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October 21, 2026

Mr. Seth Ricketts
Legislative Clerk
Committee on Energy and Commerce
U.S. House of Representatives
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Responses to Questions for the Record, Subcommittee on Environment hearing of February 24, 2026, "From Source to Tap: A Hearing to Examine Challenges and Opportunities for Safe, Reliable, and Affordable Drinking Water"

Dear Mr. Ricketts:

Thank you for the Committee's letter of September 24, 2026, transmitting questions for the record from the Honorable Laurel Lee and the Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr. following my appearance before the Subcommittee on Environment on February 24, 2026.

My responses are enclosed in the format requested by the Committee: the name of the Member, the complete text of each question in bold, and my answer in plain text. I have answered on behalf of the National Rural Water Association and the Alabama Rural Water Association, and in my capacity as General Manager of the Russellville Water & Sewer Board.

Please let me know if the Committee requires anything further for the printed record. I am grateful to Chairman Palmer, Ranking Member Tonko, and the Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify and for their continued attention to small and rural water systems.

Sincerely,

Eric Hill
General Manager, Russellville Water & Sewer Board
On behalf of the National Rural Water Association and the Alabama Rural Water Association
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Enclosure: Responses to Questions for the Record (5 questions, 2 Members)
cc: Michael Preston, National Rural Water Association
Rob White IV, Alabama Rural Water Association

Responses to Questions for the Record

Subcommittee on Environment, Committee on Energy and Commerce
U.S. House of Representatives
"From Source to Tap: A Hearing to Examine Challenges and Opportunities for Safe, Reliable, and Affordable Drinking Water"
Hearing of February 24, 2026

Witness: Eric Hill, General Manager, Russellville Water & Sewer Board, Russellville, Alabama, on behalf of the National Rural Water Association and the Alabama Rural Water Association

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Submitted with a transmittal letter to Seth Ricketts, Legislative Clerk, Committee on Energy and Commerce, by mail and by email, in the Committee's requested format: name of the Member, complete text of the question in bold, answer in plain text.

The Honorable Laurel Lee (R-FL)

1. In Hillsborough County, Florida, we have both urban and more rural service areas, and many smaller systems across Florida face workforce shortages and limited rate bases. As new federal requirements under the Safe Drinking Water Act, particularly related to PFAS treatment and lead service line replacement, come online, how are small and rural systems realistically planning to meet these standards without dramatically increasing rates on working families?

America's small and rural water systems are preparing to meet these requirements, but they need sustained federal investment in infrastructure and workforce development, realistic implementation schedules, and the on-site technical assistance that lets a small staff do the planning work. Without that support, many communities in Florida, in Alabama, and across rural America will have no choice but to pass substantial costs on to working families. I see this firsthand as Russellville's utility manager, as Vice President of the Alabama Rural Water Association, and as Chairman of the National Rural Water Association's Regulatory Committee. Our 26 employees manage both drinking water and wastewater operations without an in-house engineer or a dedicated compliance officer, and many communities face the same responsibilities with a smaller staff and a smaller customer base to absorb the expense.

Responsible planning begins with knowing what is in the water and what infrastructure needs attention. Russellville voluntarily tested our well and our lake intake for PFAS, ahead of any deadline, and found no detections. Under the federal PFAS rule every system must complete initial monitoring by 2027, and I encourage small systems to do that early, because a clean result is the least expensive compliance outcome there is and a detection needs every month of lead time it can get. On lead, Alabama systems submitted service line inventories to the Alabama Department of Environmental Management by the October 2024 deadline. Russellville's inventory covers about 5,700 service lines and shows no known lead service lines. Our galvanized lines were never downstream of lead, so they are not on the replacement clock. Many systems in the Southeast are not that fortunate. We do not have the legacy lead pipe of older northeastern cities, but a galvanized line that was ever downstream of lead must be replaced under the same rule, on the same clock that begins with the replacement plans due November 1,

2027, and that galvanized category is where the hidden cost sits for many small systems in our region. Across rural America, systems are doing this same work with their State Rural Water Associations: identifying service line materials, evaluating treatment options, estimating costs, and lining up financing, so that limited dollars go where they protect public health.

