



**NRWA**<sup>™</sup>

TESTIMONY OF

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**SENIOR VICE-PRESIDENT**

**NATIONAL RURAL WATER ASSOCIATION**

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

ON

**CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE PREPAREDNESS AND RESILIENCE: A  
FOCUS ON WATER**

**SEPTEMBER 21, 2022**

Good morning, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko, and Members of the Committee. I am John O'Connell, the Senior Vice President of the National Rural Water Association (NRWA), the largest public drinking water and sanitation utility organization representing more than 31,000 water and wastewater utilities nationwide. I am also an active farmer in upstate New York, and I continue to serve as a certified Water and Wastewater Systems operator for a small rural community on a part-time basis.

It is an honor to appear before you today to discuss Critical Water Infrastructure Preparedness and Resilience. I must first thank the Committee for providing this important opportunity to highlight water and wastewater utilities, one of the nation's sixteen critical infrastructure sectors. These lifeline community services are often overlooked.

Before I proceed, if you will indulge me, I would like to give credit to a few of our state associations on an issue that Chairman Thompson is currently addressing. The Mississippi Rural Water Association has been on the ground working to restore and maintain critical water and wastewater service in Jackson, Mississippi. Volunteers from our state associations in Georgia, Florida and Alabama all came to assist in this effort. These certified operators provided direct assistance to restore operations, locate service lines and install new taps necessary to disinfect the system. These services were provided at no cost to the city.

The National Rural Water Association and our 50 State Rural Water Association affiliates are governed by over 350 volunteer directors elected from these very water systems across the nation. We have a cadre of more than 750 water professionals working in the field. We have boots on the ground, working 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, reaching across the nation in all 50 states including tribes and U.S. territories.

As we all know, water utility preparedness and resiliency are vital to rural America and the nation. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Safe Drinking Water Information System, there are currently 50,000 community water supplies in the country, 91% of which serve populations of less than 10,000 and 60% of which serve populations of 500 or fewer. The current public health crises in Jackson, MS, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the historic drought conditions plaguing the western states as we speak, all highlight one essential fact: continuity of safe drinking water service and wastewater treatment is essential to modern life and the economy. This fact is particularly acute in small, rural, tribal, and disadvantaged communities across the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, demonstrated the vital nature of reliable drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. Over the past two and half years, Americans have learned to live and work in these trying times, and despite the extraordinary risks, the over 31,000 utility members of the National Rural Water Association worked every second of every day to provide uninterrupted water services as scientists advised hand washing to be a fundamental, frequent action to "Stop the spread."

Although small and rural communities faced unprecedented challenges like reduced revenues, personnel shortages, shutoff moratoriums, customer job loss, increased costs for personal protective equipment, and reductions in general economic activity, all types of water and wastewater utility system operators, circuit riders, specialists, technicians, and locally elected officials heeded their collective "call to action" and accepted the critical responsibility of providing the public with drinking water and wastewater treatment.

It is important to note that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) designated our water and wastewater utilities as critical infrastructure and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Department of Agriculture have designated our water and wastewater specialists, employed within every state rural water association, as

“essential personnel” to maintain daily, uninterrupted services of running water and wastewater treatment.

Due to the qualifications, training, licenses, expertise and relentless dedication of rural water operators, America’s economy has been able to stay resilient in the face of this scourge and rural Americans continue to depend on their clean, affordable water and wastewater service every day. It is fitting that these unsung heroes receive the recognition they have earned and deserve.

I mentioned at the top of my remarks that I am part-time for the simple fact that many small and rural systems simply cannot afford full-time certified operators. I have been in the water and wastewater industry serving small communities for 34 years, and its imperative to understand that small communities only operate to serve the public’s interests and are eager to take all feasible and necessary actions to protect our public drinking water supplies.

I want the Committee to know that when small towns like mine need help in operating our water utilities, understanding new and complex federal Clean Water Act (CWA) and Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) requirements, receiving the required training to maintain our licenses, and learning about the latest preparedness and resiliency practices, we call our state rural water association and ask for technical assistance. These professionals travel directly to our town and focus on our specific water utility issue. For over 40 years, they have been essential to almost every small and rural community in New York and across the country.

However, the reality for many small and rural water and wastewaters systems is that financial and human capacity limitations exist which impact their preparedness and resiliency. With smaller economies of scale combined with lower income residents, providing safe, affordable, and sustainable service can become challenging. Many of these small systems rely solely on the user rates paid by their customers for the entire operation including debt servicing loans, paying staff, equipment, disinfection products, and energy costs. In addition, as inflation has hit all Americans, small and rural utilities are not immune. Disinfection chemicals to preserve public health have increased by approximately 300%, forcing some rural utilities to pass on the costs to their lower-income vulnerable customers that are already struggling financially.

As this Committee considers options to address the critical infrastructure of the water sector, the National Rural Water Association suggests:

**1. Preparedness And Resilience Assistance**

Establishing a competitive grant program within DHS to include activities to assist small and rural communities with preparedness and resilience assistance.

Responses by our state rural water associations to natural disasters and extreme weather incidents are increasing. As of now, these efforts are limited to recovery and restoration activities. Assistance should be expanded to include preparedness and resiliency, potentially reducing the loss of services.

Priority could be targeted to vulnerable communities and activities could include but not be limited to conducting assessments of critical infrastructure with suggestions for modifications necessary to harden the utility and performing resiliency and mitigation planning to include direct application assistance to access available state and federal funding.

## **2. Disaster Recovery Planning**

Disaster recovery planning should include training, establishing emergency response plans, communication protocols, hazard recognition and enhancing staff evaluation skills.

NRWA recommends DHS fund direct emergency technical assistance to restore services including pump and motor evaluation and repair, water disinfection and flushing, leak detection and line repair, water main and valve location, emergency power generation, bypass pumping, water treatment, and maintaining safety measures during difficult working conditions. Application assistance should also be provided to access state and federal funding including FEMA and insurance recovery claims.

## **3. Cybersecurity**

The two recent water cyber-attacks in Florida and Kansas indicate that small communities can be a target of cyber criminals. For small and rural communities to increase their preparedness and resiliency, NRWA has advocated to implement a national collaborative cybersecurity water supply protection initiative through DHS, which would result in communities focusing on enhancing security based on local risks.

Only local experts knowledgeable of the individual systems can identify the most vulnerable elements in the community and detect immediate threats. This initiative could provide funding to rapidly assess the efficacy of all small water utilities in protecting their cyberinfrastructure, develop reasonable protocols to enhance protection, provide assistance to any inadequate cyber protection plan, and document the state of the cyber protection in all small water supplies.

Again, we are eager to partner with DHS in assessing the needs of every small water utility. Together, we can provide the expertise to ensure all necessary protective actions are conducted in a timely manner- resulting in a more resilient, prepared, and secure water sector.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate today and I stand ready to take any questions that you may have at this time.