

# THE STATE OF RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE: EMERGENCY RESPONSE, RECOVERY, AND RESILIENCE

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## HEARING

BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENERGY  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,  
NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS  
SECOND SESSION

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July 10, 2024

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## **THE STATE OF RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE: EMERGENCY RESPONSE, RECOVERY, AND RESILIENCE**

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**Wednesday, July 10, 2024**

U.S. SENATE  
Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy  
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY  
*Washington, DC.*

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:30 p.m., in room 328A, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Peter Welch, Chairman of the Subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators Welch [presiding], Klobuchar, Bennet, Smith, Luján, Tuberville, Boozman, Ernst, Braun, and Grassley.

### **STATEMENT OF HON. PETER WELCH, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF VERMONT**

Senator WELCH. Good afternoon, everyone. I want to call this hearing of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy to order, and I want to thank my colleague, Senator Tuberville, Coach Tuberville. I also want to thank our Chair, Senator Stabenow, and our Ranking Member, Senator Boozman. It is all great to be here for a very, very important hearing, and we have got tremendous witnesses. We want to get to you ASAP. I do want to give an opening statement on this one-year anniversary of the devastating floods that we experienced in Vermont a year ago. Vermonters are still struggling to recover from them.

It was a year ago, on July 10th and 11th, that we had the catastrophic flood. I want to acknowledge, by the way, the first responders, the medical professionals, the police, fire and rescue, National Guard, relief agencies, and neighbors who helped everyone in that moment of crisis. I want to take a moment to acknowledge the Vermonters who lost so much: their homes, their businesses, their farms, their communities. It is a really a traumatic experience that lingers and is a long-term struggle to get over.

We are going to have more of these in Vermont. We know that. We are going to have more of these in the Nation. The weather is changing. We do not have to argue about how, but we cannot deny that that is happening. Texas is grappling with devastating effects of the hurricane.

It does not matter what kind of disaster it is or what State you are in—Hawaii, Texas, Mississippi or Alabama—it is devastating to our towns. Those of us who represent rural communities, where

there are no resources in place to address the long-term needs of their community, bet back on their feet, are especially vulnerable.

You know, in Johnson, Vermont, the flooding destroyed the town's wastewater facility, with flood waters six feet high in the building. That facility is operating now, but at a higher energy and labor cost, and it is kind of rickety.

In Montpelier, the State's capital, flood waters destroyed the Federal building, shut down our post office, and a number of our State buildings will not be back online probably until 2025. We are still waiting for the post office to open, to be fully operational. Vermont, in our capital, we actually do not have a post office that is fully functional.

Just two weeks ago, severe storms and deadly flooding hit Minnesota, and as someone who has been through what Minnesota is experiencing, I am delighted that Commissioner Paap is here. Senator Klobuchar and Senator Smith have been informing us about everything that is going on there, and we want to be helpful in any way we can.

If there is one thing that these disasters have made clear it is that we need to put resilience and the capacity of local communities and States to essentially build back better so that when the next storm comes there is going to be a lot less damage, or maybe no damage at all if we do it right.

We learned that in Vermont in 2011, when we had Tropical Storm Irene. It was the largest and most devastating storm that we had for about 80 years. We got into a big fight, to replace an eight-inch culvert when you need a 16-inch culvert. FEMA, at that time, would not let us build back better. We have been able to change that, and we have to do more of that, not just in Vermont but in every community, in Mississippi and in Vermont.

Responding by incorporating resilience is just a practical and necessary step that we have to take. Last year, even though Brattleboro got four inches of rain, the town saw much less damage than it had in Irene, and that was because they had done some resilience work.

Another thing is our small communities cannot do it on their own, and I am sure this is true in Mississippi. We have got local volunteers that are on the Select Board. They are also part of the road crew, or they are the disaster response coordinator, and this is in towns, you know, of 1,500 or 3,000 people. They do not have any resources in place to be able to navigate the complexities of the Federal Government. One of the big things we are going to talk about today is how do we address that so those communities have the technical resources they need from a local area that is going to allow them to get what they are entitled to and what they need.

That is a critical part of ensuring that disaster recovery will work and work effectively. U.S. Rural Development has been a great partner for us, and we are going to hear from Vermont about how we can coordinate and leverage both the local leadership and the work of the USDA.

I want to express my gratitude to Chairwoman Stabenow who understands the importance of rural development programs and has included the largest mandatory funding ever proposed in farm bill history in the Rural Prosperity and Food Security Act. Good for

her. It marks the first time that a farm proposal had included permanent funding for the Rural Development Title. Chairman Stabenow's Rural Prosperity and Food Security Act also includes new funding to invest in rural capacity building. We need that.

We need to make sure that the Federal programs are spending money to help disaster victims, but not on administrative costs as much but more on actual relief. We had a situation in Vermont where there were two times the amount spent on administration than there was on relief. Obviously we want to turn that upside down, and that is where the local engagement is so essential. We need to act now.

Thank you to the members in attendance today, and to the witnesses for making the trip. I look forward to a very productive, bipartisan hearing.

I will now turn to Coach Tuberville for any opening comments he would like to make. Thank you, Coach.

**STATEMENT OF HON. TOMMY TUBERVILLE, U.S. SENATOR  
FROM THE STATE OF ALABAMA**

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for having this. This is well needed. Thanks to the witnesses for being here. It is going to be very informal. Obviously we do not have a lot of Senator here. There is a vote going on. They will be here soon. Actually both of us have to go vote and we will be in and out. Thanks to all the witnesses.

You know, today's discussion is on a very important issue for my constituents in Alabama. We are on the Gulf, and we are obviously in the tornado fly away, as we call it, down South. We live in a very vulnerable area of need a lot of times.

You know, the state of rural infrastructure during national disasters a lot of times is lacking, and we all know that. I still have farmers that are still struggling from a hurricane that we had five, six years ago, that have not gotten the need that they are supposed to have.

Communities never expect to have this happen to them. When a tornado, hurricane, or flood unexpectedly strikes, they quickly have to figure out what to do and how to rebuild, usually on their own, a little bit from the county, city, State, and usually the last one to show up is Federal, and that needs to change.

This is a topic all my colleagues should be able to agree on because it is not partisan. Access to affordable electric, water, and wastewater infrastructure is essential for survival in any place in the country now. Because there seems to be more and more, whether it is fires, whether it is floods, whether it is tornadoes. Of course, we all know we have hurricanes.

Disaster resiliency, community safety, and rapid recovery are critical to all Americans impacted by natural disasters, but this is especially in the rural areas. Rural areas are usually the last ones to get any relief. Just this week, Hurricane Beryl has wreaked havoc across Texas and brought high winds and torrential rain to Arkansas, Missouri, and the Midwest.

Alabama, my State, is all too familiar with natural disasters due to its proximity to the Gulf of Mexico, making the State more prone to tropical storms, hurricanes, and extreme weather. Over the past

few years, Alabama has suffered through its fair share of natural disasters such as Hurricanes Michael, Ivan, Sally, and numerous tornadoes. Storms like these highlight the significant need to prioritize investments in rebuilding and hardening critical infrastructure that provide water and electricity, especially in the rural communities.

Our rural communities often struggle. They often struggle to compete for Federal grants to help recovery efforts from natural disasters due to lack of full-time grant riders, attorneys, and experts who are able to identify available relief resources.

Unfortunately, they are oftentimes ill-equipped to navigate the maze of bureaucracy and complex application process. On top of that, I routinely hear about work force challenges, in my State of Alabama and across the Nation.

Our rural areas struggle, really struggle, to recruit and maintain qualified technical assistant experts, certified operators and technicians, placing them at a competitive disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts. Many certified water and electrical operators across the country are aging toward retirement without enough qualified applicants to backfill their positions.

Considering the numerous challenges already faced in rural areas, the last thing we need is more burdensome government red tape, which seems to be more and more every year. As policymakers, we need to ensure applying entities should not have to wait an average of seven years to navigate the Federal permitting process of jumping through various environmental and climate hoops. States and local entities must, they must, have the flexibility to implement funding as they see fit.

Just as each community is unique, so are natural disasters, which is why States and local entities must have the flexibility to implement funding as they see fit. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work. We found that out. What works in one town or State may not work in another.

We need to get the government out of the way and reduce regulations to make it easier for our rural communities to stand on their own. I look forward to today's witnesses and hearing their experiences and trying to find some solutions for the future for people that live in rural areas.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator WELCH. Thank you, Senator Tuberville. I understand that Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman will not be giving opening statements, so we will now move to introduce the witnesses.

Ted Brady is the Executive Director of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns. He served here for many years for the Senator who is looking at us right now, from his picture on the wall, to maybe his C-SPAN view in Burlington, Vermont, and that is, of course, our wonderful friend and former colleague, Senator Leahy. Mr. Brady served as the Vermont State Director of USDA Rural Development, and as I mentioned a decade working for Senator Leahy. Welcome.

Julie Moore serves as the Vermont Natural Resources Secretary in the Scott administration. She has worked to shape Vermont's environmental agenda, focusing on greenhouse gas mitigation and cli-

mate resilience, water quality, the forest economy, and the importance of conservation. She is a highly respected leader in Vermont, and we are delighted to have you.

Senator Klobuchar wanted to be here but as Senator Tuberville mentioned she can't be, with the vote. Oh, she is on her way. You know, somehow she manages to get to the three different places she is supposed to be at once. It is another Klobuchar miracle, so I am going to wait so that she can introduce her wonderful Minnesotan.

I am going to recognize you, Senator, because I understand you have got some reputable people here from your home State.

Senator TUBERVILLE. I would not go that far, reputable.

[Laughter.]

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you, and we do have two good witnesses here from my State of Alabama. Mr. Mark Bohlin I am proud to introduce from Foley, Alabama, who serves as the General Manager of the Perdido Bay Water, Sewer, and Fire Protection District in Bowen County. Mr. Bohlin has served as general manager for the district for over 25 years. He is Grade 4 water operator with the State of Alabama and a State-certified electrician. In addition, Mark has served on the Alabama Rural Water Board of Directors since 2009, and is currently the association's president.

Prior to joining the Perdido Bay District he served in several different technician, electrician, and operator roles across the country, including the United States Air Force. Thank you for your service. Thanks for being here today, Mark. Thank you.

Keep going? Okay.

Senator WELCH. Go ahead.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Our next distinguished guest, Mr. Brad Kimbro, our next witness, from the Wiregrass in Ashford, Alabama. He is the General Manager and CEO of Wiregrass Electric Cooperative. Mr. Kimbro has three decades of experience—I know you don't look that old, but three decades—in electric cooperative industry, and has been with Wiregrass Electric Co-op since 2006. Within the co-op he has served as Director of Member Services Chief Operating Officer, prior to assuming the General Manager position. He is actively involved with Alabama Rural Electric Cooperative Association and the National Association NRECA, and with numerous volunteer roles around the Wiregrass and southeast Alabama.

Brad, thanks for being here today.

Senator WELCH. Senator Klobuchar is in the building, and almost here. Well, she is literally coming in. I think so.

[Applause.]

Senator WELCH. There she is.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thanks for filibustering.

[Laughter.]

Senator WELCH. Well, it is wonderful to have Senator Klobuchar join us, and she is going to take a minute but then is going to be—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. I am all ready.

Senator WELCH. You always are. I will let you introduce your witness. Thank you very much.



Senator KLOBUCHAR. All right. Well, thank you to the Chair and Ranking Member for this important hearing, and I am so honored to introduce my friend, Kevin Paap, because we like a lot of drama, you know. He is Chair of the Blue Earth County Board of Commissioners. If any of you saw that dam on national TV, the Rapidan Dam, that is in his county, in his district, and he has been on the front line making sure we are either going to get that repaired, get it replaced, it kind of looks like to me. It is just one example of the work and the challenges that we have.

He is a county commissioner, a farmer, and a lifelong Minnesotan. He has used his skill in building partnerships to help solve difficult problems. He was first elected to his post in 2020, and he has been able to use his experience as a farmer and the former President of the Minnesota Farm Bureau, which he ran for 16 years, to really make the case on the local level about what we need to do to move ahead in rural America.

He is a fourth-generation farmer. I have been to his farm, and with his neighbors. My favorite memory is one of his neighbors, who had watched Meet the Press for three weeks because I was coming over, so he felt that would prepare him for having a hamburger with me. He enjoys time with his family, his wife Julie, of 40 years, two grown sons, and two grandsons.

We welcome Kevin Paap to the Committee. Thank you very much.

Senator WELCH. Thank you, Senator Klobuchar.

I will now turn to Mr. Brady. You are recognized for five minutes.

**STATEMENT OF TED BRADY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
VERMONT LEAGUE OF CITIES AND TOWNS, WILLISTON, VT**

Mr. BRADY. Thank you so much, Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and members of the Committee for having me here today, and more importantly, for bringing attention to and helping rural communities prepare for and respond to and be more resilient to future natural disasters.

I am the Executive Director of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, which is a municipal association that every one of your States has in it. We exist to serve and strengthen local government, to help them solve problems.

As Vermont's own Calvin Coolidge said, "Local self-government is one of our most precious possessions. It is the greatest contributing factor to the stability, strength, liberty, and progress of the Nation." I urge Federal lawmakers to consider partnering with us in the Federal, State, and local partnership to try to solve this Nation's most vexing problems.

Today I am asking you specifically, and asking Congress, to consider improving the way that it helps local governments invest in infrastructure, both physical and civic infrastructure, and specifically as it relates to natural disasters. The need for this capacity improvement escalated quickly one year ago today when we received as much as nine inches of rain, a full season's worth of rain in one day, which in Vermont we have these things called mountains that don't let the rain settle. It all comes rushing down into our valleys. The result was more than \$200 million of FEMA public

assistant eligible damage to municipal infrastructure, from roads to bridges to wastewater systems to town halls. Like in Minnesota, our stress on dams, as well.

We have firsthand experience assessing those damages. We are an insurer. We provided \$10 million of payouts to municipalities as a result of that. We see a huge problem as these events occur more and more often. About 15 percent of all the infrastructure we insure at VLCT, about \$500 million sits in FEMA high-hazard flood zones, which will only grow as new FEMA maps come about.

Hundreds of mayors, select board members, and others contacted us starting the moment the flooding started. At first they asked us for help accessing mutual aid from neighboring towns, called us for help looking for how to reach the Emergency Operations Center. In the days following the flood we became a central clearinghouse. Since then, we have answered hundreds of questions about FEMA public assistance eligibility, with a lot of questions about what kind of procurement policy do you need to qualify for FEMA, and perhaps more disturbingly, how much do we have to pay a consultant to do this FEMA work for us, because we can't handle it ourselves.

While our Regional Planning Commissions, our Emergency Management Office are the primary players, VLCT has had to step in to help with capacity. The State of Vermont, USDA Rural Development, along with other have held disaster preparedness calls weekly and disaster recovery calls weekly. In these calls we have found that the fundamental thing that we need to do differently is that municipalities need to have a better grasp on municipal finance operations and management practices before the storm.

You may know this, that wonderful thing called USDA Rural Development that you have jurisdiction over is one of the only Federal programs that provides capacity to rural communities. Through its Rural Community Development Initiative it provides technical assistance funding to spur community and economic development in rural places. All 20,000 cities, towns, and villages in Vermont, as well as tens of thousands of nonprofits, compete for a whopping \$5 million in that program this year.

Fortunately in Vermont, our USDA Rural Development Office was there for us after the disaster. They are not a primary response agency, but they are a support agency. They identified \$1 million in the RD Disaster Assistance Fund that helped us enter into a cooperative agreement, where we are supporting municipalities with direct one-on-one technical assistance in times of need and to help them apply for Federal resources. This is flexible funding.

There is an old saying in community and economic rural development, "Once you've seen one rural community, you've seen one rural community." I don't think that can be better explained than the fact that Commissioner Paap and I are sharing this table. We don't have county government in Vermont. They have a very functioning county government in Minnesota. This difference is sometimes not articulated well in the policies that come out of Washington because it is so different, and that one-size-fits-all thing threatens effective disaster preparedness and recovery.

This cooperative agreement has a long list of things in that we are doing at RD. I am happy to answer those questions. I have also submitted what we are doing in my full written testimony.

Rural municipalities know how to work with RD. RD has staff in our communities that build trusting relationships. Using those relationships to prepare and respond to a disaster are really important. I have to put a plug in. Our RD Office is down 30 percent in staff.

On behalf of every city, town, and village leader in Vermont, thank you for taking the time to consider how to make these programs work better for us, to prepare for and respond to disaster.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Brady can be found on page 30 in the appendix.]

Senator WELCH. Thank you, Mr. Brady. Now I recognize Ms. Moore.

**STATEMENT OF JULIE S. MOORE, PE, SECRETARY, AGENCY OF NATURAL RESOURCES, STATE OF VERMONT, MIDDLESEX, VT**

Ms. MOORE. Good afternoon and thank you, Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and the members of the Subcommittee. I am Julie Moore, the Secretary of Natural Resources for Vermont, and have served in this capacity for about eight years now. By training I am a civil engineer and registered professional engineer in Vermont, and I mention that because I'm going to talk a lot about water and wastewater infrastructure.

I appreciate the opportunity to offer my perspective on these critical infrastructure needs facing Vermont's rural communities, which are being driven by concurrent challenges of aging systems, a shrinking user base, and the impacts of a changing climate. Today's hearing is particularly timely, as you alluded to Chairman Welch, in that one year ago today Vermont watched a storm system drop as much as nine inches of rain across the State, which caused massive flooding, hundreds of millions of dollars in damages, and impacted liberally thousands of homes and businesses, damaged municipal and State infrastructure, caused landslides, and compromised dams.

While that widespread damage from the July 2023 storms attracted significant national attention, the fact of the matter is since 2010 Vermont has had 22 flood-related Federal disaster declarations, nearly two per year, and up from an average of one every other year throughout the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's. Clearly, more frequent and more severe storms are our new normal, including today, with Vermont forecasts calling for multiple inches of rain as the remnants of Hurricane Beryl pass over the Green Mountains.

I see the key to building resilience as consistent investment and municipal water infrastructure, and let me tell you why.

First I think it is important to frame the issue and some of the challenges we are facing. Small rural States like Vermont are challenged to fund essential investments in water infrastructure without our Federal partners, especially in and immediately following natural disasters. For perspective, Vermont has 417 community water systems serving just about half our State's population, 300,000 Vermonters, but almost 75 percent of those 417 systems serve a population of less than 500 people. Most have volunteer

boards with volunteer, part-time operators. During the July 2023 storms, 18 systems, serving about 40,000 Vermonters, sustained significant impact to their drinking water infrastructure or operation that required Boil Water notices or Do Not Drink notices.

The story was even more challenging the wastewater side. Vermont has 92 municipal wastewater facilities that serve mainly small rural communities. About two-thirds are permitted to treat less than 100,000 gallons a day, which I see as an indicator of the small rural population they serve. More than one-third of these facilities, 33 in total, sustained damage during last July's floods, totaling more than \$75 million. Three facilities, including the one you mentioned, Chair Welch, in Johnson, will require extensive rebuilding and possibly even relocation. Unfortunately, most of these small utilities do not have capital available within their annual budget to make these kinds of significant, unanticipated repairs.

While ultimately a significant share of the cost of the infrastructure repairs following a natural disaster is covered by insurance and FEMA reimbursement, there is an upfront cost to this work which can be substantial, and immediate cash-flow is critical, helping ensure communities make decisions around recovery and reinvestment based on what will serve them best in the long term, as opposed to being limited by what they can afford in the immediate.

I saw this firsthand in the weeks following last July's floods. In speaking with leaders in some of the most flood-ravaged communities, it was clear that they were leveraged to the hilt and had exhausted market-rate private capital available to them to make emergency repairs and restore services, limiting the resources needed to plan for how they can build back smarter.

In response, I convened a Funder Summit involving my staff responsible for administering Vermont's State Revolving Fund programs, the Vermont Municipal Bond Bank, State Treasurer's Office, and USDA Rural Development. Over a period of weeks we cobbled together a complicated and tenuous funding stack to meet the same need that would be better addressed, I believe, through the Rural Recovery Act and the enhancements it would make to the Disaster Assistance Fund.

I cannot overstate the importance of having available, flexible, low-cost or no-cost money that can be deployed quickly following a disaster. There simply isn't time to wait for Congress to designate and appropriate additional disaster-related funds to support the work that needs to happen on the ground in those moments of need.

Ideally, a robust Disaster Assistance Fund would include budget authority, provide flexibility around RD's water and environmental programs immediately following a disaster. Changes would also be helpful to increase RD's authority to issue waivers, to expedite funding to meet real-time needs and streamline procedures that can be extremely difficult for smaller communities.

In closing, one of the most important collaborative relationships my agency has in the drinking water and wastewater space is with USDA Rural Development. Rural Development supports cost-effective investments in community infrastructure and partners with us on long-term disaster recovery. The Rural Recovery Act would establish and expand this essential partnership, helping ensure that

immediate financial challenges following a disaster don't perpetuate vulnerabilities and increase long-term costs, but instead support our rural communities in developing and implementing considered and durable solutions in the wake of natural disasters.

Thank you for your consideration.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Moore can be found on page 36 in the appendix.]

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much. I recognize Mr. Paap.

I am going to have to go vote, and I am going to ask Senator Smith if she would chair in my absence. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF THE HON. KEVIN PAAP, COUNTY  
COMMISSIONER, BLUE EARTH COUNTY, GARDEN CITY, MN**

Mr. PAAP. Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding today's hearing. My name is Kevin Paap. I have represented the National Association of Counties.

As a Blue Earth County Commissioner, fourth-generation farmer, emergency medical services instructor, past volunteer firefighter, and Minnesota Farm Bureau President, I have witnessed firsthand the impacts of natural disasters on rural communities. As a farmer, whether it is a fence or a farm bill, farm building, I think about four corner posts. Please consider these four corner posts in the county's role in disaster planning, response and recovery, in how Federal policy can building resiliency to natural disasters in rural America.

The first corner post. Natural disasters have become more frequent, more severe, and more costly. Last year, 849 counties experienced at least one federally declared major disaster. Minnesota has not been immune to these trends. We have been impacted by seven separate billion-dollar disasters in 2023.

Corner post No. 2. County governments are on the front line of disaster response and recovery. County governments are responsible for local emergency response, with county-elected officials and emergency managers leading these efforts. We also support the operation of hospitals, maintenance of public roads and bridges, and invest significant funds in building public infrastructure and maintaining and operating public works. To protect our investments, county must develop preventive plans to mitigate risk and determine how to respond when a disaster unfolds.

Water and wastewater infrastructure are critically important, and particularly vulnerable during natural disasters. During the recent flooding in Blue Earth County, our county-owned Rapidan Dam infrastructure failed, causing significant damage to public and private property along the Blue Earth River. Thousands of aging rural infrastructure projects like our Rapidan Dam pose a threat to communities in future disasters without adequate support.

Corner post No. 3. Natural disasters not only disrupt the lives and livelihoods of our residents but also put heavy burdens on rural counties. Rural counties are often hindered in our ability to manage emergency response and recovery efforts due to limited personnel and limited funding. These capacity challenges can lead to prolonged disruptions to infrastructure and services as well as extended recovery periods and economic loss for residents. Address-

ing these issues by building rural capacity through technical assistance or direct funding can help protect residents and promote long-term prosperity.

Existing USDA Rural Development programs, such as the Community Facilities Program and the Emergency Water Assistance Grants Program are important for supporting rural communities during and after natural disasters. While these programs can be a lifeline for rural areas hit by disaster, consistent funding shortages at Rural Development mean that these programs may not be able to help as many communities as needed.

Corner post No. 4. The farm bill provides a unique opportunity to improve rural disaster resilience. NACo urges the following provisions be included in the 2024 Farm Bill to bolster rural capacity building:

The Rural Partnerships Program, which would provide flexible grants to rural communities to help them respond to a wide variety of urgent needs, including disaster preparedness. By improving the capacity of rural communities, the program can make sure rural counties are better equipped to protect residents from natural disasters.

Permanent authorization for the Rural Partners Network. This USDA-led initiative places Federal employees in rural communities to improve collaboration with our Federal partners and help the local governments navigate Federal funding opportunities. Although it is a small program, it has managed to turn its \$11.5 million budget into over \$3 billion in Federal investments in participating rural communities since its creation in 2022.

Passage of the streamlined Federal Grants Act. This bill would make it easier for local governments, including rural communities, to access Federal resources and grant opportunities by simplifying the Federal grant administration process.

Chairman Welch and Ranking Member Tuberville, thank you for inviting me to share Blue Earth County's story. Counties look forward to working with you to build a stronger, more resilient rural America. I appreciate the opportunity to testify, and look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Paap can be found on page 40 in the appendix.]

Senator SMITH. [Presiding.] Thank you very much, commission Paap, and we will now hear from Mr. Bohlin for five minutes.

**STATEMENT OF MARK D. BOHLIN, GENERAL MANAGER, PERDIDO BAY WATER, SEWER, AND FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT, FOLEY, AL**

Mr. BOHLIN. Good afternoon, Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and members on the Committee. I am deeply honored to be here today. I would like to extend my personal gratitude to Senator Tuberville for his invitation and stalwart leadership for Alabama's rural water and wastewater sector.

I am the General Manager of the Perdido Bay Water, Sewer, and Fire Protection District and serve as the President of the Alabama Rural Water Association, where I represent Baldwin, Mobile, and Washington counties, serving a population of over 630,000 Alabamians.

Perdido Bay is a nonprofit organization that was incorporated in 1973 to deliver drinking water to the communities of Lillian and Perdido Beach. We started with 600 customers, with direct assistance from the Farmers Home Administration, the precursor of Rural Development.

Fast forward almost 50 years and Perdido Bay continues to take advantage of the affordable low interest rates provided through Rural Development. If I may, I would like to express my gratitude to this Committee for its unwavering commitment to the success of these initiatives.

There is sentiment that billions from the American Rescue Plan Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act will meet industry needs, but much of this funding benefits larger systems. The Alabama Department of Environmental Management has done great work supporting rural communities. However, this positive trend in Alabama is not seen nationwide. Predominantly rural States like Alabama benefit from a political landscape that directs more funds to rural areas.

It is critical to emphasize that these additional funds are not permanent, and small and rural communities heavily depend on Rural Development to maintain and enhance their utilities and affordable services. According to the most recent EPA drinking water survey, a 20-year capital improvement assessment for both urban and rural communities totaled \$625 billion in needs. Currently, we face challenges including PFAS treatment, cybersecurity upgrades, work force development, and compliance with Federal mandates like the Lead and Copper rule. Inflation and supply chain issues also heavily impact small water utilities.

We urge the Committee to ensure USDA's Rural Development program has the resources needed to help rural communities address these challenges now and into the future.

During my 25-year tenure serving as General Manager of my utility I have experienced numerous storms and two direct hits by Hurricanes Ivan and Sally. During Hurricane Ivan, we did not have resources and manpower to adequately respond. For Hurricane Sally, we relied on the direct assistance from ARWA to fill this void. In cooperation with National Rural Water Association and other State Rural Water Associations, Alabama Rural Water Association brought in emergency response trailers, generators, and manpower. They set up a command center at my utility where they coordinated with Alabama's Emergency Management Agency, deploying staff and resources to surrounding water and wastewater systems. Within a week, operations were restored to normal.