Identifying the need does not give a community the means to pay for it. Even when federal assistance covers construction, PFAS treatment creates recurring costs for electricity, sampling, replacement media, disposal, and qualified operators. Those costs become a permanent obligation for the utility and its customers, continuing long after an initial grant is spent. And the funding timeline is slower than the rule timeline. Russellville applied for State Revolving Fund assistance in 2022 and is receiving those funds in 2026, a four-year path for a one million dollar project. A small system that detects PFAS in 2027 and needs treatment in place by 2029 cannot get there on the normal SRF timeline. EPA's May 2026 proposal would let a system request up to two additional years, to 2031, without changing the standard. I support that extension, and so does the National Rural Water Association. When EPA announced in May 2025 that it would seek the additional time, NRWA's Chief Executive Officer, Matthew Holmes, said: "EPA has done the right thing for rural and small communities by delaying implementation of the PFAS rule. This commonsense decision provides the additional time that water system managers need to identify affordable treatment technologies and make sure they are on a sustainable path to compliance. NRWA greatly appreciates this reasonable and flexible approach, and we look forward to partnering with the agency's PFAS OUTreach Initiative to help ensure water systems have the resources and support they need." Whatever the final rule says, compliance schedules have to account for the time it takes to secure financing, complete engineering, procure equipment, and hire a contractor.

Congress can help by sustaining dedicated PFAS and lead infrastructure funding now that the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act's five years of supplemental appropriations have run their course, by providing grants and principal forgiveness based on a community's ability to pay, and by simplifying access to assistance. A low-interest loan is valuable, but it is still debt our customers repay. Treatment for PFAS is not a rate-base project for a community of our size. Granular activated carbon or ion exchange for a small plant is a multi-million dollar capital addition plus a permanent operating cost, and spread over roughly 5,700 service connections as a conventional loan it is a rate increase that a working family in Franklin County would feel every month for twenty years. At the February hearing I told Representative Menendez that communities still need a dedicated federal funding source for lead service line replacement, and the other utility witnesses said the same. I would say the same about PFAS treatment.

Congress should also strengthen on-site technical assistance and operator training through State Rural Water Associations. This is a proven model built over decades, carrying forward Congress's recognition from the earliest years of the Safe Drinking Water Act that small communities need practical help to meet federal requirements. Experienced professionals work directly with local operators to troubleshoot treatment, find leaks, prepare compliance plans, navigate financing, and train the next generation of operators, and their established relationships and statewide reach let them stay involved until the problem is solved. The Alabama Rural Water Association has helped Russellville work through SRF financing and each new regulation at no cost to our customers, because Congress funds that assistance under the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Finally, Congress should enact H.R. 1267, the Water Systems PFAS Liability Protection Act, to protect water and wastewater systems from CERCLA liability for PFAS contamination they did not cause. Our customers are already paying to remove these chemicals from their water. They should not also inherit the polluters' liability. Affordable compliance requires federal policy that supports the communities doing the work and holds those responsible for the contamination accountable.

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ)

1. The Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (SRF) provides critical support to help states and water systems deliver safe, reliable drinking water to communities.

a. As we consider reauthorization of the SRF, what recommendations do you have for increasing access to funding and assisting communities as they address drinking water challenges?

The Drinking Water SRF is one of the most effective water infrastructure financing tools Congress has ever created to help communities provide safe, affordable water. In Russellville it has affordably financed essential improvements on both sides of our utility: on the water side, a booster station upgrade with larger pumps and variable frequency drives that raises our pumping capacity and lowers our electrical cost, and on the wastewater side, added treatment capacity to serve residential and industrial growth. Reauthorization should build on that success with sustained funding that reflects infrastructure and regulatory need, affordable financing, and a more practical process for small communities to access assistance. I would offer four recommendations.

