

**Opening Statement of Republican Leader Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
“There’s Something in the Water: Reforming Our Nation’s
Drinking Water Standards”
July 28, 2020**

As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Almost two years ago, Congress capped off--for the first time in 25 years--the comprehensive reauthorization of the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA). Driven by this Committee, the Act had overwhelming bipartisan support and focused on improving utility compliance, aiding state efforts to help drinking water systems, bringing innovation and resilience to the drinking water sector, bettering management of utility assets and greatly improving poor performing water systems. The legislation continues to make a difference today and I am glad that we can be a part of that, Mr. Chairman.

Today’s hearing, though, is focused on perhaps a more contentious aspect of SDWA: efforts to make substantial changes to the regulatory process for contaminants under the Safe Drinking Water Act.

In my experience, any significant change to a core environmental law requires overwhelming bipartisan support. Knowing this issue is quite important to you and the members in your Caucus, I wanted to lay out some areas of importance to me and my fellow Republican members.

First, we believe objective science should guide decisions. The Safe Drinking Water Act currently requires that science be at the forefront of decision-making process and we believe this must remain the case to protect public health. Facts and science matter.

Second, we are concerned about efforts to eliminate risk from the Act. Specifically, some have called for the removal of the current statutory criteria focused on ‘meaningful health risk reduction’ or that the contaminant’s occurrence be ‘at a frequency and at levels of public concern.’ This would almost certainly result in community water systems spending significant resources on the reduction of contaminants that may not present a significant threat to public health. It also would require EPA to promulgate regulations when there would be little or no meaningful public health benefit.

Issuing numerous drinking water regulations for contaminants that don’t occur at levels of health concern will divert limited resources from more

important actions to assure safe drinking water, like lead service line removals. We must ensure that finite public resources are focused on those contaminants for which public health risks are real and can be reduced.

Additionally, we must be mindful of the burden reforms would have on states, particularly because they would need to keep up with their responsibilities as the primary enforcers of federal regulations. The states are already stretched thin. It's not smart to over-regulate them to the point they are forced to return operation of their drinking water programs to the federal government because of the underfunded mandates ill-conceived reforms would place on them.

Third, we're concerned about waking the ghosts of the 1986 Amendments by placing EPA on an accelerated treadmill of regulatory decision-making quotas and increasing the rolling three-year cycle for regulatory determinations. We are apprehensive about the impact this would have on the scientific community's ability to provide the health effects research and high-quality peer-reviewed risk assessments needed to establish regulatory goals for the increased number of contaminants that EPA would be required to regulate. Again, Mr. Chairman, Republicans believe science and facts matter.

We understand that some people would like to see the federal government act more frequently to regulate. However, the quality of the work is much more important than the quantity of pages in the Federal Register.

Fourth, we believe the costs and benefits provisions should remain part of the Safe Drinking Water Act. One unfortunate impact of its removal is that it could require EPA to establish stringent regulatory standards -- based only on feasibility for large water systems. That could leave small water systems with no affordable options and force states into a burdensome administrative process, so its smaller systems could potentially use technology that less effectively removes the contaminant. This is an especially punitive, no-win sanction on rural and small communities and state governments.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate your ambition in tackling this topic. I wonder whether some of the concerns you have are better remedied with implementation improvements rather than statutory overhauls. I hope our witnesses can help us better understand that and other questions. I appreciate their willingness to testify and want to welcome them.

I yield back the balance of my time.