For decades, NRWA and State Rural Water Associations have served as the leaders in disaster recovery in many States. Unfortunately, there has been no dedicated Federal funding to enhance or expand this activity beyond the limited assistance currently provided under the Circuit Rider Program. Preventative measure and post-disaster assistance are equally important. Having dedicated, onsite, and experienced full-time staff will greatly improve services for rural utilities.

We are grateful that Congress responded with pending bipartisan legislation in both the House and Senate. The Rural Water Systems Disaster Preparedness and Assistance Act, if enacted, this

approach will fund and authorize pre-and post-disaster activities. This includes creating vulnerability assessment, disaster action and mitigation plans, geographic mapping and hardening facilities. Post-disaster support will help with applying for Federal and State funding and meeting reporting requirements necessary for reimbursement and other needs.

After the devastating impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, NRWA established a permanent standing Emergency Response Committee. This committee meets regularly to coordinate and review response efforts nationwide.

In summary, I firmly believe that with additional Federal authorities, effective collaboration, thoughtful planning, and mutual aid, we can address the challenges of emergencies and enhance the response, recovery, and resilience of rural water and wastewater systems nationwide. Our State Rural Water Association stands ready to continue providing these services.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am ready to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Bohlin can be found on page 50 in the appendix.]

Senator SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Bohlin. Now we will turn to Mr. Kimbro for five minutes of testimony. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF BRAD KIMBRO, GENERAL MANAGER AND CEO,  
WIREGRASS ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, ASHFORD, AL**

Mr. KIMBRO. Thank you. Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. On behalf of Wiregrass Electric's roughly 18,000 consumer members we sincerely appreciate the Committee's interest in natural disaster and rural infrastructure issues.

Wiregrass Electric Cooperative (WEC), is a distribution electric cooperative in its 84 years of operations, providing affordable, reliable electricity to homes, farms, businesses in the Wiregrass region in southern Alabama. As a cooperative, we are member owned and controlled. The cost of running our electric utility is shouldered by our member owners.

Electrification of the Wiregrass region was only possible because the Federal Government offered low-interest loans beginning in the 1930's. Fast forward to today, WEC continues to borrow money through the Rural Utility Service Electric Loan Program in order to keep the lights on, and at a price that families can afford.

Roughly 25 percent of our consumer members struggle to pay their electric bill each month. Low-interest RUS electric loans help us keep costs affordable. Our job is to reliably deliver affordable electricity to our consumer members 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During thunderstorms, windstorms, floods, hurricanes, and other weather event we work hard to keep the lights on, and in the event of an outage, our mission is to safely restore service in the most timely fashion.

In my 30 years in the electric utility cooperative industry I have witnessed and managed recovery efforts for over a dozen hurricanes and tropical storms. This includes powerful Category 5 Hurricane Michael that hit our WEC service territory in October 2018.



Hurricane Michael resulted in \$8 million in additional costs for WEC. We were able to work through our already approved RUS workplan to respond and rebuild after this storm. Unfortunately, not every co-op can continue to work under their co-op's current RUS workplan after this type of storm events.

To obtain a new RUS electric loan a co-op is responsible for submitting extensive paperwork and go through lengthy approval processes. For this reason, obtaining a new RUS electric infrastructure loan for rebuilding after these type storms is usually not a viable option. Instead, many electric cooperatives need quick financing after natural disasters, so they turn to a private lender or draw down an existing line of credit to pay for storm response and infrastructure repair. These loans come with higher interest rates often.

While electric cooperatives are eligible for 75 percent reimbursement under FEMA's Public Assistance Program, our members, after Hurricane Michael, still had to absorb the remaining 25 percent, or around \$2 million. Additionally, recouping the interest accrued on those loans or lines of credit just adds to the financial burden.

Thankfully, which Hurricane Michael public assistance process was relatively smooth, that is not always the case for every cooperative. I am aware of other electric cooperatives still dealing with reimbursement issues related to Hurricane Michael. The same is true with other storms that hit the Gulf Coast in the last five years. The longer reimbursement takes, the higher the interest expense, which is ultimately passed on to the cooperative's consumer member.

Also it is important to remember that responding to a disaster is not just about physical damage. These storms take an emotional toll. We are a co-op of around 60 employees. Our linemen perform dangerous work during these times, when their families' well-being and financial situations are uncertain. This impact is really difficult to measure.

In closing, Wiregrass Electric is dedicated to delivering affordable, reliable electric service to Alabama households, businesses, farms, and our communities. Nearly 900 electric cooperatives across the country have similar community-focused missions for the areas they serve. As this Committee works on rural infrastructure issues, I look forward to continuing to work with you toward our shared goal of improving life in rural America.

I am happy to answer any questions you all may have. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Kimbro can be found on page 98 in the appendix.]

Senator SMITH. Thank you very much. Thanks for all your testimony.

While the Chair is returning from voting we will begin our round of questioning, and I will start. Oh good, here is the Chair.

I want to thank Senator Welch and also Ranking Member Tuberville for holding this hearing right now. As Commissioner Paap indicated, in June Minnesota was hit by very heavy rains. I know these also affected Iowa. Senator Ernst, I was talking with Senator Grassley about this, as well, heavy flooding. Senator Klobuchar and I led a delegation letter to the President asking for

major disaster declaration. I know that the USDA has offered disaster assistance to Minnesota producers.

The Federal response to helping Minnesota is at the top of my mind right now in the wake of these floods. As Commissioner Paap said, the Rapidan Dam, which is in Commissioner Paap's county, was breached during this heavy rainstorm, and 11.6 cubic yards of sediment were released, overtaking a house and power infrastructure. It was really quite incredible. This was a 100-year-old dam and in need of repair, major repair, even before the flooding, that closed it in 2020.

I think the story and the experience of Blue Earth County is a good story for us to be thinking about as we consider the burden that falls on counties as we are responding to these disasters all over the country.

Commissioner Paap, let me just ask you a question about this. Can you just talk a bit more about why it is so important to help rural communities that might not have the staff power, rural communities and rural counties that might not have the staff power to go after Federal grants and resources in ways that much larger, better staffed, I would say, urban counties might have. What does that mean in terms of your resilience when it comes to these disasters?

Mr. PAAP. Madam Chair, thank you for that question. You learn a lot after a disaster. Thankfully, we do not have them every day so we do not become that well versed. There are many times, especially with smaller communities, smaller counties, local governments, you do not have the capacity, whether it is personnel, whether it is resources. Quite frankly, you do not know what you do not know.

We need that help to do that, and not only is responding, certainly with the Rapidan Dam, our No. 1 goal was the safety and the health of our residents, and that is the No. 1 goal of all local governments.

As we get through that and respond and go through the process we need assistance. We do not know what we do not know. We have maybe never done this before. Many counties do not have the expertise. They do not know what is available.

I guess I would just ask that we all work together the best we can. You know, as a farmer you learn at an early age, from your dad or really probably from your grandpa, that working together works. I would just ask that whether it be the Federal, State, or the local governments we do as good a job as we can to work together.

When a disaster strikes, the rest of the activities in the county do to come to a standstill.

Senator SMITH. That is right.

Mr. PAAP. We had county employees that went above and beyond, spent days and days onsite. There are still other things going on in that county that have to be covered. Certainly a thank-you to all of our Blue Earth County employees for the great job they did and all over the country.

We really need some assistance because we do not know sometimes what is available or we do not have the resources to access that technical assistance.

Senator SMITH. Right. Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate your comments. I want to just point out, and then I am going to wrap up my questions, Mr. Chair, I want to point out that a propos what you are talking about, the farm bill framework and proposal that Chair Stabenow has put out includes the Rural Partnerships Program, which is this public-private partnership to help rural areas apply for and access Federal money. I think this is very important. I think this is a strength of the Chair's proposal over the House proposal, and I hope that we can keep that in mind as we think about what we can do to support rural communities as they are seeking Federal funds to help them do their jobs.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Senator WELCH. [Presiding.] Thank you. The Chair recognizes Senator Tuberville.

Senator TUBERVILLE. I would like to pass my time to Senator Ernst.

Senator WELCH. The Chair recognizes Senator Ernst.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Ranking Member. I certainly appreciate it. I want to thank all of our witnesses for being here today, as well. Now more than ever, as you have seen, just disasters across the United States. I can say that your testimonies, and, of course, the challenges that have been described are shared among many of my Iowa communities. Again, thank you so much.

Just a couple of weeks ago, as Senator Smith had referenced, we saw a lot of flooding coming through the northwest corner of my State. We saw heavy rainfall that caused major flooding up and down the Missouri River. Of course, it did impact Minnesota. It impacted North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa. In a matter of hours we saw hundreds and hundreds of families that had their homes destroyed. We saw helicopter rescues. We had boat rescues in communities. We had just so many small businesses that were in total ruin. The roads and bridges completely swept away. Water and electrical systems ceased operations, and, of course, Iowa, known for its crops, we had a significant amount of crop damage under feet of flowing water.

Large portions of western Iowa saw similar destruction earlier this spring when we had tornadoes. Iowa seems to have been the epicenter this year for so many different events. We had a number of communities that saw 60 percent or more of their homes destroyed by tornadoes. Following each of these disasters I was able to go out and visit with our constituencies, the Iowans, and personally hear their testimonies.

In previous disasters, having served in the National Guard, had deployed to many of those types of events through the years, and we really are Iowa strong. I certainly saw the best of our communities.

Anyway, Mr. Paap, thank you, and thanks for being here. I know that you have seen so many of these similar situations and a lot of swift response from those local emergency management teams. What I would like to do is just dive in a little bit different. You have mentioned access to resources, understanding where and how to go about getting those resources. Have any of the farmers that you have worked with faced challenges when they do go to the

USDA or the Small Business Administration? Maybe walk me through gaining access to some of those larger Federal agencies.

Mr. PAAP. Mr. Chairman and Senator Ernst, thank you for that. As you look at agencies in agriculture, of our 128-year-old family farm, probably the best relationship is always USDA because that is the agency that is used the most in agriculture every year, through farm programs or whatever it would be.

As you broaden out to Rural Development and then into the other agencies you do not have that relationship, and many times, quite frankly, you do not have that local, that county FSA office where you know the folks there. Even if you do not know what you do not know, you know who to ask.

As we get into disasters and other things and programs, sometimes people just aren't sure who the right person is, so that is why we really feel it is important to get that information out to those ag producers, and not just the farmers and ranchers but those rural communities that have been affected by that weather.

I think agriculture, like everything else in life, we can always do better. We want to work on continuing improvement. I think there are many things we can improve on in that coordination. Really the key to coordination is communication, and we can always do better communicating with those rural residents.

Senator ERNST. Yes, agreed. Then responsiveness, once you have found the go-to person, whether it is at the FSA or any other local agency, maybe even in your capital city, or responding here in Washington, DC, the response times, do you find that those Federal agencies get back to you in a reasonable amount of time?

Mr. PAAP. Well, serving on a local ambulance and fire department for 29 years, nobody ever said you got there too soon. You know, "What took so long?" I think that is the case, as well.

I do think as we look at this process, whether it is applications, whether it is limiting the number of pages that are involved, or if it is response time how many days, we want to know what that timeline is. We know things cannot happen overnight, but when can we, or should we, expect an answer. Again, I would go back to continual improvement. I believe this process can and should be improved.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, and thank you, Mr. Chair. I think Mr. Paap gets quote of the day. Thank you. Thanks to all of you.

Senator WELCH. Thank you, Senator Ernst. I want to recognize our Ranking Member. Thank you for all the great work you have done on this Committee and the support you have given me and Senator Tuberville on this Committee, as well.

Senator BOOZMAN. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have got to run. I just want to thank you two. This is really what the Ag Committee is all about, and this hearing is excellent. You all have done a tremendous job.

You know, we hear all about the rancor up here and the this and that, but this is just everybody working together, trying to figure out a solution to a really significant problem.

Thank you for your testimonies. Very, very helpful, very incisive. I am going to get out of your way so you can actually get some good things done. I do want to compliment you two and your leadership, and example. I know it is hard with Senator Tuberville.

[Laughter.]

Senator BOOZMAN. We appreciate you.

Senator WELCH. Thank you, Senator, and thank you, Senator Ernst. The Chair will recognize himself.

Mr. Brady, what was the biggest challenge that the rural communities that you work with throughout Vermont face in identifying and applying for Federal Disaster Assistance funds, including the funds from USDA RD?

Mr. BRADY. Thanks for asking, Mr. Chairman. Simply put, it is capacity. In Vermont, of the 247 cities and towns and another 31 or so villages, less than half, about 40 percent, have professional career staff to help manage the town, which means the person writing the grant application is oftentimes a Select Board member who works in a garage, works on the farm, you name it. They are doing it after hours. That means 60 percent of Vermont does not have professional capacity to deal with these things. When the Federal Government stands up a grant program that needs to be applied for, and you need to follow the rules to apply, then administer, and then follow the reporting requirements, you know, 60 percent of the time it does to work every time in Vermont. It is really overwhelming.

A quick couple of stories. Marshfield, Vermont, population 1,583. Last July's flooding resulted in \$4 million worth of damages. Their budget is \$1 million. Their annual budget is \$1 million. They do not have a career manager, which meant it was up to the elected town clerk, whose town has nothing to do with disaster management, to manage a disaster. She called us and said, "I need to write an RFP. I need an engineer. I need a consultant. I don't know how to do this. None of my Select Board members know how to do this. Where do I go for help?"

Down the road in Cabot, Vermont, the Governor yesterday was at a fire station that was destroyed, red-tagged by public safety after the July flooding. The chairman of that Select Board came to us and said, "How do we afford to hire help? We don't have any money. Who is going to actually do all of this work for us?" They had no capacity.

The town of Weston, population 566, famous for the Weston Playhouse, a wonderful, bucolic, incredible little town in south central Vermont. They faced the fact that the Select Board, Jim Linville, called us and said, "We are overwhelmed. We are a tiny town. Our volunteers are exhausted. We don't have any expertise. Who are the consultants we can work with?"

Jamaica, Vermont, southern Vermont, population 1,030. The 2023 floods resulted in \$1.6 million in damage. That does not sound like a lot. You know what is a lot? That \$1.6 million was in 77 different FEMA public worksheets. They have very little professional capacity in Jamaica.

Senator WELCH. Thank you, yes.

Mr. BRADY. Who is going to do those?

Senator WELCH. Thank you. Thank you very much. Those are very vivid and very real, and I have got to take the Ranking Member to some of those towns.

I want to ask Ms. Moore, the last major flooding was during Hurricane Irene, I mean, preceding last year. We did some resilience

work in that. I want you to just describe how those investments in resilience—not just building back the same built building back better, with the threat of another storm—how did those investments help the State’s infrastructure withstand flooding last year?

Ms. MOORE. I think they were critical. I want to highlight two specific examples of investments Vermont made following Tropical Storm Irene.

The first was more generally in enhancing what we refer to as our codes and standards, and that governs the sizing of culverts and bridges as they are replaced around the State of Vermont. We modernized our codes and standards to reflect the kinds of rainfall patterns we are seeing in the 2020’s as opposed to what we were seeing in the 1960’s, which had been the rainfall data driving much of our design.

As a result, structures that were replaced following Tropical Storm Irene, with appropriately sized structures for our current climate, only one was lost during the 2023 floods. The overall damage to our road and bridge infrastructure was significantly lower than it was. Some of that is a reflection of the type of storm we saw last July, but I think a lot of that is a reflection of changes we have made and how we size our infrastructure.

The other one I would point to is our Waterbury State Office Complex. This is a building that houses over 1,000 State employees and was closed for literally six years following Tropical Storm Irene, when the Winooski River flooded the complex and frankly filled the basement of that building with water. We rebuilt, filling the basement with flowable fill, elevating all of the building’s utilities. The Winooski River flooded again last July, but the damage was really limited to the parking lots, and that facility was reopened within two weeks’ time. It is just such a night-and-day difference how strategic investments in hardening as well as resiliency can help us withstand a wider range of weather events.

Senator WELCH. That is very helpful. Based on your experience do you have some suggestions on what steps Congress can take to ensure that USDA RD resources help communities rebuild in the wake of disasters.

Ms. MOORE. Yes. I think, as I alluded to in my remarks, that immediate cash-flow is really important. It is very hard to go to the communities that Ted just described with his examples, in the throes of a disaster, and suggest what they really need to do with a planning study or an engineering assessment.

RD has the technical know-how and capacity to support communities in thinking through what the best long-term decisions are, as well as the ability to bring contracted resources to bear that oftentimes these communities do not know where to start.

It is a partnership, but just knowing where to turn with those important questions, being able to not just react in the moment but think for the long term, and having partners that stand ready and available to provide that kind of support in the moment is really essential.

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much. That is very helpful. I recognize Senator Tuberville.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Bohlin, work force is going to play a large role in the next few years, decades, especially in our rural areas. Now my understanding is you have an apprenticeship program in your water area. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Mr. BOHLIN. Thank you for the question, Senator. As you mentioned, we are members of apprenticeship program that is provided through Alabama Rural Water that they have put together with the Labor Department.

First off I would like to say, you were talking about the aging work force, I am one of them. I am getting to an age where I am looking at retirement. Our system currently, right now, has six certified operators. Of those six certified operators, four of us are at retirement age or quickly approaching. In fact, I have got one operator that is retiring this month.

It is imperative that we can get young people involved, hired, in the system, and get them trained, provide the proper training. We have found out, by partnering with the Alabama Rural Water Association and the apprenticeship program, that they can provide an avenue that we can get our employees classroom time to get the education that they need in order to pass the certification, State certification, so that they can become licensed to operators. It is also hands-on, work under a mentor type program.

I am proud to say that right now, we have got one employee that is in the apprenticeship program. He is fixing to finish it. He has already acquired his Alabama State certification. We have got another employee we are fixing to put in there. I would also like to mention that the employee that we have in the apprenticeship program right now that is finishing up will be the first graduate in the State of Alabama in the apprenticeship program.

I feel that it is very important, Senator, that we look out for young people and try to bring them into the field and get them involved and that we have ways to get them educated, and also give them the tools that they need so that they can go out and make the taps, put in the services.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Do you have any recommendations for the farm bill that we are putting together for work force development?

Mr. BOHLIN. Yes, sir. As you know, the apprenticeship program was started with Rural Development funds back in 2018. Coming forward, anything that we can get in to help with the technical assistance and training that is in the farm bill, if we can get any more help in there I honestly believe that that would be of great benefit to us.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Mr. Kimbro, Do you have any work force development in your area?

Mr. KIMBRO. Yes, sir, Senator, we do. We work with our local and regional, State, to do that. Yes, sir, sure do. They are successful at it. You know, the success of businesses moving in is to have the people to employ, and that is very critical.

Senator TUBERVILLE. You know, most people don't know where your region is in your part of Alabama. You are not actually on the Gulf, but you do see quite a bit of devastation from tornadoes to hurricanes as we saw a few years ago.

Mr. KIMBRO. Right.

Senator TUBERVILLE. You have huge problems with electric and water anytime that we have this devastation. Speak to the importance of being able to utilize all energy sources, like natural gas. Tell me about your experiences with that.

Mr. KIMBRO. Yes, sir. Well, as CEO of Wiregrass Electric Cooperative, I am concerned about reliability and affordability. They are both important. We would like to see an all approach, where one size does not fit all. We certainly depend on a lot of generation resources, and we need that capacity. Certainly, after these storms, the reliability is very, very critical, and having access to that affordability and reliability is critically important as we move forward in this country.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Yes, I would like to ask all of you this question, if you want to add in onto this. What problems do you see with smaller water systems as compared to larger water systems, Mr. Bohlin, we will start with you, in terms of getting funding. How do we fight that problem for rural areas?

Mr. BOHLIN. Thank you for the question, Senator. Going through the RD apply process can be very tedious and cumbersome. I have done it myself before, and it takes time. You have to provide engineering reports, as a lot of these other people have testified today. You have to fill out all their paperwork, get budgets together. They want 5-year capital improvement budgets, and they want your audited reports. There is a lot that goes into it, and fortunately we have got enough people at our system that I could do it myself and work through the process, along with our engineering firm.

There are so many water systems throughout the State of Alabama that do not have the people and the resources to do that themselves, and there does need to be a vehicle where they can assist these smaller systems. That is one of the things that Alabama Rural Water does supply. They have people, and they have the resources. They can go out and they can call on these smaller systems if they have a need. If they reach out and they say, "Hey, we want to apply for some Rural Development funds," they have got the people that can assist them and get these applications filled out and turned in.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Mr. Kimbro?

Mr. KIMBRO. Yes, sir, Senator. Infrastructure is so important—water, sewer, electricity, broadband, everything for our community. In rural America, which I represent, if you do not have those things then people are not coming, businesses are not coming, they are not providing jobs, they are not providing hope for quality of life for our rural America. It is majorly important.

I would just say that the programs that are in place, like the Rural Utility Services Program, RUS, FEMA after natural disasters, those are really helpful programs that really help rural America not be left behind, and that is majorly important.

Senator TUBERVILLE. One more question if I could.

Senator WELCH. All you want.

Senator TUBERVILLE. All I want? Good. I want everybody to answer this. Manmade disasters, cyberattacks. Who wants to start? Have you had any problems with it? How did you overcome it? What do you see down the road to be able to stop it? Have at it. Go ahead.



Mr. BOHLIN. Yes, sir. Thank you for bringing up that subject. At our water system 10 years ago we ended up getting, I don't know, we think it came through email, but we ended up getting ransomware-ed. They locked all of our files up. We could not access any of our customer files. We could not get into any of our company files.

Fortunately, this happened on a weekend, on a Friday, and it was a long weekend. I believe it was Labor Day weekend. We have an IT team that works with us. We were able to call them in. They were able to come in and take all of our servers offline. They stripped the hard drives and got everything off of it. They re-installed the software. They put the data and everything back in from backups, to get us back up and running.

It is a real threat. I am afraid that it is growing right now, and there are a lot of things that need to be done. I think that training and technical assistance in that area is greatly needed.

It is scary when you are in a situation like that, you know. Fortunately I can say that none of our customers' information was compromised, or none of our company's information was compromised. It is scary because you do not know what is going to happen.

The funny thing about it, when we were hacked and they got into our files, they never sent anything wanting a ransom. They just tied everything up. That's our experience.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Anybody else?

Mr. KIMBRO. Yes, Senator. We actually had a cyberattack hit our system July 3rd of 2021, and we were down 4 days, mostly without a precaution, just going through things, just making sure we did not bring it back up before we knew we were safe. It a real concern. Spent a lot of resources, human resources, dollars, of course. The bad guys get smarter, it seems, every day, and what worked today they figured out so you are constantly chasing that.

It is a very big concern. In some cases it locks us down to where it is not as friendly to do business with us as we would like, like speaking credit card information over the phone you can't do because you are not PCI compliant in those regards. Our members, we want to make sure their information is protected, certainly their financial information, credit card information and so on and so forth. It is a major concern, and we spend a lot of resources looking at it. Literally, I hope and pray every day that nothing bad happens.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Any other experiences? Go ahead.

Mr. PAAP. From a NACo perspective, and it does not matter which one of the 3,069 counties, parishes, or boroughs we represent, I think we have to recognize with cybersecurity it is not a fair fight. You know, the bad guys only have to be right once to win. We have to be right every day, every hour to win. There are many of those local governments that do not have the resources, do not have the capacity to make sure that they are state-of-the-art, and continual improvement on cybersecurity.

I think it is only going to get worse, and it is something we have got to recognize.

Ms. MOORE. I would just offer we have been digging into this in Vermont, as well. Frankly, one of the saving graces, if it can be

considered that, that we have discovered, is many of our smallest State systems are not actually connected to the outside world, and that is their best form of prevention. I do not know that that is long-term sustainable, and certainly comes with other costs.

We are starting from square one oftentimes for locals that are connected to the internet, with some sort of remote access. Oftentimes folks have not even set passwords. Thinking to the minds of the bad guys who are constantly advancing, and we are still at the stage where many of these systems have the default passwords remaining in there as the access point is a challenging set of circumstances.

There is an enormous need for education, understanding, building that awareness. Vermont is challenged by the fact that we do not have county government, as Ted has spoken to—250-plus municipal entities, 450-plus public water systems. Figuring out how to deliver those services in partnership with Vermont Rural Water is the direction we are headed.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you.

Mr. BRADY. Thank you for asking. As the insurer for most of the State's water and sewer systems I can simply point to how hard it is to insure these things, and they are really uncovered. When these things do happen, oftentimes it is the town itself that needs to shoulder the burden, the system itself that needs to shoulder the burden, because that market is so hard because it is such a risk.

Senator TUBERVILLE. You cannot buy insurance for this?

Mr. BRADY. In Vermont you get a very minimal amount of coverage, not enough to restore the system in the worst-case scenario.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Interesting.

Senator WELCH. I want to just ask one question to the panel, and it is based on my observations of what happened to Vermont in Irene and a year ago.

What I noticed, and this might be true in your communities as well, FEMA was really great right after the event. They showed up. They were responsive. They provided food, some temporary shelter, immediate cash, and that was combined with the extraordinary first responder response and neighbors in the community who all came out to help the folks whose home was flooded or business was under water.

Then they leave, and they leave because they have another disaster—fire in Hawaii, Houston—and they have got to keep going. In the aftermath Vermont gets back on its feet, but if it is your home, if it is your farm, if it is your business, it is really tough, tough, tough. It is tough emotionally. It also really tough because then the folks who are coming to represent FEMA are not institutionally there. There are a lot of bureaucratic things, and this is where, Coach Tuberville, I really agree with the opening comments you made about the complexity of it.

My view is that FEMA is just to set up for that long-term, follow-through situation. They have a principal job of that immediate disaster response. What I have seen in Vermont is that those local folks on the Select Board are totally engaged with their community on how do we fix this bridge. They are totally engaged with the fact that the grocery store in the small town needs to be reopened to help folks there.

My view is that—and RD has been fantastic. The USDA has been that institution that has been the closest to the people. My view, and I want your reaction to this, is that we have got to redesign so that we drive down the resources to that local community where there are local people who are totally committed to the reconstruction as quickly, as efficiently, and as affordably as possible.

It suggests to me, listening to Senator Tuberville, that this may be an area where we could provide some reform with the goal of empowering those local communities, where we have got the citizens who are invested in the follow-through and will answer the tough questions.

Maybe just go down the line to get your reaction to that sort of outline of revised approach.

Mr. BRADY. Thank you for asking, Senator. What we find it seems long-term recovery approach really does put the recovery in the hands of local long-term recovery volunteers. It is imperfect, at best. To what you said before, projects do not get done in days or weeks or months when FEMA is there. Projects get done in years.

I will give you an example. Londonderry, Vermont, down in south-central Vermont, got a FEMA mitigation grant post-Irene. Two weeks, three weeks, before the July 2023 flooding they finished that project, more than 10 years after the disaster. It was to raise a single residence house up out of the flood zone. That system does not seem to be working well.

