



WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

HEARING TITLED, “*THE STATE OF RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE: EMERGENCY RESPONSE, RECOVERY, AND RESILIENCE*” BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION AND FORESTRY SUBCOMMITTEE ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENERGY

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**Testimony of the Honorable Kevin Paap
Commissioner, Blue Earth County, Minnesota**

Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am pleased to discuss the role of counties in disaster planning, response, and recovery, and to share recommendations for how our Congressional partners can strengthen the capacity of rural counties to address the threat of natural disasters, ensure community safety, and protect our residents. We appreciate the chance to work toward our shared goal of fostering greater resilience to the impacts of natural disasters across rural America.

My name is Kevin Paap, and I have served as a county Commissioner in Blue Earth County, Minnesota, since 2021. Before my tenure on the county board, I was the President of the Minnesota Farm Bureau for 16 years. In my current role as Commissioner, I also serve as Vice Chair of the National Association of Counties (NACo) Agriculture and Rural Affairs Policy Steering Committee. NACo is the only national organization that represents all 3,069 counties, parishes, and boroughs in the United States, serving nearly 40,000 county elected officials and 3.6 million county employees. Founded in 1935, NACo assists county governments in pursuing excellence in public service to produce vibrant, safe, and resilient communities across the country.

I am a lifelong resident of Blue Earth County, born and raised on our family farm outside the small town of Garden City, Minnesota. Today, my wife Julie and I continue to farm the land as fourth-generation owners and operators. I am deeply committed to my community and passionate about dedicating my time, experience, and energy to ensure Blue Earth County remains a strong, viable, and sustainable community for future generations.

In my role, I have gained extensive experience in emergency response, including 29 years serving with our local volunteer fire department and over 40 years of teaching emergency medical services (EMS) classes in 9 counties across Southern Minnesota. Throughout my time in public service, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of natural disasters on rural communities like those in Blue Earth County.

I come from a county that recently experienced severe flooding, culminating in a partial dam failure that deeply impacted county residents both up and downstream of the dam site. This disaster underscores the urgent need for robust federal support for rural infrastructure and swift local emergency response, as well as the critical role of federal support in helping rural areas recover and rebuild from natural disasters. In my testimony, I will describe this event to highlight the challenges rural counties face in planning for and responding to disasters.

In rural counties, where resources are often limited, it is crucial to recognize the need for additional support to effectively respond to the threat of natural disasters. Rural areas in the United States are home to 20 percent of Americans and encompass over 70 percent of the nation's land mass. In these communities, we face unique challenges in terms of access to emergency services, infrastructure and financial resources. It is imperative that the 2024 Farm Bill acknowledges the specific needs of rural communities and allocates additional resources to bolster our resilience in the face of natural disasters. By addressing these challenges, we can ensure that local governments, regardless of their location, size, or scope of services, are adequately equipped to safeguard the communities they serve.



That said, I will discuss the following points for your consideration as the subcommittee assesses obstacles to and opportunities for building resilience to natural disasters across rural America:

- Reporting the recent damages caused by severe flooding across Minnesota
- Counties play an integral role in local disaster response and recovery
- In recent years, natural disasters have become more frequent, severe and costly
- Due to rural capacity challenges, rural communities often lack the resources to adequately plan for and respond to natural disasters
- USDA investments in rural disaster planning, response, and recovery can build greater resilience to natural disasters across rural America
- The 2024 Farm Bill Reauthorization provides opportunities to deliver these resources to rural communities through targeted rural capacity-building initiatives

Blue Earth County is currently responding to a severe flooding event.

On June 24, the Blue Earth County Board of Commissioners held an emergency meeting to approve a resolution declaring a state of emergency due to heavy rain on June 20-22, 2024. The heavy rain caused significant damage to public and private property throughout southern Minnesota.

On that day, as flows peaked on the Blue Earth River at the Rapidan Dam, significant debris accumulation in the dam's spillway gates caused the Blue Earth River to back up and overtop. On the evening of June 24, high water flows caused the river to breach the western abutment of the dam, causing the river to bypass the dam's structure and resulting in significant erosion on the Blue Earth River's western bank and the destruction several structures in the vicinity, including an energy substation and a small business.

