

**Opening Statement of the Honorable John Shimkus
Subcommittee on Environment and the Economy
Hearing on “The Needs of Drinking Water Systems in Rural and Smaller Communities”
February 27, 2015**

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Today’s hearing focuses on challenges facing rural water systems. I congratulate and thank the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Mr. Tonko, and the Vice-Chairman of the Subcommittee, Mr. Harper, for their bipartisan work to raise the profile of this issue before the Subcommittee.

According to the Census Bureau, approximately 27 percent of the U.S. population lives in a rural area. The smallest water systems account for 77 percent of all systems. As someone who proudly represents communities in small town and rural America, I am glad we have bipartisan interest in tackling this subject.

Under the Safe Drinking Water Act, small and rural drinking water supply systems are subject to a number of drinking water regulations issued by EPA. These requirements include system monitoring, treatment to remove certain contaminants, and reporting. Addressing these matters requires technical, managerial, and physical capabilities that are difficult to develop and are often beyond the capacity of these towns to afford on the same scale as urban centers – particularly when it comes to regulatory compliance.

It’s ironic that these communities, where residents work hard to support their families and their local governments, while often earning wages below those of their counterparts in the more urbanized areas, face per customer compliance costs and demands that are disproportionate to many larger communities. Sometimes, it’s just a matter of having the ability to keep up with the red-tape.

While I am sure we will explore the funding mechanisms under EPA, the Agriculture Department, and other Federal agencies, it’s not just a matter of throwing more scarce money at the problem. Rather, it’s about smartly assessing what the needs are for these systems, prioritizing the importance of those needs, finding out whether the current system can be improved to remove unnecessary burdens and eliminate bureaucracy, and examining whether voluntary or other collaborative efforts can aid where Congress cannot.

I want to thank our witnesses who have put their lives on hold to battle the elements and join us. People who live in rural communities deserve every bit of water quality and technical resources that folks who live in densely populated urban centers do. We look forward to your wisdom in helping us understand these issues.

Thanks again to Mr. Tonko and Mr. Harper for their work on this issue. I know Mr. Tonko has an interest in addressing some drinking water issues and I appreciate the work he and Mr. Harper are doing to “break the ice” with this first effort.

###