Killington, Vermont, paid off its last piece of disaster debt from Irene, which was 2011, the week before the 2023 flooding. That system does not seem to be working, so we would embrace it.

I think the Rural Recovery Act that you have proposed would be an incredible opportunity for changing the way we do disaster response and have RD more involved. I think the Rural Partnerships Program that Commissioner Paap mentioned is also important for getting ready ahead of time for disasters.

Senator WELCH. Thank you.

Ms. MOORE. Yes. I would echo, actually, some of the comments Ted made in his opening remarks about the importance of financial, operational, and managerial capacity in many of our small rural communities, and I think that is where part of this disconnect is. FEMA has a lot of opportunities, but they tend to be complex and application intensive. We have a lot of passion and commitment on the part of the volunteers and town clerks who would go after those resources. What is needed in between is technical assistance and expertise, and to my mind, that is where I see the Rural Recovery Act coming in. USDA RD has the ability to sort of work between, with a foot in each of those worlds, and help connect that vision that the community holds to how you actually build that project on the ground, and that is a gap right now.

Senator WELCH. Yes. Any others? Mr. Paap?

Mr. PAAP. I would add that sitting in this room in the Ag Committee and Agriculture we have got a lot of commodities that are raised in this country. The most precious commodity we all have is time. Whether it is during the disaster or the recovery process, time is critical. Anything we can do to help with that process, to help with that coordination, I think would be important.

Senator WELCH. Great. Thank you.

Mr. BOHLIN. Yes, sir. Thank you for the question. As far as FEMA goes, when Ivan came through they were great. They were there with boots on the ground. They had appraisers coming out, checking out properties, and trying to help get money and aid into the community. They gave us spreadsheets where we had to keep our force work, timesheets of employees and what they worked. They also provided funds to pay for equipment such as chainsaws and generators that we might need during the event, to get us up and going.

When Sally hit, I called our local EMA and told them that we had some issues and needed to talk to FEMA. I never saw anybody.

Once the crisis was over they came back and they funneled some money into Baldwin County, because what they are doing is they take money and they will give a county, an area, they will give them a lot of money. Then what we have is we have stakeholders, and us, as a water system, in Baldwin County, we are stakeholder in this group. If we want to get money to do something—and all of this money is hazard mitigation, it is not to repair or fix anything that has been damaged. It is do something for mitigation, which is fine. It's great. I think hazard mitigation is needed.

It becomes competitive, and we have to compete with Foley, Robertsedale, Orange Beach, Gulf Shores, Fairhope, Daphne, to get these funds. As a system I have to submit an RFP back to this group of stakeholders. They review the projects that everybody has submitted, and then they pick which projects they want to fund or they would see funded.

Now once you do that you still have to file your project with FEMA, and it has to be approved. I tried doing this and going through the process. We were wanting to build a safe house for our employees so that we could house them during a storm. I filled out all of the paperwork, submitted it to FEMA. I did not hear anything for over a year and a half. I finally get a call back from FEMA, and they want to know about our safe house project. I said, "Well, I didn't think we got the money because we didn't hear anything from you." "Oh, no, no. We just need you to update some paperwork."

They sent me the paperwork with what they need updated. I update this paperwork and I send it back to them, and I don't hear anything for another year. Then when I hear from them then, they have turned down the project.

Now you have got to keep in mind, too, when things take this long the cost of what you are trying to do is going up. We had borrowed money from RD to build a safe house several years ago, and the pandemic hit, and then the supply chain issues hit, and the cost of a safe house was \$450,000 and went to \$850,000. By the time we worked through this process it was up to \$1.4 million. It is just a long, drawn-out process.

Senator WELCH. Thank you. I do want to be brief. I just want to be able to recognize, Senator Luján has just come in, but go ahead.

Mr. KIMBRO. Yes, sir. Real brief. We are an at-cost provider, electrical cooperative. Our total utility plant is \$140 million. If a Hurricane Michael came through and hit our service territory we could literally have a \$40 to \$50 million expense.

FEMA is critically important for us. The only thing I would offer about FEMA is going forward the regulations surrounding it and the reimbursement, the process of that, just tell us what they are. Don't keep moving the goalposts. Have that where we can get that process known and understood and therefore applied for quickly.

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much. The Chair recognizes Senator Luján.

Senator LUJÁN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member Tuberville. It is good to see both of you. Thank you for this important conversation.

I am especially grateful for this discussion after what has been a difficult and devastating fire season and flooding season in New Mexico, just two years after we saw the largest fire in our State's history, a fire, by the way, that was started as a prescribed burn. Some folks did not see the need to look at it with infrared technology with the burn pile, and put a hand to it, and it was cool enough. Community after community was devastated and destroyed, not because of Mother Nature.

Last month two fires that started on the Mescalero Apache reservation quickly grew out of control. Hotter and drier conditions from climate change along with high winds helped the fire spread and burn over 25,000 acres of land in the Village of Ruidoso and throughout southern New Mexico. A fire that started one afternoon, by that night the town was being evacuated, because it spread so quickly. It was so dry.

A few weeks later we thought Mother Nature was going to help us, and she put down some water and some rain, but it was a little too much because of the burn scars. What the fire did not take out, the flood did.

Hundreds of homes and buildings have been destroyed by the fires and by the flooding, but the impacts on rural infrastructure do not end there. The fire scar, the monsoons, the flash flooding, the debris flows, septic, in this area there is not a wastewater system. Families are on septic. Those get filled up and that contaminates everything. It gets into the water lagoons. We are talking about communities up in the mountains. Where our water comes from is if we are blessed with a little bit of now and it melts, and we are able to save it in some lake and some ponds, and we can filter it and we can get it to people to drink, that is how we survive back in New Mexico. All of that gets ruined.

The costs can quickly become overwhelming, especially for small rural communities that have fewer resources and less capacity for resilience, finding and repairing damaged infrastructure, which I appreciate every one of the panelists today with your testimony.

Mr. Chairman, while you may be on the East Coast, and Coach, you are down South, on the West side the smallest towns, it is hard. They do not have the revenue base, a tax base sometimes, to come up with the cost shares, to figure things out based on population.

For whatever reason, you know, my ancestors and folks back in New Mexico saw it forthright to draw our counties large. You know, some of the Eastern States can fit inside some of our counties in New Mexico. When that happens, based on the current

rules, if we do not hit the population density or the cost threshold, then it is not a national disaster. It is a State disaster.

For all my friends in the Midwest, who the size of their counties is the size of ranches in New Mexico, they hit that density pretty quickly. For Western States—New Mexico, Wyoming, pick one—it is just not fair. It is not fair when we just look at a line that was drawn over a century ago by some folks that got together to throw some lines on a map based on who lived where, or they could see down that way, or there was a mountain here, or there was a creek that divided this place from that place, or it took that many days for you to get on horseback and ride through two towns, so that is where we are going to drop the marker, and that is where we are going to draw the county line.

It does not apply today with the current rules that we have based on treating all American citizens equally. I certainly hope that when we look at a rewrite of FEMA, some of the legislation that you have been championing, Mr. Chairman, and our Ranking Member, Coach, that we even think about FEMA in a regional way across America.

Fires in the West are not just fires. It is a day or two or a week or two of fire, and then it is a decade of flooding, because everything that was holding up that water, it is all gone. Any of you that have ever poured concrete, if you poured it on an incline or decline, and a little bit of water gets on top of it, you see how quick it runs and how it picks up steam? Think about that on a mountain, 13,000 feet, going down to 7,000 feet pretty quickly. You think about the steam that that water picks up. It picks up trees that have fallen, and it turns them into torpedoes, and they go through people's homes. It is like an explosion, when a bomb goes off and there is shrapnel that sticks into stuff. The same thing happens with wood and to people's homes. It is just devastating.

Mr. Chairman, I have used up all my time here. You know, community after community, the city of Las Vegas, which is in the heart of that fire that started with a prescribed burn, their water treatment center, we thought it was going to be okay after that fire a few years ago, with all the mitigation. Then some floods came in, destroyed the reservoir again. We are trying to get in there to help them. While that flood hit, two other communities, one by the name of Medanales, just north of the city of Espanola, beautiful little community, hardworking families, a little bit of debris came down in the river, even though it was not raining on this little town, pulled down a bunch of water and rock, stopped the river flow. The river picked it up itself, as it sometimes can do, went over a bank, and took out a town. Took out a community.

The devastation was not large enough for that county. No Federal declaration. It takes all the Fed's approval to go into the river to take the dirt out. It takes an act of God to get their permission to be able to go do that without a Federal declaration.

Mr. Chairman, I cannot thank you enough for having this conversation and bringing attention to what has been happening not just across Vermont and Alabama and all over America but in New Mexico. We need to find a way to work together, Democrats and Republicans. We are one big American family here, and I know we can do better to make sure that the smallest communities in Amer-

ica get the same benefit as the biggest cities across the beautiful country that we all home.

Thanks for the time. I yield back.

Senator WELCH. No, thank you for that wonderful statement summarizing the collective commitment we all have and whether we are in a red State or a blue State, we love the citizens we represent. When they get hit, when they get hurt, we want to help. I have appreciated the support that Vermont has received from many of my Republican colleagues, and I want to reciprocate. I know Senator Luján, you do as well.

This is a great hearing. You know, I go back to Senator Tuberville's, oops, Coach Tuberville's comments about trying to have some flexibility in local implementation. It really makes sense. All of our communities, folks who live there, the biggest thing in their life is their community, and let's take advantage of that. I think with some of the legislation we have before us we might be able to get together, hopefully work together to improve the capacity of local people to fix their own disasters, with the help of the Federal Government, but with local leadership.

I really want to thank all the witnesses. This is terrific. I mean, this is the way we should have hearings. The next step on this would be to propose concrete legislation that incorporates many of the recommendations that all of our witnesses, from the great State of Vermont, from the great State of Minnesota, and the great State of Alabama. You know, it is great to have folks on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line here, speaking truth to the Senators. I look forward to continuing to work with all of my colleagues.

I would like to submit a letter for the record, submitted by the National Association of Counties. Without objection, to do that.

[The letter can be found on page 106 in the appendix.]

Senator WELCH. The record will remain open for five business days for members to submit additional questions or statements.

This hearing, this very good hearing, is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:03 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

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# **A P P E N D I X**

JULY 10, 2024

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**Testimony of Vermont League of Cities and Towns  
Executive Director Ted Brady  
To the United States Senate  
Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy  
July 10, 2024**

**“The State of Rural Infrastructure:  
Emergency Response, Recovery, and Resilience”**

Thank you Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and members of the subcommittee for your attention to helping rural communities prepare for, respond to and be more resilient to natural disasters. I am the executive director of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that was founded in 1967 with the mission of serving and strengthening Vermont local government.

VLCT is an instrumentality of government – deriving our authority from a board of directors elected by our members. Our members include every single city and town in Vermont – all 247 of them – and another 143 units of municipal government. This includes villages, county sheriffs, fire districts, and regional planning commissions. We’re part of a network of municipal associations across the country that helped found the National League of Cities, of which VLCT is a proud member, 100 years ago. We provide workshops and consulting advice for municipal officials, support legislation that strengthens local government, provide comprehensive insurance coverage for municipalities, and maintain a Municipal Assistance Center that provides advice and toolkits on a wide range of municipal issues. We’re the one-stop-shop for selectboard members, clerks, city councilors, mayors, and alderpersons when they want to know how to do

their job.

Vermont's own Calvin Coolidge said: "Local self-government is one of our most precious possessions. It is the greatest contributing factor to the stability, strength, liberty, and progress of the nation." Local government serves an important purpose – of placing some of the most consequential public policy decisions and everyday impacts of government spending and decision making as close to the voter as possible. While a lot has changed in our society since Calvin Coolidge issued those words in 1925 – Americans' trust in local government has not. Federal policy makers like yourselves should look to local government as an important partner in solving some of our nation's most vexing problems. Today, I'm asking Congress to consider improving the way it helps our local governments invest in infrastructure – both physical and civic – as it relates to preparing for and responding to disasters.

The need for these capacity investments escalated quickly one year ago today, when Vermont received as much of nine inches of rain in a single day – an entire season's worth of rain in a day. Vermont's bucolic and famed iconic cities, towns and villages – from Stowe to Montpelier to Killington to Ludlow to Brattleboro – have been repeatedly inundated by flood waters year after year. They've found themselves responding to one-hundred-year floods multiple times in a decade. This is particularly concerning because much of Vermont's infrastructure was built in the valleys between our mountains – which happen to be the same places where our rivers have formed. The federal government has helped us build thousands of miles of roads, dozens of wastewater treatment plants, several town buildings, and other infrastructure in these same river valleys – increasingly at risk of flooding.

#### **Impact of July 2023 Flooding on Municipal Infrastructure**

The July 2023 flooding resulted in more than \$200 million in FEMA Public Assistance eligible damage to municipal infrastructure – from roads, to bridges, to wastewater systems to town halls. As the principal insurer to Vermont's municipalities, VLCT has firsthand experience assessing these damages. We have reimbursed Vermont municipalities nearly \$10 million for flood damage resulting from the July 2023 flooding. We've replaced police cars, restored wastewater treatment plants and cleaned up city and town halls, like the City of Montpelier's that was flooded. Nearly 15 percent of all our insured property – or \$500 million – lies in high hazard flood zones as identified by FEMA. We anticipate this number to increase as FEMA updates flood maps.

Despite VLCT not being a disaster response agency, hundreds of mayors, selectboard members, city councilors, clerks, treasurers, and emergency management coordinators contacted us starting the moment the first river topped its banks last July. In the first hours of the disaster, selectboard members called us to ask for help accessing mutual aid from neighboring towns and how to reach the state's emergency operations center. In the days after the flood, we became a central clearing house for information – as we compiled resources usually spread throughout multiple agencies and presented them in a direct, easy to find format. And in the longer-term recovery, we've answered hundreds of inquiries related to accessing FEMA money – with the most common requests related to what constitutes an adequate procurement policy for goods and services related to storm clean up that would meet FEMA's reimbursement requirements and how to access professional capacity to manage the FEMA process.

I'd like to share several of those stories with you today in hopes it demonstrates the tremendous need to invest in local capacity to better prepare our local governments to respond to disasters.

In Marshfield, population 1,583, the July 2023 flood resulted in \$4 million worth of damages, four times its \$1 million annual budget. Marshfield Town Clerk Bobbi Brimblecombe fills the town's capacity gap related to FEMA Public Assistance and other grants, although it is well outside of her job description. She contacted VLCT to ask how to write a request for proposals to find an engineer to remedy a post-flood groundwater leak in the Town Office. Neither she nor her Selectboard had experience undertaking such a project. Rural communities can better invest in long-term recovery and resilience if they have technical assistance providers and federal program staff to bolster their efforts.

In Wells River Village, population 449, an extended period of high groundwater levels due to flooding resulted in multiple sources of infiltration into its wastewater system. Aging 1970s concrete manholes turned to mush, and elbow connections cracked due to ground movement. Over three months, the quantity of wastewater in the system doubled due to groundwater infiltration, and treatment costs rose from \$60,000 per year to \$300,000. The system used all its reserves to manage the emergency with no expectation of FEMA reimbursement because the damages occurred after the Public Assistance deadline had passed. A USDA technical service provider helped the system determine that the infiltration was linked to high flows in the Connecticut River after significant summer and fall rains. With only about 400 residents and a median household income of \$35,417, they lack the financial capacity, technical and funding knowledge, and time to implement the technical service provider's recommendation: replace the wastewater collection system. Operating on a replace-as-you-repair approach will not build a sustainable wastewater system that can withstand the ongoing impacts of climate change.

In Monkton, population 2,079, they wanted to charge employee fringe benefits as overhead to a transportation grant so it could recoup the full cost of road resilience projects. The part-time town administrator hoped to use FEMA's Benefits Calculation Worksheet. The Vermont Agency of Transportation referred him to VLCT. VLCT coached the town through basic federal grant administration concepts, such as the difference between direct and indirect costs, the concept of actual versus estimated costs. We developed a spreadsheet the town could use annually to recoup its grant-related costs. Towns with fewer resources don't have strong knowledge about federal grant administration. Because they don't know how to leverage maximum federal investment, their grant awards are fewer and smaller, and they spend more limited local dollars and resources on projects.

In Cabot, population 1,449, the catastrophic damage to the village center included a red tag for the Town's fire department and damage to the historic town office. Many of the damaged areas also incurred flood damage in 2011 related to Irene. The town was ready to explore long-term recovery planning to reduce future flood damage but lacked staff capacity to manage its recovery process much less start a new planning effort. Selectboard Chair Mike Hogan asked, "*How can we afford to hire help? We have to build a temporary fire station and a permanent one.*" Rural communities often don't know where they can find help or how federal programs work, especially when they need to move multiple efforts forward at the same time.

In Weston, population 566, the village center was underwater during the 2023 flood. Many vital community resources sustained damages since the village sits directly on the West River – the fire station, the village’s sole market (only place for food and gas), town green, Weston Theater Co., roads and bridges gone. There are multiple mitigation projects to undertake that will make the town more resilient for the next event, but they have no capacity to tackle them. A selectboard member said: *“We are overwhelmed and under-qualified; we are a tiny town; our volunteers are exhausted; who are the consultants we can hire to help us get this work done?”*

#### **Need for Fundamental Capacity Development in Local Government**

Our state’s regional planning commissions and office of emergency management largely do the heavy lifting of disaster preparedness, recovery and resiliency. But through this process VLCT, the State of Vermont, and USDA Rural Development, along with other disaster response agencies, found that being prepared for a disaster starts long before the first drop of rain falls, first gust of wind flies, or first flake of snow falls. We found it was vital that municipalities have a fundamental grasp of the best municipal finance, operations and management practices.

Our municipal leaders who had good accounting practices in place, good contracting policies enacted, and a basic understanding of grants management before the storm were able to take advantage of more FEMA assistance. And as our Federal Funding Assistance Program staff can attest, they are also the ones applying for and receiving other federal grants for infrastructure investments. Those without those processes and experience, struggled to respond to the disaster.

In early June, I attended a disaster recovery symposium in Johnson, Vermont – a village that was underwater one year ago today. At the symposium, representatives from federal agencies, including FEMA, HUD, SBA, Interior, and USDA, presented a myriad of grant and loan programs available to help municipalities recover and rebuild. Every single one of these programs required one thing: the capacity to write a grant. Few municipalities have that capacity. As an example, in Vermont – 60 percent of our municipalities have no professional fulltime manager or administrator. When Congress creates a grant program that requires a competitive application, deep financial expertise, and complicated grant management, it doesn’t work 60 percent of the time...every time.

#### **USDA Rural Development Assistance Pre- and Post- Disaster**

USDA Rural Development is the only federal agency that provides capacity assistance to rural communities. Through its Rural Community Development Initiative, it provides technical assistance funding to spur community and economic development in rural places. Municipalities are amongst the eligible beneficiaries. However, the competition is stiff – as 20,000 or so cities, towns and villages will compete for their share of about \$5 million in 2024.

Fortunately, in Vermont, our USDA Rural Development office participated in weekly convenings with disaster recovery partners and saw the need to help municipalities prepare for and respond to future disasters by getting back to the fundamentals. Our State Director, Sarah Waring, worked with others in the Biden/Harris Administration to secure \$1 million from the RD Disaster

Assistance Fund to enter into a cooperative agreement with VLCT to support municipalities with direct one-on-one technical assistance in times of need, including resources and curriculum to apply for and implement available federal funds.

Using the funding, VLCT will:

- Provide one-on-one training and technical assistance to municipal officials who manage budgetary issues with FEMA applications and reimbursements;
- Build out a formal education program in government finance for treasurers, administrators, managers, and legislative body members;
- Build government finance expertise through networking, mentoring and formal and informal learning opportunities with partners such as Vermont Clerks and Treasurers Association, Vermont Government Finance Officers Association and more; and
- Develop model templates and best practices to be used in disaster response, such as tip sheets on available assistance from FEMA, USDA, etc.

Coordinate with regional planning and development corporations and service providers through the Municipal Technical Assistance Program. This cooperative agreement was one of five such RD Disaster Assistance Fund investments made recently. This flexible funding is critical to responding to the unique needs of rural areas post disaster. There's an old saying in rural community and economic development: "When you've seen one rural town, you've seen one rural town." The saying aims to remind policy makers that while there are commonalities amongst America's rural places, everyone is truly unique – with their own governance models, personalities, funding mechanisms and more. That can be seen clearly on today's panel – where a county commissioner shares the witness stand with me. Vermont has no functional county government – and federal programs designed to partner with county governments routinely create inefficiencies in Vermont. I encourage Congress to give RD the flexibilities it needs to meet rural communities where they are post-disaster, including:

- Providing additional flexible funding to USDA RD to be used at the discretion of the USDA State Director, as proposed in the Rural Recovery Act, and as currently authorized for the Natural Resources Conservation Service – a sister mission area to RD at USDA;
- Giving USDA RD the authority to waive match, median household income or rural designations across its entire programmatic portfolio; and
- Authorizing USDA RD to move funds between soft and hard infrastructure programs during a disaster.

Rural municipalities know how to work with RD, and the RD staff in state offices have relationships with municipal leaders that take years to build. As such, I would also encourage Congress to consider leveraging these relationships into quick and impactful disaster infrastructure recovery projects by authorizing USDA RD to change how it does business after a disaster. These changes include:

- Giving authority for Water & Environmental Programs (WEP) to make no interest or low interest loans for operations;

- Increasing population limits to 50,000 in declared disaster areas (Stafford Act and Secretarial declarations) on all RD programs;
- Waiving median household income limits in declared disaster areas (Stafford Act and Secretarial declarations);
- Providing a waiver to local field offices for endorsement authority for Single Family Housing disaster claim payments in excess of \$10,000;
- Allowing higher proportion of grant to loan ratios or grant only awards;
- Allowing greater conversion from loans to grants to increase grant awards;
- Waiving collateral requirements on the 504 program, and increasing grant awards;
- Providing towns, villages or counties with the Community Facility or WEP programs as a line of credit for emergency repairs. This will allow local municipalities to adjust quickly to emergencies and protect lives and property;
- Streamlining the Single Family Housing Repair Loan & Grant program and offering a expedited application along with age waivers for disaster survivors.

On behalf of every city, town and village leader in Vermont, thank you for taking the time to consider how to make federal programs aimed at sparking infrastructure investments in rural areas work better.



*July 2023 - Waitsfield, Vermont*

State of Vermont, Agency of Natural  
Resources

**Testimony of Secretary Julie Moore  
to the United States Senate  
Subcommittee on Rural Development  
and Energy**

*July 10, 2024*



## Building Resilience in Vermont's Rural Communities After Disasters

Good afternoon, Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Julie Moore, and I am the Secretary of the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources. I have served in this capacity for nearly eight years. By training, I am a civil engineer and a registered professional engineer in the State of Vermont.

I appreciate the opportunity to offer my perspective on the critical infrastructure needs facing Vermont's rural communities, which are being driven by the challenges of aging municipal water and wastewater systems, a shrinking user base and the impacts of our changing climate.

Today's hearing is particularly timely as one year ago, Vermonters watched as a storm system drop as much as nine inches of rain across the state, causing massive flooding and hundreds of millions of dollars in damage – impacting thousands of homes and businesses, damaging municipal and state infrastructure, causing landslides, and compromising dams.

While the widespread damage from the July 2023 storms attracted significant national attention, the fact of the matter is that since 2010, Vermont has had 22 flood-related federal disaster declaration: nearly two per year and up from an average one every other year throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s.

Clearly more frequent and more severe storms are our new normal.

And I see the key to building resilience is consistent investment in municipal water infrastructure.

However, small, rural states like Vermont are challenged to fund these essential investments without support from federal partners – especially in and immediately following natural disasters.

- For perspective, Vermont has 417 community drinking water systems
  - Almost 75% of them serve populations less than 500.
  - Most have volunteer boards, with volunteer or part-time operators.
  - Eighteen systems, affecting approximately 40,000 Vermonters, sustained significant impacts to their drinking water infrastructure or operation requiring boil water or do not drink notices during the July storms.
- The story is even more challenging on the wastewater side





State of Vermont, Agency of Natural Resources  
**Testimony of Secretary Julie Moore to the United States Senate**  
**Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy, July 10, 2024**

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- Vermont has 92 municipal wastewater facilities that serve mainly small rural communities. 58 of these facilities, or two-thirds, have a permitted treatment capacity of 100,000 gallons per day or less, an indicator of the small, rural population areas they serve.
- More than one-third of these facilities – 33 in total – sustained damage during last July's floods totaling more than \$75 million.
- Three facilities experienced catastrophic damage that will require extensive rebuilding and possible relocation.

Unfortunately, most of these small systems do not have capital available within their annual budget to make significant, unanticipated repairs.

While ultimately, a significant share of the cost of infrastructure repairs following a natural disaster will be covered by insurance and FEMA reimbursement – there is an upfront cost to this work, which can be substantial.

Immediate cash flow is critical – helping ensure communities make decisions around recovery and reinvestment based on what will serve them best in the long-term... as opposed to being limited to what they can afford in the immediate.

I saw this firsthand in the weeks following last July's floods.

In speaking with leaders in some of our most flood-ravaged communities, it was clear that they were leveraged to the hilt and had exhausted market-rate private credit available to them to make emergency repairs and restore service – limiting how they might “build back better”.

In response, I convened a “funders summit” – involving my staff responsible for administering Vermont's state revolving fund programs, the Vermont Municipal Bond Bank, the State Treasurer's Office and USDA – Rural Development.

- Over a period of weeks, we cobbled together a complicated and tenuous funding stack to meet the same need that would be better addressed by Senator Welch's *Rural Recovery Act* and the enhancements it would make to the Disaster Assistance Fund.
- I can't overstate the importance of having available flexible low cost or no cost money that can be deployed quickly following a disaster.
- There simply isn't time to wait for Congress to designate and appropriate additional disaster related funds to support communities in their moments of need – like emergency operations, the design, development and implementation of critical water



State of Vermont, Agency of Natural Resources

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and wastewater projects, as well as essential investment in floodproofing and hardening existing infrastructure.

- Ideally a robust Disaster Assistance Fund would include budget authority to provide flexibility around RD's Water & Environmental Programs immediately following a disaster.
  - Changes are also needed to increase RD's authority to issue waivers to expedite funding to meet real-time needs and streamline procedures that can be extremely difficult for smaller communities.

In closing, one of the most important, collaborative relationships my agency has in the drinking water and wastewater space is with USDA-RD. Rural Development supports cost-effective investments in community infrastructure, and partners with us on long-term disaster recovery.

The *Rural Recovery Act* would establish and expand this essential partnership, helping ensure that immediate financial challenges following a disaster don't perpetuate vulnerabilities and increase long-term costs, but instead support our rural communities in implementing considered, durable solutions in the wake of natural disasters.



**WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**THE HONORABLE KEVIN PAAP  
COMMISSIONER  
BLUE EARTH COUNTY, MINNESOTA**

**ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES**

**HEARING TITLED, “*THE STATE OF RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE: EMERGENCY RESPONSE,  
RECOVERY, AND RESILIENCE*” BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,  
NUTRITION AND FORESTRY SUBCOMMITTEE ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENERGY**

**July 10, 2024**

**Testimony of the Honorable Kevin Paap  
Commissioner, Blue Earth County, Minnesota**

Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am pleased to discuss the role of counties in disaster planning, response, and recovery, and to share recommendations for how our Congressional partners can strengthen the capacity of rural counties to address the threat of natural disasters, ensure community safety, and protect our residents. We appreciate the chance to work toward our shared goal of fostering greater resilience to the impacts of natural disasters across rural America.

My name is Kevin Paap, and I have served as a county Commissioner in Blue Earth County, Minnesota, since 2021. Before my tenure on the county board, I was the President of the Minnesota Farm Bureau for 16 years. In my current role as Commissioner, I also serve as Vice Chair of the National Association of Counties (NACo) Agriculture and Rural Affairs Policy Steering Committee. NACo is the only national organization that represents all 3,069 counties, parishes, and boroughs in the United States, serving nearly 40,000 county elected officials and 3.6 million county employees. Founded in 1935, NACo assists county governments in pursuing excellence in public service to produce vibrant, safe, and resilient communities across the country.

I am a lifelong resident of Blue Earth County, born and raised on our family farm outside the small town of Garden City, Minnesota. Today, my wife Julie and I continue to farm the land as fourth-generation owners and operators. I am deeply committed to my community and passionate about dedicating my time, experience, and energy to ensure Blue Earth County remains a strong, viable, and sustainable community for future generations.

In my role, I have gained extensive experience in emergency response, including 29 years serving with our local volunteer fire department and over 40 years of teaching emergency medical services (EMS) classes in 9 counties across Southern Minnesota. Throughout my time in public service, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of natural disasters on rural communities like those in Blue Earth County.

I come from a county that recently experienced severe flooding, culminating in a partial dam failure that deeply impacted county residents both up and downstream of the dam site. This disaster underscores the urgent need for robust federal support for rural infrastructure and swift local emergency response, as well as the critical role of federal support in helping rural areas recover and rebuild from natural disasters. In my testimony, I will describe this event to highlight the challenges rural counties face in planning for and responding to disasters.

In rural counties, where resources are often limited, it is crucial to recognize the need for additional support to effectively respond to the threat of natural disasters. Rural areas in the United States are home to 20 percent of Americans and encompass over 70 percent of the nation's land mass. In these communities, we face unique challenges in terms of access to emergency services, infrastructure and financial resources. It is imperative that the 2024 Farm Bill acknowledges the specific needs of rural communities and allocates additional resources to bolster our resilience in the face of natural disasters. By addressing these challenges, we can ensure that local governments, regardless of their location, size, or scope of services, are adequately equipped to safeguard the communities they serve.



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That said, I will discuss the following points for your consideration as the subcommittee assesses obstacles to and opportunities for building resilience to natural disasters across rural America:

- Reporting the recent damages caused by severe flooding across Minnesota
- Counties play an integral role in local disaster response and recovery
- In recent years, natural disasters have become more frequent, severe and costly
- Due to rural capacity challenges, rural communities often lack the resources to adequately plan for and respond to natural disasters
- USDA investments in rural disaster planning, response, and recovery can build greater resilience to natural disasters across rural America
- The 2024 Farm Bill Reauthorization provides opportunities to deliver these resources to rural communities through targeted rural capacity-building initiatives

**Blue Earth County is currently responding to a severe flooding event.**

On June 24, the Blue Earth County Board of Commissioners held an emergency meeting to approve a resolution declaring a state of emergency due to heavy rain on June 20-22, 2024. The heavy rain caused significant damage to public and private property throughout southern Minnesota.

On that day, as flows peaked on the Blue Earth River at the Rapidan Dam, significant debris accumulation in the dam's spillway gates caused the Blue Earth River to back up and overtop. On the evening of June 24, high water flows caused the river to breach the western abutment of the dam, causing the river to bypass the dam's structure and resulting in significant erosion on the Blue Earth River's western bank and the destruction several structures in the vicinity, including an energy substation and a small business.

Starting on June 26, County staff shifted their focus from the dam to the safety of the County Highway 9 Bridge, just upriver from the dam, knowing that the bridge may be vulnerable to further damage from the flooding event. Two days later, 4,000 tons of riprap was placed at pier one of the bridge to protect the structure from further scour. State and county officials continue to monitor the bridge's structural integrity.

As substantial erosion on the west bank continued following events of June 24, the County took possession of a business building on site that suffered damage – the Rapidan Dam Store – and demolished and removed the structure from the riverbank as an emergency mitigation measure. While Blue Earth County employees helped the business owners remove the building's contents before the acquisition, the Dam Store was an integral part of the community and remains embedded in the memories of many residents.

On June 28, Minnesota received a Federal Disaster Declaration because of severe storms and flooding. Blue Earth County is included as one of the 22 counties designated for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Public Assistance.

The County's response is ongoing. Besides the event at the Rapidan Dam, Blue Earth County is addressing nearly 100 storm-damaged areas of County Roads and trails that have been reported so far. Additionally, there are a significant number of private properties that have incurred damages.



The County is requesting any property owner with damage to complete an online damage report form. In the first week, the County received nearly 400 reports of damage to private property and expects to see more. Many residents have limited or no insurance for this kind of flooding event. Federal resources will be important tools as Blue Earth County residents begin the journey to recovery.

**The recent partial failure of Blue Earth County's Rapidan Dam serves as a compelling example of the impact of aging infrastructure on disaster resilience in rural areas.**

Constructed between 1908 and 1910, the Rapidan dam stands 87 feet tall and 475 inches long passing flows from a 2,430 square mile drainage area. The dam has been owned and under the management of Blue Earth County for the past 46 years and has faced recurring flooding that has impacted the dam's structural integrity and operations, straining county resources.

The second through fifth-largest floods of record at the Rapidan Dam have all occurred since 2010. The June 24, 2024 flood event peaked at 34,800 cubic feet per second (CFS), surpassing the 2019 flood flows of 32,700 CFS as the second largest flood of record at the dam (1965 flood was the first largest at 43,100 CFS). In April 2023, the National Inventory of Dams rated the dam in poor condition and noted that it posed a significant hazard if it were to fail due to the potential loss of millions of yards of agriculturally impacted sediment impounded upstream of the dam.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) conducted a Dam Safety Inspection on May 21, 2024. A June 4, 2024 letter from FERC states, "all project structures were inspected and were found to be in overall satisfactory condition. No major dam safety deficiencies were observed that would require immediate remedial action." However, inspection conducted by FERC inspects the safety of the dam, not the condition.

The March 2019 flooding event caused significant damages to the dam including damages to the structural integrity of the five steel tainter gates, damages to the intake deck, damages to the downstream training wall, scour at the downstream apron, and damages to the downstream powerhouse walls. Following this flood event the gates were left open in a run of river condition. Subsequently in the winter of 2020, frazil ice dams built up backing up downstream flows into the powerhouse 15' deep inundating and incapacitating all of the electrical generation equipment. The Dam Operator (Eagle Creek Renewable Energy) subsequently terminated its lease agreement with the County.

The County elected to assume the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) licensure exemption while it studied a path forward of either returning the dam to service or decommissioning and dam removal via two parallel feasibility studies. Feasibility studies conducted in 2021 resulted in cost estimates of \$15 million to repair the dam and return it to service or \$82 million to remove the dam, replace the upstream County Road 9 bridge and re-establish approximately 3 miles of river channel. In late 2022 the County determined that its return on investment for hydroelectric production was insufficient and subsequently submitted a notice to surrender its FERC licensure exemption in April 2023. FERC initially estimated this process would take six to twelve months. As of the June 24, 2024, flood event (16 months later), no conversation has been initiated by FERC with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for the assignment of regulatory authority of the dam to the state.



Due to quick action from local and state officials, we were fortunate that the failure of the Rapidan Dam did not claim any lives. However, there are thousands of pieces of aging infrastructure projects across rural America that without adequate upkeep may put communities at risk in the event of future disasters. Federal resources provide rural community leaders with essential tools to implement proactive measures and invest in infrastructure modernization to enhance disaster resilience. By prioritizing the assessment and maintenance of aging infrastructure, rural communities can mitigate potential risks and minimize the impact of natural disasters. However, doing so requires robust funding and strong partnerships with federal agencies, private organizations, and neighboring communities. By working collaboratively to address infrastructure challenges and secure necessary resources, rural communities can build a more resilient and secure environment for all residents.

While this flood has been particularly devastating, it is only the most recent in a series of destructive natural disasters that have strained our local resources. These cumulative impacts highlight the necessity for sustained and comprehensive support to build resilience and ensure the long-term sustainability of rural areas.

**As demonstrated by Blue Earth County's response to our current disaster, all the nation's counties play an integral role in local disaster response and recovery.**

Counties are on the front lines of defense before and after disasters strike. In most cases, county governments are responsible for local emergency management, with county elected officials and emergency managers leading coordination efforts and damage mitigation. Other key staff involved in disaster efforts include police, sheriffs, firefighters, 911 call center staff, public health officials, and code inspectors. After a disaster, counties coordinate cleanup, recovery, and rebuilding efforts to help residents return to normal life as soon as possible.

Counties also own a significant amount of public infrastructure, including roads, bridges, hospitals, jails, nursing homes, and airports, making counties uniquely positioned to mitigate disaster impacts and protect residents. Collectively, counties own and maintain 44 percent of public road miles, 38 percent of the National Bridge Inventory, 960 hospitals, more than 2,500 jails, more than 650 nursing homes and a third of the nation's airports. We are responsible for maintaining public safety infrastructure like roadside ditches, flood control channels, and stormwater systems, as well as providing public outreach and education on water quality and stormwater impacts prior to and following disasters. Counties work to reduce water pollution, implement land use plans, and manage water recharge areas, green infrastructure, and water conservation programs.

Counties are not merely stakeholders in this conversation, but essential partners in the intergovernmental system protecting the nation from disasters. We stand ready to work with the federal government to ensure federal programs and resources can make our communities more resilient in the face of natural disasters.

**Over the past 20 years, natural disasters have become more frequent, more severe, and more costly.**

In recent years, the frequency, severity, and financial impact of natural disasters have become a growing concern across rural America. Since 1980, the U.S. has experienced nearly 400 natural disasters with overall damages exceeding \$1 billion, totaling over \$2.74 trillion. The past two





decades have seen a marked rise in incidents such as hurricanes, wildfires, floods, and tornadoes, each leaving a trail of destruction and impacting communities more severely than before. These disasters not only disrupt lives and livelihoods but also impose significant economic burdens on county governments.

From 2019 to 2023, the frequency of billion-dollar disasters consistently exceeded the historical average, with some years experiencing over 20 such events. This increase in frequency is paralleled by a rise in the severity and cost of these disasters, as more intense storms, wildfires, floods, and other extreme weather events cause extensive damage and economic losses. In 2023 alone, 849 counties experienced at least one federally declared major disaster, 312 counties had at least one emergency declaration, and 720 counties had at least one disaster declaration. In that same period, the nation experienced 28 separate billion-dollar disasters, costing over \$92.9 billion. 2023 was also deadly, causing at least 492 direct or indirect fatalities—the 8th most disaster-related fatalities for the contiguous U.S. since 1980.

The financial toll of these disasters has increased significantly over time. In the 1980s, the average annual cost of billion-dollar disasters was around \$17.8 billion. By the 2010s, this average had risen to \$81 billion per year. The past five years have seen some of the highest costs on record, with 2020 setting a new high at over \$100 billion in damages nationwide.. This escalation in costs underscores the growing financial burden these disasters impose on affected communities, particularly those in rural areas.

Minnesota has not been immune to these trends. Since 1980, the state has experienced 58 natural disasters in which losses exceed \$1 billion. These events included 12 droughts, 5 floods, 1 freeze event, 35 severe storms, 2 wildfires, and 3 winter storms. In recent years, Minnesota has been hit particularly hard. In 2023 alone, 7 separate billion-dollar disasters impacted Minnesota counties, an astonishing figure compared to prior decades. From 2000 to 2009, there were 14 such events, and 11 such events from 2010 to 2019. If we stay at the rate of 7 events per year for the remainder of this decade, we'll total 70 billion-dollar disasters from 2020 to 2029. The financial and social impacts of these events emphasize the urgent need for enhanced disaster preparedness and resilience strategies, particularly in rural areas where resources are often limited.

**Rural communities often lack the resources to adequately plan and respond to the impact of natural disasters.**

Rural areas in the United States are home to 20 percent of Americans and encompass over 70 percent of the nation's land mass. Residents living in rural communities are also among the nation's most underserved. The poverty rate in rural America (14.4 percent) is 2.5 percentage points higher than the national average (11.9 percent). Of the 353 counties that experience persistent poverty, 85 percent are rural. 20 percent of rural census tracts are considered disadvantaged communities, which is also considered a predictor of vulnerability to natural disasters.

Rural communities face unique challenges when it comes to preparing for and responding to natural disasters. Unlike our urban counterparts, rural counties must rely on less staff and limited funding to manage emergency responses and marshal recovery efforts in the event of natural disasters. These forms of resource shortages are known as rural capacity challenges. "Capacity" consists of the assets – personnel, capital, and expertise – available to a community to provide services to residents and access external resources, such as state and federal funding





opportunities. Across much of the country, rural counties often lack the capacity needed to apply for and manage support provided through federal programs, such as a full-time grant writer, permitting staff, or access to capital required to meet match requirements.

Capacity shortages act as a bottleneck that may dictate whether a county can adequately provide services to its residents. Rural counties that lack the capital, manpower or expertise required to apply for and manage federal loans or grants are challenged to navigate federal rural development resources, including an often-arduous application and reporting process. As a result, many rural development resources will not reach the communities with the greatest need. Despite these limitations, county governments must continue to deliver essential services to residents and visitors. Such services include road and bridge maintenance, law enforcement, education, water and wastewater provision, emergency medical services, fire protection and waste management.

**Capacity challenges negatively impact a rural county's ability to effectively respond to natural disasters in the following ways:**

- **Rural capacity challenges negatively impact disaster planning.** Effective disaster planning requires a comprehensive approach, integrating risk assessments, resource allocation, and coordination with various stakeholders. However, rural counties often struggle with these responsibilities due to limited financial resources and fewer staff. Inadequate planning can result in slower response times, inefficient use of resources, and a higher overall cost of disaster recovery. Consequently, rural communities may experience prolonged disruptions to critical infrastructure and services, further exacerbating the impacts of natural disasters.
- **Rural capacity challenges negatively impact emergency response during natural disasters.** Rural counties may face challenges such as a scarcity of emergency response personnel, lack of access to specialized medical care, and limited funding for disaster preparedness and recovery efforts. The vast geographic spread of rural communities can also create logistical hurdles, delaying the arrival of aid and prolonging the time it takes to restore normalcy. Emergency services in rural areas often operate with fewer resources, including a heavy reliance on volunteers to fill the ranks of emergency personnel, which can hinder their ability to respond swiftly and effectively to disaster situations. This can result in higher casualty rates, increased damage to property, and prolonged recovery periods for affected communities.
- **Rural capacity challenges negatively impact post-disaster recovery.** After a disaster, the recovery process can be lengthy and complex, requiring substantial financial and human resources to rebuild infrastructure, restore services, and support affected populations. Rural communities often lack the necessary capacity to navigate this process efficiently. Limited access to federal and state recovery funds, insufficient staffing to manage recovery projects, and a lack of expertise in long-term recovery planning can all hinder recovery efforts. Prolonged recovery periods in rural areas may lead to sustained economic losses and long-term impacts on community well-being. Additionally, the inability to rebuild resiliently in the aftermath of a disaster can leave rural communities vulnerable to future disasters, creating a cycle of damage and recovery that is difficult to break.



Initiatives that focus on building rural capacity – either by providing technical assistance or by providing funding directly to county governments to invest in capacity-building – address this bottleneck by lowering barriers to entry for rural development resources. In doing so, rural capacity building programs empower local policymakers to plan and implement long-term development strategies that can protect our residents and invest in the long-term prosperity of our rural communities.

**USDA investment in disaster planning, response, and recovery, tailored to the specific needs of rural communities, can help rural America become more resilient to natural disasters.**

Strategic investments from U.S. Department of Agriculture-Rural Development (USDA-RD) in disaster planning, response, and recovery can significantly improve the resilience of rural communities. These investments focus on the specific needs of rural areas, aiming to build sturdy infrastructure, enhance access to emergency services, and provide financial support for disaster mitigation projects. Tailored resources empower rural counties to develop and implement effective disaster response plans, ensuring they are better prepared for future events. This targeted approach not only saves lives and property but also supports the long-term sustainability of rural communities across America.

Among the current suite of USDA-RD programs, the Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program is crucial for maintaining infrastructure and enhancing natural disaster resilience in rural communities. This program provides essential funding for the construction, expansion, or improvement of critical community infrastructure, ensuring that rural areas have the necessary resources to effectively prepare for, respond to, and recover from natural disasters. Additionally, the program supports the acquisition of emergency equipment and vehicles, enhancing the capability of rural communities to protect lives and property during disasters.

USDA-RD's Water and Environmental Programs (WEP) provide funding for water and waste disposal systems in rural areas. These programs are essential for maintaining public health and safety during and after disasters. The Emergency Water Assistance Grants Program (EWAGP) is also critically important for rural communities planning for, responding to, and recovering from natural disasters. This program provides much-needed financial support to ensure access to clean and safe water during and after disaster events. By funding the repair and maintenance of water systems, the program helps prevent the spread of waterborne diseases and ensures that communities can maintain essential water services in the face of adversity. This crucial support safeguards public health and enables a quicker, more effective recovery process. Additionally, the Predevelopment Planning Grants (PPG) assist communities in preparing for future water infrastructure projects, enhancing their resilience against potential disasters.

Rural Utilities Service (RUS) programs offer significant support for broader infrastructure needs. The Telecommunications Infrastructure Loan and Loan Guarantee Program and the ReConnect Program focus on expanding rural broadband, essential for modern communication and disaster response. Reliable internet access is crucial for coordinating emergency services, disseminating information, and enabling telehealth services. Funding is also available through RUS programs for maintenance and repair of existing telecommunications infrastructure. The Electric Infrastructure Loan and Loan Guarantee Program rebuild and modernize the electrical grid in rural areas, ensuring continuous power supply, which is critical during recovery efforts. Moreover, the Distance Learning



and Telemedicine Grant Program facilitates access to education and medical services through improved telecommunication networks, enhancing community resilience.

Regarding economic recovery, the Rural Business Development Grants (RBDG) program and Intermediary Relending Program (IRP) support local businesses in resuming operations post-disaster. By offering both immediate relief and long-term recovery support, USDA RD ensures that rural communities can recover more quickly and effectively, building resilience against future disasters. The comprehensive approach of combining financial assistance, technical support, and infrastructure development underscores RD's commitment to sustaining rural America's vitality and safety.

Adequate funding levels and flexible eligible usages for these programs are crucial to their effectiveness. Ensuring that these programs are well-funded allows for timely and comprehensive support to rural communities in times of need. Flexibility in the use of these funds enables communities to address their unique challenges and priorities, whether it be infrastructure repairs, emergency response upgrades, or public health interventions. By providing both ample resources and the discretion to use them where they are most needed, these programs can maximize their impact and foster resilient, self-reliant rural communities.

**The 2024 Farm Bill Reauthorization provides an opportunity to improve rural disaster resilience.**

The Farm Bill authorizes a series of resources that support rural communities to build resilience, and respond to and recover from natural disasters. However, without adequate investments in rural capacity building, rural communities will continue to face obstacles in accessing the resources they need to protect residents from natural disasters.

**Counties support the inclusion of new rural capacity-building resources in the 2024 Farm Bill, including the Rural Partnership Program and other provisions put forward in the *Rural Partnership and Prosperity Act (S.3309)*.** We applaud Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and the members of the Senate Agriculture Committee for including the Rural Partnership Program (RPP) in both the majority and minority frameworks for the 2024 Farm Bill. This innovative initiative would provide multiyear, flexible funding awards to partnerships of two or more rural stakeholders, including county governments, to address urgent needs in a particular rural community.

Funding distributed through this competitive grant program would invest in the expertise and capacity of rural governments to plan, implement, and measure the impact of locally-led community development strategies, enhancing their resilience to natural disasters. By strengthening local governance and increasing access to expert resources, RPP ensures that rural communities are better prepared for, can effectively respond to, and can swiftly recover from natural disasters.

We firmly believe that investing in rural capacity building is not only essential for the success of our rural communities but also for the long-term resilience of our nation. A rural capacity-building program designed to meet the needs of rural communities should incorporate direct assistance to local governments and their partners, support for non-federal technical assistance providers working in rural areas, and enhanced resources to put additional federal representatives on the



ground in rural areas through the Rural Partners Network or similar initiatives. RPP accomplishes these objectives.

We also want to express our strong support for the historic inclusion of \$50 million dollars per year in mandatory funding for RPP in Chairwoman Stabenow's Farm Bill proposal. This substantial funding commitment demonstrates a meaningful investment in the resilience of rural communities across the nation. With this sustained financial and technical assistance, RPP will empower rural communities and our partners to effectively address urgent needs and provide essential resources to rural stakeholders, further enhancing their ability to prepare for and respond to natural disasters.

Relatedly, **counties support efforts to permanently authorize and expand the Rural Partners Network (RPN)**, a cross-departmental pilot initiative spearheaded by USDA Rural Development that embeds federal employees in rural communities to facilitate more robust collaboration between local and federal partners operating in rural America. RPN is collaboration amongst 25+ federal partners who have prioritized working with 36 cohorts of rural communities across 10 states and Puerto Rico to provide one front door for the federal resources they need to thrive. We would like to see this successful effort expand and request increased resources. Since its launch in 2022, RPN has been allocated around \$11.5 million through USDA Rural Development's budget. This modest \$11.5 million program has leveraged over \$300 million in awards—a direct result of RPN engagement at the community level. Additionally, federal agencies intentionally prioritizing RPN communities has strengthened investments in these areas. Since RPN began nearly \$3 billion in federal investments have been made across the RPN Community Network footprint. Chairwoman Stabenow's proposal for the 2024 Farm Bill included a permanent authorization of the Rural Partners Network. **Counties support the permanent authorization and expansion of the Rural Partners Network in the final version of the 2024 Farm Bill.**

**Further, counties support the inclusion of the bipartisan *Streamlining Federal Grants Act (S.2286)* in the 2024 Farm Bill.** This bill will allow local governments across the country, including small and rural communities, to take advantage of federal resources and grant opportunities more easily by simplifying the federal grant administration process. The bill would address the barriers that communities face in applying for complex federal grants due to resource constraints. Any simplification of the process will go a long way to improving uptake of grant programs by rural communities.

### **Conclusion**

Chair Welch and Ranking Member Tuberville, thank you for inviting me to share Blue Earth County's story. Counties stand ready to work with Congress and our federal partners to reimagine how federal policy can support rural counties and protect our rural communities from the growing threat of natural disasters. Counties continue to serve as essential intergovernmental partners in disaster response and recovery. We look forward to partnering with you to achieve our shared priorities as we work toward the passage of a new, bipartisan Farm Bill this year. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.



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**TESTIMONY OF  
Mark D. Bohlin  
General Manager, Perdido Bay Water, Sewer, and Fire Protection District**

On Behalf of the  
**Alabama Rural Water Association  
National Rural Water Association**

Before the  
**SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENERGY**

On  
**"State of Rural Infrastructure: Emergency Response, Recovery, and Resilience"**

**July 10, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and esteemed members of this Committee. I am deeply honored to be here today, offering my testimony concerning the "State of Rural Infrastructure: Emergency Response, Recovery and Resilience."

Before I proceed, I would like to extend my personal gratitude to Senator Tuberville for his invitation and, more importantly, his stalwart leadership and advocacy for Alabama's rural water and wastewater sector.

My name is Mark Bohlin. I am the General Manager of the Perdido Bay Water, Sewer, and Fire Protection District (hereafter: 'the District'), a rural water system located in Southeast Baldwin County, Alabama. Additionally, I am honored to represent the Alabama Rural Water Association (ARWA) where I currently serve as President of its 10-member board. I represent District 9, including Baldwin, Mobile, and Washington Counties, which are comprised of 41 community water systems that provide service to 253,703 homes and businesses serving a population of 634,258 Alabamians. The ARWA currently provides services to 502 community water systems in the state, serving a population of 5,077,100 Alabamians, of which 443 are members of ARWA at present. The ARWA is a member of the National Rural Water Association (NRWA) that represents over 31,000 communities within all 50 states and Puerto Rico.

Currently, the District covers an area stretching from the Town of Elberta east to the Florida state line, south to the Perdido Bay, and north to the Blackwater River. We provide drinking water to the communities of Lillian, Josephine, the Town of Perdido Beach, and areas of Elberta. Our District has 4,400 water connections, serving a population of 13,200. This includes unincorporated areas, making us eligible for U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development (RD) assistance under their 10,000-population cap.

The District is a Non-Profit Organization that was incorporated in August of 1973 to deliver clean and safe drinking water to the communities of Lillian and Perdido Beach. The District started delivering water to its first 600 customers in 1978. Over the years the District expanded to provide services to the community of Josephine and unincorporated areas of Elberta.

Currently, the District has three wells with a pumping capacity of 2,520,000 gallons of water per day and a storage capacity of 1,000,000 gallons. The District is governed, managed, and operated by a 5-member Board of Directors and a staff of eleven employees, one of which, if all goes to plan, will be the first graduate of ARWA's Apprenticeship Program later this year.

Like so many rural water systems that were formed years ago, it was with the assistance of the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) which was the precursor of USDA Rural Development. The District was born from a 40-year loan of \$736,300 and a grant of \$176,000 provided by the FmHA.

Fast forward almost 50 years and the District continues to take advantage of the affordable low interest rates provided through the USDA Rural Development Water and Environmental Programs (WEP). In the last 8 years, we have replaced all the meters in the District, renovated and painted all 3 of the District's elevated water storage tanks, installed new lines, bought new equipment and we are currently in the process of developing another well to provide an additional 1,000,000 gallons of water to the water users of the District.

#### **State of Rural Water Infrastructure**

The USDA Rural Development Water and Environmental Direct loan portfolio is currently \$14.15 billion with 10,982 projects. These are 40-year term loans with 33% of the portfolio with less than 10 years from closing and 38.8% with less than 20 years from closing. Throughout the life of these projects, additional funding is needed to upgrade and modernize the utilities. This high-performing loan program has and continues to provide tremendous investments and returns for the federal government and more importantly, the rural communities and residents they serve. With a

delinquency rate of only 0.35%, this stable portfolio of investments has improved the public health and economic vitality of rural communities.

