

U.S. House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water Wildlife, and Fisheries  
Legislative Hearing, November 14, 2023, RE: H.R. 5770 (Rep. Neguse), “Water Data Improvement Act”

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Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding H.R. 5770 “Water Data Improvement Act”. I am here today representing the Interstate Council on Water Policy (ICWP), established in 1959 to promote integrated water resource management. ICWP is a national organization that provides an opportunity for regional, state, and local water resource agencies to share experience and inform and shape federal water policies and programs. I serve on ICWP’s Board of Directors and chair of the Water Data and Science Committee. I am also the Manager of Water Resource Operations for the Delaware River Basin Commission, overseeing programs related to droughts, floods, and climate change.

H.R. 5770 Water Data Improvement Act reauthorizes the United States Geological Survey’s (USGS) National Streamflow Information (NSIP), the Groundwater Resources Monitoring Program, and Improved Water Estimation, Measurement, and Monitoring Technologies. With the information provided by these programs, critical decisions are made every day regarding the protection of public health and safety, design and operation of water infrastructure, navigation, agriculture, wildlife, personal well-being, among others.

The NSIP was designed by USGS and authorized by Congress in 2009 to be a federal funded network of streamflow gages to provide reliable, accurate, and timely data related to river flows, water levels, velocity, and other information. It is of utmost importance to the nation and our members to continue the collection and dissemination of vital water data and develop the associated science to inform real-time decisions, planning, and policy development. For decades, ICWP has advocated full implementation and sufficient full-federal funding for the streamgaging program with letters of support to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees and the Administration. Our letter for the FY2024 program is attached to my testimony and has 96 signatories representing stakeholders nationwide, representing multiple states, agencies, and stakeholder groups.

While rereading the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, which H.R. 5770 amends, it occurred to me that for many, the term “data” implies research and science, and the information provided by the national streamflow information program is so much more. Rather than provide excerpts from our letter or go into the specifics of each program, I thought it would be more informative to explain how water resource managers and we the people use and benefit from the data made possible by these programs.

As a water resource manager, one of my responsibilities is to ensure enough freshwater flows into the tidal Delaware River, where intakes for the drinking water supplies of Philadelphia and portions of southwestern New Jersey are located. Much like New Orleans, these water supplies can also be threatened by saltwater moving upstream during droughts and periods of low streamflow. To keep saltwater intrusion to a minimum, reservoir releases are made to meet a minimum flow requirement at

Trenton, New Jersey. Higher freshwater flows push the saltwater downstream, protecting the drinking water intakes from saltwater. Information from more than 34 USGS streamgages along the Delaware River Basin is used to determine the amount and timing of reservoir releases. If too much water is released over time, enough may not be available should conditions become worse.

The National Weather Service flood forecast locations are co-located with USGS streamflow gages because decades of data were available to develop and calibrate the river models that predict the timing and peak river levels. These long-term continuous streamflow records are needed to verify that these models, as well as others, such as the National Water Model, remain accurate given changes that occur on land and in the river that affect streamflow.

Not all streamgages are flood forecast locations, but the real-time information can be used to determine if areas may flood based on the water level or how fast the water is rising. Emergency managers use flood forecasts to determine when and where to mobilize, pre-placing barriers and other equipment prior to a flood event. As the flood is occurring, the real-time streamgage data are used to determine where to deploy life-saving emergency services. For instance, on a sunny day in the spring of 2006, portions of the non-tidal Delaware River experienced the worst flooding since 1955, four days after heavy rains occurred in the headwaters of the river. Public officials had enough time to evacuate low-lying flood-prone areas, potentially saving the lives of the residents.

The recreation community also benefits from the streamgage program. The ability to check river conditions in real-time allows people to make better decisions about activities on the river. People who canoe, tube, and boat along the river check water levels and know if their boat will float or scrape the bottom. I was able to teach my dad how to use the USGS website to check the water level at his favorite fly-fishing locations, so he does not drive over only to find that the flow is too high to wade into the stream.

On behalf of the members of ICWP, we support enactment of the “Water Data Improvement Act” to extend and fund these invaluable programs for an additional five years. The information provided by these programs improves the ability of water resource managers to make informed decisions and planning for public safety, land use, and economic development. Unfortunately, the federal funds appropriated have not covered the costs of the networks, although the original intent was for them to be fully funded. The USGS has been able to maintain portions of the network with limited funding from state and interstate agencies, but not always, and some gages have been discontinued due to the lack of alternate funding sources, impacting those who depend on the data to make informed decisions. Please consider revisiting 9507(a)(5) and 9507(b)(5) to prioritize full funding for the national streamgage network.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about H.R. 5770 and the importance of the USGS streamgage programs for we the people as we use and manager the nation’s water resources.