

**Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Field Hearing
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**Dennis Sternberg,
Executive Director
Arkansas Rural Water Association**

Thank you Chairman Lincoln, Ranking Member Chambliss, and members of the Committee for this opportunity to testify today. My name is Dennis Sternberg and I speak to you today on behalf of the Arkansas Rural Water Association which is one of a non-profit federation of State Rural Water Associations that operate in all 50 states.

Madam Chair, it is an honor to testify before you and this committee today on the important topic of safe drinking water. Before I get started, I would be remiss if I didn't also recognize that you are the first person in the history of Arkansas

to become Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee. With your strong rural roots I don't need to tell you of the many of the barriers our rural communities face every day. And I don't have to tell you that in spite of these barriers, these are some of the best places in the world to live. This is why we are proud and honored that you hold this position, and we can firmly say rural American is well represented.

The importance of safe, clean water and why we must continue and strengthen the efforts to make sure our citizens have it cannot be stressed enough. Simply put, water is life. However, far too many of us take it granted that the water we need to keep us healthy, and our economy strong will always be there as soon as we want it. Every day, millions of your constituents count on the very first drop of water that comes out of their kitchen faucet to make that first pot of coffee, and prepare breakfast. And when they do, they expect that water to

be safe for themselves and their families. We must not forget that it takes a great deal of effort to make that first clean drop of water your constituents count on each and every day possible. It takes positive programs, and well trained personnel to make this happen. This is why I am proud to talk about the strong USDA programs that make it possible to have the facilities and trained people who can make sure that the clean water we must have will be there in the future.

The current water and waste disposal grant and loan programs operated by the Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service have a long successful history of providing critical infrastructure assistance to meet one of the most basic needs in rural America---providing safe and affordable water and waste water assistance to low and moderate-income communities. This is one of the highest rated government programs in history, and one with a default rate that

is almost non-existent and with a delinquency rate is currently .6 percent nationally. Arkansas Rural Water helps these communities not only access these funds, but help to ensure that these funds are used efficiently to protect the community and government's investment.

Rural Development also has the unique advantage over other federal agencies by having a field structure with experience staff with community development expertise scattered throughout small town Arkansas and throughout rural America. Without this assistance, many of these communities could not survive or compete in this global economy. As you are aware, the economic downturn has also disproportionately impacted many of these small rural communities more than our urban counterparts. Small rural communities are also faced with the additional burden of reduced tax revenues that impact their

ability of providing essential services like water and waste water assistance.

Arkansas Rural Water is there to provide on-site assistance to these small rural communities in Arkansas. Many of these communities lack the staff, capacity, funding or expertise to address technical water and waste-water issues. I hear daily from rural communities in need of assistance, whether it is to design or construct a new system, repair an existing system or respond to a pending emergency, we are always there. Our mission is simple----we are there to restore and improve the public health, environment and sustainability of these small communities or in other words, to give them a level playing field with our urban counterparts so individuals and small communities can prosper in this global competitive environment.

We are able to accomplish this important mission because of the help we get from the Rural Development NRWA Circuit Rider Program and Wastewater Technician Program. This program provides technical assistance to eligible systems to meet the real world challenges of bringing safe, clean water to the people. These challenges are real, and so are the solutions we provide because of the Circuit Rider Program. This program succeeds because of the high quality circuit rider technicians that serve the water utilities in your states. These technicians work with the local operators that have the responsibility of keeping the safe water flowing on a wide variety of issues to include: operations and maintenance, treatment, compliance, construction, financial management, general management and board training.

The primary objective of the programs is for the circuit rider and wastewater technician to work alongside the rural system officials and operators to show them how to solve their problems. The on-site system personnel must participate in the corrective actions taken during the visit. Technical assistance services will be prioritized as necessary to ensure the most effective and efficient operation of the program. I have placed in the record of my remarks some letters from local operators that were reprinted in our *ARWA Water Insight* magazine. Please take a moment to look at them. Their words tell the story why this program is important and they come from every single part of Arkansas.

In Arkansas, we have trained over 1900 water and wastewater system personnel a year for over two decades and provided over 2400 on-site technical assistance visits a year.

Over sixty-five (65) ground water protection plans have been adopted by local communities like the Highway 63 Water Association near Rison, Arkansas, and others are in the process of being adopted. We are on the front lines everyday ensuring water is safe and available each time someone in rural Arkansas turns on the tap. When the northern half of Arkansas was hit with a major ice storm in January of this year, ARWA was called on to help provide emergency assistance with generators to scores of smaller community water and wastewater systems throughout the areas hit by the storm. Our technical staff made a difference in the lives of Arkansans who needed water more than ever during a tough time.

We conduct this work through three USDA programs that are currently authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill. -

First is the Rural Development Circuit Rider Program- Since 1980, Circuit Riders have produced on-site technical assistance to small communities in all states for water infrastructure development, compliance, training, certification, operations, management, rates, disaster response, public health protection—all necessary to encourage local responsibility and local solutions for protecting and enhancing water resources. This mission is simple- grassroots assistance to communities in need by providing safe, affordable and sustainable water and waste water service.

Second is the Farm Service Agency Grassroots Source Water Protection initiative-- This is the only statewide initiative ensuring environmentally progressive local land-use decisions

for local elected officials, landowners, agricultural producers and other interested parties.

Third is the Waste Water Technical Assistance program- This initiative provides on-the ground technical assistance directly to communities for waste water treatment facilities. Assistance includes design and upgrade recommendations, daily operation and maintenance advice, assisting with permit renewals and helping these systems meet compliance requirement from state and federal regulations.

These programs are essential for the long term health and vitality of these communities. Thank you Madam Chair for your continued support.

I must also thank you for your leadership and support in the passage of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act

(ARRA) and I would like to briefly discuss the impact of that legislation thus far in Arkansas. The ARRA provided \$3.778 billion in water and waste loan and grants funds which represented the largest single infusion in the USDA Water and Waste Water programs in history, enough funds to completely eliminate the backlog of existing projects at the time the bill was passed. The Department has spent about half of their recovery money to date. The only concern is the new backlog for assistance has actually increased to \$5.9 billion.

Let me bring it home to Arkansas- The Ozark Mountain Regional Public Water Authority recently received a \$19,365,000 loan with a \$36,363,000 grant for this needed project. This project would have never been possible without a larger influx of funds made available by this bill. It is also

worthy to note that 76 percent of the users for this system fall in the persistent poverty range for income.

In closing, NASA scientists recently announced that they have discovered water on the moon. This was widely reported in the media a major news story. It made me think: There has never been a news flash when an Arkansan turns on their faucet to get a safe, clean drink of water. I would like to keep it that way. And with this committee's support of the outstanding USDA programs we have, that is one headline we should never have to see.

Thank you Madam Chair for allowing me to testify and I would welcome any questions that you may have at this time.