Providing adequate annual appropriations to support the WEP programs will ensure the aging portfolio has access to affordable financing necessary to upgrade and modernize their utilities. The current backlog for WEP funding in the nation is \$2.024 billion and \$12.74 million in Alabama. Sufficient grant funding is also necessary to blend with the direct loan program to sustain affordable rates for service in lower-income communities.

In my opinion, our partners at the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) have done commendable work in ensuring that both American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, also known as BIL) funds are directed toward our rural systems as much as possible. The Alabama Rural Water Association (ARWA) has closely collaborated with them to bring these projects to fruition.

However, it's important to note that this positive trend in Alabama is not necessarily reflective of the national situation. Predominantly rural states, like Alabama, benefit from a political landscape that is more conducive to directing funds to rural areas. This unique alignment has facilitated a stronger focus on rural infrastructure, unlike the broader national trend. Our strong relationship with ADEM and the prioritization of rural development have been crucial in this regard.

As of early 2024, utilizing IIJA and ARPA funding, 646 projects have been awarded funds across all 67 counties in Alabama. These projects were selected through a needs-based process to aid disadvantaged and rural communities that would otherwise face further deterioration. ADEM estimates that \$1.105 billion of the \$3.3 billion needed for necessary water infrastructure projects has been accounted for, not including ongoing federal grant allocations from the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs.

This effort is ongoing, and providing clean water to all Alabamians remains a priority for Governor Ivey. However, many projects remain unfunded, with additional funding anticipated over the next few years to meet the needs of rural water and wastewater systems in Alabama and nationwide. Despite significant investments, a substantial portion of the available funds are often absorbed by larger systems. Historical trends indicate that, during typical funding rounds, most funds are directed toward and utilized by larger entities. Once the allocation of these infrastructure 'catch-up' dollars is completed, we can expect a return to these historical funding patterns.

It's crucial to emphasize that small and rural communities heavily depend on the Rural Development Water and Environmental Programs (WEP) to maintain and enhance their utilities and affordable services. These communities often lack the resources and

capacity to compete with larger systems for funding, exacerbating the gap between their needs and the funds they receive. Ensuring adequate resources are allocated to these programs is vital to support the sustainability and development of essential services in rural areas. Without sufficient funding, these communities face continued infrastructure deterioration and increased challenges in providing clean and safe water to their residents.

According to the most recent United States Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Drinking Water Infrastructure Needs Survey and Assessment (DWINSAs) gathered from information collected in calendar year 2021, a twenty-year capital improvement assessment totaled \$625 billion in needs for drinking water alone. While this is a valuable tool, and ARWA was a participating contractor with ADEM to conduct the assessment, unfortunately, the survey only targets a small number of water systems, and the final report aggregates data in categories for communities with populations of 3,300 and under, 3,301 to 100,000 and above 100,000. Currently, there is no credible source of data to capture the total needs for both drinking water and wastewater infrastructure for rural communities.

We would ask this Committee to consider requesting the USDA Economic Research Service to issue a report to survey the actual needs of all rural communities eligible for RD WEP funding.

Other financial and sustainability challenges on the horizon include the regulatory landscape with the significant costs associated with treatment of PFAS, Cyber Security assessments and enhancements, workforce development, compliance with the lead and copper rule, and other current and forthcoming federal mandates. The inflationary cost of equipment combined with supply chain issues continues to plague small water utilities. This has caused delays and cost overruns for many projects.

All of these factors impact smaller rural utilities with limited financial resources more than their urban counterparts. Recent reports, including a 2023 report from the USDA Economic Research Service, have indicated the U.S. rural (nonmetro) population is growing again. If this trend continues, rural utilities will have to expand their services to cover this growth.

#### **Rural Water Workforce Development**

Supporting the country's public drinking water and sanitation systems is a highly skilled, diversified labor force of water utility workers. These professionals perform a wide range of tasks, from operating heavy equipment to repair broken lines, managing toxic chemicals, maintaining public records, conducting laboratory tests, operating process controls, reviewing engineering plans, and monitoring biological treatment processes. They comply with federal environmental and labor standards and manage complex



engineering and construction projects. The exact duties depend on the size and complexity of the water utility, with smaller utilities requiring versatile workers who handle multiple roles, while larger utilities have larger staffs with departmentalized teams.

The water utility workforce is trained in emergency management response and safety, available during emergencies like floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and intentional acts of sabotage. Given the inherently dangerous nature of their work, such as operating heavy machinery and handling large quantities of toxic chemicals, ensuring their safety is paramount. All water utilities operate 24/7, including holidays and weekends.

Safe and effective water utility management is vital to rural America and the nation. With over 50,000 community water supplies in the country, 91% serve populations under 10,000, and 55% serve populations of 500 or less. Employment data indicates that up to 50% of this workforce will leave the industry within the next 10 years. Rural water and wastewater utilities urgently need a pipeline of skilled workers to ensure clean, safe water and maintain essential infrastructure.

Since 2016, the National Rural Water Association, State Rural Water Associations, local small and rural community water utilities, and federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Labor, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, have successfully collaborated to establish the first nationally recognized Registered Apprenticeship Program for water and wastewater system operators (O\*NET-SOC CODE: 51-8031.00). This initiative has created jobs in rural America and, as of this year, 36 State Rural Water Associations, including Alabama and Vermont, have obtained federally approved Registered Apprenticeship Programs. Over 600 apprentices have enrolled or graduated, marking significant progress.

The NRWA Water and Wastewater Operator Apprenticeship Programs include 4,000 hours of on-the-job training with a one-to-one mentor-apprentice ratio and 288 hours of technical instruction over two years, with a suggested wage increase every six months. Graduates often serve as public health officials, responsible for complying with federal regulations and ensuring safe drinking water and sanitation services.

The program's activities include but are not limited to learning system operation basics, safety procedures, operating heavy equipment, installation and inspection of water lines, leak detection, quality control, and compliance with federal, state, and local regulations. The Apprenticeship Program has enhanced workforce participation and retention, protected federal investments in water systems, and modernized workforce development in the industry.

Workforce challenges are particularly acute for small community water systems, many of which operate with minimal staffing and struggle to comply with complex federal

regulations due to a lack of qualified operators. Our Apprenticeship Program has seen significant growth but is constrained in very small communities with insufficient capacity to employ or mentor apprentices.

In Alabama, the Apprenticeship Program, finalized with the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship in February 2020, has seen promising developments despite pandemic-related delays. We now have 14 participating employers and have successfully placed 11 apprentices at 6 utilities. This program raises public awareness about water sector careers and supports newcomers with structured training and incentives; the first of its kind.

The District was one of the first participants in ARWA's Apprenticeship Program, and in fact, is slated to have the very first graduate of that program in the next few months. The process has been very successful for us so far, and we intend to continue to participate in the acquisition and training of new employees for years to come.

To address these workforce challenges, we urge the Committee to incorporate financial resources and policies into the 2023 Farm Bill to expand and enhance this successful Apprenticeship Program. Prioritizing this initiative is essential to protect the federal investment in rural America's water and wastewater systems, ensuring these critical services remain sustainable and effective.

#### **Emergency Response, Recovery, and Resilience**

The remaining portion of my testimony will focus on lessons learned from disaster and recovery efforts including my personal experience and make recommendations for the Committee's consideration. I will also speak on the direct assistance provided by the Alabama Rural Water Association and the Vermont Rural Water Association for disaster assistance.

Due to the geographical location of the District, we are prone to tropical weather and hurricanes. During my 25-year tenure serving as the General Manager of the District, we have been through numerous tropical storms and 2 direct hits by Hurricanes Ivan and Sally. With each event, we made plans and preparations to deal with the disaster.

NRWA and State Rural Water Associations serve as the lead entity in disaster recovery in many states necessary to restore and maintain critical water and wastewater services in small and rural communities and have done so for decades. We stage and deploy experienced staff and equipment for each event.

Unfortunately, there has been no dedicated federal funding to enhance or expand this activity beyond the extremely limited assistance currently provided under the USDA Circuit Rider program which is only limited to disaster recovery activities to systems

under 10,000 population. After service is restored, this federal assistance is terminated. In addition, only a small portion of this existing contract is available for disaster assistance.

To date, most of the disaster recovery costs have been absorbed by Rural Water State Associations. FEMA does not consistently reimburse direct costs. This is in stark contrast to the electric power industry.

Continuity of essential water services is required to maintain the public health and economic vitality of communities during and after a disaster. The current disaster assistance provided through the Circuit Rider Program is designed to aid after a disaster incident takes place. Equally important are the preventive measures, resiliency planning and design, response, and recovery activities, training, etc. Providing an all-hazards approach is necessary to adequately identify and address all vulnerabilities and threats to the water utility.

Establishing dedicated, on-site, experienced staff to provide these services to rural utilities will directly benefit the public. Targeting assistance to rural communities that lack the financial resources and staff capacity to adequately prepare and restore critical services would help the residents who will be impacted the most and experience a longer recovery time.

ARWA and NRWA have advocated for and testified numerous times for expanded authorities and assistance to be provided to rural communities over the last two years. Our recommendations are directly derived from the water sector field staff with decades of experience.

We are grateful that Congress responded with pending bipartisan legislation in both the House and Senate. In the Senate, S. 2917, the "Rural Water System Disaster Preparedness and Assistance Act" was introduced by Senators Cortez Masto and Hyde-Smith and cosponsored by Senator Baldwin.

If accepted within the final 2023 Farm Bill, this comprehensive approach will provide additional authorities for pre- and post-disaster assistance. Additional authorities to enhance preparation with the development of vulnerability assessments, disaster action and mitigation plans, geographic mapping, and hardening facilities, will all decrease potential disruptions and physical damage. Hardening facilities can provide additional non-natural disaster benefits including protection from physical and cyber-attacks. To address administrative burdens, post-disaster efforts would include direct assistance with the entire application process for available federal and state funding and the necessary reporting requirements.

Unfortunately, many small rural systems have limited capacity with one full-time or part-time operator responsible for all operational activities of their system. This legislation also targets assistance to these vulnerable communities that lack the financial and human capacity to adequately protect the public health of their residents without this direct assistance.

As previously mentioned, State Rural Water Associations have been providing disaster assistance for decades. The ARWA and other state rural water associations, especially the 5 Gulf States, have extensive, valuable experience providing direct recovery, response, and restoration assistance.

What began as individual state rural water associations assisting and coordinating mutual aid agreements between utilities within their states has evolved into a well-organized and robust collaboration. Today, state rural water associations collectively own, service, and share a diverse array of equipment and emergency response tools. Additionally, this collaboration has developed a small army of trained response professionals who specialize in water and wastewater response. This network significantly enhances Rural Water's ability to respond swiftly and effectively to emergencies, ensuring that resources and expertise are readily available where they are most needed. The federal authorities encapsulated in S. 2917 will formalize and enhance this promising effort.

After the devastating impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, NRWA established a permanent standing Emergency Response Committee. This committee meets regularly to coordinate and review response efforts nationwide.

Additionally, an annual on-site training event, hosted by different states, offers both classroom and hands-on training essential for the education of Rural Water Association first responders. This training is then disseminated to individual states, where the knowledge is shared with local water system managers, employees, and other first responders, thereby impacting thousands of emergency responders across the country and Puerto Rico.

In recent years, the NRWA Board of Directors has provided non-federal funding to bolster state association efforts, enhancing their capacity to respond effectively to emergencies and support local communities. While Rural Water's collective emergency preparedness and response activities have significantly improved over the past few decades, additional resources and authorities made available through legislation such as S. 2917 would offer exponential improvement opportunities. This legislation would not only enhance response efforts but also provide resources to minimize future impacts on utilities and ensure efficient and rapid recovery.

Please find additional information and examples of response activities appended to this written testimony as 'Appendix A: NRWA Emergency Response Highlights'.

I will now turn to my direct experience dealing with disaster and recovery activities.

### **Hurricane Ivan**

In preparation for Hurricane Ivan, we secured all equipment, fueled our vehicles, and filled our elevated water storage tanks to maximum capacity. As the storm's arrival became imminent, we shut off the water tanks and evacuated as ordered. After the storm passed, we returned to find only three employees had stayed in the area.

We connected an emergency generator to one of our wells to restart water pumping and began inspecting the system for damage and water quality. Many property owners along the bay had evacuated without turning off their water, causing docks and attached water lines to wash away, leading to water freely pumping into the bay. This placed a tremendous demand on the system, causing our pumps to run continuously.

Despite having a 500-gallon tank of diesel fuel, it was located 7 miles from the generator, requiring constant refueling efforts. One employee (myself) was dedicated solely to transporting and refueling the generator, while the other two employees worked to shut off water to evacuated properties. The storm had altered the landscape in a dramatic fashion, making it difficult to locate assets.

After a week, we restored operations to a somewhat normal state, with power and full staff returning. Services were either shut off or repaired, and normal pumping resumed. However, the cleanup phase presented new challenges. Contractors and outside help arriving to remove debris inadvertently damaged our infrastructure, including meter boxes, valves, flush stands, and fire hydrants. We then faced the task of replacing services, fixing main breaks, and reinstalling damaged equipment.

### **Hurricane Sally**

Hurricane Sally differed significantly from Hurricane Ivan in that it was initially projected to be a tropical storm. We prepared as we did for Hurricane Ivan by securing and boarding up everything, fueling all vehicles and equipment, and filling our elevated water storage tanks to maximum capacity. However, we did not valve off the water storage tanks as there was no evacuation order, given it was expected to be a tropical storm.

As we waited for the storm to pass, Sally unexpectedly intensified into a hurricane, wreaking havoc on the Gulf Coast. Power outages, fallen trees, and destroyed structures were widespread. Unlike Hurricane Ivan, the extent of damage from Sally caught us off guard.

Once the storm had passed, we began the process of starting generators and inspecting the system for damage and water quality. This time, we had the advantage of

a full staff available to address arising issues. Additionally, we received full assistance from the Alabama Rural Water Association, which significantly bolstered our response efforts.

As soon as the storm passed the District was contacted by Rob White, the Executive Director of the ARWA, and he wanted to know the status of our system and how the ARWA could help. After speaking with Rob, we decided to offer our facility as the onsite command center for emergency response efforts. The ARWA, in cooperation with NRWA, Oklahoma Rural Water Association, Louisiana Rural Water Association, Mississippi Rural Water Association, Georgia Rural Water Association, and Florida Rural Water Association mobilized and brought their emergency response trailer, generators, and manpower. The ARWA set up a command center at the District's office from which to conduct coordination meetings with the Alabama Emergency Management Agency, as well as communicate and deploy resources to surrounding affected water and wastewater systems. With the mutual aid of the Rural Water Association, the District was able to identify and fix all deficiencies in the system and regain normal operations in a week. All the Rural Water Associations that came and offered aid in a time of need stayed for the duration to ensure all the systems in the area had services restored.

#### **Vermont Rural Water Association: 2023 Flooding Response**

The Vermont Rural Water Association (VRWA) played a crucial role in addressing the severe impacts of the July 2023 floods on water and wastewater systems throughout Vermont. Their swift and comprehensive response highlighted the expertise, dedication, and resilience of rural water professionals in managing emergency situations and supporting affected communities. Affixed to this testimony is Vermont Rural Water's official Flood Response Report with highlights below:

#### **Impact of the Floods**

- **Drinking Water Systems:** At least 19 water systems were impacted, with several experiencing Boil Water Notices, Do Not Drink Orders, or an inability to deliver water. Water mains and sewer lines were damaged due to flooding, further complicating water delivery and treatment.
- **Wastewater Systems:** An estimated 23 wastewater systems violated permits due to the flooding, with several treatment facilities becoming flooded. The Johnson Wastewater Treatment Facility was completely destroyed, demonstrating the extent of the damage.

#### **VRWA's Emergency Response**

- **Immediate Response:** VRWA staff worked around-the-clock to assist impacted systems. Their efforts included sourcing pumps, portable treatment units, and

temporary lab/office spaces for the most severely impacted facilities like Johnson Wastewater Treatment Facility.

- **Onsite Assistance:** VRWA staff conducted inspections, needs evaluations, and sourced equipment from nearby utilities and rental companies. They set up bypass pumping, coordinated sludge pumping, and provided emergency response trailers for clean and dry workspace.
- **Mutual Aid Coordination:** VRWA coordinated a mutual aid response between towns and facilitated the delivery of essential supplies such as dehumidifiers, industrial fans, and KN95 masks. They also designed and implemented chlorination systems for disinfection.
- **Communication and Coordination:** VRWA maintained continuous communication with local, state, and federal agencies, including the EPA, Army Corps, USDA, and FEMA. This coordination ensured a comprehensive response to both immediate and long-term needs.

### Lessons Learned

- **Resilience and Preparedness:** The floods underscored the importance of having well-prepared and resilient water and wastewater infrastructure. The ability of VRWA to quickly mobilize resources and coordinate responses was critical to mitigating the impacts of the floods to the systems and their respective communities.
- **Collaboration:** Effective collaboration and constant communication between local communities, utilities, and various agencies was of the utmost importance. The support from neighboring cities, like Burlington providing equipment, was absolutely essential.
- **Challenges and Opportunities:** The event highlighted supply chain challenges which can severely impact repair timelines. It also provided an opportunity to improve infrastructure resilience and emergency preparedness for future incidents.

The hard work and expertise of the Vermont Rural Water Association were instrumental in the emergency response, recovery, and ongoing resilience efforts following the July 2023 floods. Their actions restored critical water and wastewater services and reinforced the importance of resilient rural infrastructure and effective emergency management strategies.

### Conclusion

In summary, I firmly believe that with additional federal support, mutual aid, effective collaboration, and thoughtful planning, we can address the challenges of emergencies and enhance the response, recovery, and resilience of rural water and wastewater system infrastructure nationwide. Our State Rural Water Associations currently provide aid at their own expense, without full compensation or reimbursement for their time and effort.

It is worth noting that the Circuit Rider Program does cover a portion of their salaries, particularly for recovery and restoration efforts. However, the scope of this support is limited, and on rare occasions, it includes application assistance. This highlights the need for more comprehensive funding to fully support the vital work carried out by these associations.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am ready to answer any questions you may have.



Appendix A: NRWA Emergency Response Highlights

***Hurricane Ian***



ARWA Andrew Crawford and FRWA Ben Lewis set up the Starlink at the National Rural Water Command Center



ARWA Generator being delivered to Englewood



ARWA, Andrew Crawford surveying damage to a well



One of the many night time deliveries of Generators





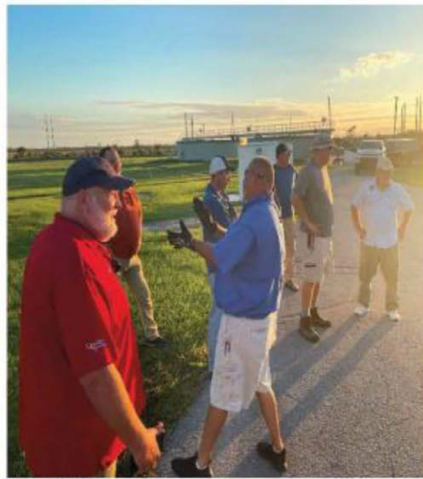
*Checking for Leaks*



*Georgia Rural Water Association Emergency Response*



*Some of the response efforts*



*Morning Briefing*



*National Rural Water Emergency Response Trailer and Truck that was utilized as the Command Center.*



*ARWA's numerous Emergency Response*



*Some of the many assets that were used.*



*ARWA Darrell Brewer, Delivering a Generator.*



*October 12th the last of our two Man deployments headed back to Alabama with two of our Large Generators.*



***Alabama Christmas Deployments***

Water Delivery to Old Line Water Authority in Jackson, Alabama, located in Clarke County. They serve approximately 2,475 water customers. Through the Associations' efforts, Old Line Water Authority Received 432 cases of bottled water. (10,368 Bottles)



Water Delivery Wilcox County Water Authority, in Camden, Alabama, located in Wilcox County, Alabama, serves approximately 4050 Customers. Through the Associations' efforts Wilcox County Water Authority, Received 576 cases of bottled water. (13,824 Bottles)



Water Delivery City of Reform Water & Sewer Board, Located in Pickens County, Alabama, serves approximately 754 Customers. Through the Associations' efforts City of Reform Water & Sewer Board, Received 432 cases of bottled water. (10,368 Bottles)

***Leaks, Repairs, and Generators***







## Emergency Response Training



Each year, members of the National Rural Water Association's Emergency Management Committee come together for a day and a half of emergency response training. This year Florida was once again chosen as the host state for this event, but with the event taking place at their warehouse in Cairo, GA. The format was simple and efficient: association members from all over the country started arriving on Tuesday afternoon/evening to be ready for a full day of training on Wednesday, and half of a day training on Thursday. Then, everyone headed home! Each day the attendees were treated to fabulous, cooked meals from the Louisiana Rural Water Associations cooking team. The training was split between classroom presentations and hands-on activities (stations) in which participants could try their hand at a variety of emergency response techniques and a variety of equipment.

Over 20 states were in attendance this year along with several members of the National Rural Water Association.

### THE FOLLOWING ASSOCIATIONS WERE IN ATTENDANCE:

- Alabama Rural Water Association
- Arkansas Rural Water Association
- Florida Rural Water Association
- Idaho Rural Water Association
- Kentucky Rural Water Association, Inc.
- Louisiana Rural Water Association
- Minnesota Rural Water Association
- National Rural Water Association
- Nebraska Rural Water Association
- New Jersey Water Association
- New Mexico Rural Water Association
- New York Rural Water Association
- North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association
- Rural Water Association of Arizona
- Rural Water Association of Utah
- South Carolina Rural Water Association
- South Dakota Association of Rural Water Systems
- Texas Rural Water Association
- Vermont Rural Water Association
- West Virginia Rural Water Association
- Wyoming Rural Water Association

This type of training prepares the members of these associations "Emergency Response Teams" for the next emergency.



Alabama group demonstration the Ground Penetration Radar



Panel discussion on other states Emergency Response plans





*Bill Messick at one of the demonstrations.*



*The Alabama guys learning about VFDs*



*Garry Williams, Executive Director with Florida Rural Water Association going over morning instructions.*



*Pat Credeur, Executive Director for Louisiana Rural Water Association, holding up a sign with all the demonstrations' locations and safety areas.*



*Louisiana Rural Water Cooking Team with their Executive Director, Pat Credeur.*

### A Story from Wyoming

Sometimes perfect storms happen. One community experienced this when their source water supply was limited due to a construction project, the treatment facility was limited in production capacity by the alternate water supply, and the distribution system had experienced several leaks. This amounted to the lower portions having very low pressure, and the higher portions of the community having no water at all. Even during those perfect storms, there is always a silver lining. Prior to the loss of water, the system had scheduled the Source Water Protection Specialist to come out and discuss protecting the springs and wells that the community relies on for drinking water. The date happened to coincide with the community running out of water and of course, the day before a weekend.

When the Specialist (also a former circuit rider and Level 4 operator) arrived, it was apparent that discussions of source water protection would be inappropriate and increasing the flow of source water to the plant, through the plant and to the community would be the order of the day. The Source Water Specialist began assisting the water treatment staff with contacting the appropriate regulatory agency for loss of pressure, assisting with the ensuing boil water order, coordinating with labs for samples, and troubleshooting the treatment process. She also delivered messages as well as meals to the field crews who were out of cell service. During this incident, the County Emergency Manager supported the community by coordinating with the water staff, supplying potable water to residents, maintaining community awareness, and sample delivery. This was the first mobilization of the county emergency management coordination center.

The treatment plant is fed primarily by a 32-mile pipeline from the springs. Wells and reservoir water are available but require the plant to be run at considerably lower flows. To meet system demands and fill the tanks, higher flows would be necessary. The pipeline from the springs wasn't sending water to the plant, and the Source Water Specialist and the water treatment staff began inspecting the line for any issues. Inspecting the line in early March is no easy task, as the area is lovingly referred to as "The Tundra". This pipeline ranges from 30 to over 100 years old. There were several air-vac valves that had corroded away or froze and broke and were gushing water. The team shut down the broken valves and began locating the remaining valves and making sure they were able to be shut down quickly if necessary. This involved shoveling frozen mud out of access manholes. By the end of day two, the spring pipeline was again sending water to the plant. Within 5 days of the initial loss of pressure, the regulatory boil order was lifted. This was only possible because of the dedication of the water treatment and distribution staff working long days and nights, the assistance of the Association staff, and the support of the County Emergency Management.

Field staff were able to keep the Executive Director of the Association up to date on assistance allowing him to relay the information to Homeland Security, the Governor's office and others seeking their assistance in transporting samples, activating our WARN system to find a lab that could do tests since fee based labs were closed for the weekend, educational information on the basics of a boil order notice and how long it takes to cure the violation which enabled them to keep press announcements accurate, elected officials in the know and the public updated as needed.

This could have been a one and done incident. This community, however, took a hard look at their infrastructure and realized they were in trouble. Low utility rates over the years had made it impossible for them to complete any upgrades to the treatment facility or distribution system. Association staff assisted the community with getting a quality rate assessment, and the community began the arduous process of increasing rates. Even with the rate increases, it was apparent that the community wouldn't be able to complete all the necessary upgrades. Again, Association staff stepped in to assist the community with applying for funding for a Master Plan and the following upgrades. The Association staff continues to work with the community developing a source water protection plan, updating their emergency response plan in response to the incident, continued assistance with funding applications and working towards sustainability.

### Wildfires in Washington State

The summer of 2014 put our field staff on high alert. In the north central area of Washington State the largest wildfire our state had seen was raging with over 256,000 acres burned. All staff were ready to help. We took our cues from Mike Pendergraft, our Eastern Region Circuit Rider as this wildfire was happening in his very own backyard, literally.

Power was out in the entire Valley, our Eastern Region Circuit Rider called systems in his area to see how they were fairing. If he couldn't reach them by phone, as many phone lines were down as well as power lines he drove to their system to see where he could assist. Our circuit rider helped systems with backup power and system repairs; water testing, disinfecting, and locating broken and burnt water lines. It's also worth mentioning that the highway to the Valley was closed, so they had to take the long route around. The fire lasted almost a month, over 185 homes were burnt down.



"The most amazing thing that I witnessed through this disaster was the giving of time and equipment from surrounding communities and neighbors to help each other," said State RWA Circuit Rider. "Without them it would have been much, much worse."

We all learned firsthand how important an emergency response plan is and how important the network of local communities is. Communication is also of key importance. We were in constant communication with both of our State Senators and the Congressional Representative for the area. Our Circuit Rider was working hand in hand with both local county health workers and our Eastern Region Health Department. The state praised our circuit rider for his help and he received the "high-five" award from our State Department of Health.





## Flood Response at Drinking Water & Wastewater Utilities

A large number of drinking water and wastewater utilities in Vermont were severely affected by the storms and flooding on July 9–10, 2023. At least 19 water systems experienced Boil Water Notices, Do Not Drink Orders, or were unable to deliver drinking water to customers. An estimated 23 wastewater systems had some form of permit violation due to flooding. Several treatment facilities were themselves flooded. Many water mains and sewer lines broke when streets or rivers flooded.

Vermont Rural Water's staff has been working around-the-clock to assist systems impacted by this emergency.

