WRITTEN TESTIMONY

OF

KRISTIN CONZET
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
WESTERN DAKOTA REGIONAL WATER SYSTEM
PO BOX 484
RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA 57709
605-519-7333
KRISTIN.CONZET@WDRWS.ORG

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, WILDLIFE, AND FISHERIES

"LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON H.R. 7288"
April 16, 2026

SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

TO:

CHAIRWOMAN HARRIET HAGEMAN
RANKING MEMBER VAL HOYLE

Dear Chairwoman Hageman and Ranking Member Hoyle:

Please accept this written testimony for inclusion in the official record of the Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries' April 16, 2026 hearing on H.R. 7288, a bill to require the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study to determine the feasibility of constructing a project to supply municipal, rural, and industrial water from the Missouri River to the Western Dakota Regional Water System, and for other purposes.

It is important to note that Bureau of Reclamation (BoR) leadership has indicated limited capacity to complete the requested feasibility study. WDRWS stands ready to have its consulting team complete a majority of the feasibility study under BoR oversight through a cooperative agreement with the BoR.

Western Dakota Regional Water System

Western Dakota Regional Water System (WDRWS) was formed in response to growing concerns among western South Dakota communities, rural water systems, and regional leaders about the long-term reliability of their water supplies. Around five years ago, West Dakota Water Development District (WDWDD) commissioned South Dakota Mines to study whether WDWDD should retain its future use permit for Missouri River water, an additional water source required for projected growth in Pennington County, SD. In addition, the study provided anticipated infrastructure and costs to convey water from the Missouri River to Pennington County. The study found that the current water demand exceeds the available water budget during drought conditions. Projected water demands emphasized that the local water sources that have sustained the region for decades could not reliably support future demand on their own. At the same time, steady population growth, increasing pressure on rural water systems, and the expansion of Ellsworth Air Force Base made it clear that a long-term, drought-resistant solution was necessary. Individual communities understood they could not solve this challenge alone.

In response, regional partners came together to form the WDRWS as a nonprofit regional entity with the sole purpose of securing a permanent, reliable water supply for western South Dakota. Founding members included municipalities, rural water systems, Tribes, and regional stakeholders who shared the understanding that the Missouri River is a sustainable long-term solution, just as it has been for eastern South Dakota. Since its formation, WDRWS has grown steadily in membership and support, completed initial engineering and planning work, secured state, and local funding to advance project development, and built partnerships with state and federal leaders.

Over the past five years, our efforts have evolved from a shared concern into an organized regional initiative with broad support and a clear path forward. The State of South Dakota demonstrated its commitment to this effort through an over $10 million investment of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to advance planning and development. Those funds have been matched with an additional $2 million in state and $900,000 in local funds. WDRWS has worked to define the project concept, evaluate potential intake and delivery options, and position the project for federal feasibility study authorization. This progress reflects a proactive, locally led effort, supported by significant state partnership, to address a regional water supply challenge before it becomes a crisis. WDRWS will ensure western South Dakota can sustain its communities, agriculture, Tribal Nations, federal lands, and national defense mission for generations to come. Please note the letters of support included at the end of this testimony, including a letter from South Dakota Governor Larry Rhoden.

The Need for Missouri River Water in Western South Dakota

Western South Dakota, a 51,600 square mile area, faces a structural water supply problem that cannot be solved with existing sources. Communities, ranchers, and critical national assets rely heavily on the Madison and Minnelusa aquifers, which are finite, over-allocated in key areas, and vulnerable to drought. Most livestock producers depend on shallow wells, windmills, and springs that are becoming less reliable. At the same time, the region is experiencing steady population growth and increased demand, driven in part by the expansion of Ellsworth Air Force Base, which plays a vital role in national defense. Western South Dakota remains the only major region of the state without access to Missouri River water, the state's most reliable long-term water source. Without action, water limitations will increasingly constrain economic stability, agricultural production, and national security infrastructure.

The United States Geological Survey (USGS), in cooperation with the WDRWS, evaluated groundwater conditions in the Black Hills region, focusing on the Deadwood, Madison, Minnelusa, Minnekahta, Sundance, and Inyan Kara aquifers, which supply most of the municipal and rural water in western South Dakota. https://pubs.usgs.gov/publication/sir20255067.

Using data from 1931 through 2022, the study found that these aquifers receive approximately 279,000-acre-feet of recharge annually under average precipitation conditions, with more than 75% occurring in the Madison and Minnelusa formations, which are also the most heavily relied upon sources.

Groundwater withdrawals have increased approximately 33% since the 1990s, reaching about 50,000-acre feet annually, reflecting growing demand. The study identified localized areas of concern, including the Rapid City, Piedmont, and Hermosa regions, where withdrawals and water level trends indicate increasing stress. The study also found that recharge is dependent on precipitation and variable hydrologic conditions, and that water quality and usability vary by location.

USGS concluded that while these aquifers remain essential water sources, they are finite and subject to increasing demand and hydrologic variability, reinforcing the need for long term, drought resilient supplemental water supplies.

Federal Nexus

Ellsworth Air Force Base (EAFB):

WDRWS directly supports the long-term water security of Ellsworth Air Force Base, a major United States Air Force installation with a critical national defense mission. The base is undergoing significant expansion, including the beddown of the B-21 Raider Long-Range Strike Bomber, which will further increase water demand and the strategic importance of reliable infrastructure. A permanent, drought-resistant water supply is essential to ensure mission assurance, operational continuity, and the ability of the installation to perform its national security functions without disruption. By securing a sustainable Missouri River water source, WDRWS helps protect a federal military asset in which the United States has invested billions of dollars. This project supports federal military readiness and aligns directly with national defense priorities by ensuring the infrastructure necessary to sustain current operations and future mission growth.

