



HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES
CHAIRMAN BRUCE WESTERMAN

To: Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries Republican Members
From: Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries Staff: Richie O’Connell (richie@mail.house.gov), Doug Levine (doug.levine@mail.house.gov), Kirby Struhar (kirby.struhar@mail.house.gov), and Jackson Renfro (jackson.renfro@mail.house.gov); x5-8331
Date: Monday, March 23, 2026
Subject: Legislative Hearing on 4 Bills

The Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries will hold a legislative hearing on four bills: H.R. 5694 (Rep. Begich), “*Alaska’s Right To Ivory Sales and Tradition Act*” or the “*ARTIST Act*”; H.R. 6893 (Rep. Scott of VA), “*Chesapeake Bay Watershed Advancement for Training, Education, Restoration, and Science (WATERS) Act*”; H.R. 7250 (Rep. Downing), To reauthorize the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System Act of 2000; and H.R. 7889 (Rep. Wittman), “*Advancing Water Research and Collaboration Act of 2025*” or the “*AWRC Act of 2025*”.

The hearing will take place on **Thursday, March 26, 2026, at 10:00 a.m., in room 1324 Longworth House Office Building.**

Member offices are requested to notify Hannah Garrett (hannah.garrett@mail.house.gov) by 4:30 p.m. on Wednesday, March 25, 2026, if their Member intends to participate in the hearing.

I. KEY MESSAGES

- H.R. 5694 amends the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) to protect the right of Alaska Natives to sell authentic native handicrafts and artwork in interstate commerce.
- H.R. 6893 reauthorizes the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Chesapeake Bay Office.
- H.R. 7250 reauthorizes the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System Act of 2000 to continue supporting the development and maintenance of critical rural water infrastructure serving the Fort Peck Reservation and surrounding communities in northeastern Montana.
- H.R. 7889 supports research and education initiatives designed to improve the scientific understanding, management, and sustainability of the nation’s water resources.

II. WITNESSES

Panel I (Members of Congress)

- *To Be Announced*

Panel II (Administration Witnesses)

- **Dr. Tim Petty**, Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere, Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C. [*H.R. 5694* and *H.R. 6893*]

Panel III (Outside Experts)

- **The Hon. Megan Onders**, Chief, King Island Native Community, Nome, Alaska [*H.R. 5694*]
- **Mr. Rick Knick**, Chairman, Board of Directors, Dry Prairie Rural Water System, Culbertson, MT [*H.R. 7250*]
- **Dr. Kevin McGuire**, Director, Virginia Water Resources Research Center, Blacksburg, VA [*H.R. 7889*]
- **Mr. Joshua Kurtz**, Secretary, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Annapolis, MD [*H.R. 6893*] (Minority Witness)

III. BACKGROUND

[H.R. 5694 \(Rep. Begich\), “Alaska’s Right To Ivory Sales and Tradition Act” or the “ARTIST Act”](#)

The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA, or Act)¹ was enacted “to conserve marine mammal populations and protect them from extinction or depletion as a result of human activities.”² Title I of the MMPA contains most of the Act’s provisions, including the moratorium on the take of marine mammals, the process for performing and developing stock assessments, the development of regulations, and provisions addressing commercial fishing.³ The Act is administered by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).⁴

The MMPA comprehensively regulates the take of marine mammals incidental to commercial fishing operations. It also allows NMFS and FWS to develop regulations authorizing the incidental take of “small numbers” of marine mammals for non-fishing activities.⁵ The Act defines take as meaning “to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal.”⁶

¹ P.L. 92-522.

² Anthony R. Marshak, “The Marine Mammal Protection Act (P.L. 92-522): Primer and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, January 5, 2024, available at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R47892.pdf>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, As Amended*, Marine Mammal Commission, www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/2025-06/The-Marine-Mammal-Protection-Act-as-Amended-Through-2023_Final-June-2025-.pdf, accessed 12 February 12, 2026.

