

TESTIMONY OF

# **BOBBY SELMAN**

ON BEHALF OF THE

MISSISSIPPI RURAL WATER ASSOCIATION

AND

LAWRENCE COUNTY WATER, SONTAG WATER ASSOCIATION, TOWN OF MONTICELLO, TOWN OF NEW HEBRON, CROOKED CREEK WATER ASSOCIATION, HIGHWAY 28 WATER ASSOCIATION, BOGGAN RIDGE WATER ASSOCIATION, DOUBLE PONDS WATER ASSOCIATION, NE JEFF DAVIS WATER ASSOCIATION, BUNKERHILL WATER ASSOCIATION, TOPISAW CREEK WATER ASSOCIATION, AND TOWN OF ROXIE (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

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Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to appear before you today.

My name is Bobby Selman. I am a certified drinking water and wastewater operator in the state of Mississippi with an engineering background from Mississippi State. I have been working in the water world for 25 years, starting in my home town in Lawrence County. I still work for the Lawrence County Water Authority in addition to 12 other small communities and rural water associations.

Before I give you some thoughts on the water challenges small and rural communities are facing related to more stringent compliance, depressed economies, aging of water infrastructure, failing infrastructure, limited technical expertise, new standards for operator certification, hurricanes devastating the water supply, and shrinking funding programs – I want

thank my Congressman, Gregg Harper for his support and assistance to all the over 150,000 small public water systems across the country for sponsoring the Grassroots Rural and Small Grassroots Rural and Small Community Water Systems Assistance Act. Representative Harper's bill directs the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to prioritize the type of technical assistance that small communities find is most beneficial. The rural water type of on-site technical assistance is what all the small communities in Mississippi and the other states rely on for help with compliance, operations, emergencies, line break, loss of water, setting rates, and training for operator certification. I am told that Congress funds the EPA's internal management budget for hundreds of millions of dollars every year. Small and rural communities want Congress to know that the only benefit we get comes from the small portion of the EPA funding that is directed to on-site technical assistance provided by what we call circuit riders. Guidance documents, inspections, manuals, symposia, reports, on-line tools, webinars, and civil penalties don't really help at the local level when a small town needs immediate help. What small communities do when they have a question or water issue is call their local circuit rider that they know, trust, and know can give them clear answers – these circuit riders often come immediately on-site to small communities and teach them how to fix their problem. There is just no one else out in the field at the local level providing this essential help.

After Katrina, two of my small communities in Simpson County were devastated. Each served approximately 2,500 people and they were without power and water. People and communities can get by without power for a while, but not without water. I called the Mississippi Rural Water Association circuit riders and they found emergency generators for me and delivered them to the communities at no charge. Since the circuit riders know everybody in the state, they were able to borrow some generators from northern communities not impacted by the hurricane and have the generators delivered to get the drinking water and sanitation restored expeditiously. The circuit riders also have the technical know-how to rig the generators' electrical systems, size the right voltage, and even drive a back-hoe if needed to clear the streets and dig up rupture lines – all of this type of assistance is essential to restore a water supply in an emergency.

I called the circuit rider out to help me at the Double Ponds Water Association, a community of about 1,000 homes, to find a line break causing a loss of water for many homes. The circuit rider came with advanced radar equipment that can precisely identify the location of the break – which on this day happened to be out in the woods. By funding the circuit riders, Congress is

allowing all small and rural communities to share this technical resource that no one community can afford on their own. We think it is the best use of your federal water-environmental dollars.

With the federalization of operator certification under the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1996, state rural water associations have become the main source of training for operators and the main source of continued education credits which are needed every year to maintain the certification. It can be very expensive for a small community to keep their operators certified, in fact many small communities can't afford to have a certified operator and have to share one – as is the case with many of the communities I am representing. Rural water training is often provided free of charge, provided locally, and tailored to exactly what that particular operator needs to stay certified and competently operate their specific facility. Many small community water systems only have a few hundred homes that have to fund their operations, infrastructure, testing, treatment chemicals, and personnel for both a water and sewer supply. Further, many of these systems were built in the 1960s and are reaching the end of their lifespans resulting in pipe breaks, tanks and pumps needing replacing, old wells failing, and the list goes on.

Many parts of rural America have seen industry move on, leaving behind depressed economies. In my region, the garment industry moved south after NAFTA. When this happens, raising rates becomes overly burdensome. In the town of New Hebron, Mississippi with just over 400 people, we are being told we need to comply with a new EPA wastewater discharge permit for the cost of 2-3 million dollars. In addition to more stringent compliance standards, standard operation and maintenance that a large community would have no problem with absorbing the cost can be very expensive on a cost per household basis in small water supplies. In Lawrence County with approximately 2,000 persons, we are trying to finance a new well because our 50 year-old well has rusted out and at the same time pay for the storage tank to be painted for a combined cost of 500,000 dollars – and this is a relatively large, small water supply.

It would be nice if we could consolidate all the little towns into one large water supply to realize cost savings, limit duplication, and obtain greater economies of scale. When this is practical, we emphatically pursue it. Often it is more expensive to develop the new infrastructure needed to accomplish regionalization than to continue to operate separate systems.

I will close with some comments on the federal water infrastructure programs – namely the EPA state revolving funds and the USDA rural development grant and loan program. We are very

appreciative for Congressional funding of these initiatives, and realize the funding constraints on Congress and the nation. Notwithstanding the curtailment of federal funding, the regulatory burden continues to increase and become more complex. We urge you to emphasize grants in these funding programs. Low interest loans often don't help the communities facing the most severe hardship from federal compliance – leaving the loan funds to be used for compliance with greater ability to afford financing.

We also urge to keep reviewing the federal funding program to ensure that the subsidized funding is being targeted to the communities most in need financially and environmentally. And please do what you can to make the process of obtaining funding as simple as possible. Often the complexity of the funding process overwhelms small and rural communities' abilities – this could be addressed by using some of the infrastructure funding to help these communities with the application process. It can currently take up to 3-4 years from the beginning of the process to the awarding of funding.

We are very grateful for the funding assistance, it has allowed many rural and small communities to have access to drinking water and sanitation that they would otherwise not have been able to afford without the federal assistance, and we want to be partners in the effort to make the initiatives as efficient and successful as possible.

Thank you very much Mr. Chairman and I am eager to answer any questions at the appropriate time.