Starting on June 26, County staff shifted their focus from the dam to the safety of the County Highway 9 Bridge, just upriver from the dam, knowing that the bridge may be vulnerable to further damage from the flooding event. Two days later, 4,000 tons of riprap was placed at pier one of the bridge to protect the structure from further scour. State and county officials continue to monitor the bridge's structural integrity.

As substantial erosion on the west bank continued following events of June 24, the County took possession of a business building on site that suffered damage – the Rapidan Dam Store – and demolished and removed the structure from the riverbank as an emergency mitigation measure. While Blue Earth County employees helped the business owners remove the building's contents before the acquisition, the Dam Store was an integral part of the community and remains embedded in the memories of many residents.

On June 28, Minnesota received a Federal Disaster Declaration because of severe storms and flooding. Blue Earth County is included as one of the 22 counties designated for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Public Assistance.

The County's response is ongoing. Besides the event at the Rapidan Dam, Blue Earth County is addressing nearly 100 storm-damaged areas of County Roads and trails that have been reported so far. Additionally, there are a significant number of private properties that have incurred damages.

The County is requesting any property owner with damage to complete an online damage report form. In the first week, the County received nearly 400 reports of damage to private property and expects to see more. Many residents have limited or no insurance for this kind of flooding event. Federal resources will be important tools as Blue Earth County residents begin the journey to recovery.

The recent partial failure of Blue Earth County's Rapidan Dam serves as a compelling example of the impact of aging infrastructure on disaster resilience in rural areas.

Constructed between 1908 and 1910, the Rapidan dam stands 87 feet tall and 475 inches long passing flows from a 2,430 square mile drainage area. The dam has been owned and under the management of Blue Earth County for the past 46 years and has faced recurring flooding that has impacted the dam's structural integrity and operations, straining county resources.

The second through fifth-largest floods of record at the Rapidan Dam have all occurred since 2010. The June 24, 2024 flood event peaked at 34,800 cubic feet per second (CFS), surpassing the 2019 flood flows of 32,700 CFS as the second largest flood of record at the dam (1965 flood was the first largest at 43,100 CFS). In April 2023, the National Inventory of Dams rated the dam in poor condition and noted that it posed a significant hazard if it were to fail due to the potential loss of millions of yards of agriculturally impacted sediment impounded upstream of the dam.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) conducted a Dam Safety Inspection on May 21, 2024. A June 4, 2024 letter from FERC states, "all project structures were inspected and were found to be in overall satisfactory condition. No major dam safety deficiencies were observed that would require immediate remedial action." However, inspection conducted by FERC inspects the safety of the dam, not the condition.

The March 2019 flooding event caused significant damages to the dam including damages to the structural integrity of the five steel tainter gates, damages to the intake deck, damages to the downstream training wall, scour at the downstream apron, and damages to the downstream powerhouse walls. Following this flood event the gates were left open in a run of river condition. Subsequently in the winter of 2020, frazil ice dams built up backing up downstream flows into the powerhouse 15' deep inundating and incapacitating all of the electrical generation equipment. The Dam Operator (Eagle Creek Renewable Energy) subsequently terminated its lease agreement with the County.

The County elected to assume the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) licensure exemption while it studied a path forward of either returning the dam to service or decommissioning and dam removal via two parallel feasibility studies. Feasibility studies conducted in 2021 resulted in cost estimates of \$15 million to repair the dam and return it to service or \$82 million to remove the dam, replace the upstream County Road 9 bridge and re-establish approximately 3 miles of river channel. In late 2022 the County determined that its return on investment for hydroelectric production was insufficient and subsequently submitted a notice to surrender its FERC licensure exemption in April 2023. FERC initially estimated this process would take six to twelve months. As of the June 24, 2024, flood event (16 months later), no conversation has been initiated by FERC with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for the assignment of regulatory authority of the dam to the state.