⁶ *Id.*

Section 101(b) of the MMPA exempts the take of marine mammals by Alaska Natives for subsistence purposes or “for purposes of creating and selling authentic native articles of handicrafts and clothing.”⁷ Subsistence-related takes fulfill an obvious need for Alaska Natives, particularly those living in remote locations with scarce food and resources. Yet the creation of native handicrafts and clothing from marine mammals is similarly vital, namely, for maintaining Alaska Natives’ traditions and cultures. Such artwork is also a significant source of economic opportunity for Alaska Natives’ communities, as interest in these products is widespread among the state’s residents and millions of annual visitors.

Despite their importance, the sale and trade of these products have faced challenges in recent years. Several states, for example, have enacted bans on ivory, primarily to stem the illegal trade of elephant tusks. But such measures have also banned walrus ivory, which is an essential component of many Alaska Native handicrafts and clothing.

Accordingly, H.R. 5694, sponsored by Representative Nicholas Begich (R-AK-At Large), establishes a special rule under the MMPA to ensure that “an item presented as an authentic Alaska Native article of handicrafts and clothing may be sold in interstate commerce,” provided that the item meets certain criteria.⁸ This change will allow Alaska Natives to continue producing their artwork and handiwork, overriding arbitrary state-level bans.

A similar version of this legislation, introduced by Senator Dan Sullivan (R-AK), recently passed the U.S. Senate by unanimous consent.

H.R. 6893 (Rep. Scott of VA), “Chesapeake Bay Watershed Advancement for Training, Education, Restoration, and Science (WATERS) Act”

Established in 1992, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Chesapeake Bay Office (Office) works as a partner in the Chesapeake Bay Program (Program) by advancing oyster restoration, protecting habitat, and contributing to scientific research.⁹ These efforts help sustain a fishery that produces roughly 500 million pounds of seafood annually¹⁰ and supports abundant recreational opportunities.

H.R. 6893 reauthorizes the Office. The bill also requires Program-funded projects to undergo peer review and the Office’s director to consult with the Chesapeake Executive Council to ensure that the Office’s activities align with the Chesapeake Bay Agreement, a voluntary agreement between Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to protect the Chesapeake Bay.¹¹ The legislation also encourages the Office’s director to collaborate with public and private institutions to support observation systems that are consistent with the Integrated Coastal and Ocean Observation System Act of 2009.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ H.R. 5694, 119th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/5694/text>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ “Chesapeake Bay,” NOAA Fisheries, April 29, 2020, <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/chesapeake-bay>.

¹¹ *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement, 2025*, available at <https://www.chesapeakebay.net/files/documents/CBWA-2025-IV-Final-Facing.pdf>.

H.R. 6893 also reauthorizes NOAA's Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System (CBIBS).¹² Established in 2007, CBIBS collects key water-quality data and other oceanographic and meteorological information that serve the region's boaters, anglers, and scientists.¹³ In reauthorizing this system, the Office's director is encouraged to incorporate these data into the Integrated Ocean Observing System.

Further, the bill authorizes the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Education and Training (Chesapeake B-WET) Program to help serve students and teachers in the Chesapeake Bay region. Although the Chesapeake B-WET Program has funded projects since 2020,¹⁴ it has never operated under specific congressional authorization.¹⁵ Providing statutory authorization would allow the Office to award grants to support education and training to address environmental challenges in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, subject to appropriate direction from Congress. H.R. 6893 also establishes the Chesapeake Bay Coastal Living Resources Management and Habitat Program for oyster restoration, vegetation restoration, shellfish research, and other scientific activities.

Finally, the bill requires the Office to submit to Congress and the Secretary of Commerce a biennial report on the Office's progress in protecting the Chesapeake Bay. The report must also include an action plan that outlines recommended research and data-collection activities, as well as ways to integrate NOAA's work with that of other partners in the Program to achieve the goals of the Chesapeake Bay Agreement.