### Johnson Wastewater Treatment Facility

Johnson's wastewater treatment facility was completely destroyed by flooding. Vermont Rural Water staff have visited the site numerous times since the flood to help source pumps, portable treatment units, and temporary lab/office space. We also continue to meet with the wastewater operators, the Village manager, and staff from the State of Vermont, EPA, Army Corps, USDA and FEMA about the immediate and long-term needs of Johnson's wastewater facility.

"Thank you for your assistance yesterday and all of your help behind the scene today with FEMA. I think we all take the services VRWA provides for granted sometimes as Wayne and Paul are always there when we need them. I can't explain how important it is to know you all are a phone call away when we need it like this week. I literally can't explain how much VRWA's support over the last couple days has meant."

—**Dan Copp**, plant manager, Johnson water/wastewater and Morrisville wastewater treatment facilities



Plant manager Dan Copp shows the height that floodwaters reached on the first floor of the treatment facility.



The City of Burlington provided equipment to help pump floodwaters out of Johnson's treatment facility.

## Assistance Provided

The types of help that Vermont Rural Water has provided to drinking water and wastewater utilities includes:

- Inspected treatment plants, distribution/collection pipes, man holes, river crossings, and pump stations
- Completed initial and ongoing needs evaluations
- Sourced equipment from nearby utilities and rental companies
- Set up bypass pumping and coordinated sludge pumping
- Cleaned and rebuilt chemical feed room and plumbing
- Repaired blower for secondary treatment
- Located influent manhole coming into plant and sewer line under brook
- Dye tested potential broken pipes at river crossings
- Delivered emergency response trailers for onsite clean and dry workspace and storage
- Designed chlorination system for disinfection
- Coordinated mutual aid response between towns
- Sourced and delivered a borrowed vacator truck
- Spoke with press about how supply chain issues are impacting repair timelines
- Delivered supplies such as dehumidifiers, industrial fans, and KN95 masks
- Installed replacement chemical feed pumps and tubing
- Pumped water out of reservoirs and lagoons to prevent overflows
- Delivered sample bottles to water system
- Transported water samples to laboratory
- Called all water and wastewater systems in areas affected by flooding to offer assistance
- Called all water systems under Boil Water Notices
- Provided information and resources on our website and through daily email updates

“Your response has been amazing and I know the facilities most impacted are grateful for any help [Vermont Rural Water] can provide.”

—Margaret Dwyer, senior manager, Winhall-Stratton Fire District #1

## VT WARN

Vermont Rural Water’s executive director, Liz Royer, is co-chair of the Vermont Water/Wastewater Agency Response Network (VT WARN), a mutual aid network of water and wastewater utilities. Throughout the emergency, Liz has managed requests and offers for assistance from member utilities.

## Communities Helped

Vermont Rural Water provided onsite or phone assistance to drinking water and/or wastewater utilities in:

Barton	Montpelier
Castleton	Morrisville
Cavendish	Orleans
Chester	Pownal
Georgia	Richmond
Graniteville	Royalton
Hardwick	St. Johnsbury
Johnson	Waitsfield
Ludlow	Wallingford
Lyndonville	Waterbury
Marshfield	Woodstock

## Time Spent

Vermont Rural Water’s staff spent a tremendous amount of time helping water and wastewater utilities in the two weeks following the beginning of the flood (July 10 through 21)

- **228 hours** onsite at impacted water and wastewater utilities
- **208 hours** additional support (phone calls, emails, etc.)



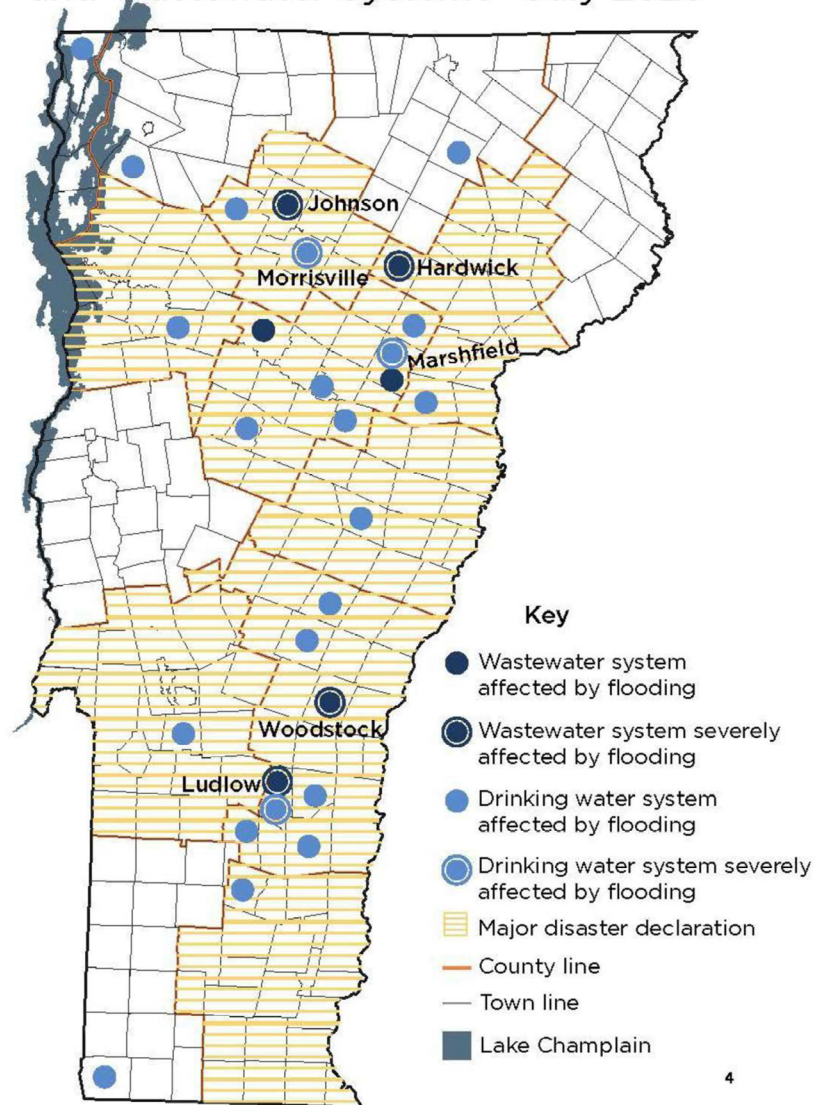
## Photos of Vermont Rural Water's Flood Response



Clockwise from top left: Liz Royer at Johnson WWTF, Wayne Graham at Johnson WWTF, the Vermont Rural Water/VT WARN emergency response trailer at Hardwick WWTF, Brad Roy (center) with Waterbury's wastewater operators, Paul Sestito in Waterbury, Elijah Lemieux and Aaron Perez at Ludlow WWTF.



## Flooding Impacts on Public Drinking Water and Wastewater Systems—July 2023



### Minnesota Floods – June 2024

In June 2024, Minnesota faced significant flooding, prompting a swift and coordinated response from the Minnesota Rural Water Association (MRWA). Beginning on June 20th, MRWA's USDA/RD funded staff, including Circuit Riders Ben Oseien, Jake Williams, Zach Blonigen, and Wastewater Technician Paul Plaetz, alongside EPA-funded staff Bob Klug and state-funded John Nelson, mobilized to address the crisis.

The team deployed the Emergency Response Trailer and a fleet of pumps, sourced both from MRWA and cooperating communities, to assist flooded areas such as Waterville, Morristown, Adrian, Windom, Lismore, Lake Henry, Round Lake, Jackson, Eagle Lake, and Brownton. The critical work involved not just flood response, but also the logistical challenge of securing and transporting equipment, as some communities hesitated to release their pumps due to their own flood risks.

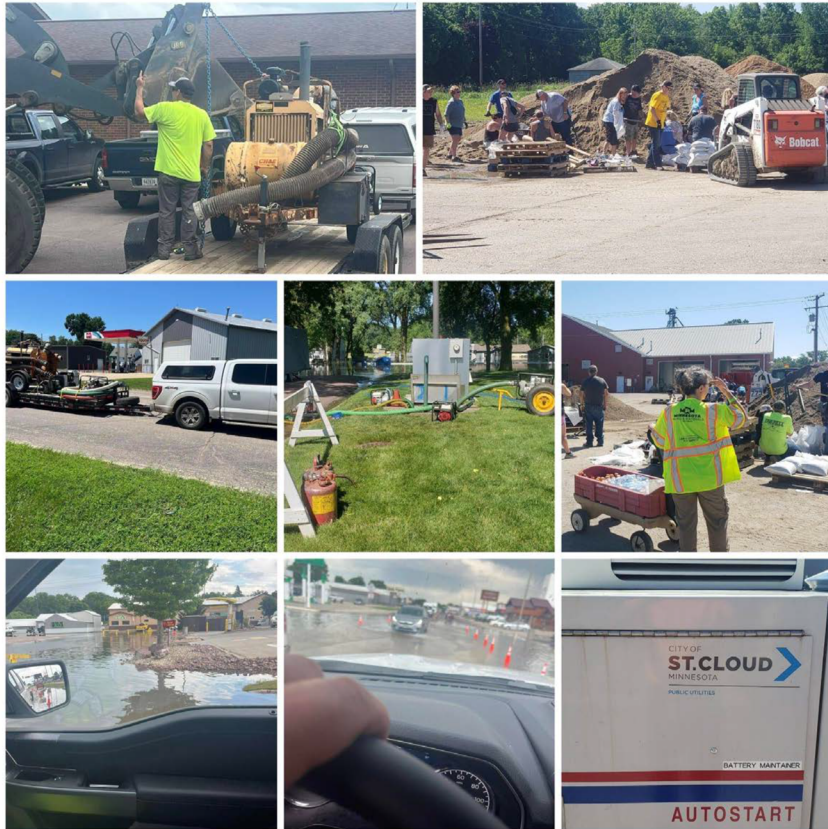
Close collaboration with MnWARN directors and the Minnesota Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM) was crucial in ensuring pumps and other resources were dispatched to where they were most needed. MRWA's efforts extended to monitoring the situation in St. Cloud and Mankato, where the potential failure of the Rapidan Dam posed additional threats.

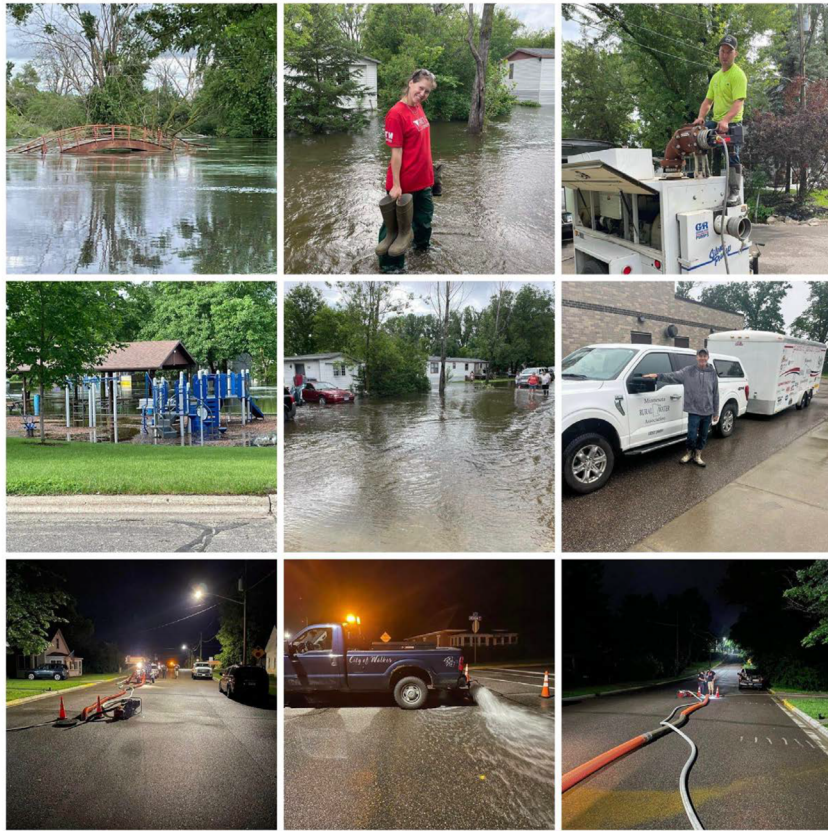
Additionally, MRWA's USDA/RD funded Wastewater Technician Joe Janson and Disaster Response Coordinator Terah Rinerson responded to flooding in the northern areas of Cook, Tower, and Walker, providing critical support and resources.

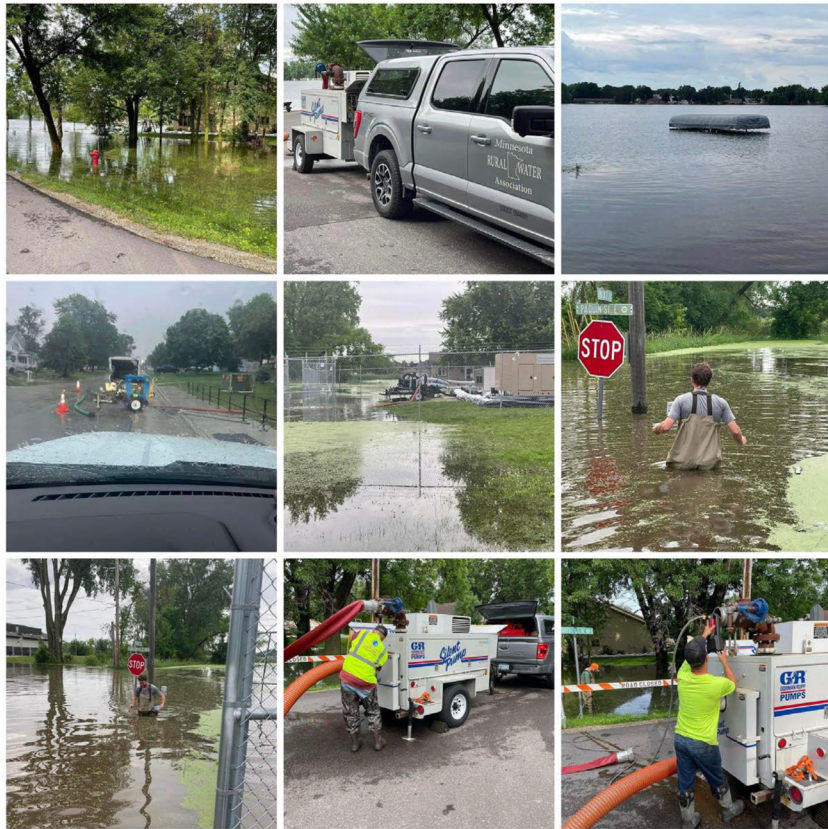
The collective efforts of MRWA, MnWARN, and HSEM, supported by the cooperation of local communities, exemplify the resilience and preparedness necessary to manage such natural disasters. The teams remain on high alert, ready to respond to evolving conditions and potential new threats as the situation develops.



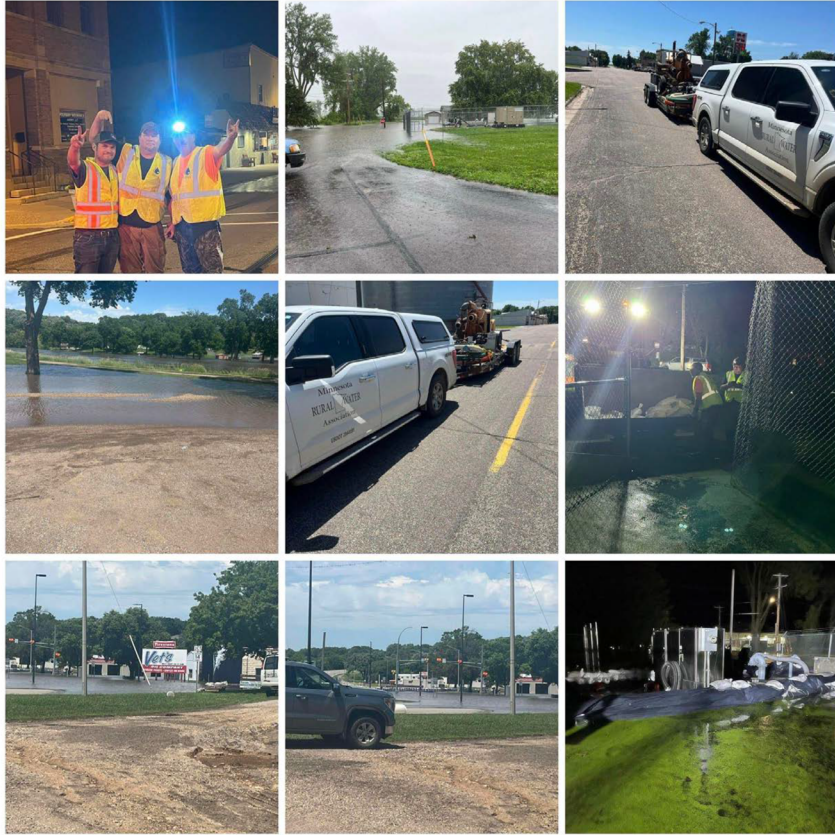


















## Hawaii Wildfires: Rural Water Lessons Learned

*Rural Water comes together in response to unimaginable disaster*



Kaylyn Brannen Snow  
Feb 21, 2024

In August 2023, while attending training in Duncan, Oklahoma, Hawaii Rural Water Association (HRWA) Executive Director Juanita Reyher-Colon woke up to news no one wanted to hear: wildfires were burning back in her home state.

"It was kind of nerve-racking, and I really wanted to be home to see how I could help," Reyher-Colon said. "I felt like I was useless on the mainland."

Without being physically there, Reyher-Colon did the only thing she could: she began making phone calls.



Wildfires ravage Maui in August 2023. Source: Juanita Reyher-Colon

"I reached out to the county water department as well as the other private utilities that I knew were within the area to see how HRWA could assist in providing support, whether it was manpower or getting resources to them or just putting them in contact with other folks from Rural Water that had experienced these things," Reyher-Colon said.



Evacuation alert urges residents to leave area.

Source: Juanita Reyher-Colon

The issue many utilities faced wasn't with the water source but rather burnt distribution lines, hydrants, and valves causing water to spill or not get where it needed to go. Reyher-Colon was able to help from afar while making her way back to Hawaii. However, due to a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and safety concerns, she was unable to send HRWA staff to the field to provide assistance.

"Juanita's was one of the first phone calls that I received to see if I needed any help at all and let me know that they would be on standby to help us," said Tony Carrasco, manager of special projects for Hawaii Water Service and NRWA National Director for Hawaii. "And that was nice to know, that Rural Water was there to support us if needed."

Other Rural Water Associations contacted Carrasco to offer assistance during the natural disaster.

"Relationships really played a role in the response since we had that built-up connection before it happened," Carrasco said.



Those relationships, coupled with his more than 37 years of experience in the water industry, made Carrasco's response a little easier. During the wildfire response, his role was the incident commander for Hawaii Water Service. In that capacity, he was responsible for communicating with city, state, and federal agencies, employees, and media outlets. However, this proved to be a difficult task with some cell phones not working and the fire and debris blocking entrances to the island.



Maui wildfire from a distance. Source: Juanita Reyher-Colon

"One of the things that affected me the most was ensuring all of our employees and their families were safe," he said. "And until we were able to get ahold of the very last person, I did not rest easy."

With no communication with his employees and being temporarily unable to gain access to the island, Carrasco had to trust his employees and the training they had received for emergency situations.



Maui homes, businesses devastated by wildfire. Source: Juanita Reyher-Colon

"I had to trust. It's hard when there's absolutely no communication; there's nothing you can do. You have to make sure your team is properly trained for these events because you're going to have to rely on their experience that things will get done until you can communicate with them. I took comfort knowing that my utility had been prepared for not necessarily this specific disaster but emergencies in general."

Eventually, the utility personnel gained access to satellite phones for communications; however, some didn't work properly.

"We transferred satellite phones from one state to another, and we found out that they did not work," Carrasco said. "So, you need to make sure if you're going to use equipment from one area to another that it will work in that area."

In addition to the limited communication, Carrasco's utility had no electricity for two weeks. In order to maintain operations, they used generators for power. Since the generators were running 24/7, utility staff performed maintenance on each generator to keep them functioning properly. This included changing the oil, air filters, and fuel filters. During those two weeks, customers never lost service.



Crews respond in aftermath of wildfire.

Source: Juanita Reyher-Colon

Another detail Carrasco had to consider was fuel for the generators. As a part of emergency preparedness, the utility had fuel cells ready to use, but those reserves were quickly depleted. Residents of the community offered whatever they had, even if it was just five gallons of diesel. In the end, the utility used five different vendors during this time to replenish their fuel supply.

During the wildfire response, Carrasco transferred operators from Hawaii Island to Maui, allowing the Maui operators to get a break. The facilities are set up differently, so the employees have been cross-trained for this purpose.

"When we talk about preparing for an event like this, any cross-training you do at the different types of water or wastewater plants is key," he said.

For other utilities and State Associations, Carrasco suggested taking steps now to be ready for future emergency response situations and natural disasters.

"Be prepared," he said. "Have emergency response tabletop exercises, plan capital projects accordingly, keep on top of maintenance, train your staff and then cross-train your staff, and reach out to neighboring partners. If you need any help, contact your State Rural Water Association. They're there to support you."

For wildfires specifically, Reyher-Colon suggested purchasing the proper PPE to protect staff. It is difficult to determine if any dangerous chemicals or fumes are in the air when responding to such disasters, which poses safety risks without the right equipment.

Now, months after the fires, utilities and the communities they serve still face challenges from the damage and starting the rebuilding process.



Aerial view of Lahaina before and after wildfire. Source: Juanita Reyher-Colon

"The number one challenge is the supply chain issue," Reyher-Colon said. "It's really impacting us. And second is being respectful of the people who lost their homes, lives, and family members, and not moving at a pace that is disrespectful to the families. A lot of them have not returned to their homes. Giving them the time to be in that space and grieve their loss is important."



Moving forward, Reyher-Colon said utilities in other states can learn from this disaster response and start preparing now for future incidents.



Another aerial view of Lahaina before and after wildfire. Source: Juanita Reyher-Colon

"I think we can learn from this experience and make our communities better, including our water utility, and strengthen our relationships and partnerships with other agencies," Reyher-Colon said, "not just here but also across the country. And should this happen again, we wouldn't necessarily be facing it alone. If other folks can start the conversation and not wait until an incident happens, and if we understand what other people's resources are, that can help alleviate some of the pressures."

After reflecting on the wildfire and the events that occurred during the response, Carrasco said he is grateful for the support not only from the community but also from Rural Water.

"I personally cannot thank the Rural Water Association community enough for all their support throughout this event, from the national to all the state associations," Carrasco said. "And I'm proud to be associated with an organization like Rural Water that does so many great things for the communities that we serve." **RW**



# The Great Mask Delivery of 2020

( ROB WHITE IV, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR; KATIE HILL, PROGRAM  
SPECIALIST)




By now, we are all aware of the importance of masks and their ability to reduce the level of exposure to a person. Throughout this pandemic, it has been imperative that the ARWA be here for our critical water and wastewater personnel and provide resources to those groups that will protect them as business returns to something that resembles the way things were before COVID-19.

One crucial objective that ARWA was able to participate in was mask delivery. Our partners and friends at ADEM, EPA, and FEMA were able to acquire from the Haynes Corporation 50,000 reusable cloth masks for distribution within the State of Alabama. These masks were intended only for water and



wastewater personnel. One other note: these masks could not be distributed solely from the ARWA office but were required to be made available from 'distribution points' strategically located throughout the State.

Luckily, the ARWA is governed by ten board members who are themselves water and wastewater personnel located in 10 districts across our State. We asked for three volunteers to assist, and, of course, every board member volunteered without hesitation. We chose three to keep the process manageable. They were as follows:

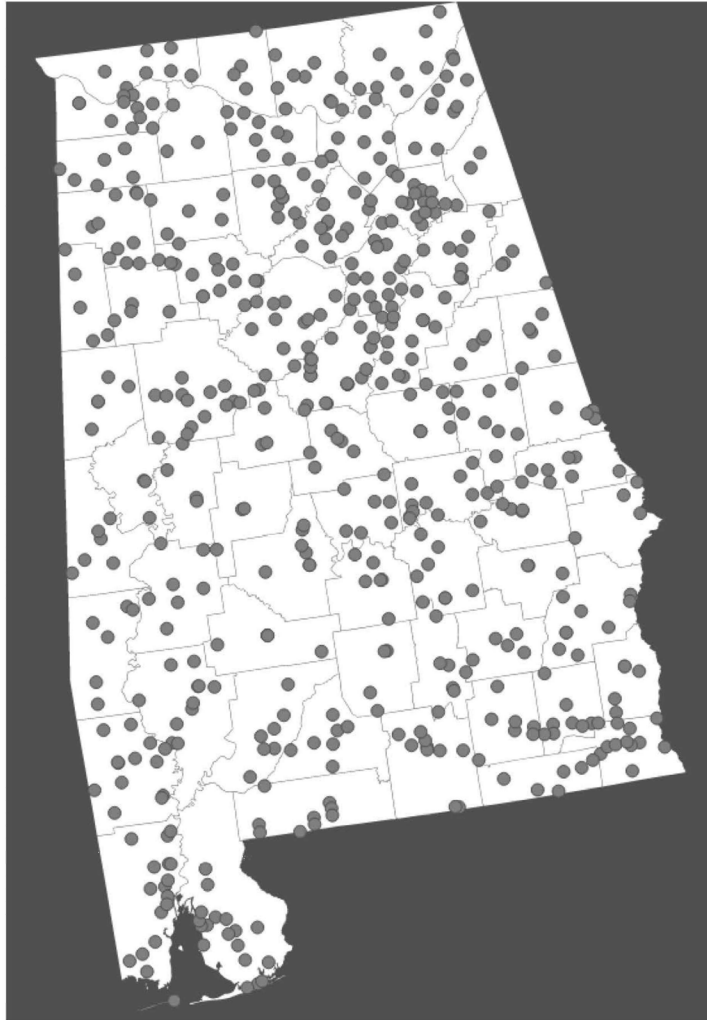
North Alabama	Central Alabama	South Alabama
		
Wayne Reed, General Manager of the Northeast Morgan County Water & Sewer Authority in Somerville, AL.	Terry Jackson, former General Manager of the Town of Thorsby Water Works Board, in Thorsby, AL.	William Snyder, General Manager of Monroeville Water Works and Sewer Board in Monroeville, AL.

Our partners at ADEM took the lead in developing a request list and sent word to all the permitted entities in the State. We staged 15,000 masks in the north and south of the State, with an additional 20,000 in the central portion. With everything in place, the work began on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

The ARWA would not wait on systems to collect masks from the distribution points or require systems to respond to the survey. We intended to be proactive. We prioritized the request list but also had staff reach out to every system in our database to learn how many masks they needed. Then, we hit the road. From June 8<sup>th</sup> to July 1<sup>st</sup>, the ARWA distributed 38,675 cloth masks to 557 groups across Alabama. We still have more than 10,000 masks available for distribution and will continue to deliver masks to the water and wastewater personnel that require them. Simply pick up the phone and call! We'll get your masks to you in record time!