Due to quick action from local and state officials, we were fortunate that the failure of the Rapidan Dam did not claim any lives. However, there are thousands of pieces of aging infrastructure projects across rural America that without adequate upkeep may put communities at risk in the event of future disasters. Federal resources provide rural community leaders with essential tools to implement proactive measures and invest in infrastructure modernization to enhance disaster resilience. By prioritizing the assessment and maintenance of aging infrastructure, rural communities can mitigate potential risks and minimize the impact of natural disasters. However, doing so requires robust funding and strong partnerships with federal agencies, private organizations, and neighboring communities. By working collaboratively to address infrastructure challenges and secure necessary resources, rural communities can build a more resilient and secure environment for all residents.

While this flood has been particularly devastating, it is only the most recent in a series of destructive natural disasters that have strained our local resources. These cumulative impacts highlight the necessity for sustained and comprehensive support to build resilience and ensure the long-term sustainability of rural areas.

As demonstrated by Blue Earth County's response to our current disaster, all the nation's counties play an integral role in local disaster response and recovery.

Counties are on the front lines of defense before and after disasters strike. In most cases, county governments are responsible for local emergency management, with county elected officials and emergency managers leading coordination efforts and damage mitigation. Other key staff involved in disaster efforts include police, sheriffs, firefighters, 911 call center staff, public health officials, and code inspectors. After a disaster, counties coordinate cleanup, recovery, and rebuilding efforts to help residents return to normal life as soon as possible.

Counties also own a significant amount of public infrastructure, including roads, bridges, hospitals, jails, nursing homes, and airports, making counties uniquely positioned to mitigate disaster impacts and protect residents. Collectively, counties own and maintain 44 percent of public road miles, 38 percent of the National Bridge Inventory, 960 hospitals, more than 2,500 jails, more than 650 nursing homes and a third of the nation's airports. We are responsible for maintaining public safety infrastructure like roadside ditches, flood control channels, and stormwater systems, as well as providing public outreach and education on water quality and stormwater impacts prior to and following disasters. Counties work to reduce water pollution, implement land use plans, and manage water recharge areas, green infrastructure, and water conservation programs.

Counties are not merely stakeholders in this conversation, but essential partners in the intergovernmental system protecting the nation from disasters. We stand ready to work with the federal government to ensure federal programs and resources can make our communities more resilient in the face of natural disasters.

Over the past 20 years, natural disasters have become more frequent, more severe, and more costly.

In recent years, the frequency, severity, and financial impact of natural disasters have become a growing concern across rural America. Since 1980, the U.S. has experienced nearly 400 natural disasters with overall damages exceeding \$1 billion, totaling over \$2.74 trillion. The past two



decades have seen a marked rise in incidents such as hurricanes, wildfires, floods, and tornadoes, each leaving a trail of destruction and impacting communities more severely than before. These disasters not only disrupt lives and livelihoods but also impose significant economic burdens on county governments.

From 2019 to 2023, the frequency of billion-dollar disasters consistently exceeded the historical average, with some years experiencing over 20 such events. This increase in frequency is paralleled by a rise in the severity and cost of these disasters, as more intense storms, wildfires, floods, and other extreme weather events cause extensive damage and economic losses. In 2023 alone, 849 counties experienced at least one federally declared major disaster, 312 counties had at least one emergency declaration, and 720 counties had at least one disaster declaration. In that same period, the nation experienced 28 separate billion-dollar disasters, costing over \$92.9 billion. 2023 was also deadly, causing at least 492 direct or indirect fatalities—the 8th most disaster-related fatalities for the contiguous U.S. since 1980.

The financial toll of these disasters has increased significantly over time. In the 1980s, the average annual cost of billion-dollar disasters was around \$17.8 billion. By the 2010s, this average had risen to \$81 billion per year. The past five years have seen some of the highest costs on record, with 2020 setting a new high at over \$100 billion in damages nationwide.. This escalation in costs underscores the growing financial burden these disasters impose on affected communities, particularly those in rural areas.

Minnesota has not been immune to these trends. Since 1980, the state has experienced 58 natural disasters in which losses exceed \$1 billion. These events included 12 droughts, 5 floods, 1 freeze event, 35 severe storms, 2 wildfires, and 3 winter storms. In recent years, Minnesota has been hit particularly hard. In 2023 alone, 7 separate billion-dollar disasters impacted Minnesota counties, an astonishing figure compared to prior decades. From 2000 to 2009, there were 14 such events, and 11 such events from 2010 to 2019. If we stay at the rate of 7 events per year for the remainder of this decade, we'll total 70 billion-dollar disasters from 2020 to 2029. The financial and social impacts of these events emphasize the urgent need for enhanced disaster preparedness and resilience strategies, particularly in rural areas where resources are often limited.