[H.R. 7250 \(Rep. Downing\), To reauthorize the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System Act of 2000.](#)

The Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System Act of 2000¹⁶ authorized the construction of two interconnected water systems—the Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water System and the Dry Prairie Rural Water System—collectively known as the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System (System).¹⁷ One of Montana's four regional water systems, the System is designed to supply municipal, rural, and industrial water from the Missouri River to the Fort Peck Reservation (Reservation) and surrounding communities in northeastern Montana that historically relied on limited groundwater sources or poor-quality surface water.¹⁸

The System's cost-sharing structure divides federal responsibilities between the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) based on project phase rather

¹² "About the CBIBS Buoy System," NOAA, Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System, <https://buoybay.noaa.gov/about/cbibs-system>, accessed March 12, 2026.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ "Past and Current Chesapeake B-WET Projects," NOAA Fisheries, March 16, 2026, www.fisheries.noaa.gov/new-england-mid-atlantic/chesapeake-bay/past-and-current-chesapeake-b-wet-projects.

¹⁵ "Scott, Wittman, Kiggans, Elfreth Reintroduce Bill Reauthorizing NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office," The Office of Congressman Bobby Scott, December 18, 2025, <https://bobbyscott.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/scott-wittman-kiggans-elfreth-reintroduce-bill-reauthorizing-noaa>.

¹⁶ P.L. 106-382.

¹⁷ H. Rep. No. 106-823, Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System Act of 2000, 106th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/committee-report/106th-congress/house-report/823/1>.

¹⁸ "Get to Know Montana's Regional Water Systems," Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, January 2021, <https://dnrc.mt.gov/docs/conservation/Regional-Water/DNRC-Regional-Water-Systems.pdf>.

than on a proportional cost split.¹⁹ For the Assiniboine and Sioux System Rural Water System, which serves the Reservation, Reclamation is responsible for financing and constructing the infrastructure, while BIA assumes responsibility for funding the operation and maintenance (O&M) of the system once it becomes operational.²⁰ Unlike the Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water System, whose federal cost-share is 100 percent, the federal share for construction of the Dry Prairie Rural Water System, which serves non-Tribal rural communities, is capped at 76 percent.²¹ The non-federal project operator of this component is also responsible for covering all future O&M costs.²²

Major features of the System have already been completed, including a Missouri River raw-water intake and a water treatment plant, which started delivering water in 2012.²³ As construction has progressed, the system has expanded service to thousands of users, delivering water to approximately 3,800 service connections and 1,800 rural connections across multiple communities.²⁴ Although a substantial portion of the infrastructure is already operational, the System has not been fully completed.²⁵ Remaining work primarily involves finishing additional transmission pipelines, storage facilities, and rural distribution connections. Current estimates place final completion in 2028.²⁶

Introduced by Representative Troy Downing (R-MT-02), H.R. 7250 amends the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System Act of 2000 to extend the project's authorization from 2026 to 2028, allowing continued federal support for the System's construction and maintenance.²⁷ The completed System will consist of over 3,200 miles of pipeline and deliver drinking water to more than 20 communities and nearly 4,000 farms, ranches, and rural homes.²⁸

[H.R. 7889 \(Rep. Wittman\), "Advancing Water Research and Collaboration Act of 2025" or the "AWRC Act of 2025"](#)

Authorized by Section 104 of the Water Resources Research Act of 1984 and administered by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the Water Resources Research Act Program is a federally supported research and education initiative designed to improve the scientific understanding, management, and sustainability of the nation's water resources.²⁹ Specifically, the program

¹⁹ H. Rep. No. 106-823, Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System Act of 2000, 106th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/committee-report/106th-congress/house-report/823/1>.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ "Get to Know Montana's Regional Water Systems," Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, January 2021, <https://dnrc.mt.gov/docs/conservation/Regional-Water/DNRC-Regional-Water-Systems.pdf>.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Buy America General Applicability Public Interest Waiver for Rural Water Program Previously Planned Projects*, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, May 2, 2024, <https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-05/doi-usbr-rural-water-program-public-interest-waiver.pdf>.