Native American Tribal Consultation and Nation-to-Nation Engagement

Western South Dakota is home to approximately 51,570 Native American residents whose communities depend on in part finite and vulnerable groundwater supplies. Twenty-eight Tribes have ancestral ties to the Missouri River, and Tribes in western South Dakota have been engaged in discussions regarding long term water supply solutions since the inception of the WDRWS. Tribal representatives, including members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, participated in early project governance to help identify regional water needs. Formal government-to-government consultation is a federal responsibility, and authorization of the feasibility study allows the BoR to evaluate opportunities to improve long term water reliability consistent with federal trust and treaty obligations.

Figure 1 Tribal Nations map courtesy of U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

The passage of HR7288 and S3723 and the direction of the U.S. BoR to lead a study of the feasibility of bringing Missouri River water to western South Dakota triggers the involvement of the federal government and the ability to begin government-to-government consultation with Tribes.

WDRWS welcomes the involvement of BoR and the Tribes to ensure that Tribal water needs, rights, and priorities are fully evaluated as part of the project. Tribes that could directly benefit from a partnership with WDRWS to access additional Missouri River water include the Oglala Sioux Tribe, Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, and Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. As with other water systems throughout the western part of South Dakota, the WDRWS would seek a partnership that would support and supplement existing systems by providing additional water and redundancy to current water supplies.

1. **Mni Wašté Water Company**: The Mni Wašté Water Company is a tribally chartered entity owned by the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, dedicated to providing safe, clean drinking water to residents on the Cheyenne River Reservation in north-central South Dakota. It sources water from the Missouri River at the eastern boundary of the reservation, transporting raw water 10 miles to a water treatment plant. It serves approximately 14,000 members primarily in Dewey and Ziebach Counties (the core of the reservation), with extensions into western Meade County and southeastern Perkins County.
2. **Standing Rock Sioux Rural Water**: The Standing Rock Sioux Rural Water System is a tribally managed water supply system serving the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which straddles North Dakota and South Dakota along the Missouri River. It sources water primarily from the Missouri River (Oahe Reservoir/Lake Oahe) via intakes (including facilities near Fort Yates, ND, and a newer near in Mobridge, SD), delivering safe drinking water to communities such as Fort Yates, Wakpala, Kenel, Little Eagle, Bullhead, Cannon Ball, and others across the reservation and some surrounding areas in Sioux County, ND, and Corson County, SD.
3. **Rosebud Rural Water System**: The Rosebud Rural Water System is a tribal component of the Mni Wiconi Rural Water Supply Project. It receives high-quality, safe drinking water sourced primarily from the Missouri River via the Mni Wiconi core treatment plant near Fort Pierre, South Dakota. The Mni Wiconi water supply is supplemented by 19 groundwater wells and serves the Rosebud Sioux Tribe on the Rosebud Indian Reservation primarily in Todd County, with extensions into Mellette, Gregory, and surrounding areas.
4. **Lower Brule Sioux Rural Water System**: The Lower Brule Sioux Rural Water System is a key tribal component of the Mni Wiconi Rural Water Supply Project, which provides high-quality Missouri River-sourced drinking water to the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe on the Lower Brule Indian Reservation. The system primarily serves residents in Lyman County (core of the reservation) and parts of Stanley County in central South Dakota, supporting municipal, rural, and tribal needs with ongoing federal operations and maintenance support. The Lower Brule Sioux Rural Water System operates its own water supply and treatment system in addition to receiving supplemental water service from the Mni Wiconi Rural Water Supply Project.
5. **The Mni Wiconi Rural Water Supply Project**: The Mni Wiconi Rural Water Supply Project is a large-scale municipal, rural, and industrial water system in South Dakota created by Public Law 100-516 that provides a reliable, safe drinking water supply from the Missouri River to serve tribal communities on three Sioux Indian Reservations and adjacent non-tribal rural areas in west and south-central South Dakota. Public Law 100-516 directed the Secretary of the Interior (through BoR) to plan, design, and construct the Oglala Sioux Rural Water Supply System on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and to enter cooperative agreements for related non-tribal systems (West River/Lyman-Jones Rural Water System). Subsequent amendments added service to the Rosebud and Lower Brule Reservations as part of the Project. It was designed to address chronic water shortages, poor quality, and health/safety issues on the reservations and adjacent non-tribal areas. The eastern portion of the proposed WDRWS overlaps with the Mni Wiconi Rural Water Supply Project service territory. Any regional water solution for western South Dakota would

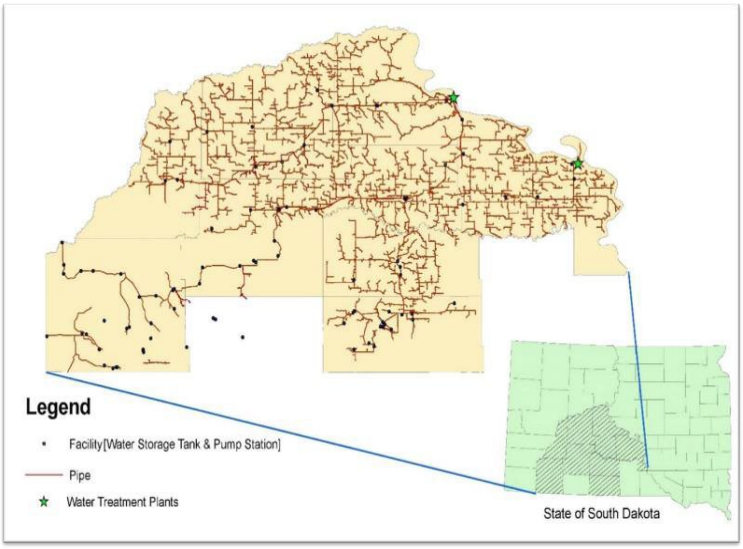

Figure 2 Service Area of the Mni Wiconi System, map courtesy of U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

be well served to coordinate between the Mni Wiconi and WDRWS to avoid duplication of services and unnecessary overhead costs. Authorizing BoR to conduct a WDRWS feasibility study would provide an opportunity for BoR to engage in nation-to-nation consultation on a regional water solution that best addresses long-term tribal and non-tribal water needs for western South Dakota

