployment and per capita incomes that are below poverty level. Urban and industrial waste is a mainstay of Chelsea Creek and the surrounding communities. Through an Urban Resources Partnership grant, the Chelsea Creek Action Group mobilized successfully to improve their environment. They conducted a community mapping project to identify the origins of pollution, conducted various education and outreach activities, and carried out urban forestry projects with neighborhood groups to help mitigate the pollution effects.

**In Seattle:**

As the City of Seattle has grown from the relatively quiet port city of the 1970's to its present place as the major industrial and manufacturing center for the northwest United States, the City has experienced its share of growing pains. One of the consequences of this transformation has been increased youth violence and vandalism. That is why the City of Seattle Parks and

Recreation Department began the Teens for Recreation and Environmental Conservation program (TREC). TREC received both financial and technical assistance from the diverse coalition that makes up the Puget Sound Urban Resources Partnership. TREC recruits at-risk youth, provides them with hands-on planning and implementation training for environmental restoration projects, and then utilizes the program graduates as recruiters for the following season. To date, 7 individual conservation projects have been accomplished, and 30 youngsters have become "Junior Naturalists." Bob Warner, TREC Coordinator stated, "By mobilizing local volunteers to achieve conservation objectives we are paving the way for long-term protection and stewardship of our public lands and open spaces."

### **In San Francisco:**

The San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG) demonstrates the linkage between environmental and economic development programs, specifically welfare to work programs. SLUG is one of the largest welfare-to-work employers in the Bay Area, and the Urban Resources Partnership continues to be a partner in these important efforts to not only provide employment to inner-city residents, but to restore wetlands, plant trees, and increase awareness about natural resources.

### **Summary**

Mr. Chairman, the Urban Resources Partnership improves the delivery of federal services through the use of existing authorities and programs. In 13 cities, despite some early administrative lapses, the Urban Resources Partnership is a success. The Urban Resources Partnership recognizes these cities' vital role in enhancing and preserving not just open space and natural resources in neighborhoods and communities, but also in protecting the natural resource treasures valued by all Americans. At a very basic level, funding for future agricultural programs depends on the success of initiatives like the Urban Resources Partnership. As the nation becomes more urbanized, we must cultivate new connections to the land – to agriculture, forestry, and conservation. The Urban Resources Partnership fulfills that role.

This concludes my statement; I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

### **Attachments**

- Urban Resources Partnership National Guidance Document, September 2000
- February 3, 2000 Memorandum to Inspector General, with December 16, 1999 Memorandum to James R. Lyons from Pearlle S. Reed and Mike Dombeck, Chiefs, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Forest Service, respectively
- April 5, 1994 Memorandum
- USDA Correspondence with Congress
- Fiscal Year 1999 Report from the House Committee on Appropriations
- Urban Resources Partnership Accomplishment Report, 2000
- September 19, 2000 Memorandum to Inspector General
- Interim final rule

