

Utah Legislative Report 2009

Gordon Younker, Utah Association of Conservation Districts

Appropriations for fiscal 2009 (current year budget) and 2010 were the principal focus of this year's work at the Utah Legislature. The previous special session had reduced state agency budgets approximately 4 percent. At the beginning of the regular session the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food had been asked to propose additional cuts of 7.5 percent for 2009 and 15 percent for 2010. The proposed cuts would have eliminated 36 positions from the department and cut funding for Resource Conservation (the pass-through funding to conservation districts, UACD, and for the Utah Conservation Commission Administrator) by \$80,300 and \$208,600 respectively.

With Commissioner Leonard Blackham's support, the UACD presidency and principal legislative contact, Bill Rigby worked closely with the co-chairs of the Natural Resources Appropriation Subcommittee. As proposed cuts were prioritized on a list of 45 reductions in the Departments of Agriculture and Natural Resource Budgets Committee, Co-chairs Rep. Kerry Gibson (Dist. 6 Western Weber County) and Senator Dennis Stowell (Dist. 28 Beaver, Garfield, Iron Kane, Millard, Washington Counties) supported Resource Conservation funding as number 2 and number 9 priorities. Rep. Jack Draxler (District 3, Cache County), who two years ago carried the UACD request for an additional \$100,000 for conservation planning and SERA, was able to get the number 9 priority moved to number 6. We appreciate that Senator David Hinkins (Dist. 27, Carbon, Emery, Grand, San Juan, Utah Counties) was recently elected and assigned to the Natural Resources Appropriations Sub-Committee. He is a former conservation district supervisor who has served on the San Rafael District.

Generally all appropriation bills were held by Executive Appropriations as negotiations continued with the Governor to the end of the session and new one-time federal stimulus monies were used to backfill many earlier prioritized cuts. S.B. 2, sponsored by Appropriations Co-chair Senator Lyle Hillyard (District 25, Cache, Rich Counties), passed both houses and appropriated to the Department of Agriculture funding for Resource Conservation in 2009 and 2010 at the previous levels, without cuts, though some of this amount is one-time funding replacing on-going cuts. The total appropriated is \$1,626,500 with \$170,200 for Utah Conservation Commission Administration, \$8,800 for commission member expenses, \$302,000 pass-through to conservation districts, and \$1,127,700 pass-through to UACD. We are hopeful that the department will fill the position held in the past by Jake Jacobson who retired March 12 after 37 years with the department. At the department's request, Thayne Mickelson has been assigned by UACD to temporarily fill this position, until July 1 when the 2010 state budget takes effect.

The state and national economy will ultimately determine the ability of the governor and legislature to maintain state agency budgets, consider future increases, or reconsider and make additional cuts. We appreciate all supervisors, staff, and Commissioner Blackham for effectively explaining the work of Utah conservation districts and why allocating state monies for resource conservation is an important priority. If not already done, please extend your district's appreciation and thank your representatives and senators.