

TESTIMONY OF

KATETRA “K.T.” NEWMAN

ON BEHALF OF THE

MISSISSIPPI RURAL WATER ASSOCIATION

AND

NATIONAL RURAL WATER ASSOCIATION

AND

TOWN OF COMO, CITY OF SARDIS, TOWN OF SLEDGE, CITY OF MARKS, TOWN OF TUTWILER, TOWN OF SHAW, TOWN OF CRUGER, TOWN OF TCHULA, HARLAND CREEK COMMUNITY WATER ASSOCIATION, CITY OF DURANT, TOWN OF VAIDEN, WEST MADISON UTILITY DISTRICT, MT OLIVE WATER ASSOCIATION, ST. THOMAS WATER ASSOCIATION, TOWN OF BOLTON, TOWN OF EDWARDS, TOWN OF UTICA, VICKSBURG/WARREN CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT AND WEST TALLAHATCHIE UTILITY DISTRICT (MISSISSIPPI)

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND THE ECONOMY

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

(FEBRUARY 27, 2015)

Subject: Safe Drinking Water Act issues related to small and rural drinking water utilities

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

Before I introduce myself, I would like to summarize the key points I plan to make in my remarks:

- That most all the communities needing to comply with the federal EPA water mandates are small and rural communities.

- That these communities have a more difficult time complying with federal mandates and operating and maintaining their water infrastructure because of limited economies of scale, limited budgets, and limited technical resources.
- That when small and rural communities look for help for compliance, finding funding, operations, and emergency response – they all call their state rural water association on-site technical assistance providers – every time.
- That of all the billions of dollars that Congress provides to the federal agencies for environmental programs, the only assistance that small and rural communities see and utilize is the assistance from these on-site “circuit riders.”

My name is K.T. Newman and I have been working for or in small and rural community water systems in the Mississippi Delta for nearly 20 years. I first started out as a small city water manager in my hometown of Town of Vaiden, Mississippi which has about 1,000 homes. I then worked for the Mississippi Rural Water Association as a circuit rider for ten years. In this capacity I visited every one of the Delta's approximately 500 small communities to help them with their water and sewer problems. Currently, I am working for about two dozen small Delta communities, assisting them with their water and sewer utilities.

I am honored to be accompanied here today by the mayor of one of these small communities, Mayor Everette Hill from Como, Mississippi. The Town of Como has a population of approximately 1,200 persons. Mayor Hill has been mayor for two years and his community is facing overwhelming water challenges. Como is typical of the types of challenges many of the approximately 45,000 small and rural communities across the country are facing today regarding their water infrastructure. The mayor's challenges are compounded by the fact he is a small town mayor, meaning he has a full-time job (as a truck driver), has to handle much of

the city's issues on his free-time, his community has little professional staff because they simply can't afford it.

In Como, the wastewater system is failing because of its age and inability to meet its current EPA permit. The cost to update Como's sewer system to be compliant is approximately 2 million dollars. The Como drinking water system needs an additional 1.0 million dollars in upgrades. The town was recently fined by the department of environmental quality for failure to comply with their wastewater discharge permit; currently the Como wastewater treatment facility is actually discharging only partially treated wastewater due to failure of the current treatment works. Within the past few months, Como finished paying the approximately 1 million dollar loan to construct their currently failing activated sludge treatment system. The loan placed considerable hardship on the residents.

Como is just like thousands of other small communities in the Delta and the other states, they need a grant-rich infrastructure funding program like the USDA's rural development program, and they need access to someone they can trust for technical advice, on-site assistance, and help with managing the funding application process.

Mississippi has 1,234 regulated public water systems -- only 2 serve populations over 50,000 persons and only 59 serve populations over 10,000 persons. That leaves 1,175 small and rural communities with populations under 10,000 persons that have to comply with every EPA regulations just like the larger cities of Jackson or Gulfport.

In the Town of Utica with a population of 850 persons, we are facing a nearly 1 million dollar compliance upgrade to meet our new and more stringent wastewater discharge permit. The town will likely have to accept hundreds of thousands of low-interest loan.-- I can personally see

the repayment of this loan placing significant hardship on the rate-payers. The Town is accepting this tremendous burden to pay for a new treatment technology called bio-domes that will be designed to enhance their current facultative lagoon cells and reduce the nutrient levels in the wastewater effluent. Small towns all across Mississippi and in fact the Country are faced with this dilemma. I believe small towns should be given more flexibility in their approaches to addressing these dilemmas. In addition, more training needs to be provided to small Town Mayors like Mayor Hill so that multi-million dollar upgrades that will most certainly tax the rate payers of these communities can be more readily understood and communicated to these residents who will ultimately be responsible for bearing the financial burden.

Recently, many of the small communities in the Delta have received violations for a new EPA regulation referred to as the “disinfection byproducts rule.” These byproducts are a result of disinfecting their water to make it safe to drink. If these small communities limit or reduce the disinfectant levels of the water, they will comply with the EPA regulation, but the water may no longer be safe to drink. Once the “disinfection by products rule” is violated, many small communities are forced to spend limited resources to report these violations to the consumers. As I am sure you can imagine, any notice indicating a problem with the drinking water has the potential to cause pandemonium in these small communities. We urge Congress to take a look at this current and acute situation.

In the Town of Shaw, population 1,900 persons, the community was under a boil water order for over 6 months because of a broken chlorinator needed to disinfect the drinking water. The local schools had to buy bottled water for over six months. After they called the Mississippi Rural Water Association Circuit Rider, Tom Abernathy, they were able to come up with a plan to pay for a new chlorinator, revise the town’s billing program to accurately assess the water used by citizens and receive the payments, train the new mayor and town council, get the Towns’ credit

stable, and secure some emergency state revolving fund financing. I have to acknowledge that Congressman Thompson was essential in getting this plan started for the initial assistance to the community. The new mayor is overwhelmed with the challenges the town is facing, but now he has a plan and someone he can count on and trust to help the town deal with all the challenges – and that person is the rural water circuit rider.

In closing, whenever a small community is facing a compliance issue, the complication of a new EPA rule, a line break that they can't find that is causing people to lose water service, an emergency from a storm or power loss – we all call the circuit riders to tell us what it means and what to do. They have developed a trust relationship with small communities in their states, know how to fix things, and are willing to come to your town day, night or weekend. The analyst here in DC who works for rural water told me that Congress gives EPA over 2 and ½ billion dollars every year to pay for environmental programs – I am sure that it goes to good use somewhere, but the only benefit that small and rural communities get to help them with their water issues comes from the on-site technical assistance provided by their state rural water associations. Thank you for the opportunity to be here, and Mayor Hill and I are happy to answer any questions.