First, make SRF funding more timely and accessible to small communities. This is the barrier I live with. Russellville applied in 2022 and received funds in 2026. In that time the number of contractors at our bid openings went from eight or ten to one or two, and prices rose accordingly. A neighboring system received $845,000 for a project that drew a single bid of $1.4 million. Small systems often pay for preliminary engineering and environmental review before they know whether funding will come, and the delay leaves them carrying those costs while construction prices rise and available contractors move to other work. Earlier assistance with planning and design, simpler applications, and faster processing would get projects under way. As an affiliation of 50 State Rural Water Associations, NRWA understands the staffing and capacity constraints facing state funding authorities and appreciates the demands placed on them. Our State Associations are ready to help communities complete applications, troubleshoot problems, and work alongside state agencies to get funding to the small systems that need it most.

Second, principal forgiveness should reflect a community's actual ability to repay the remaining debt without imposing unaffordable rates. A low-interest loan can still place a substantial burden on households already paying for both water and wastewater improvements. States should keep the flexibility to target assistance by financial hardship and public health need, while ensuring that small communities receive proper consideration. A community's access to funding should not depend on the size of its project or on its ability to hire staff and consultants to navigate the application process.

Third, federal requirements must be feasible, affordable, and proportionate to the size of the project. I support the goals of Build America, Buy America. But as I explained in my testimony,

the paperwork and compliance costs of Build America, Buy America and Davis-Bacon consume a far larger share of a small rural project's budget and staff time. For a one million dollar project, certified payroll and the domestic sourcing paperwork for a replacement pump that a 30-year-old plant was designed around can turn a two-week job into a two-month job. Congress should provide targeted flexibility for small projects, eliminate duplicative reporting, streamline environmental review for work on previously studied sites, and allow completion schedules that reflect equipment availability and contractor shortages. These changes would preserve accountability while ensuring that federal requirements do not price small communities out of the very programs Congress created to help them.

Finally, protect and strengthen the on-site technical assistance that makes the SRF accessible. Through my work in Russellville and with the Alabama Rural Water Association, I see how much depends on having an experienced professional who knows the community, understands the state's funding process, and stays involved through completion. State Rural Water Associations help operators and local leaders assess needs, assemble applications, evaluate financing, and resolve operational and compliance problems. Section 1452(q) of the Safe Drinking Water Act lets states set aside up to two percent of their capitalization grant for small-system technical assistance, and the Committee's discussion draft extends it. Reauthorization should preserve that set-aside and the Grassroots Rural and Small Community Water Systems Assistance Act, which this Committee wrote, and should prioritize providers with demonstrated field experience, local relationships, and a track record of delivered results.

For a small community, the measure of success is a completed project that protects public health at a cost its residents can afford. Reauthorization should make that outcome easier to achieve.

b. What specific changes would be beneficial to support disadvantaged communities?

Congress should make sure the communities with the greatest needs can actually qualify for and use the assistance that is available. I would offer four changes.

Fund the front end. Many small systems cannot afford the engineering reports, environmental reviews, and application work required before a project can be funded. Planning and design grants, earlier reimbursement of eligible expenses, and direct technical assistance with local expertise in preparing applications would give these communities a realistic opportunity to secure funding. The barrier for a disadvantaged community is usually not the loan. It is everything that has to exist before a state can make one.

Measure disadvantage by what the investment means for a family's water and sewer bill. Median household income alone can mask substantial hardship, particularly in communities with many elderly residents on fixed incomes or families living in poverty. Funding decisions should account for those conditions, for existing utility debt, and for the rate increases needed to repay another loan, and they should count a household's combined water and wastewater burden, because in a community like Russellville the same family pays both bills. Where repayment would put essential service beyond residents' means, grants and principal forgiveness should receive priority. Alabama's Department of Environmental Management ran a needs-based process that put IIJA and ARPA funds into 646 projects across all 67 counties, with priority for disadvantaged and rural communities. Reauthorization should protect that kind of state discretion while asking every state to show how it defines and reaches its disadvantaged communities.

Dedicate a share of the assistance to small and rural systems. Small systems compete for the same limited funds as large utilities with grant writers and consultants on staff, and a single large award can absorb a significant portion of what a state has available in a funding round. When Mark Bohlin, President of the Alabama Rural Water Association, answered questions for the record from the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry in 2024, he recommended allocating funds specifically for small and rural communities with populations of 10,000 or less. The Drinking Water SRF already carries that principle: Section 1452(a)(2)(F) of the Safe Drinking Water Act reserves 15 percent of each state's loan fund for loan assistance to systems serving fewer than 10,000 people. Reauthorization should keep that 15 percent in place and treat it as a floor, not a ceiling. More than 91 percent of the nation's community water systems serve fewer than 10,000 people. A dedicated share for those systems is the surest way to keep them from being outcompeted for the assistance Congress intended them to have.