²⁷ H.R. 7250, 119th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/119/bills/hr7250/BILLS-119hr7250ih.pdf>.

²⁸ "Get to Know Montana's Regional Water Systems," Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, January 2021, <https://dnrc.mt.gov/docs/conservation/Regional-Water/DNRC-Regional-Water-Systems.pdf>.

²⁹ "Water Resources Research Act Program," U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, <https://water.usgs.gov/wrri/>, accessed March 11, 2026.

provides federal funding to a nationwide network of Water Resources Research Institutes (WRRI) located at universities in every U.S. state, as well as in U.S. territories and the District of Columbia, ensuring that each state and territory is equipped to manage its unique water challenges.³⁰

Sponsored by Representative Rob Wittman (R-VA-01), H.R. 7889 reauthorizes the program through Fiscal Year (FY) 2029 and increases the program's authorization of appropriations from \$15 million to \$16 million per year.³¹ The legislation adds the artificial intelligence (AI) industry's water-use impacts to the Congressional declarations of purpose for the program, reflecting that many WRRIs are already working with industry partners to meet growing water demands associated with the expansion of AI technologies.³² Lastly, this bill formally establishes an 80/20 funding allocation between the base program and special interstate project funds, respectively.³³

IV. MAJOR PROVISIONS & ANALYSIS

[H.R. 5694 \(Rep. Begich\), "Alaska's Right To Ivory Sales and Tradition Act" or the "ARTIST Act"](#)

Section 2. Alaska Native Handicrafts.

- Amends the MMPA to allow for the sale of authentic Alaska Native handicrafts and clothing to be sold in interstate commerce.
- Provides for the same longstanding exemption for the taking of marine mammals for subsistence purposes or for the creation of Alaska Native handicrafts.
- Allows the Secretary of Commerce to promulgate regulations to recover a species or stock of marine mammals if it becomes depleted.

[H.R. 6893 \(Rep. Scott of VA\), "Chesapeake Bay Watershed Advancement for Training, Education, Restoration, and Science \(WATERS\) Act"](#)

Section 3. Reauthorization of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Chesapeake Bay Office.

- Reauthorizes the Office to support its work in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Allows the Office to be headed by a Director with knowledge of the Chesapeake Bay.
- Authorizes the Director to implement Program activities, which include the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Education and Training Program, the Coastal and Living Resources Management and Habitat Program, and working with the Chesapeake Executive Council.
- Authorizes the Director to work with academic and scientific institutions to support observation systems consistent with the Integrated Coastal and Ocean Observation System Act of 2009.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ H.R. 7889, 119th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/7889>.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

[H.R. 7250 \(Rep. Downing\), To reauthorize the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System Act of 2000.](#)

Section 1. Reauthorization.

- Extends the authorization for the construction and maintenance of the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System from 2026 to 2028.

[H.R. 7889 \(Rep. Wittman\), “Advancing Water Research and Collaboration Act of 2025” or the “AWRC Act of 2025”](#)

Section 2. Congressional Declaration of Purpose.

- Amends the Congressional declaration of purpose in the Water Resources Research Act of 1984 to include the AI industry.

Section 3. Water Resources Research and Technology Institutes.

- Reauthorizes the Water Resources Research Act Program through FY 2029 and increases the program’s authorization of appropriations from \$15 million to \$16 million per year.
- Establishes an 80/20 funding allocation between the base program and special interstate project funds, respectively.

V. COST

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that enactment of S. 254, the Senate companion to H.R. 5694, will not affect the federal budget.³⁴

A formal cost estimate from CBO is not yet available for the remaining bills.

VI. ADMINISTRATION POSITION

The Trump administration’s position on any of these bills is unknown at this time.

VII. EFFECT ON CURRENT LAW

[H.R. 5694](#)

[H.R. 6893](#)

[H.R. 7250](#)

[H.R. 7889](#)

³⁴ “Congressional Budget Office Cost Estimate: S. 254, ARTIST Act,” Congressional Budget Office, August 15, 2025, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/61684>.