Thank you all for everything you do to keep the water flowing! We are proud to support you in those efforts.

## Mask Deliveries



*This map represents each delivery conducted over the course of one month.*



## Georgia Rural Water Prevents Sewer Spill in Small Town

William "Dub" Pearman, III  
*Mayor*



Harold Simmons  
*City Manager*

To whom it may concern:

I wanted to write this letter to show how much the GRWA means to the cities and communities around Georgia.

My name is Stephen Jewell and I am the lead operator for the City of Senoia. We are a small but growing town, with a population under 6000. While we strive to make strides in modernizing our sewer collection system we are still far from perfect. We have one mobile generator that must be shared across of 16 lift stations. On some occasions we must fight to mobilize the generator across town to various lift stations to prevent spills.

On April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024 at approximately 10:30 pm we were alerted to a single lift station had lost power. It took us around 1 hour to dispatch the generator and walk away from the lift station after it was powered on. Before we could leave, we received two more alarms of two different lift stations had lost power. We would have been in a bind, and a spill was imminent if it had not been for GRWA loaning us two of their mobile generators. We were able to quickly reposition them to those lift stations and wire them in with the very helpful connectors that GRWA provided. We were able to sleep that night at a reasonable hour without having a spill thanks to the GRWA. It was not until 8 pm the following day that power was restored for those stations, so it was destined to spill.

The generators are also great for planned outages. On May 29<sup>th</sup>, Georgia Power will be swapping out every transformer in three subdivisions which will knock out 3 of our lift stations. We will be able to plan ahead, wire the generators beforehand and make it through without a spill.

So, thank you to the GRWA for helping us avoid disasters.

Sincerely,

Stephen Jewell  
City of Senoia Lead Operator

The City of Senoia • P.O Box 310 • Senoia, GA 30276  
TEL.: 678-675-5357  
[www.senoia.com](http://www.senoia.com)

## Georgia Rural Water Assets / Response Images









Testimony of Brad Kimbro  
Chief Executive Officer, Wiregrass Electric Cooperative

United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy  
“State of Rural Infrastructure: Emergency Response, Recovery, and Resilience”  
328A Russell Senate Office Building

July 10, 2024

### **Introduction**

Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. On behalf of Wiregrass Electric Cooperative’s more than 18,000 consumer-members, we are grateful for the opportunity to share our perspective. We thank the Committee for their interest in issues facing rural communities and specifically their attention to the challenges rural utilities face preparing for and responding to natural disasters.

My name is Brad Kimbro and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Wiregrass Electric Cooperative (WEC). WEC is a not-for-profit distribution electric cooperative headquartered in Hartford, Alabama. Our cooperative maintains 26,356 meters in rural areas of Geneva, Henry, Houston, Dale, Coffee, and Covington counties. We service 3,205 miles of line, roughly the distance from here to the Pacific Ocean.

At our core, WEC is an electric infrastructure company. Our job is to reliably deliver affordable electricity to our consumer-members 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We deliver electricity across our network of poles, wires, substations, and other electric infrastructure during thunderstorms, windstorms, floods, hurricanes, and other extreme weather events. When a weather event damages our infrastructure resulting in the loss of power for any of our consumer-members, our mission is to safely restore electric service in the most timely manner possible.

Responding to a disaster is not just about physical damage. These storms take an emotional toll on our communities and our cooperative employees. We are a co-op of around 60 employees. Our linemen perform dangerous work during times when their families’ wellbeing and financial situations are uncertain. Our ability to perform basic functions like reading meters or dealing with billing matters is upended. This impact is difficult to measure.

### **Rural Utilities Service (RUS) Electric Loans**

The federal government has been critical to financing rural electric infrastructure since rural electrification began in the 1930s. In the early 1900s, as urban areas began to electrify, rural areas lagged behind. It became clear that the economics of the for-profit electric business did not work in high-cost, low-density areas. For decades, rural communities and policymakers were vexed by the problem of how to bring electric service to areas of the country that lacked it. Eventually, with the passage of the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 and the establishment of the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), farmers and ranchers could pool their resources together and organize as cooperatives, then obtain REA loans to build electric infrastructure to electrify their communities.

WEC's story is similar to many of the other roughly 900 electric cooperatives around the country. In 1939, a group of determined Wiregrass farmers joined together to form a cooperative and with help from the REA, began electrifying Wiregrass farms and homes in 1940. What was then the REA is now the Rural Utilities Service (RUS), and it is as important today as it was back then. Today, electric cooperatives use low-cost RUS electric loans to build, upgrade, and expand electric infrastructure to continue to provide affordable, reliable electric service in rural communities.

For WEC, RUS electric loans are critical to affordability and reliability. Roughly 25% of WEC consumer-members struggle to pay their electric bills. As an at-cost service provider, any costs we incur are shouldered by our membership. Low-interest loans through RUS help us keep costs low while also providing the capital necessary to invest in infrastructure to maintain reliability for our consumer-members. We use RUS electric loans for basic electric infrastructure, like poles and wires; and also to fund projects to make our systems more modern, efficient, and secure.

### *Disaster Financing*

It is difficult to imagine life back in 1939 when WEC was founded. The families, farms, and communities of the Wiregrass region worked and raised their families without electricity. Fast forward to today when an afternoon without power is a disruptive event. A week without electricity is a once-in-a-lifetime experience of hardship and possible catastrophe. WEC's goal is to prevent service interruptions and make them as short as possible when they occur.

Given the proximity of our service territory to the Gulf of Mexico, we occasionally are hit by hurricanes and tropical storms, along with the high winds, tornadoes, and heavy rains that accompany these weather systems. WEC is ready and prepared to respond to any outage. In 2018, Hurricane Michael came through the eastern part of our service territory resulting in

extensive damage to infrastructure that needed to be repaired or rebuilt quickly. Also, there was damage not critical to getting the power back on but that needed to be addressed in the near term to maintain the safety and resiliency of our system.

Hurricane Michael ultimately resulted in around \$8 million in additional costs for WEC. Our cooperative operates on thin margins, so an added cost of this size would have been a significant financial burden for our consumer-members. We are grateful that we were able to work within our RUS work plan to finance recovery efforts and ultimately secure reimbursement through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Public Assistance (PA) process. It is hard to overstate the importance of these programs. Without them, higher electric bills would have placed financial strain on the communities we serve, with our most vulnerable members feeling it the most.

Every disaster and every co-op is different. After some natural disasters, an electric cooperative may need to turn to a private lender or draw down an existing line of credit to finance recovery efforts because they are unable to work through their already-approved RUS work plan. The RUS electric loan program is not designed for immediate-need situations. Securing an RUS electric infrastructure loan requires time and extensive paperwork. A cooperative is responsible for submitting a work plan and going through processes that satisfy the environmental, historical preservation, and other federal requirements before approval. In some cases, obtaining RUS financing triggers new environmental requirements due to federal involvement. An electric utility focused on response and recovery after a hurricane or other severe weather event needs access to capital quickly. For this reason, obtaining a new RUS electric infrastructure loan for rebuilding is not an option.

### *Resiliency*

In addition to my role as CEO of WEC, I serve on the Board of Trustees of PowerSouth Energy Cooperative. PowerSouth is the wholesale power provider for sixteen electric cooperatives and four municipal electric systems in Alabama and northwest Florida. A critical part of WEC's system resiliency is ensuring that we have a reliable power supply.

RUS electric loans for generation and transmission projects play a critical role in ensuring affordability and reliability for our consumer-members, just like loans for distribution infrastructure. Each generation and transmission cooperative is responsible for making the power supply decisions for the territories they serve. They must balance the different characteristics of various generation sources, like dependability. Always available power sources like natural gas, nuclear, or hydropower are inherently different than intermittent sources like solar and wind. To ensure resiliency and reliability of systems, it is critical that RUS electric loans remain available

for any of these sources a cooperative determines are best to maintain reliability and affordability for their consumer-members.

#### **Other Federal Disaster Issues Affecting Rural Electric Cooperatives**

Rural electric cooperatives are eligible for federal funding under FEMA's Public Assistance Program and have been since the original Disaster Relief Act of 1974 was enacted (P.L. 93-288). The Disaster Relief Act, which was later re-authorized and renamed to the more commonly known Stafford Act, enabled the President to make grants to help "repair, restore, reconstruct, or replace" certain private nonprofit facilities – such as utilities – that were damaged or destroyed by a major disaster.

PA is available to an affected community only if authorized by a Presidential Declaration of emergency or major disaster. A state, tribe, or territory with an applicable Stafford Act declaration serves as the PA primary grant recipient. State, tribal, territorial, and local governments, as well as eligible nonprofit entities (such as electric co-ops), may then apply for funding as applicants. The Stafford Act authorizes FEMA to reimburse not less than 75% of the eligible costs of specific types of disaster response and recovery work undertaken by eligible applicants.

I have seen my fair share of major disasters resulting in FEMA Public Assistance while working in the utility industry, including Hurricane Charley, which wreaked havoc on Florida's Peace River Electric Cooperative when I was there in 2004. Another, Hurricane Michael, provides a glimpse into the nature of every disaster and every co-op being different. Michael made landfall as a high-end Category 4/Category 5 storm in the Florida Panhandle in October 2018 with maximum sustained wind speed of 155 mph.

In our service territory, almost 18,000 members lost power. The storm downed about 60 miles of WEC's electric lines, and more than 500 poles were broken or damaged. Restoring power required nine days and 225 linemen working 12–14-hour days from WEC and other Alabama cooperatives. They worked 45,000 hours, and storm recovery required \$7.6 million, of which \$5,660,768.46 was eventually reimbursed approximately one year later under the Public Assistance program.

Without a doubt, securing this reimbursement and being good stewards of taxpayer dollars required hard work and attention to detail by WEC employees, who tracked and documented expenses associated with the storm. As non-profits, any costs incurred to rebuild the system are passed along to our consumer-members, so we owe it to them to fight for every eligible dollar in order to minimize potential rate impacts.



*FEMA Reimbursement and Interest Eligibility*

We are grateful that our reimbursement experience with Michael proceeded relatively smoothly but are aware of some applicant co-ops in Florida where the effort to secure reimbursement for the damage caused by the storm is still ongoing or only recently concluded.

I am also aware of numerous electric cooperatives in Alabama and elsewhere awaiting PA reimbursement from major storms before and after Michael. The delay in reimbursement can be caused by numerous factors given the state-federal partnership, but it is nevertheless a major issue of concern for those co-ops – particularly when they are required to take out large loans or draw down on lines of credit to cover the immediate costs of recovery to return their communities' and residents' lives back to normal as quickly as possible. When electric cooperatives must borrow to cover these recovery costs until reimbursement is made, it means potentially years of accumulating interest, the cost of which is borne by the cooperative consumer-members.

FEMA has inconsistently recognized when interest paid on these loans or lines of credit can be reimbursed, and seeking the reimbursement can be a costly and complicated effort for an individual cooperative. For this reason, cooperatives encourage additional support for the FEMA Loan Interest Payment Relief Act (H.R.2672/S.1180), which would mitigate this additional burden by requiring FEMA to reimburse the cost of interest on loans taken out while the PA process is completed. Specifically, in an approach that enjoys broad bipartisan support, FEMA would reimburse cooperative electric utilities and local governments for interest expenses of loans used to fund activities for which they receive assistance under the PA program. This reimbursement would be limited to the lesser of the actual interest paid or the interest that would be paid at the prime rate.

The bright-line clarity for this interest reimbursement as provided by S.1180 would be a useful tool for Wiregrass and our fellow cooperatives to help us keep the lights on and rates affordable, and I again encourage all Senators here today to support it.

*Per Capita and State Threshold Reform*

I would also like to raise another FEMA Public Assistance issue affecting the recovery and resilience of rural communities, which relates to state and county thresholds established by FEMA. As part of the process to unlock federal assistance, FEMA considers different factors to evaluate a request for a major disaster declaration and recommend a course of action to the President. One key factor FEMA considers is whether costs exceed annually adjusted per capita thresholds across the county and the state or territory in need.

Despite Congressional efforts in the 2018 Disaster Relief Reform Act requiring FEMA to give “greater consideration” to severe local impacts and recent disasters when considering requests for PA, barriers remain in rural communities that struggle to meet the agency’s existing per capita benchmarks.

For example, disasters in rural areas – such as the March 2024 tornado near Cottonwood – that cause significant damage on a per capita basis to infrastructure, yet to fewer people overall, generally do not qualify for assistance under the current Public Assistance review criteria. So, unfortunately, a damaging and localized storm with high costs to local residents will not receive a federal cost share because it did not meet the Alabama statewide PA threshold, which is approximately \$9.3 million in 2024. The State of Alabama Emergency Management Agency has noted that these types of undeclared disasters disproportionately affect the state’s rural and economically challenged populations.

On a related point, Wiregrass would like to associate itself with comments filed by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) in March of 2021 to a proposed FEMA rule titled “Cost of Assistance Estimates in the Disaster Declaration Process for the Public Assistance Program” that could make it even harder for small entities like ours to qualify for Public Assistance in the future by raising the state thresholds even further.

According to NRECA’s research, a wide range of stakeholders also expressed concern with the proposed rule, including Subcommittee Member Senator Grassley on behalf of the State of Iowa, the National Emergency Management Association, Vermont Emergency Management, the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies, the National League of Cities, and the National Association of Counties. FEMA has yet to release a Final Rule.

#### *Southern Pine Beetle Infestation & Vegetation Management*

Finally, I would like to note a vegetation management issue electric cooperatives in the Southern Region are seeing more and more that could have significant ramifications for resiliency.

According to the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Southern Pine Beetle Information Center, activity and damage from the southern pine beetle (SPB) is the most widespread it has been in the past 2 decades. In 2023, there were more than 3,000 southern pine beetle “spots,” and damage is significant in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. More than half of the spots are on National Forest land, but there are more than 1,000 spots on state and private land as well. Populations of the native SPB can be triggered by climatic events, such as last year’s drought in Alabama, or trees that are weakened by hurricanes or other storms.

For electric cooperatives managing their rights-of-way on a variety of lands, dealing with diseased or dead-standing trees caused by the beetle infestation is putting increased pressure on not-for-profit cooperative budgets. As the Senate Agriculture Committee continues discussions on a 2024 Farm Bill, Wiregrass and our fellow cooperatives encourage Senators to look into greater ways the U.S. Department of Agriculture and/or RUS can help manage these previously unanticipated costs associated with the SPB. For example, Agriculture Committee Member Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith has introduced the Emergency Pine Beetle Response Act and begun a conversation around a potential federal response. Cooperatives' initial suggestion is to look at amending the bill to include our members as eligible recipients of grants and aid proposed by the Act to help ensure trees damaged by the SPB do not cause outages or other issues on the grid.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I would like to thank the Chair and Ranking Member for the opportunity to testify today. Nearly 900 electric cooperatives around the country routinely face extreme weather including hurricanes, snowstorms, floods, tornadoes, and other weather systems. I hope it was helpful to hear about the issues WEC has faced maintaining and rebuilding our electric infrastructure. We are grateful electric cooperatives are eligible for federal assistance programs.

To me, the then-REA and now RUS electric program are arguably the most effective economic development programs in history. Millions of rural Americans have a more prosperous life because of these programs. Rural communities would be unrecognizable today without them. Today, the RUS electric program is a critical tool for electric cooperatives building electric infrastructure, and it can provide disaster recovery financing under an existing workplan; however, it is not a nimble enough program to be a disaster response tool for a co-op in need of a new loan.

With respect to FEMA, we again appreciate the ability to participate in the Public Assistance Program and are grateful for the agency's assistance after disaster strikes. Electric cooperatives and numerous other grant applicants are best positioned to support the communities they serve and help restore strong local economies when the grant program is administered fairly and efficiently and offers certainty.

As the Committee considers rural infrastructure issues, I look forward to working with you on our shared goal of improving rural communities. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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**DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE  
RECORD**

JULY 10, 2024

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July 10, 2024

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Chairwoman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture  
328-A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Glenn "GT" Thompson  
Chairman  
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture  
1301 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Boozman  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture  
328-A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable David Scott  
Ranking Member  
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture  
1301 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, Chairman Thompson  
and Ranking Member Scott:

On behalf of America's 3,069 counties, parishes and boroughs, the National Association of Counties (NACo) is committed to working with our Congressional partners to develop a Farm Bill that will strengthen America's counties. As a key intergovernmental partner, we welcome the opportunity to work with our federal counterparts toward the passage of a bipartisan, comprehensive and long-term Farm Bill that achieves our shared priorities of invigorating rural communities, providing access to affordable and healthy foods, supporting more robust forest management through initiatives like the Good Neighbor Authority, investing in clean energy security, and supporting farmers and ranchers that stimulate the economy and feed our nation.

Therefore, America's counties submit the following recommendations for consideration as you progress toward the drafting and passage of the 2024 Farm Bill:

#### **Cross-Title Recommendations**

**Improve ease of access and flexibility of Farm Bill programs:** Cumbersome regulations and statutory requirements restrict many communities from accessing the resources we need to thrive. Counties support legislative action to streamline application processes and reporting requirements for Farm Bill programs, as well as efforts to adopt more equitable funding award structures for programs targeting rural communities by using competitive grants over loans. In turn, counties support adding additional flexibility for eligibility, usage requirements, and federal match requirements that force rural communities to secure additional funding before unlocking much-needed resources.



*Program-specific recommendations:*

- **Ensure program eligibility for local governments under rural development programs**, especially for those areas suffering from chronic poverty.
- **Adopt grants-based funding structures instead of direct and guaranteed loans**, particularly for programs targeting rural infrastructure and community development.
- **Provide long-term certainty for communities** seeking to utilize federal resources authorized in the Farm Bill by adopting multi-year funding terms for federal funding opportunities.
- **Recognize the diversity of rural places across the country by incorporating greater flexibility** for eligible uses for federal rural development resources into existing statutes.
- **Minimize or eliminate local matching requirements.**

**Provide stronger support for small and mid-size producers:** According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), small farm operations constitute almost 90 percent of the nation's farms. Despite the vital role these producers play in their communities and the broader economy, small farmers often need help accessing the affordable sources of financing they need. An increasing number of these operations rely on off-farm sources of income to make ends meet. This trend has corresponded with a troubling decline in family farms. **Counties support efforts to enhance resources that support beginning, small, and mid-size producers.**

*Program-specific recommendations:*

- **Maintain and improve farm safety net programs** for new, beginning and underserved agricultural producers, including broader crop insurance coverage and improved technical assistance for small and mid-sized producers.
- **Reauthorize the Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach (FOTO) Program**, which would provide critical sources of financing and technical assistance for new, beginning, and socially disadvantaged producers.
- **Increase funding for Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP)** to assist counties in developing more resilient local food systems and support local producers.

**Title II: Conservation**

**Maintain and expand Farm Bill conservation programs:** Protecting our nation's most sensitive ecosystems starts with the voluntary conservation efforts of American farmers, ranchers and foresters. Voluntary agricultural conservation programs provide valuable resources and expertise to support ongoing local-level conservation initiatives. These programs are timely as they are important. According to the 2024 *Farms and Farm in Lands Report*, the United States lost over 4,800 acres of working agricultural land every day from 2015 to 2022. From 2021 to 2022 alone, total land in farms decreased by 1,900,000 acres. Voluntary agricultural conservation programs, coupled with a strong relationship with USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), give communities the support they need to take the lead in conservation efforts and preserve working lands for future generations. **Counties support maintaining or increasing funding levels for Farm Bill conservation programs that empower farmers and ranchers to voluntarily engage in projects that serve the needs of their communities.**



*Program-specific recommendations:*

- **Ensure funding for voluntary conservation programs** appropriated through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) is sustained. Relevant programs that received additional funding through the IRA include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP).
- **Secure increased and long-term funding for NRCS Watershed Programs** to provide communities with the resources and certainty needed to effectively plan and carry out conservation efforts in local watersheds, as well as additional resources to protect watersheds from natural disasters.
- **Reauthorize producer-led voluntary conservation programs** administered by NRCS, including the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

**Title IV: Nutrition**

**Strengthen SNAP to combat hunger among county residents:** As the front line of the social safety net, counties are key partners with the federal government in developing, implementing and administering food and nutrition programs that combat hunger at the local level. **Ten states, accounting for 32 percent of total program participants, delegate the administration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to county governments:** California, Colorado, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin. In these states, counties often contribute substantial local funds for administrative and supplemental costs toward the program. Given our unique role in SNAP administration, counties recognize the critical role that this program plays in helping vulnerable county residents avoid hunger and access employment and training opportunities. **We encourage you to ensure the Farm Bill reauthorization strengthens and protects SNAP.**

*Program-specific recommendations:*

- **Increase the options available to state and local administrative bodies** in streamlining SNAP applications and administrative processes with the ultimate goal of reducing barriers to entry for participants and reducing program churn.
- **Combat food insecurity among active-duty service members** by excluding the Basic Allowance for Housing from income eligibility determinations.
- **Ensure SNAP benefit adequacy**, especially for families with children, and create a more gradual phase-out from the SNAP program to ease the transition from benefits to income, especially for families.
- **Provide greater flexibility in the SNAP work requirements** and time limit for Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDS) to allow counties and states to meet the individual needs of our caseloads and more effectively support individuals in accessing sustainable employment. This includes lengthening the time limit for ABAWDs, allowing for increased training to make employment goals more realistic, allowing counties to apply directly for ABAWD area waivers and creating tax incentives for employers who hire ABAWD SNAP participants. Counties also support increased funding for SNAP E&T and further integration with existing federal, state and local workforce programs.
- **Support the promotion of healthy diets** by strengthening incentives and infrastructure to encourage more fruit/vegetable production and consumption.



- **Address the specific obstacles rural communities face** in ensuring access to healthy foods, including additional administrative flexibilities targeting rural states and counties.

#### **Title VI: Rural Development**

**Invest in the capacity of rural counties:** Rural counties and the communities we serve often lack the resources and expertise needed to access federal support. Although almost 70 percent of America's counties are rural, county governments have been historically denied eligibility for most rural development resources authorized in the Farm Bill. These decisions were often made under the assumption that rural counties can access additional financial resources outside the purview of programs authorized in the Farm Bill, such as the collection of property taxes.

Counties are severely constrained in their capacity to raise revenue by state mandates that restrict the types of taxes counties may impose, limits on tax rates and total revenues collected, and an obstacle-strewn approval process. These restrictions are compounded by high rates of poverty across much of rural America. Of the 353 counties that experience persistent poverty, 85 percent are rural. This has corresponded with a 0.6 percent decline in overall rural population over the 2010s, the first instance of rural population decline in U.S. History. Rural population decline is strongest among working-age adults, threatening the continued economic resilience of rural communities. Despite these limitations, counties must still deliver essential services to our residents and visitors. Such services include road and bridge maintenance, law enforcement, medical care, community water systems, emergency services, fire protection and waste management.

By investing in rural capacity building and preparedness, Congress can ensure rural counties have access to the same community development resources already available to larger municipalities that are tailored to meet the specific needs of rural America. Counties support efforts to secure additional funding for rural capacity building in the Rural Development title of the 2024 Farm Bill. **Robust investment in the expertise and capacity of rural counties will empower rural policymakers to plan and execute locally-led community development strategies.**

#### *Program-specific recommendations:*

- **Provide at least \$1 billion dollars in mandatory funding** for a grants-based rural capacity-building program. Funding distributed through this program would invest in the expertise and capacity of rural counties to plan, implement, and measure the impact of locally-led community development strategies. Counties call for a set-aside in this grant funding allotment that would be reserved for enhancing the capacity of local governments.
- **Extend eligibility for the Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program** to rural county governments to provide financial assistance to county-operated public facilities.
- **Increase population thresholds where possible** when considering eligibility for rural development programs while inserting language that would prioritize low-population counties.

**Bridge the digital divide:** Access to high-speed internet connectivity is critical to rural America's economic and social vitality. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), approximately 14.5 million Americans lack access to broadband speeds of at least 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload, with 11 million of these Americans residing in rural areas. Universal deployment of high-speed internet to rural counties would bring major benefits, including improved health care services through





telemedicine services, increased ability for remote education and closing of the homework gap, and the promotion of quality economic development through the ability to support remote work opportunities.

Counties support utilizing the Farm Bill as a mechanism to provide long-term funding support, including digital literacy, for the universal deployment and adoption of high-speed broadband services in rural America that will help build resilient and future-ready communities in the 21st century. Counties further support the inclusion of the USDA's ReConnect Program in the reauthorization of the Farm Bill, which brings grant funding in support of high-speed and future-proof internet technology to rural counties across the country.

*Program-specific recommendations:*

- **Authorize the ReConnect Program** for long-term funding support through the Farm Bill. Prioritize program objectives that will ensure funded project service areas remain rural in character through a minimum percentage of rural households served to reach at least 50%. The ReConnect program should also include a goal of deploying high-speed internet technology that can meet a 100 Mbps symmetrical speed standard where geographically and economically feasible. The ReConnect program should permit a project speed standard of 100 Mbps download, and 20 Mbps upload only where geographic and economic conditions prove a 100 Mbps standard to be unattainable.
- **Reauthorize the Distance Learning & Telemedicine Program**, which supports rural communities that use the unique capabilities of telecommunications to connect to each other and to the world. The Distance Learning & Telemedicine program will allow counties to expand on goals of connecting county residents to telemedicine and remote learning opportunities through robust broadband infrastructure support.
- **Reauthorize the Community Connect Grant Program** to continue investments in community-oriented connectivity, fostering economic growth and delivering enhanced educational, health care, and public safety benefits.

**Expand opportunities for rural entrepreneurs:** The Farm Bill authorizes several important programs to catalyze rural communities' economic development and business creation. Counties support the maintenance or expansion of USDA Rural Business programs that have empowered rural entrepreneurs across the country. Continued investment in these programs in the 2024 Farm Bill is crucial to securing new economic opportunities for rural communities.

*Program-specific recommendations:*

- **Reauthorize the Rural Business Development Grants Program** to invest in local entrepreneurs in rural communities.
- **Reauthorize the Rural Investment Stronger Economy (RISE) Grant Program**, which helps localities strengthen the local economy through job accelerator partnerships with the private sector and institutions of higher education.

**Close the wastewater access gap:** The critical water and wastewater infrastructure deployment remains a priority for many rural communities. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, more than two million Americans lack access to basic running water. Despite this need, the cost of building, maintaining, and upgrading local water systems is a challenge for many small towns and rural counties. Beyond public health interests, clean and reliable water is a necessity to spur economic growth. Counties



call on Congress to continue our partnership in addressing rural Americans' water and wastewater infrastructure needs by increasing funding for USDA RD's Water and Environmental Programs (WEP) in the 2024 Farm Bill.