Federal Land & Trust

The WDRWS supports areas with significant federal land and trust responsibility, including Black Hills National Forest, Buffalo Gap National Grassland, and Badlands National Park. These federally managed lands rely on sustainable water resources to support recreation, grazing, tourism, natural resource management, and the surrounding gateway communities. In addition, federal grazing permittees depend on reliable water access to sustain livestock operations on these lands. By developing a permanent Missouri River water supply, the WDRWS helps fulfill the federal government's responsibility to protect the long-term viability, economic productivity, and public use of these nationally significant lands and the communities and economies connected to them.

State of South Dakota Impact

Livestock Producers

WDRWS supports livestock-based agriculture, primarily cow, calf, and cattle operations that depend on reliable water every single day to sustain animal health and production. This makes water infrastructure essential, not optional, for the continuation of these operations.

The project protects existing agricultural production that is already contributing to the regional and national economy, rather than supporting speculative future growth. It serves the majority of South Dakota grazing lands, where cattle production is the dominant agricultural activity and the foundation of many rural communities. The system also addresses failing and declining stock water sources, including shallow wells, windmills, and springs, which are becoming less reliable due to drought and aquifer limitations. By providing a permanent, drought resistant water supply in an arid and drought prone region, the WDRWS supports large-scale ranch operations that span extensive geographic areas and fulfills the federal rural water mission to sustain remote agricultural economies.

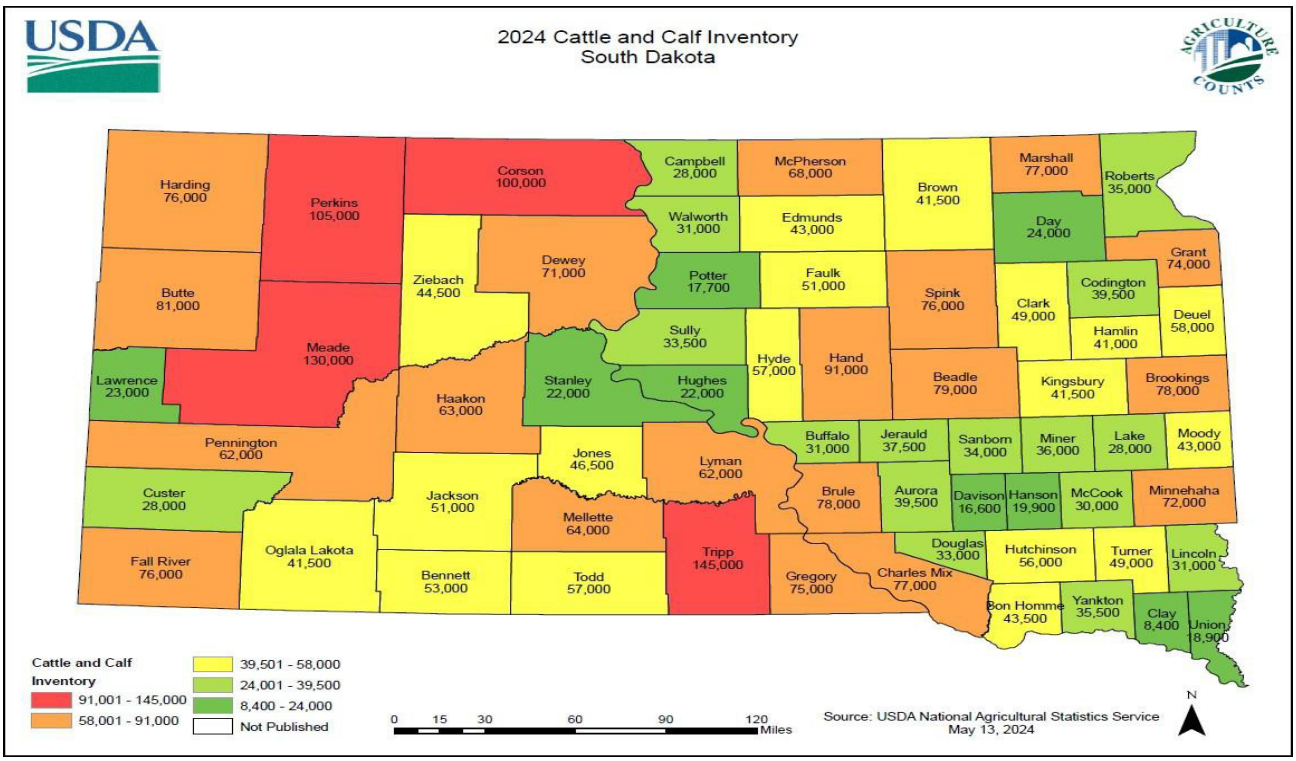

Figure 3 2024 Cattle & Calf Inventory, map courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture

Tourism

Tourism is the economic engine of western South Dakota and depends on reliable water. The Black Hills and Badlands generate approximately $2 billion annually and support 20,000 to 25,000 jobs. Mount Rushmore National Memorial attracts about 2.5 million visitors each year, Badlands National Park more than 1 million, and Black Hills National Forest approximately 3 million recreational visits.

