

**Written Testimony of the
WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL**

**Submitted to the
House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food
and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies**

**Regarding FY2022 USDA Appropriations
June 1, 2021**

My name is Tony Willardson, and I am the Executive Director of the Western States Water Council (WSWC). The Council appreciates the opportunity to submit comments related to the Administration's request for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Council is a government entity, an instrumentality of each and every participating state, advising the governors of 18 western states on water policy issues to ensure that the West has an adequate, secure and sustainable supply of water of suitable quality to meet its diverse economic and environmental needs now and in the future.

Water is the lifeblood of the West. This is most apparent in the agricultural sector, which accounts for the predominant share of consumptive water use throughout Western states. Agriculture sustains many rural economies, provides important employment opportunities, and is a vital national industry. Federal funding is critically important for many agricultural communities, and USDA plays a crucial role in implementing programs that deliver assistance. USDA programs help to provide water and wastewater infrastructure, technical assistance, financial assistance, and conservation measures that ensure water is an available resource and that allow the agricultural industry to thrive.

The Council urges the Subcommittee to carefully consider the needs of small, rural and tribal communities and businesses and provide or otherwise ensure they have access to financial and technical assistance sufficient to guarantee they can meet federal water quality and drinking water mandates, as well as achieve public health goals. The WSWC supports funding to implement rural water supply projects and programs that enhance water supplies and promote economic development, and the use of appropriate financing instruments, while protecting taxpayers.

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. At present, severe to exceptional drought conditions afflict large parts of Arizona, California, Colorado, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, as well as parts of Idaho, Texas, Washington and Wyoming. The Sacramento and the Colorado River Basin have been hit particularly hard impacting tens of millions of people and millions of irrigated acres of farmland, as well as thousands of head of livestock.

Many small, rural and tribal communities have experienced water supply shortages due to drought, declining streamflows and groundwater supplies, as well as inadequate infrastructure. Some communities still must haul water over substantial distances to satisfy their potable water needs. 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. Often water supplies available to these communities are of poor quality and may be impaired by naturally occurring and man-made contaminants, including arsenic, copper, lead, and carcinogens, which impact communities' health. There is a federal responsibility to assist these communities in meeting related federal mandates to achieve water and wastewater public health goals.

USDA's water and wastewater grant and loan programs help provide financing for clean and reliable drinking water systems, sanitary sewage disposal, solid waste disposal and stormwater drainage. The beneficiaries are individual households, businesses, cooperatives, private non-profits, and state and local governmental entities and tribal communities, many of which do not have access to private, commercial credit on reasonable terms or other federal financial assistance.

USDA's Rural Development (RD) is a leader in helping rural communities with populations of 10,000 or less, including native Alaskan villages, tribal lands and colonias. RD's Water & Environmental Program (WEP) investments help rural communities improve their quality of life and increase economic opportunities through technical assistance and financing to develop safe drinking water, wastewater and sanitary waste disposal systems. 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.

USDA offers many other important programs supporting water resources and water quality that benefit agricultural and other communities in the West. The Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and its National Water and Climate Center (NWCC) administer many water-related programs. The latter manages the Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting Program, which is instrumental in predicting snow melt runoff and water supplies for crop irrigation, stockwater and municipal drinking water supplies, as well as managing springtime flooding. USDA conservation programs also focus on conservation of ground and surface water resources, as well as reducing nonpoint source pollution, including nutrients, sediment, pesticides and salinity.

The Council supports the role of Conservation Title Programs in providing solutions to resolve water supply reliability, water quality impairments, groundwater recharge, and other water resource concerns facing agricultural water users and agricultural producers. These programs provide financial assistance that is particularly important to producers and rural communities, water users and water quality managers.

These programs include the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP) and its Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) and Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program (CRBSCP), 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. EQIP funding covers a number of important initiatives, including the Drought, Ogallala Aquifer, National Water Quality, Resiliency to Climate Change, and initiatives that help communities plan for current and future needs.

Many agricultural producers in the West voluntarily participate in USDA programs to implement conservation practices that improve water use efficiency, water quality and wildlife habitat. The Council supports investment in voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs that are implemented in coordination with state and local governmental partners, while providing the maximum flexibility possible and opportunities for innovation to create efficiencies, coordinate funding and achieve real water savings.

The Council supports changes to Conservation Title programs that remove existing barriers for western users and producers, and make the Farm Bill's conservation title programs more accessible and relevant and effective in stretching limited water resources. Further, WSWC supports funding levels based on need rather than baseline budget targets. It also supports collaborative, targeted and voluntary conservation actions to address locally identified farm, range, forest and water resource concerns on private and public lands.

The Council also supports the development and implementation of appropriate soil, water and watershed conservation programs including regional cooperative agricultural programs such as EQIP, the CRBSCP, and the RCPP.

The WSWC supports USDA programs to promote secure water supplies, and improve water quality, wildfire resilience, wildlife habitat conservation and address invasive species threats.

Finally, 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.

Thank you for considering our continued support for these important programs that benefit the West's rural and agricultural communities.