

**SB 2037
Testimony of Keith Weston
Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee**

Chairman Luick and members of the Senate Agriculture Committee, I am Keith Weston, the Executive Director of the Red River Retention Authority, as well as a member of my local water and joint water boards. I rise today in opposition to SB 2037.

SB 2037 would require local water resource districts to conduct an economic analysis on every single parcel included in an assessment area prior to holding a vote on any type of assessment project. This new mandate would interfere in what is today a grassroots process. Assessment projects, particularly drainage projects, allow agricultural producers to fully utilize their land. Today, these producers are the drivers of assessment projects.

Today, North Dakota's assessment process for water resource districts is transparent and landowner driven. Unlike other states, North Dakota requires assessment projects be voted on by all impacted landowners. In other words, under the current system, landowners vote to tax themselves for a project. If SB 2037 would pass, the economic analysis mandated would limit the ability of landowners to influence their own assessment and would dilute the voice of the landowners in what is today, and should be, a local process.

Additionally, if this bill passes, the outcome of the mandated economic analysis would tie the hands of water resource districts when it comes to setting assessments and would not allow landowners or facts-on-the-ground to influence the assessment analysis. Water resource districts would have to follow an economic model created by economists and engineers, and not the knowledge and wishes of the local landowners, who know their land better than anyone.

I would also note, that while much of the discussion today has revolved around drainage projects, assessments projects are also used to build other water management projects, like dams. Dams, built using assessment districts, provide flood protection for thousands of downstream landowners. Not only will passage of this bill make drainage harder, it will make these flood protection projects harder to complete as well.

As a water manager, I can tell you that the current assessment process works. It provides producers and landowners the ability to work with their neighbors and local water resource districts to establish and maintain the infrastructure needed to manage water and increase agricultural productivity. SB 2037 only makes this process less locally-driven. It takes control away from producers and landowners, making vital drainage projects harder to accomplish.

For these reasons, I ask you to give SB 2037 a Do Not Pass recommendation.

Thank you. I'd be happy to stand for any questions you may have.