Gateway communities including Rapid City, Keystone, Hill City, Custer, and Wall rely on groundwater from the Madison and Minnelusa aquifers to support residents and millions of visitors, with peak demand occurring during the driest months. Missouri River water is essential to sustain this federal tourism economy and protect the $2 billion industry that depends on reliable water in western South Dakota.

Need

The need for the WDRWS is driven first and foremost by the region's increasing risk to long-term water reliability. Western South Dakota remains the only region of the state without access to a Missouri River municipal water supply. For decades, many communities relied primarily on the Madison and Minnelusa aquifers. These aquifers are finite, precipitation-dependent groundwater sources that are susceptible to drought, which can result in variable recharge and reduced aquifer production. Water rights and allocations do not guarantee physical deliverability during drought, and repeated drought cycles have demonstrated the region's vulnerability to shortages. The WDRWS provides a permanent, drought resistant solution by accessing the Missouri River, a stable and federally managed supply capable of supporting the region's long-term needs.

The expansion of Ellsworth Air Force Base significantly increases the urgency of securing a reliable water supply. The federally directed B 21 bomber beddown will bring permanent aircraft, personnel, and families to the region, creating sustained and non-discretionary water demand. Ellsworth Air Force Base is a critical national defense installation, and its mission readiness depends on reliable municipal infrastructure, including water. The WDRWS supports national security by ensuring a dependable long-term water supply for this strategic installation and the surrounding defense community.

The WDRWS encompasses five Tribal Nations in western South Dakota and can be a partner in access to a long-term, drought-resistant Missouri River supply. Many Tribal systems face the same groundwater limitations, drought vulnerability, and infrastructure constraints affecting the broader region. As the Missouri River is a federally managed resource, development of this supply supports the federal government's trust responsibility to ensure reliable water infrastructure that protects public health, strengthens Tribal communities, and promotes long-term water security.

Agriculture remains a foundational component of western South Dakota's economy and is directly dependent on reliable water. Livestock producers require consistent water supplies to sustain herds, maintain herd health, and support regional and national food production. Drought conditions increase stress on local groundwater systems, placing agricultural operations at risk. A Missouri River supply provides long-term stability that protects the agricultural economy and preserves the viability of rural communities.

Tourism places significant seasonal demand on already limited water supplies. The Black Hills and Badlands region generates approximately $2.0 billion in annual visitor spending and relies on dependable water infrastructure to support gateway communities and federally managed destinations. Peak tourism occurs during the driest months, intensifying stress on groundwater systems. Reliable water infrastructure is essential to sustain this economic driver. Informal discussions with representatives from Badlands National Park and Wind Cave National Park have indicated both facilities have limited water supply capacity issues. Mount Rushmore National Memorial draws drinking water from a fractured rock groundwater system, requiring treatment to manage contaminants. Recent tests found per and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS ("forever chemicals")) exceeding proposed new federal limits, alongside historically detected perchlorate from past fireworks displays.

The WDRWS will deliver Missouri River water to the only remaining geographic region of the state without access, while supporting national defense, Tribal communities, and federally managed lands. Regional organization, completed planning, and strong local and state support position the project to move efficiently from federal feasibility study to construction, ensuring timely infrastructure development before shortages become a crisis.

WDRWS Preparation and Pre-Feasibility Work

Over the past five years, the WDRWS has completed the foundational technical, engineering, and regional coordination work required by the BoR to advance a Missouri River water supply solution. This work confirms the need, demonstrates technical viability, and positions the project to proceed immediately upon federal feasibility study authorization.

- **User Canvassing and Membership Outreach:** Established a regional user coalition of 49 water systems, Tribal partners, and communities across western South Dakota. The user canvassing and membership outreach efforts targeted answering questions regarding regional water service, determining interest in participation, and gathering information to help understand potential and future water needs for project participants. To date, WDRW has 49 members, including 30 different public water systems and 19 other stakeholders.

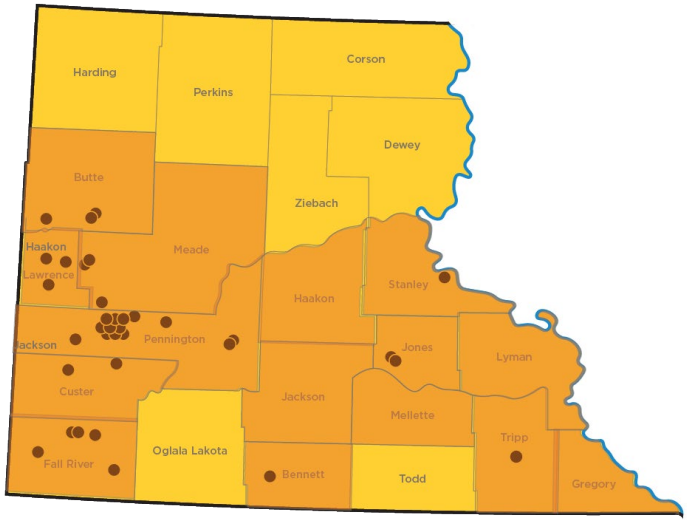

Figure 4 WDRWS footprint and membership.

- **Water Supply Analysis:** Completed need and options analysis to define long-term water supply deficiencies and evaluate potential solutions in cooperation with the USGS. The USGS validated the findings of a South Dakota Mines study that indicated existing local water supplies may not be able to meet current demands during prolonged drought conditions.