Pair the funding with people. Through my work with the Alabama Rural Water Association, I know that making funding available is only part of the job. A disadvantaged community usually has one operator doing four jobs. State agencies and Rural Water staff should work together to reach communities that lack the personnel to pursue assistance. On-site help lets a local board establish project priorities, assemble financial records, work with an engineer, and submit a complete application, and it stays with the community through construction and compliance. Congress should sustain that practical support and expect states to show whether assistance is reaching their most financially distressed and disadvantaged communities.

2. The Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA) is a low-cost financial assistance program that helps communities pay for water infrastructure projects. As Congress considers ways to ensure communities can meet the water infrastructure needs, what changes should we consider to the WIFIA program?

I want to be candid that Russellville has not used WIFIA, and very few National Rural Water Association members have. WIFIA has been a success for the projects it was designed for. As of February 2026 it had closed 149 loans totaling $23 billion in credit assistance. But it was designed for large projects. Projects generally must be at least $20 million, or $5 million for communities of 25,000 or fewer. WIFIA can finance up to 49 percent of eligible costs, and the application and credit processing fees have historically run well into six figures. More than 91 percent of the nation's approximately 50,000 community water systems serve fewer than 10,000 people, and a system of that size with a one or two million dollar project is not a WIFIA borrower today.

Congress should make WIFIA easier to use for the smaller projects rural communities need, by lowering the small-community project cost threshold, simplifying applications, and making small-community fee relief permanent. In June 2026 EPA announced it would waive the application fee for communities of 25,000 or fewer and the credit processing fee for small communities in fiscal years 2026 and 2027, a savings EPA put at almost $200,000 per loan. That was the right call, and it belongs in the statute rather than in annual administrative discretion.

Congress should also make the existing options for combining eligible projects more accessible through state financing programs and voluntary local partnerships, so that a state SRF program, a regional authority, or a group of systems can aggregate several small projects into one loan that clears the minimum. State Rural Water Associations can help communities identify suitable projects, assess repayment capacity, and prepare the financial information needed. Clear

processing timelines, published by EPA and met, would give local boards greater certainty when budgeting, securing other financing, and scheduling construction.

When Representative Peters asked at the hearing whether NRWA's members would benefit from a higher federal share cap, I said yes, and I will repeat it here: where the local share is the barrier, Congress should allow WIFIA to finance a larger share of a small community's eligible project costs.

WIFIA should complement strong SRF and USDA Rural Development infrastructure funding, not compete with it. Those programs remain essential to communities that need smaller loans or substantial grant assistance to keep rates affordable. More favorable financing can reduce borrowing costs, but it cannot make additional debt affordable for every community. Congress should expand access to WIFIA while preserving the grants and principal forgiveness small systems depend on, and WIFIA should never be funded at the SRF's expense.

3. In the hearing, you mentioned a "whack-a-mole" approach to addressing drinking water contaminants. How would a more wholistic approach to addressing drinking water contaminants help water systems more efficiently achieve public health goals?

For clarity, I did not use the phrase "whack-a-mole" in my testimony, though it captures a concern I share.

My concern is the cumulative burden of federal requirements on small systems and on the customers who pay for them. In Russellville the same 26 employees operate our drinking water and wastewater facilities, maintain our infrastructure, and implement each new rule. We tested for perchlorate under the first Unregulated Contaminant Monitoring Rule from 2001 to 2005 and had no detections, and twenty years later a court-ordered rulemaking will have us testing for the same compound again. PFAS monitoring is under way. The Six-Year Review of the microbial and disinfection byproduct rules is expected to produce a proposal in 2027 and a final rule in 2028 that could add storage tank and distribution requirements. Each rule may be reasonable on its own. Together, on a small staff, they arrive as a series of separate emergencies. EPA should evaluate those obligations together, including their combined cost and staffing demands. Considering each rule separately does not reflect how a utility operates or what a family can afford.

