

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, for the record my name is Gayla Wortman. I am the coordinator for the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council, a coalition of 15 conservation districts that lie adjacent to the Missouri River from the headwaters in Gallatin County to the North Dakota border in Richland County.

On behalf of the conservation districts that are in the Missouri River Corridor, of which five will be negatively impacted by this bill, I rise in opposition of House Bill 635 for the following reasons:

Tribal conservation districts, though they have a similar name, have very different roles and responsibilities compared to state-created conservation districts. Tribal districts are not established or defined under state law, but are set up pursuant to federal law. They create their own duties and are not guided by the state nor can they be required to administer state-mandated laws, such as the 310 law. If this bill passes, county commissioners or the grazing districts will have to administer the 310 law within tribal conservation districts.

Furthermore, as political subdivisions of the state, state-created conservation districts have taxing authority and receive revenue from taxing land within their boundaries. Land owned by non-tribal members within the tribal boundaries is considered part of the state-created conservation district and is taxed accordingly. Under this piece of legislation, this land in a tribal district, could no longer provide revenue for the local conservation district. And, the non-tribal members owning land within the tribal districts would not be eligible to receive assistance through the Farm Bill and other like programs.

Lastly, with this bill, tribal districts would have access to state appropriations, which would decrease the amount available to state-created conservation districts. This would be unjust since tribal districts are federal and do not function in the same capacity as state-created districts. It would also be inequitable to not hold tribal districts to the same standards, terms, and conditions for receiving grant funds, as this bill indicates.

Let's not re-invent the wheel. Some of these state-created conservation districts have been in existence for 65 years. Dismantling them would cause more harm to more people and to the resources than it would provide benefits to tribal members. Tribal districts would gain very little with this piece of legislation. For instance, currently tribal members can and do serve on state-created conservation districts boards, and conservation districts can and do sponsor grants for projects on tribal lands.

Don't penalize the existing conservation districts by taking away their revenue source. This would be a slap in the face for a group of hard-working volunteers that have made great strides in resource conservation both off and on tribal lands. I urge you to vote no on passage of this bill.