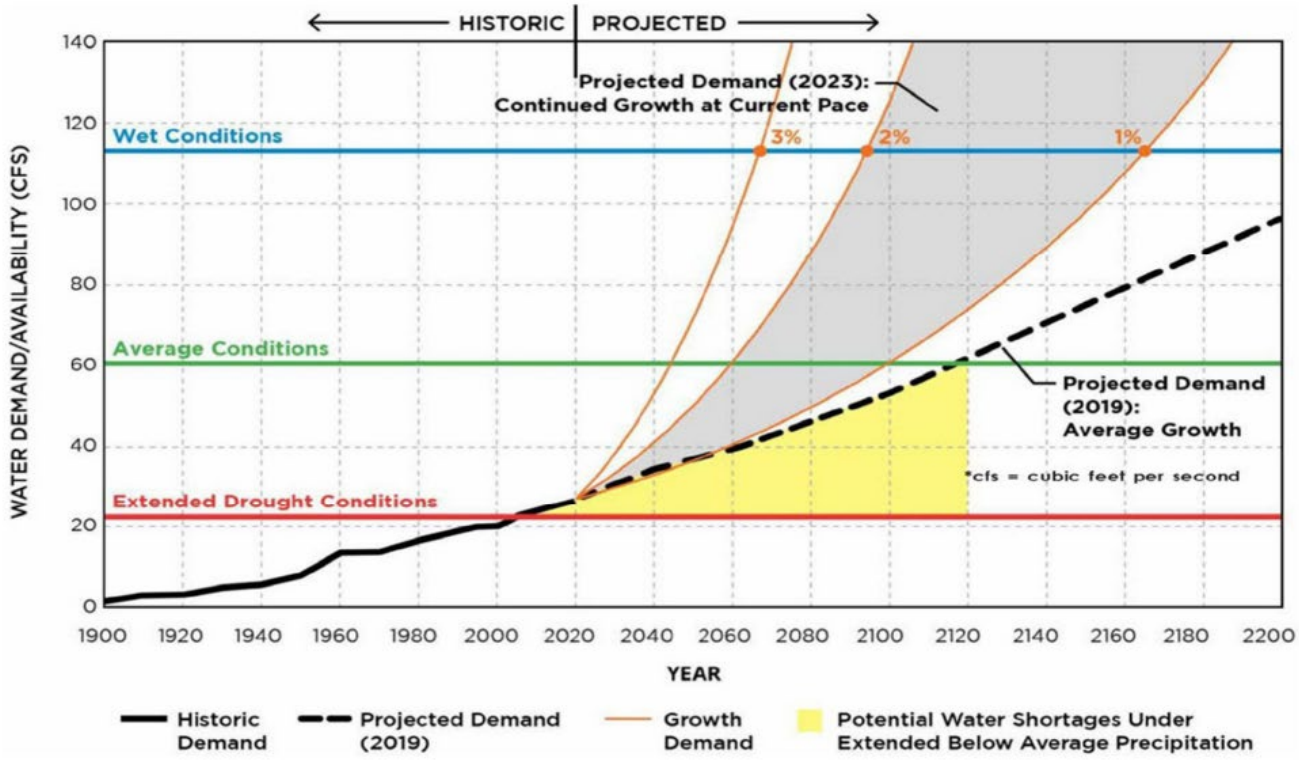

Figure 5 Water availability in western Pennington County under various precipitation conditions in comparison to population growth and water demand projections.

- **Population and Water Demand Projections:** Completed long-term population and corresponding water demand projections based on historical data. Historical population and water demand information were evaluated for each member, resulting in a predicted collective water demand growth rate of 1.13% per year.

