

The Western Governors' Association (WGA) recently submitted testimony to both the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies on March 4, and March 12, respectively. The testimony focused on two items within the Subcommittees' jurisdiction for FY2021 appropriations and activities: (1) adequate and dedicated funding for the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) program, which promotes a coordinated and integrated approach to managing future drought; and (2) the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), which strives to improve the accuracy of broadband data coverage measurements.

In regards to NIDIS, the letter stated: "[Western Governors] are well-acquainted with the significant environmental, economic, and social effects of drought on the West and its communities...[The NIDIS] approach involves improved forecasting and monitoring to provide the kind of authoritative, objective and timely drought information that farmers, water managers, decision-makers, and local governments require for effective drought preparation and response. Through NIDIS, [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] NOAA is building a network of early warning systems for drought while working with local resource managers to identify and address unique regional drought information needs. Western Governors value the approach used to build and improve NIDIS. Rather than creating a new NIDIS bureaucracy, the system draws from existing capacity in states, universities and multiple federal agencies, as called for in the original authorizing legislation. Given our shared fiscal challenges, we regard this as a model for federal-state collaboration in shared information services."

The letter also called out support for the National Weather Service River Forecast Centers and Weather Forecast Offices for their "valuable role in western water management and response."

USDA-Appropriations

WGA submitted testimony to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies on March 4 and February 25, respectively. The testimony focused on activities and programs within U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The letter stated: "USDA programs have a significant effect on the American West and the economic viability of its rural communities. Western Governors recognize the importance of a close and productive working relationship between states and the federal government and understand that more effective cooperation depends on federal recognition of states as co-sovereigns and partners.... Agriculture in western states faces a variety of challenges, including extreme variations in soil, climate, terrain, commodity types and production practices, and water availability.... Western agricultural lands also serve as primary sources of crucial ecosystem services, including open space, wildlife habitat, and water supply."

WGA expressed support for the conservation title programs, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), including the Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting program, and the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) for their contributions to ensuring the West has adequate drinking water and wastewater infrastructure, and technical and financial assistance to address water challenges.

Regarding the conservation title programs: "Western Governors support targeted, voluntary and collaborative conservation to address locally identified natural resource issues affecting farms, rangelands and forests on private and public lands. These issues include soil health, air and water quality, drought and wildfire resilience, wildlife habitat conservation and invasive species. WGA supports the role of conservation title programs in promoting voluntary solutions to the challenges of threatened and endangered species, water quality impairments, and groundwater recharge."

Regarding NRCS: "The work of [NRCS] is especially important to western states.... NRCS programs provide multiple benefits to western communities [including]...mitigating wildland fire potential in western states, improving water quality, reducing the threat of invasive species on western lands, and responding to

imminent hazards caused by floods, wildfire, windstorms, and other natural disasters through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program.”

“Western Governors also support adequate funding of the NRCS [SSWSF] program.... The SSWSF program provides integral information for water supply management decisions in agricultural production, hydroelectric power generation, reservoir operations, industry, recreation and economic development, and international treaties. The program’s forecasting and predictive capabilities are critically useful throughout the arid West, where snowpack accounts for the vast majority of the region’s annual water supply.”

Regarding RUS: “Western Governors support the continued efforts of the Rural Utilities Service to provide financial assistance for drinking water and wastewater facilities, and broadband connectivity in rural and remote areas, particularly in communities that have minimal or no such infrastructure.”

WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL/CONGRESS **USDA-Appropriations**

On April 6, the WSWC submitted written testimony to the Senate Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies, with a focus on support for USDA programs. The testimony relied on four of the Council’s standing positions, focusing on the need to ensure federal resources are available to rural and agricultural communities to have safe drinking water and wastewater infrastructure, technical and financial assistance, access to conservation programs, and help where needed to meet federal mandates and public health goals.

“The Council recognizes that increasing demands on often scarce water resources and periodic drought threaten the West and its agricultural base, as well as the communities built on that base. Much of the West is characterized by its aridity, and water availability is an ever-present constraint defining our economic and environmental wellbeing and quality of life... Many small, rural and tribal communities have experienced water supply shortages due to drought, declining streamflows and groundwater supplies, as well as inadequate infrastructure. These communities also face challenges related to meeting federal mandates for water and wastewater treatment, especially small rural communities struggling to meet future water supply needs and comply with increasingly stringent federal water quality and drinking water mandates. There is a federal responsibility to assist these communities....”

The testimony highlighted the important role of USDA’s Rural Development, especially its Water and Environmental Program (WEP). “WEP provides water and waste disposal grants, loans, loan guarantees, predevelopment planning grants, revolving loan funds, technical assistance and training grants, emergency community water assistance grants, and a circuit rider program, as well as individual water and wastewater grants and household water well system grants. The circuit rider program has been especially important for delivering technical assistance to rural communities who otherwise would not have access to critical knowledge and resources.”

Other programs highlighted include: The Farm Service Agency (FSA), NRCS and its National Water and Climate Center (NWCC), including the Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting Program, and Conservation Title programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP) and its Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) and Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program (CRBSCP), the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWPP), and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), as well as other watershed protection and planning programs.

The testimony concluded, “The Council believes it is important that rural water project development and USDA conservation program implementation should recognize and ensure consistency with state water law and regulatory authority.” For the full testimony, see <https://www.westernstateswater.org/letters/>.