

**PREPARED TESTIMONY**

**Representative John J. Faso (NY-19)**

**March 9, 2017**

**House Appropriations Committee**

**Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies**

Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member Bishop, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I come before you in support of the Circuit Rider program which is administered through the USDA Rural Utilities Service.

In 1976, the National Rural Water Association (NRWA) was founded in response to the Safe Drinking Water Act passed two years earlier. The act allowed the EPA to establish national standards to protect drinking water but as many of the original EPA standards were written for large metropolitan water systems, smaller utilities did not have the resources to meet the standards. As a result, the National Rural Water Association was created to assist rural operators with compliance and technical assistance. The NRWA provides several programs to rural utilities to help them remain in compliance with EPA water standards.

Despite the NRWA's best efforts, our nation's water and wastewater facilities continue to suffer from a lack of investment in infrastructure. It is estimated that nearly \$300 billion will need to be invested in the nation's water-processing facilities over the next 20 years simply to keep pace with aging infrastructure. On top of this, the American Water Works Association estimates that the US will need to invest more than \$1 trillion over 25 years to replace all its aging drinking pipes. Water utilities bear the

brunt of upgrading costs, and while it is difficult for all water utilities to keep pace with crumbling infrastructure, rural water systems are particularly at risk. Project costs tend to be higher in remote areas compared to more populated communities, which means that resources are already limited. USDA rural water programs provide additional tools, skills, and counsel to help small utilities remain in compliance with ever-changing water guidelines.

One of the programs that receives funding through the USDA is the Circuit Rider Program which is currently operating on a \$16 million budget. The program consists of 117 full-time employees that work through the various State Rural Water Associations to provide technical assistance to 31,000 utility system members. This program is critically important to support rural infrastructure because of the on-site services and expertise that it offers to small operators. Circuit Riders assist local operators in a variety of capacities including day-to-day operational issues such as detecting leaks and water contamination. Technicians can leverage local knowledge of water systems with advanced technology and experience to quickly alleviate day-to-day operational issues. In addition to short-term support, circuit riders also provide advice on financial and management issues, as well as energy audits to increase long-term stability of small utilities.

Another major responsibility of circuit riders is to provide emergency support services to local utilities. In my district the Village of Hoosick Falls directly benefited from circuit rider assistance. In 2015 it was discovered that the village had its water supplies polluted with Perfluorooctanoic Acid (PFOA) from a nearby manufacturing facility. Initial tests indicated that the water contained PFOA levels above 600 parts per trillion (ppt), well above the then-EPA guideline of 400 ppt for short-term exposure. Circuit riders worked over the course of a week in conjunction with local operators to flush the entire system to clear out large amounts of PFOA. Additionally, USDA circuit riders were the first advisors to recommend

the use of carbon filtration systems to remove more PFOA from the water and worked closely with engineers, primary agencies and village officials to implement the filtration plan.

While relatively small, the Circuit Rider Program is an integral part of ensuring clean water in rural areas. In FY2015, FY2016, and FY2017 reported bills, the program received an annual 3 percent cost of living factor built into the competitive bid fixed price contract. To sustain the current workforce of 117 full-time employees, \$17,404,000 million is required to meet contractual obligations. Appropriating anything less than this full amount may result in a decreased level of service by state water authorities. Our rural water operators are already facing financial and technical strain, and decreasing the availability of circuit riders further threatens water utilities. The Circuit Rider program has been one of the USDA's most successful partnerships because it provides technical expertise, training, and disaster assistance to rural communities.