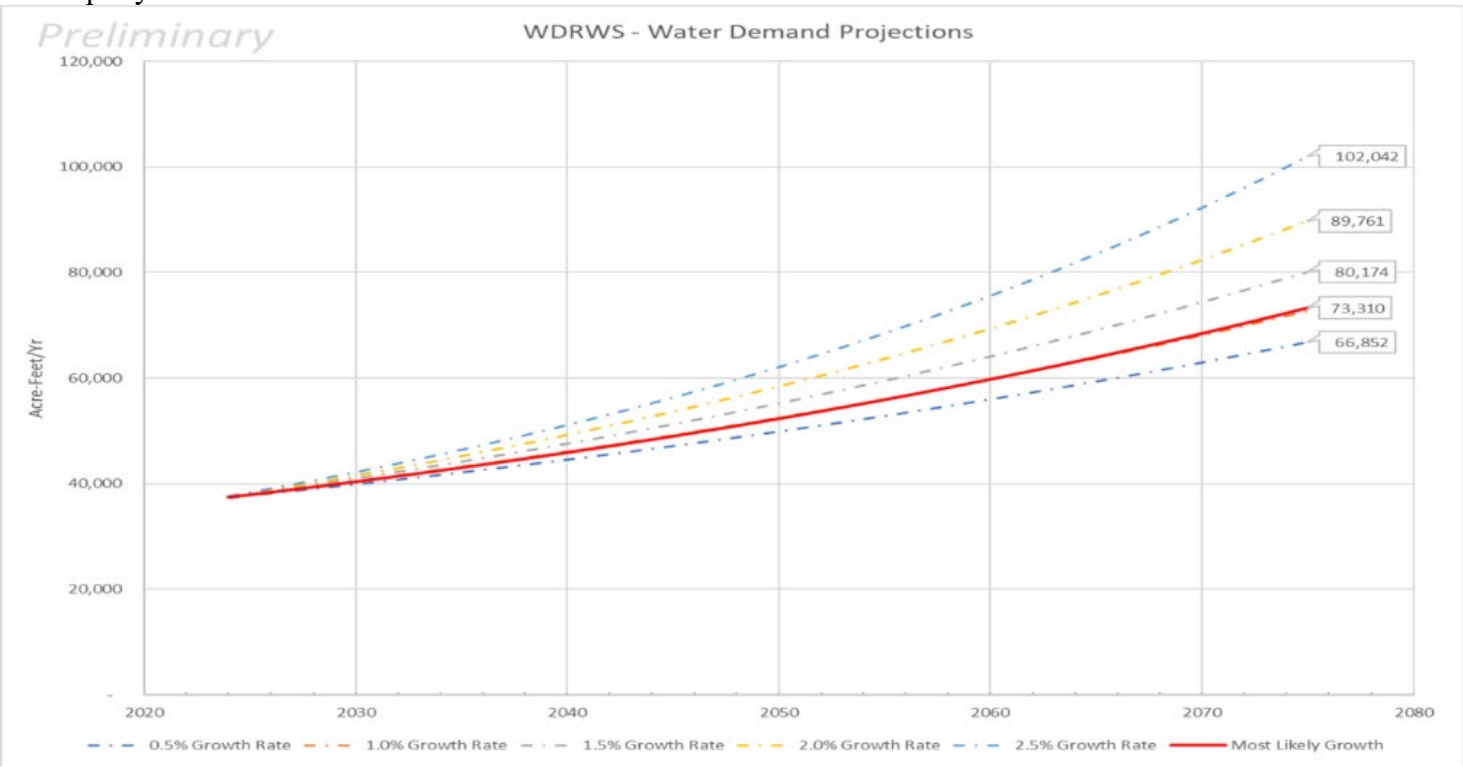

Figure 6 Long-term water demand projection for WDRWS members.

- **Conducted Appraisal Level Engineering**, including conceptual intake, pipeline corridors, transmission and distribution system layout, storage planning, and water treatment concepts.
- **Water Supply Intake Analysis**: Three alternatives were evaluated with a new intake in Lake Oahe as the recommended alternative due to lower construction and operational costs.

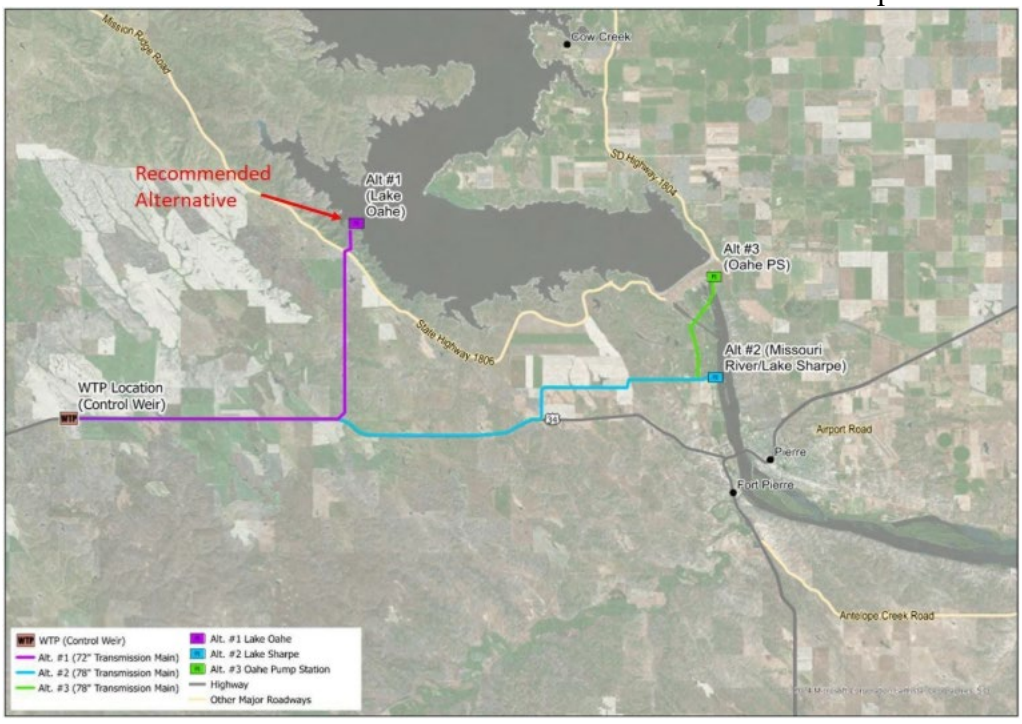

Figure 7 Location of three water supply intake alternatives evaluated.

- **Conceptual Transmission System Hydraulic Model and Design**: Developed a conceptual hydraulic model and design of a 72-inch diameter transmission pipeline from Lake Oahe to Rapid City, including pump stations, and reservoirs.

Figure 8 Conceptual horizontal alignment and design of WDRWS transmission system.

- **Conceptual Distribution System (In-Progress)**: Developing a conceptual distribution system to deliver water to all WDRWS members. The conceptual design is in progress and is scheduled to be completed in mid-2026.