A more effective approach would give communities enough information to make sound, lasting investments. EPA should identify foreseeable requirements, coordinate implementation schedules where practical, and help systems evaluate treatment options against their actual water quality and operating conditions. A small plant gets one major capital project every 20 to 30 years, and a system designing a PFAS treatment addition should know what the next rules will ask of it before it pours concrete. Treatment that addresses several contaminants at once may offer real benefits, a point Mr. Olson of the Natural Resources Defense Council also made at the hearing, but it must be affordable to operate, maintain, and staff. Congress expressly included feasibility and small-system affordability provisions in the Safe Drinking Water Act. Those principles should guide implementation so communities can sustain the public health improvements they are being asked to make.

Prevention must also be part of the answer. Source water protection, supported by experienced State Rural Water Association personnel through the Grassroots Source Water Protection

Program, helps communities identify contamination risks and work with landowners and other local partners to address them before costly treatment becomes necessary. EPA should also allow monitoring flexibility where a reliable sampling history and source water assessments demonstrate low risk, with safeguards to identify changing conditions. That is not less protection. It directs limited resources where they provide the greatest public health benefit.

Finally, a comprehensive approach must hold those responsible for contamination accountable. Small utilities should not be expected to finance increasingly expensive treatment while also facing liability for chemicals they did not manufacture or release into the environment. Congress should enact H.R. 1267, the Water Systems PFAS Liability Protection Act, and strengthen infrastructure funding and on-site technical assistance. The test of sound federal water policy is whether communities can deliver safe water consistently, affordably, and over the long term.

4. How can a permanent, federal water affordability program help water systems, especially small and under-resourced, provide safe, reliable drinking water to communities they serve?

In the rural water industry, affordability starts with feasibility. That means achievable, practical regulations, accessible infrastructure funding, and respect for the role of state and local government. Congress wrote technical assistance provisions into the Safe Drinking Water Act because they are the most effective way to help small communities comply with federal mandates without raising rates beyond what families can pay or relying on expensive engineers and consultants.

With smaller economies of scale and lower than average household incomes, water service affordability is a driving factor in whether a small or rural community stays viable. Rural water and wastewater utilities rely on the affordable financing of the EPA State Revolving Fund programs and the USDA Water and Environmental Programs. Without those options, many rural systems would forgo the upgrades needed to protect public health and support the local economy, or would be forced to raise rates to levels that lower-income customers cannot afford. Compliance with new regulations adds to that burden. In Russellville, the SRF is what makes a one million dollar project possible at a rate our customers can carry, and the same is true in small communities across the country. Maintaining those affordable federal financing options is of the utmost importance to rural utilities, and it is the most direct way the federal government keeps water affordable: by keeping the cost of compliance off the rate base in the first place.

Customer assistance programs for water and wastewater bills, while well intended, have seen limited success in rural America. Most rural utilities lack the administrative capacity to manage them, the programs can conflict with state law, and utility staff are not trained social service providers. Customer data collection, eligibility tracking, and reporting can be extremely burdensome. A system with one office clerk does not have a human resources department or a caseworker. A permanent federal program designed around large utilities would, in practice, pass most small systems by.

Small and rural communities carry the public responsibility of complying with every applicable Safe Drinking Water Act and Clean Water Act requirement and of delivering safe drinking water and sanitation every day. More than 91 percent of the approximately 50,000 community water systems serve fewer than 10,000 people, and 81 percent serve fewer than 3,300. Those communities often struggle with complicated federal mandates because of limited economies of

scale and limited technical expertise, and that difficulty is eased by the ongoing training and technical assistance delivered through State Rural Water Associations. That established, trusted assistance allows operators in Alabama and across the country to focus on delivering safe water and clean wastewater service and protecting public health every second of every day.

Customers should pay the cost of their service, and utilities should be given the tools to keep that service efficient and rates affordable. Technical assistance, properly managed and targeted infrastructure funding, and practical regulation are the requirements for sustainable water service and long-term community development in rural America. That is where I would respectfully ask Congress to put its effort first, because it would do more for affordability in a small town than a new program could.