



TESTIMONY OF
DENNIS STERNBERG
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE
ARKANSAS RURAL WATER ASSOCIATION
ON BEHALF OF THE
NATIONAL RURAL WATER ASSOCIATION
BEFORE THE
**UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS**

MAY 9, 2018

S. ____, *America's Water Infrastructure Act of 2018*

Good afternoon, Chairman Barrasso, Senator Boozman and Members of the Committee. It is an honor to be here and we are grateful that you have included a voice for rural America at this hearing. Thank you, Senator Boozman for consistently listening to and helping rural Arkansas including holding the first hearing on Senators Wicker and Heitkamp's technical assistance bill which is contained in today's legislation – and thank you as well for sponsoring the "*Securing Required Funding for Water Infrastructure Now Act*" with Senator Booker.

Rural and small town USA depends on this committee to ensure that the interests of rural communities are contained in federal legislation. The "*Great Compromise*" of 1787 that allows for proportional representation of states, including very rural states, in federal policy is alive and well in this committee and in your legislation. Thank you for that, Senators Barrasso, Carper, Inhofe and Cardin. Rural America is very appreciative for the very

helpful and beneficial provisions in your water legislation, “*American’s Water Infrastructure Act of 2018*,” and we urge its passage and enactment.

My name is Dennis Sternberg, and I am the Executive Director of the Arkansas Rural Water Association – a non-profit association of small and rural community water utilities in Arkansas. I am also representing the National Rural Water Association which has over 31,000 community members.

We are very appreciative that your legislation includes numerous drinking water and clean water provisions that make the “*American’s Water Infrastructure Act of 2018*” a comprehensive water legislative package. I would like focus my comments on the important and beneficial water provisions under Title 5.

Section 5004. Technical Assistance: Approximately 80 percent of the country’s 14,500 wastewater utilities serve a population fewer than 10,000 persons. Small and rural communities have a much more challenging time complying with our federal Clean Water Act permits and operating complex wastewater systems due to the lack of technical resources in small communities. While we have fewer resources, we are regulated in the exact same manner as a large community. Many small communities may only have one operator with multiple duties, not just wastewater treatment. This legislation provides a solution to the lack of technical resources in small communities by providing technical experts; we call them Circuit Riders, in each state to be shared by all small and rural communities. For these Circuit Riders to be effective and helpful, they must be available to

travel directly to any given community to work specifically with a community's unique treatment and personally educate that operator, mayor, or other local official on how to solve their particular problem.

The small town of Kensett, Arkansas provides a good recent example of technical assistance. A rural water Circuit Rider traveled to the community. After discussing several ideas, it was found that the return sludge pump didn't appear to be working properly. After clearing the lines and pumps, the Circuit Rider recommended they feed some artificial enzymes and food supplements to try to jump-start the recovery of the plant to solve their compliance problem, this assistance saved the community \$1,000 per day in potential fines. If enacted and appropriated, your legislation would allow for thousands of similar assistance events each year; every Circuit Rider can visit over 20 communities in a month.

Section 5010. Water Workforce Investment: We welcome this new federal attention and emphasized mission for water workforce development. Like me when I first started working with water infrastructure, not every young person entering the workforce necessarily has the option to go to college. A college degree is of value but is not required. The apprenticeship model would be a welcome enterprise for the water worker universe. In any given day, water workers may be operating heavy equipment to repair broken lines, managing toxic chemicals, welding, conducting tests, operating process controls, complying with federal environmental or labor standards, managing large construction, and the list goes.

Section 5011. Sense of Congress Relating to State Revolving Funds:

Thank you for supporting funding for the SRFs. They are essential in funding water infrastructure and projects to comply with federal rules – especially for small and rural communities that may have more difficulty affording water service due to lack of population density. The SRFs overcome these challenges by requiring that federal subsidies be targeted to communities most in need based on their economic challenges combined with the public health necessity of the project. Also, the SRFs additional subsidy including forgiveness of principal that can be used in disadvantaged communities.

Section 5012. GAO Study on WIFIA Projects: We hope GAO will review the WIFIA program considering it lacks any economic needs-based targeting, credit elsewhere means-testing, or focus on improving public health or compliance. Small and rural communities support Senators Boozman and Booker's SRF WIN Act which improves WIFIA by authorizing an opportunity for states to direct some portion of WIFIA funding to be used by each of the states' SRFs.

Section 5006. Water Infrastructure Flexibility: We support the legislation for improving the current affordability analysis used by EPA to make compliance reasonable on ratepayers – especially in economically disadvantaged populations. Under the Safe Drinking Water Act, EPA adopted a policy that families can afford annual water rates of 2.5% of median household income. EPA's policy of assuming all families and communities can afford the same rate increases appears to adversely

impact rural communities that have higher percentages of people living in poverty. We believe that EPA's affordability determinations need to be modified to adequately reflect the ability of low-income families and communities to afford the rules without harming their communities.

This committee is very important to rural and small town America. We are grateful for the opportunity to testify today and for the attention and consideration you have provide in crafting this more recent water legislation.