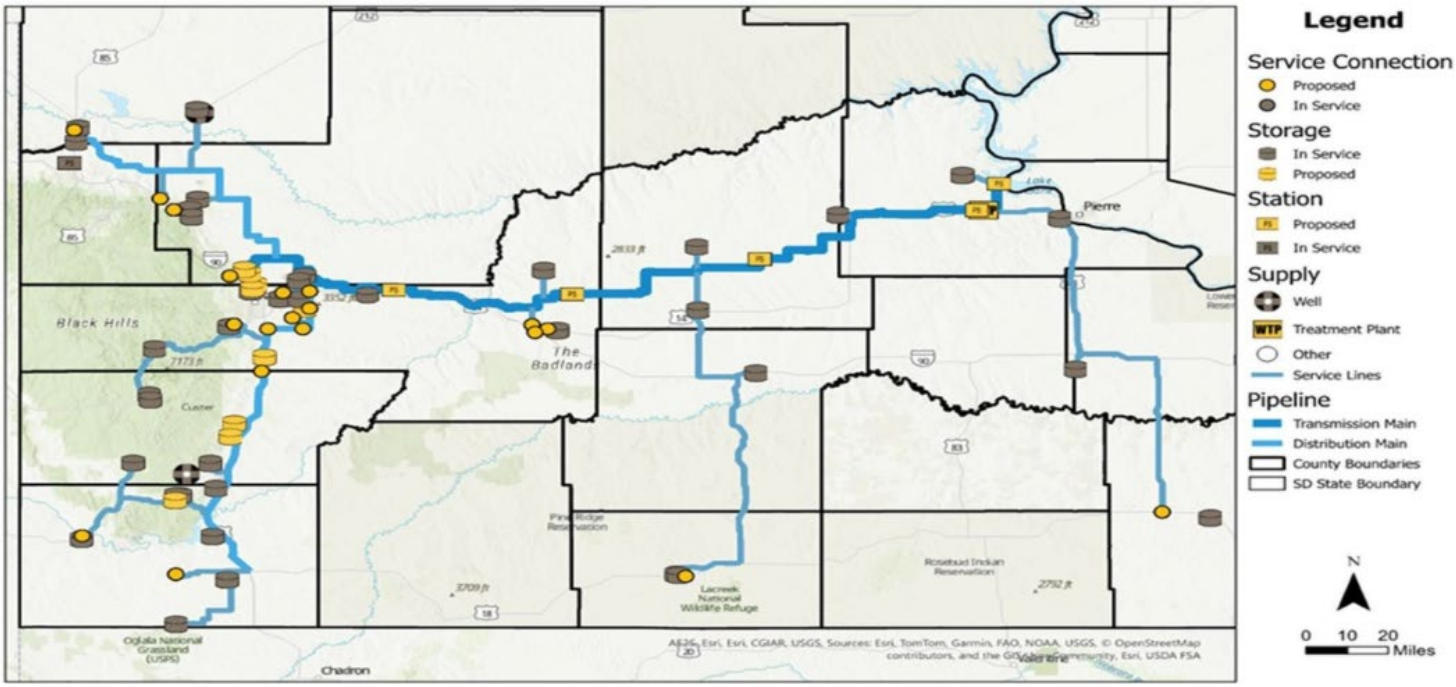

Figure 9 Conceptual WDRWS distribution system layout.

- **Conceptual Water Treatment System (In-Progress)**: Developing conceptual water treatment systems to provide water quality compatible with existing WDRWS Members' water quality. Samples have been collected from the Missouri River and analyzed for comparison to water quality data collected from Members. Conceptual designs are in progress and scheduled to be completed in mid-2026.
- **Conceptual Financial Analysis (In-Progress)**: Developing preliminary capital and operational cost estimates for life cycle cost analyses for financial planning to support project implementation and federal evaluation. The conceptual financial models are under development pending completion of conceptual designs and are scheduled to be completed in late 2026. Summary of preliminary capital cost estimates developed to date:
    - Intake System:$0.24B to $0.27B
    - Transmission System: $2.00B to 2.50B
    - Treatment System: To Be Determined (TBD)
    - Distribution System: TBD
- **Critical Issues Analyses**: Preliminary critical issues analyses on the proposed pipeline alignments are being completed to identify potential barriers (critical issues) to project construction. The baseline criteria for the analyses are to identify natural, biological, and cultural resources, geographic areas, and political boundaries that will require additional review, and may require avoidance, minimization, or mitigation as well as associated local, state, and federal permits. The conceptual designs are implementing a strategy of avoidance as it relates to critical issues.
- **Coordinated with the BoR, USGS, and state agencies** to evaluate aquifer conditions, water availability, and federal interest.