*Program-specific recommendations:*

- **Increase grant funding for the Rural Water, Waste Disposal and Wastewater Facility Grants Program**, which assists rural communities in providing residents with access to clean, affordable water sources.
- **Reauthorize the Rural Water and Wastewater Circuit Rider Program**, which is a crucial source of technical assistance to rural water systems.

**Title VIII: Forestry**

**Elevate the county role in federal land management:** County governments are a leading voice in the intergovernmental partnership with federal lands management agencies, and the 2024 Farm Bill poses an opportunity to build on that partnership. Counties support efforts to expand federal land management authorities to allow for more robust conservation and stewardship agreements with county governments. In addition to improving forest health and reducing wildfire risk, expanding the partnership between counties and federal land management agencies will generate more revenue for the federal government and critical services provided by counties, while promoting job creation and economic growth in counties across the nation. **To strengthen this partnership, counties call on Congress to expand the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) to enhance the ability of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to partner with counties on federal forest restoration and management projects.**

Since Congress amended GNA to extend eligibility to counties in the 2018 Farm Bill, counties have entered into 46 Good Neighbor Agreements with USFS and BLM. However, counties and tribes are not afforded the same authority as states to retain GNA project receipts, reducing a significant incentive to partner with federal land management agencies. Additionally, the 2018 Farm Bill removed the ability for restoration services to take place off federal lands. Consequently, adjacent state, county, and tribal land that is essential to the health and productivity of National Forests can no longer be restored as comprehensive landscapes. **Standardizing eligibility and use requirements for GNA funds will help counties support forest management projects and facilitate better land management decisions based on local impacts and needs.**

*Program-specific recommendations:*

- **Fully extend Good Neighbor Authority** eligibility to counties and tribes.
- **Secure receipt-sharing with county governments** for Stewardship End Result Contracting and Good Neighbor Agreements.
- **Reauthorize Stewardship Contracting Authority**, which allows counties to collaborate with land management agencies on land management projects within their jurisdictions.
- **Support more robust cross-boundary landscape management practices** by reauthorizing the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and the Landscape-Scale Restoration (LSR) Program.



- **Streamline the appointment process for U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Resource Advisory Committees (RACs)** to ensure that RAC appointees are promptly approved.

**Title XII: Miscellaneous**

**Advance comprehensive farm labor reform:** Half of the nation’s hired farmworkers, roughly 1.2 million individuals, lack legal immigration status. Farmers and ranchers – both in rural and urban counties – depend on these workers, who are vital to the economic health of the United States agriculture sector. Counties support similar legislative actions to those under the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, which would reform the H-2A program and provide more flexibility for employers while ensuring critical protections for workers.

*Program-specific recommendations:*

- **Secure the inclusion of farm labor reforms** that would significantly simplify administrative requirements for employers, address critical labor shortages in the agricultural sector, provide temporary legal status and protections for migrant farm workers, and create pathways for farmworkers to obtain permanent legal residence in the United States.

**Conclusion**

Thank you for your consideration of county priorities for the 2024 Farm Bill. America’s counties stand ready to work with Congress to ensure a bipartisan and long-term Farm Bill reauthorization that advances the interests of the communities we serve is signed into law.

Sincerely,



Matthew D. Chase  
CEO/Executive Director



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## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

JULY 10, 2024

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U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
 Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy  
*The State of Rural Infrastructure: Emergency Response, Recovery, and Resilience*  
 July 10, 2024  
 Questions for the Record  
**The Honorable Kevin Paap**

**Ranking Member Tommy Tuberville**

1. *Can you discuss the need to reduce burdensome government red tape and streamline application processes to make it easier for communities to identify and access funding to recover from natural disasters?*

**Response:** The need to reduce burdensome government red tape and streamline application processes is crucial for enhancing the resilience of rural communities to natural disasters. Local governments in rural areas often lack the administrative capacity and financial resources required to navigate complex federal grant applications and reporting processes. Simplifying these procedures can make a significant positive difference in the ability of these communities to access timely and necessary funding.

One of the primary challenges faced by rural counties, such as Blue Earth County, is the extensive documentation and lengthy approval processes required for federal assistance. This can delay access to crucial funding and impede swift recovery efforts, particularly during and after a natural disaster. For example, during the recent flooding event in Blue Earth County, rapid response from the county and our state and federal partners has been essential to mitigate further damage.

To improve the ability of rural counties to access federal support, we recommend that Congress consider the following measures:

1. **Simplification of Application Processes:** Streamlining the application processes for federal grants and loans, particularly those managed by the USDA and FEMA, would enable rural communities to access funds more efficiently. This includes reducing the amount of required documentation and accelerating review timelines. Counties support provisions in line with the bipartisan *Streamlining Federal Grants Act* (S.2286)
2. **Pre-Approval of Emergency Funds:** Establishing a system for the pre-approval of emergency funds for local governments and residents based on risk assessments and historical data can ensure that communities have immediate access to resources when disasters strike.
3. **Technical Assistance Programs:** Expanding technical assistance programs to help rural communities prepare and submit grant applications. This could involve deploying federal representatives to rural areas to provide hands-on support and training, a resource provided by the Rural Partners Network that could be enhanced through dedicated investments in the 2024 Farm Bill.

4. **Flexible Funding Use:** Allowing more flexibility for how funds can be used by local governments to address unique and immediate needs can enhance the effectiveness of disaster response and recovery efforts. Flexible funding for local governments provided through initiatives such as the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (SLFRF) authorized under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) is a powerful example of the potential impact of these kinds of investments.

By implementing these measures, counties and our federal partners can significantly improve the ability of rural communities to recover from natural disasters swiftly and effectively.

**Senator Amy Klobuchar**

1. *I recently surveyed the flood damage in Blue Earth County with Governor Walz, Minnesota National Guard Major General Manke, and other state officials. The damage has been devastating and the dam's partial failure provides a clear picture of the threat that aging infrastructure and more frequent natural disasters pose to rural communities across the country.*
  - a. *What challenges have more frequent natural disasters posed to infrastructure, especially in rural counties with limited capacity and resources? What resources could best support these rural communities currently facing infrastructure challenges?*

**Response:** More frequent natural disasters have increasingly strained rural infrastructure, which is often aging and not designed to withstand the increasing severity and frequency of current climate events. In Blue Earth County, for example, the recent damage sustained by the Rapidan Dam due to severe flooding highlights the vulnerability of our infrastructure. The primary challenges include:

1. **Aging Infrastructure:** Much of the infrastructure in rural areas, such as dams, bridges, and roads, was built decades ago and is now failing under the stress of frequent natural disasters.
2. **Limited Financial Resources:** Rural counties often operate on limited budgets, making it challenging to allocate sufficient funds for the maintenance and upgrade of critical infrastructure.
3. **Insufficient Emergency Response Capabilities:** Limited access to specialized emergency response equipment and personnel exacerbates the impact of natural disasters on rural infrastructure.
4. **Delays in Regulatory Processes:** Blue Earth County submitted a notice to surrender its FERC licensure exemption for the Rapidan Dam in April 2023, expecting the process to take six to twelve months. However, as of June 2024, there had been no significant progress in the conversation between FERC and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

regarding the transfer of regulatory authority, preventing Blue Earth County from taking action to repair or remove the dam.

To support rural communities, the following resources are essential:

- **Increased Investments in Rural Infrastructure Resilience:** Enhanced funding through USDA-Rural Development programs and other federal initiatives for the maintenance and modernization of rural infrastructure. Programs should specifically target investments that can improve the long-term resilience of critical infrastructure, such as bridges, dams, and water systems, to withstand natural disasters.
- **Technical Assistance:** Providing technical assistance to help rural counties develop and implement comprehensive disaster preparedness and infrastructure resilience plans, as well as to identify and access federal funding opportunities.
- **Training and Equipment for Emergency Responders:** Investment in training programs and the provision of modern equipment to local emergency responders to improve their capacity to manage disaster situations effectively.

b. *What recommendations do you have for improving the deployment of U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development programs? How can the federal government support counties in their work to prepare for and mitigate future disasters?*

**Response:** Improving the deployment of USDA Rural Development programs can be achieved through several key recommendations:

1. **Streamlining Program Access:** Simplify the application and approval processes to reduce barriers for rural communities in accessing USDA-RD programs.
2. **Flexible Funding Models:** Develop more flexible funding models that allow counties to address specific local needs and priorities in disaster preparedness and mitigation.
3. **Capacity Building:** Invest in capacity-building initiatives that empower local governments with the skills, knowledge, and resources needed to utilize federal programs and implement resilience strategies effectively. To build rural capacity, counties support the creation of initiatives similar to the Rural Partnership Program put forward in the *Rural Partnership and Prosperity Act of 2023 (S.3309)*.
4. **Enhanced Collaborative Engagement:** Foster collaborative planning efforts between federal agencies, state governments, and local communities to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive approach to disaster preparedness and mitigation. Improve opportunities for local stakeholders to engage with USDA representatives in rural areas to provide direct support and guidance /



By implementing these recommendations, the federal government can significantly enhance the effectiveness of USDA Rural Development programs and support counties in building more resilient communities.

**Senator Mike Braun**

1. *Until recently, water quality was not a focus in the State of Indiana. Our state had had — and still has — more than enough water to supply consumer demand. But as our population continues to grow and as communities begin to develop their next ten-year economic development plans, many are worried about sufficient quantity.*

*I am of the belief that successful water quantity plans must be locally and regionally driven, and that they must work with not against landowners and other stakeholders.*

*This is an important backdrop in Indiana for any conversation around rural resilience. Yes, our infrastructure needs to be resilient, but it must also be prepared for tomorrow's needs.*

*The three of you represent different sets of rural stakeholders. How have your memberships planned infrastructure that meets tomorrow's needs and accommodates economic development in nearby cities?*

**Response:** Rural counties, including Blue Earth County, have been actively modernizing infrastructure to meet future needs and support economic development through several strategic initiatives:

1. **Integrated Infrastructure Planning:** Developing comprehensive infrastructure plans that align with projected economic growth and incorporate resilience measures to withstand future natural disasters. This includes upgrading critical infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and water systems.
2. **Sustainable Development Practices:** Promoting sustainable development practices that balance economic growth with environmental protection. This involves implementing green infrastructure projects and adopting land use plans that mitigate the impact of natural disasters.
3. **Regional Collaboration:** Engaging in regional collaboration with nearby cities and counties to ensure that infrastructure projects support broader socioeconomic development goals and create synergies across jurisdictions.
4. **Investment in Technology:** Leveraging technology to improve infrastructure planning and management. This includes utilizing geographic information systems (GIS) for detailed risk assessments and adopting smart infrastructure solutions for real-time monitoring and maintenance.

By focusing on these areas, rural counties can build infrastructure that not only meets current needs but also supports future economic development and enhances resilience to natural disasters.

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
 Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy  
*The State of Rural Infrastructure: Emergency Response, Recovery, and Resilience*  
 July 10, 2024  
 Questions for the Record  
**Mr. Mark D. Bohlin**

**Ranking Member Tommy Tuberville**

1. Based on your experience working in the water industry amidst numerous natural disasters, can you discuss the need for additional resources for rural water and wastewater systems to go on the offensive and prepare for disasters in advance instead of taking a solely reactive approach?

Based on extensive experience in the water industry and navigating numerous natural disasters, it is evident that rural water and wastewater utilities require enhanced resources for proactive disaster preparedness- particularly those with limited capacity. Investing in preparedness efforts, such as advanced planning and infrastructure hardening, can significantly reduce both disruptions during disasters and post-disaster recovery costs. For example, the Alabama Rural Water Association's assistance during Hurricane Sally in 2020 demonstrated how proactive measures minimized service interruptions and financial impacts.

The USDA Rural Development's Circuit Rider Program currently offers limited assistance focused mainly on restoration post-disaster. State Rural Water Associations often absorb additional costs within their restricted budgets to provide extra services. Despite the growth in staff and financial resources within my system over the past five decades, we still depend on the expertise and support from the Alabama Rural Water Association to enhance our preparedness efforts. This reliance highlights the disparity faced by many other rural utilities in Alabama, which lack similar resources and capacity.

The National Rural Water Association (NRWA), including the Alabama Rural Water Association (ARWA), wholeheartedly endorse the pending bipartisan legislation S. 2917, the "Rural Water System Disaster Preparedness and Assistance Act." This legislation aims to expand financial and technical assistance to rural utilities, including developing vulnerability assessments, disaster action plans, geographic mapping, and hardening facilities. Enacting this legislation in short order is of the utmost importance and will be crucial for reducing potential disruptions and physical damage, ensuring rural communities can maintain essential services during disasters.

In addition, training is indispensable for disaster preparedness. Reflecting on past training has proven invaluable to effectively responding to disaster situations. Establishing a comprehensive policy for disaster response ensures that systems can protect their equipment and assets in anticipation of a disaster. A well-defined plan enables utilities to swiftly transition from disaster response to recovery and normalization of operations.

Many rural systems struggle with limited manpower, funds, and resources to fortify and prepare their infrastructure for potential disasters. Dedicated on-site, experienced staff, which would be provided through expanded funding and resources contained in S. 2917, would offer direct benefits to these utilities, ensuring continuity of essential water services, maintaining public health, and preserving the economic vitality of communities during and after disasters.

Finally, the proposed expansion of authorities and resources in the Farm Bill will provide much-needed support to small and rural utilities, enabling them to sustain and enhance their services before and after disasters. This all-hazards approach, advocated by ARWA and NRWA, addresses the comprehensive needs of rural utilities, ensuring they are equipped to protect public health and facilitate swift recovery of these most basic civic necessities.

2. Small water systems often face competitive disadvantages in receiving funds versus larger systems. Can you provide examples of this, and do you have any suggestions that could level the playing field for small systems?

Small water systems often face significant competitive disadvantages when seeking funding compared to larger systems. These challenges stem from resource limitations, administrative burdens, and the inherently competitive nature of available funds.

#### **Challenges Faced by Small Water Systems**

The funding application process, no matter the funding source or program, is typically exceptionally long and complex. Smaller rural utilities frequently lack the staff, time, and expertise to navigate this process independently and must often resort to hiring consultants or engineers, which many cannot afford. For example, on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024, the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) announced that the Mobile Area Water and Sewer System (MAWSS) was approved to receive \$64.3 million which will fund six sewer main projects. While we appreciate this initiative to improve the quality of service expected by those customers, this demonstrates the significant portion of funds that can be absorbed by a single entity when competing for limited funding, thereby signifying the importance of having funding specifically dedicated to serving rural communities which, in theory, should help level the playing field.

Moreover, smaller systems compete not only with other utilities but also with towns, fire departments, and hospitals for limited funding. Larger systems have the advantage of more manpower and resources, often including in-house grant writers who can dedicate their efforts to crafting competitive proposals to secure specific funds. In contrast, smaller systems struggle to compete due to their limited capacity.

Additionally, funding allocation criteria sometimes prioritize areas with larger populations based on FEMA claims, further disadvantaging rural areas. Applying for funding for the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), for example, is

particularly arduous. Costs can escalate during the application process, necessitating budget adjustments and, in some cases, resulting in the rejection of proposals even after years of effort.

### **Critical Role of State Rural Water Associations**

The services provided by State Rural Water Associations at no cost to small utilities are vital. Circuit Riders, who are extensively experienced and trained, offer crucial support in navigating the funding application process. They possess years of practical experience in financial, management, and technical operations, and their peer-to-peer relationship with small utilities fosters trust and effective collaboration. Circuit Riders are also required to undergo annual training on the entire Rural Development application process, enabling them to assist communities from project initiation to completion.

### **Suggestions to Level the Playing Field**

1. **Continued Support for Circuit Rider Programs:** Sustaining and enhancing the Circuit Rider Program will ensure that small and rural communities have access to experienced assistance in securing funding resources. This support is essential for leveling the playing field and enabling these communities to compete effectively for funds.
2. **Dedicated Funding for Rural Areas:** Allocating funds specifically for small and rural communities with populations of 10,000 or less and administering them through Rural Development during disasters would address some of the unique challenges faced by small systems. These funds could be used for both recovery and hazard mitigation purposes, providing a targeted approach to support rural utilities.
3. **Simplified Application Processes:** Streamlining and simplifying the application processes for federal and state funding programs would reduce the administrative burden on small systems. This could involve reducing paperwork, offering technical assistance, and providing clearer guidelines to help small utilities navigate the process more efficiently to receive funding faster.
4. **Capacity Building and Training:** Investing in capacity-building initiatives for small systems, including training programs and resources for staff, would empower them to manage the funding application process more effectively. Enhanced training on grant writing, project management, and compliance requirements could significantly improve their chances of securing funds.

### **Conclusion**

Small water systems face considerable disadvantages in accessing funding due to resource limitations and complex application processes. By providing continued support for Circuit Rider Programs, dedicating funds specifically for rural areas, simplifying application processes, and investing in capacity building, we can level the playing field

and ensure that small and rural utilities have the resources they need to sustain and enhance their services.

3. Can you discuss the general state of infrastructure in rural areas and where you foresee the greatest need for investments over the next decade?

The state of infrastructure in rural areas is a critical concern, particularly as many systems are aging and in need of significant upgrades and modernization. There are pressing challenges and substantial needs for investments in rural water and wastewater systems over the next decade.

#### **Current State of Infrastructure**

The USDA Rural Development Water and Environmental Programs (WEP) Direct loan portfolio, which currently stands at \$14.15 billion with 10,982 projects, underscores the importance of continuous investment. These 40-year term loans, with 33% of the portfolio less than 10 years from closing and 38.8% less than 20 years from closing, highlight the ongoing need for additional funding to upgrade and modernize utilities. This high-performing loan program has provided significant investments and returns for both the federal government and rural communities, with a delinquency rate of only 0.35%. This stable portfolio has significantly improved the public health and economic vitality of rural areas.

Despite these investments, there is a current backlog of \$2.024 billion in national WEP funding needs and \$12.74 million in Alabama alone. Sufficient grant funding is necessary to blend with the direct loan program to maintain affordable service rates in lower-income communities. The Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) has done commendable work in directing American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funds towards rural systems, with close collaboration from the Alabama Rural Water Association (ARWA). However, this positive trend in Alabama is not necessarily reflective of the national situation, where rural infrastructure often does not receive the same level of prioritization.

As of early 2024, utilizing IIJA and ARPA funding, 646 projects have been awarded across all 67 counties in Alabama, selected through a needs-based process to aid disadvantaged and rural communities. This effort, supported by Governor Ivey, has addressed significant portions of the \$3.3 billion needed for water infrastructure projects in the state. However, many projects remain unfunded, with significant additional funding needed to meet the demands of rural water and wastewater systems nationwide.

#### **Greatest Needs for Investments**

1. **Upgrading Aging Infrastructure:** Many rural systems are over **100 years old (true?)** and still have original piping and fittings that are failing and need replacement. Investments in new sources of water and infrastructure upgrades are

essential to meet the demands of growing populations and ever-changing EPA regulations.

2. **Compliance with New Regulations:** Upcoming changes to Lead and Copper rules and PFAS/PFOS MCLs will require significant alterations to treatment processes and infrastructure. Systems will need to conduct extensive inventories and potentially construct new treatment facilities or find new water sources to remain in compliance. This places a tremendous burden on rural systems with limited budgets, often forcing costs onto ratepayers.
3. **Financial and Sustainability Challenges:** The regulatory landscape, including treatment of PFAS, cyber security assessments, workforce development, and compliance with federal mandates, poses significant financial challenges. Inflationary costs of equipment and supply chain issues further exacerbate these challenges, causing delays and cost overruns for many projects.
4. **Rural Development Water and Environmental Programs (WEP):** Small and rural communities rely heavily on these programs to maintain and enhance their utilities. Ensuring adequate annual appropriations and expanding resources for these programs is vital to support the sustainability and development of essential services in rural areas.

Rural Water Associations across the country urge this Committee to consider requesting the USDA Economic Research Service to issue a comprehensive report surveying the actual needs of all rural communities eligible for RD WEP funding. This would provide a credible source of data to capture the total needs for both drinking water and wastewater infrastructure for rural communities.

The infrastructure in rural areas is aging and in dire need of investment to upgrade and modernize utilities. With the significant regulatory changes on the horizon and the growing population in rural areas, it is imperative to allocate sufficient resources and funding to support the sustainability and development of rural water and wastewater systems. This will ensure that these communities can continue to provide clean and safe water to their residents, maintaining public health and economic vitality.

#### **Senator Mike Braun**

1. Until recently, water quality was not a focus in the State of Indiana. Our state had had – and still has – more than enough water to supply consumer demand. But as our population continues to grow and as communities begin to develop their next ten-year economic development plans, many are worried about sufficient quantity.

I am of the belief that successful water quantity plans must be locally and regionally driven, and that they must work with not against landowners and other stakeholders.



This is an important backdrop in Indiana for any conversation around rural resilience. Yes, our infrastructure needs to be resilient, but it must also be prepared for tomorrow's needs.

The three of you represent different sets of rural stakeholders. How have your memberships planned infrastructure that meets tomorrow's needs and accommodates economic development in nearby cities?

Ensuring the resilience and sustainability of water infrastructure in rural areas is critical for public health and economic vitality. While Alabama benefits from a robust water supply, managing this resource to support economic growth and address other critical issues is paramount. This involves balancing state water rights, agriculture, forestry, manufacturing, recreation, and other land use considerations. Local experts and diverse stakeholders must participate in planning meetings to achieve this balance. The Alabama Rural Water Association and every other state rural water association play a vital role in this process.

#### **Planning for Future Needs**

**Grassroots Source Water Protection Program:** The Alabama Rural Water Association, along with the Alliance of Indiana Rural Water and every other state rural water association, administers the Grassroots Source Water Protection Program. Established in 1990 and authorized under the Conservation Title of the 2002 Farm Bill, this initiative helps rural communities, farmers, and other land use interests create and implement source water protection plans. This program underscores the importance of local and regional efforts in water management.

This is the only statewide local community-based initiative ensuring environmentally progressive local land-use decisions without the controversy and bureaucracy of regulatory programs. It provides each state with at least one full-time person to organize and assist rural communities, farmers, and other land-use interests in the implementation of source water protection plans including non-point source (runoff) protection practices in agriculture regions. This initiative allows the people who benefit from environmental protection to take responsibility for achieving it—ensuring its success and eliminating local controversy.

**Field Specialist Support:** Full-time field specialists work directly with communities across the nation to develop long-term plans that identify potential threats and maintain water quality and quantity. These specialists are crucial in addressing specific water quantity issues related to population growth. In Alabama, these plans are required for all new sources and must be updated with each permit renewal.

**Addressing Federal Mandates:** Rural communities in Alabama and other states face significant challenges due to recent federal mandates. These mandates place a heavy burden on them, as the lack of funding to cover unfunded mandates and depreciated assets hinders their ability to plan for future needs, including water quantity issues.

Additionally, these mandates are undermining public trust in local water systems, creating an untenable situation for local councils, boards, and general managers when working with their customer base.

**Continued Support for Source Water Protection:** The Source Water Protection Program is an excellent resource for rural communities, but it cannot address every need nationwide. Continued support and additional resources are essential for communities to develop resilient infrastructure that can grow and work for local citizens. This support ensures not only their survival but also their ability to thrive in communities that support clean and healthy environments, recreational enjoyment, and economic growth.

### **Conclusion**

Ensuring the resilience and sustainability of water infrastructure in rural areas is critical for public health and economic vitality. By focusing on locally and regionally driven efforts, supporting educational initiatives, and addressing financial and regulatory challenges, rural communities can develop infrastructure that meets tomorrow's needs. Continued support and investment are essential to maintain and enhance the quality and quantity of water resources, ensuring a prosperous future for rural areas.

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
 Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy  
*The State of Rural Infrastructure: Emergency Response, Recovery, and Resilience*  
 July 10, 2024  
 Questions for the Record  
**Mr. Brad Kimbro**

**Ranking Member Tommy Tuberville**

1. Can you discuss the general state of infrastructure in rural areas and where you foresee the greatest need for investments over the next decade?

*The state of rural infrastructure is strong. RUS electric loans are critical to our ability to build the infrastructure necessary to provide reliable, affordable electric service in rural America. I believe that this partnership between rural electric cooperatives and the U.S. Department of Agriculture that dates back almost ninety years has made our country safer and more prosperous.*

2. Mr. Kimbro, considering the proximity of Lower Alabama to the Gulf of Mexico, the state often experiences high winds, tornadoes, and heavy rains. Yet electric and water service providers must continue to deliver reliable and affordable utilities every day.

- a. Can you speak to the importance of being able to utilize all types of energy sources – like natural gas, nuclear, and hydroelectric power – to ensure reliability and affordability for electric service providers?

*It is critically important that the RUS electric loan program continues to provide the tools rural communities need to provide affordable, reliable electric service in the future. As I mentioned in my testimony, twenty-five percent of WEC's consumer-members struggle to pay their electric bill. We think about that every day as we plan for the future. We have to invest in assets that we know will reliably provide power. In Lower Alabama, natural gas generation, like you mentioned, is critical to keeping the lights on at a price our families can afford.*

- b. Do you have concerns that USDA RUS electric loans under this Administration may force the utilities to use intermittent sources, like solar and wind?

*Thank you for the question, Senator. As you know, we are in the business of managing the peak of energy usage on a given day. Intermittent sources like wind and solar are just that, intermittent. Electric utilities have to balance intermittent resources out with firm resources, like natural gas, nuclear, hydro, etc. that we know will be generating power when people are heating their homes, cooking dinner, and kids are doing their homework. The Power Plant Rule recently finalized by the EPA will have a devastating impact on electric co-ops around the*

*country because it jeopardizes our ability to build the resources necessary to ensure reliable, affordable electricity into the future. To your question, RUS loans are critically important. I hope the program continues to offer the flexibility co-ops need to meet the needs of the communities we serve, that includes more than just intermittent resources.*

**Senator Mike Braun**

1. Until recently, water quality was not a focus in the State of Indiana. Our state had had – and still has – more than enough water to supply consumer demand. But as our population continues to grow and as communities begin to develop their next ten-year economic development plans, many are worried about sufficient quantity.

I am of the belief that successful water quantity plans must be locally and regionally driven, and that they must work with not against landowners and other stakeholders.

This is an important backdrop in Indiana for any conversation around rural resilience. Yes, our infrastructure needs to be resilient, but it must also be prepared for tomorrow's needs.

The three of you represent different sets of rural stakeholders. How have your memberships planned infrastructure that meets tomorrow's needs and accommodates economic development in nearby cities?

*Like water utilities, electric utilities will face a supply problem in the future too. Demand for electricity is increasing while it is becoming more difficult to generate power and build the necessary transmission infrastructure to deliver it. Obtaining environmental permits from federal agencies is a lengthy, costly process.*

*Additionally, new EPA rules on new and existing power plants will make it difficult to meet future electric demand. EPA's current regulatory agenda, if achieved, will jeopardize reliability and result in more blackouts, higher costs, and greater uncertainty for rural families and businesses.*

*Still, we are making investments in electric infrastructure to meet the future needs of Alabama communities. RUS electric loans are critical to our ability to bring economic development to the Wiregrass region. In order to serve new employers and spur economic development, we must be able to provide the necessary power at competitive price.*