

Statement of Michael McNulty Before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works Hearing on "Examining the Challenges Facing Drinking Water and Waste Water Infrastructure Projects"

March 17, 2021

Good morning Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our nation's water and wastewater utilities.

My name is Mike McNulty and I am the general manager of the Morgantown Utility Board. Located just south of Pittsburgh, our water, wastewater, and stormwater system represents the largest public utility in the state of West Virginia.

Before beginning, I want to express sincere gratitude to the ranking member of this committee, West Virginia's Senior Senator, Shelley Moore Capito. Thank you, Senator Capito, for your commitment to, and tremendous work for, West Virginia. I want to thank the committee for your interest in this important topic. Whether from New England, South Carolina, Illinois, or California, the challenges facing our water and wastewater utilities affect every American.

From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been three primary messages: Wear a mask, social distance, and wash your hands.

I respectfully draw your attention to this last part- wash your hands. Thanks to the work of trained operators at more than 148,000 active water systems across this great country of ours, safe, reliable water is available. And thanks to our nation's more than 16,000 publicly owned wastewater treatment facilities, the 82 gallons of water each American uses a day is safely treated, and thanks to tens of thousands of maintenance staff, it is reliably transported. If you are looking for heroes, look no further than these folks.

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The fact is, our nation's water and wastewater professionals are so efficient, they are easy to overlook. Unlike roadways and power lines, most of what water and sewer utilities do occurs out of sight. Nearly all of the 2.2 million miles of pipes that deliver water and the 1.5 million miles of wastewater pipes are underground. When people turn on a faucet, safe water flows. When they flush a toilet, the waste is removed and treated. Not a second thought is given to how those systems work.

However, beneath the surface of all of this wonderfully orchestrated engineering and science, an unseen crisis brews. According to the *American Society of Civil Engineers 2021 Report Card on America's Infrastructure*, utilities were replacing on average *one-half-of-one-percent* of aged water pipes per year in 2015. By 2019, this percentage increased to as much as 4.8 percent, a reflection of aging infrastructure.

The same applies to the sewer side, where much of the wastewater infrastructure was constructed in the 1970s with passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972. When constructed, the lifespan of these systems was 40 to 50 years. Today, we are at the end of that lifespan and the systems are in need of upgrading.

On top of this we have increasingly stringent regulatory compliance obligations. Although I'm not here to discuss this specifically, increased regulation results in increased compliance costs. These are very real dollars that rate payers must bear. When combined with required upgrades, investments in raw water protection, and enhanced raw and treated water monitoring, the pressure on rate payers intensifies. Affordability, especially among vulnerable populations, is a very real issue. This is certainly true given the financial ramifications of the pandemic.

Then there is the fact that 50% of the workforce within our industry will retire in the coming decade. This is something that we are very much aware of at Morgantown Utility

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Board. Within the past month, we have lost more than 150 years of experience due to retirement, with more on the way. Going back twelve months, we have easily lost more than 300 years of experience.

While these challenges apply to all sizes of water and sewer utilities, they are particularly relevant to rural systems. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers just 9% of all community water systems serve over 257 million people, while the bulk of community systems - 91%, serve communities with populations under 10,000 people. These utilities not only struggle to maintain their systems but have fewer customers per mile of pipeline to share costs. We see this in West Virginia where some communities have been without safe drinking water for years, while others struggle to provide waste disposal.

If you're looking for answers, I can tell you that the complex array of funding mechanisms that exist will not solve the problem. For example, expending funds to improve a system that lacks professionally trained support staff is not a long-term solution.

Yes, we need extremely low cost to no interest loans, grants, and debt forgiveness to upgrade our water and wastewater infrastructure. But we also need direct grants to recruit, train, and retain professional level staff.

To encourage the merger of smaller systems to better share costs, we need incentives rather than heavy-handed regulations. Rural utilities need the ability to apply funds to meet their unique sets of circumstances and not a "one size fits all" approach.

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Certainly, we can all agree that no child should go thirsty or unbathed because a parent cannot afford the water or sewer bill. We can all agree that no senior citizen should have to choose between buying their medications or paying a utility bill. And we can all agree that no American should turn on a faucet and wonder if the water coming out of it is safe. No parent. No child. No senior. No person, should ever worry about these things.

Thank you for your time and for addressing this important issue.