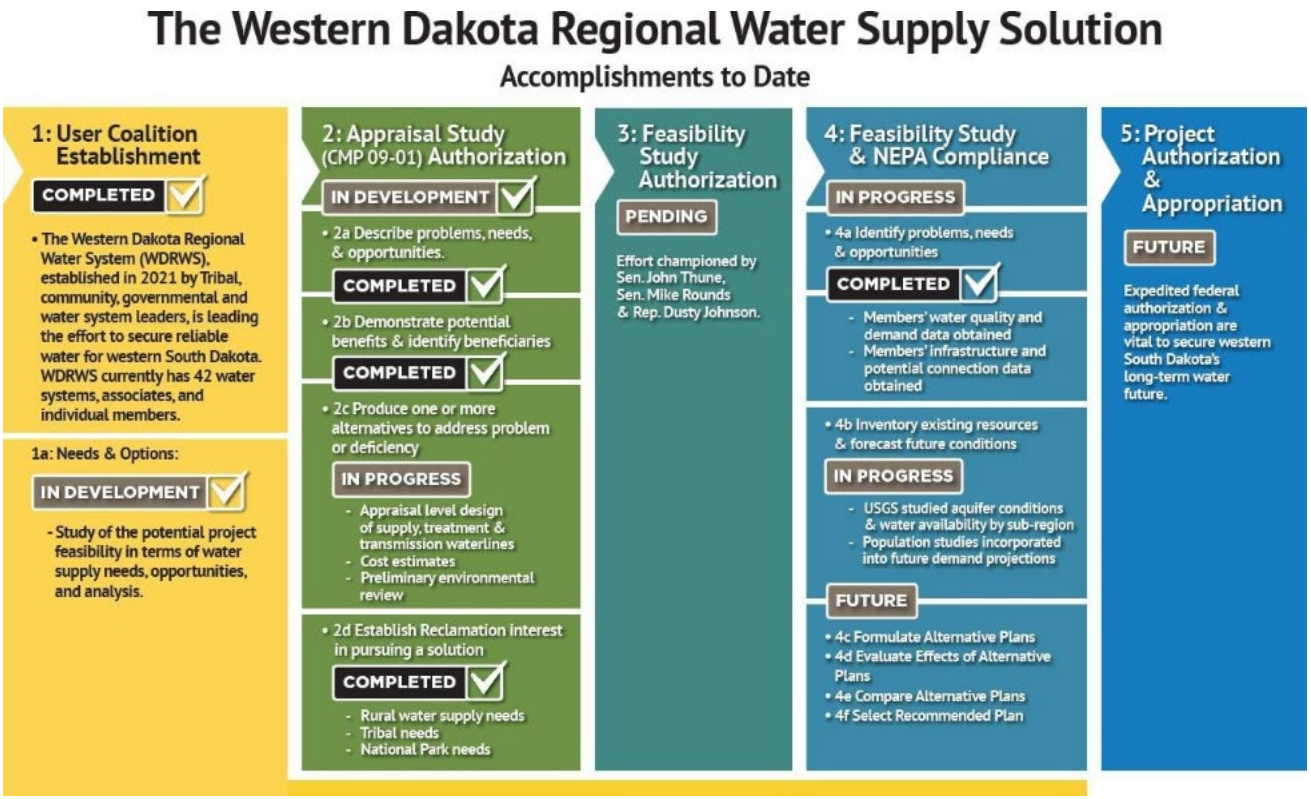

Figure 10 WDRWS Accomplishments to Date

Groundwater Quality Risks and Regulatory Compliance Challenges
In addition to water quantity issues throughout western South Dakota, drinking water quality poses challenges for many communities. Missouri River water promises abundant, clean water for communities in the reg ion.

- **PFAS**
  - Rapid Valley Sanitary District had one perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOS) sample with a result of 0.0057 (µg/L)
  - Rapid Valley Sanitary District had perfluorohexanesulfonic acid (PFHxS) samples ranging from 0.0033 to 0.004125 (µg/L)
  - Rapid City had a PFHxS sample with a result of 0.0041 (µg/L)
  - West River/Lyman Jones had a PFBA sample with a result 0.0081 (µg/L)

(*Sample data is not available for smaller WDRWS members. Although three members had test results above the minimum reporting level (MRL) PFAS samples can be easily contaminated so the results do not necessarily show a dire PFAS problem. There was groundwater contamination associated with Ellsworth Airforce Base which could be leaned on to stress the concern of contamination to the source waters of WDRWS members. Some small systems and individual users have been impacted by the PFAS plume due to the base contamination. Those impacted have since stopped using their contaminated supply and are now receiving water from Rapid City/Box Elder.)

- **Radionuclides**
  - City of New Underwood provides treatment for removal of radionuclides.
  - City of Edgemont provides treatment for removal of radionuclides.
  - Town of Hermosa historically has had levels of radionuclides that are just under the Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL).
  - City of Box Elder has elevated levels of radionuclides, but concentrations are below the MCL.
  - Butte-Meade Sanitary District has elevated levels of radionuclides, but concentrations are below the MCL.
- **Arsenic**
  - City of Martin has arsenic levels that are at the MCL
  - City of Hill City has arsenic levels at/above the MCL
  - City of Edgemont has elevated arsenic levels that are just below the MCL
  - Keystone (while not a WDRWS member they are a member of Southern Black Hills Rural Water) has arsenic problems (one well not run because it is way above the MCL)

Regional and Federal Benefit

Missouri River supply through the WDRWS provides significant regional and national benefits by strengthening national security, supporting interstate water stability, mitigating drought risk, and improving the resilience of critical infrastructure. This project aligns federal priorities to protect military readiness, ensure reliable water supplies, and invest in long term infrastructure that supports economic and community stability.

National Security
Ellsworth Air Force Base is a strategic national defense installation and future home of the B 21 bomber mission. A reliable, drought-resilient Missouri River water supply ensures uninterrupted base operations, supports military families living in surrounding communities, and protects billions in federal defense investment.

Native American Tribes and Communities
Missouri River water provides long term supply stability that supports Tribal communities, economic opportunity, and public health. This project advances the federal government's trust responsibility by strengthening regional water infrastructure that benefits Tribal members living both on Tribal lands and in surrounding service communities.

Interstate Stability
Missouri River water is a federally managed resource intended to serve multiple states and authorized uses. Developing infrastructure to deliver this supply to western South Dakota ensures equitable access within the basin and supports balanced regional development consistent with federal water management objectives.

Drought Mitigation
Western South Dakota's current groundwater sources are finite and vulnerable to drought conditions and long-term depletion. Missouri River supply provides a renewable, drought-resilient source that protects communities, agriculture, and industry from future water shortages.

Financial Positioning
WDRWS is currently completing a financial analysis to identify capital and operating costs associated with concepts developed as part of the appraisal study. The outcome of this study will be to inform participating water systems of the cost of participation and to support development of system-specific funding strategies for the local cost share.

Request for Authorization

WDRWS respectfully requests congressional authorization of the Bureau of Reclamation to be the lead federal agency on the feasibility study under S.3723.

This study is the essential first step to:

- Determine the engineering feasibility of delivering Missouri River water to western South Dakota.
- Establish accurate project cost estimates to inform federal and nonfederal investment decisions.
- Evaluate federal interest in supporting a municipal, rural, and industrial water supply project.
- Identify the most efficient intake locations, transmission routes, and storage requirements.
- Ensure responsible stewardship of federal resources through a thorough technical evaluation.

Authorization of this feasibility study will allow the federal government and project partners to:

- Protect national defense readiness at Ellsworth Air Force Base.
- Engage in Nation-to-Nation discussions to the 5 Tribal Nations.
- Strengthen long-term public health and regulatory compliance stability.
- Provide drought resilient water supply security for western South Dakota.
- Support regional economic stability and future growth.
- Fulfill federal responsibilities to ensure reliable water infrastructure in underserved regions.