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May 13, 2010 - House Finance Committee Hearing on House Bill 2443 (Severance Tax)

My name is Susan Beecher, Executive Director of the Pike County Conservation District. The District thanks the House Finance Committee for holding this hearing in our region and for providing this opportunity to comment on House Bill 2443.

I'd first like to give you a brief summary of what we do in Pike County. For some time, Pike has held the distinction of being the most rapidly developing county in the Commonwealth and has also been listed among the top 100 most rapidly developing counties in the nation. This development is taking place almost entirely within watersheds which are classified by the Commonwealth as High Quality or Exceptional Value Special Protection Waters. While the growth pressures present significant challenges to maintaining Pike County's water resources, our Conservation District, County and municipal governments and residents recognize the importance of clean and plentiful water to our quality of life, the regional economy, healthy functioning ecosystems, and last but not least, human health. The Conservation District is firmly committed to maintaining the quality and quantity of Pike County's water resources; this commitment is reflected in many of the State programs we administer locally, including:

- Erosion and Sediment Control
- NPDES Stormwater Permits for Land Development Projects
- Waterways Management Permitting and assistance
- Act 167 Stormwater Management Planning
- Dirt & Gravel Road Maintenance Grants to municipalities

The District also has ongoing locally-supported county-wide surface water quality monitoring and groundwater monitoring programs and a very active conservation education program. We work closely with our County Commissioners and County Planning office on various land and water conservation efforts and municipal planning initiatives focusing on natural resource conservation.

The District accomplishes all of this with a combination of funding from the State Conservation District Fund Allocation Program, County government funding, service fees and grants. As many of you know, Conservation Districts statewide are inadequately reimbursed for the costs of administering state programs. A 2005 Legislative Budget and Finance Committee Report on the Operation and Structure of County Conservation Districts found that State funding is not meeting the established goal of providing 50% cost share of salary and related costs for key staff. In 2010, the percentage of the Pike County costs for qualifying positions covered by the Conservation District Fund Allocation Program was 22% versus the 50% goal. A Professional Engineer position created to administer DEP's NPDES Stormwater program receives no state dollars and is funded entirely by the County. In addition, Pike County Conservation District is among a dwindling number of

In 2009, DEP transferred all Chapter 102 (Erosion Control) and Chapter 105 (Waterways Management) responsibilities related to oil and gas activities from conservation districts to DEP Regional Oil and Gas Program offices. Prior to this action, Conservation Districts provided detailed reviews of erosion and sediment control plans, administered Erosion Control permits, provided assistance with waterways permitting, responded to citizen complaints and conducted inspections of the earth disturbance activities related to gas drilling. Removing this responsibility from districts left a void in environmental reviews and resource protection that still exists. The move was widely criticized by districts, County Commissioners and conservation organizations statewide. Even with additional DEP staff that have been hired and discussions of a NE Regional Oil & Gas office, we cannot expect, and are not getting, delivery of the same level of service and natural resource protection that trained, experienced and locally knowledgeable conservation district staff provide. We ask that you consider adding a provision in this legislation to reinstate Chapter 102 and 105 responsibilities for oil and gas activities for those districts that have the staff and resources to perform these duties and we would be happy to work with you to make this happen.

Thank you again for holding this hearing and for considering Pike County Conservation District's testimony on this important legislation.