Rural communities often lack the resources to adequately plan and respond to the impact of natural disasters.

Rural areas in the United States are home to 20 percent of Americans and encompass over 70 percent of the nation's land mass. Residents living in rural communities are also among the nation's most underserved. The poverty rate in rural America (14.4 percent) is 2.5 percentage points higher than the national average (11.9 percent). Of the 353 counties that experience persistent poverty, 85 percent are rural. 20 percent of rural census tracts are considered disadvantaged communities, which is also considered a predictor of vulnerability to natural disasters.

Rural communities face unique challenges when it comes to preparing for and responding to natural disasters. Unlike our urban counterparts, rural counties must rely on less staff and limited funding to manage emergency responses and marshal recovery efforts in the event of natural disasters. These forms of resource shortages are known as rural capacity challenges. "Capacity" consists of the assets – personnel, capital, and expertise – available to a community to provide services to residents and access external resources, such as state and federal funding

opportunities. Across much of the country, rural counties often lack the capacity needed to apply for and manage support provided through federal programs, such as a full-time grant writer, permitting staff, or access to capital required to meet match requirements.

Capacity shortages act as a bottleneck that may dictate whether a county can adequately provide services to its residents. Rural counties that lack the capital, manpower or expertise required to apply for and manage federal loans or grants are challenged to navigate federal rural development resources, including an often-arduous application and reporting process. As a result, many rural development resources will not reach the communities with the greatest need. Despite these limitations, county governments must continue to deliver essential services to residents and visitors. Such services include road and bridge maintenance, law enforcement, education, water and wastewater provision, emergency medical services, fire protection and waste management.

Capacity challenges negatively impact a rural county's ability to effectively respond to natural disasters in the following ways:

- **Rural capacity challenges negatively impact disaster planning.** Effective disaster planning requires a comprehensive approach, integrating risk assessments, resource allocation, and coordination with various stakeholders. However, rural counties often struggle with these responsibilities due to limited financial resources and fewer staff. Inadequate planning can result in slower response times, inefficient use of resources, and a higher overall cost of disaster recovery. Consequently, rural communities may experience prolonged disruptions to critical infrastructure and services, further exacerbating the impacts of natural disasters.
- **Rural capacity challenges negatively impact emergency response during natural disasters.** Rural counties may face challenges such as a scarcity of emergency response personnel, lack of access to specialized medical care, and limited funding for disaster preparedness and recovery efforts. The vast geographic spread of rural communities can also create logistical hurdles, delaying the arrival of aid and prolonging the time it takes to restore normalcy. Emergency services in rural areas often operate with fewer resources, including a heavy reliance on volunteers to fill the ranks of emergency personnel, which can hinder their ability to respond swiftly and effectively to disaster situations. This can result in higher casualty rates, increased damage to property, and prolonged recovery periods for affected communities.
- **Rural capacity challenges negatively impact post-disaster recovery.** After a disaster, the recovery process can be lengthy and complex, requiring substantial financial and human resources to rebuild infrastructure, restore services, and support affected populations. Rural communities often lack the necessary capacity to navigate this process efficiently. Limited access to federal and state recovery funds, insufficient staffing to manage recovery projects, and a lack of expertise in long-term recovery planning can all hinder recovery efforts. Prolonged recovery periods in rural areas may lead to sustained economic losses and long-term impacts on community well-being. Additionally, the inability to rebuild resiliently in the aftermath of a disaster can leave rural communities vulnerable to future disasters, creating a cycle of damage and recovery that is difficult to break.

Initiatives that focus on building rural capacity – either by providing technical assistance or by providing funding directly to county governments to invest in capacity-building – address this bottleneck by lowering barriers to entry for rural development resources. In doing so, rural capacity building programs empower local policymakers to plan and implement long-term development strategies that can protect our residents and invest in the long-term prosperity of our rural communities.

USDA investment in disaster planning, response, and recovery, tailored to the specific needs of rural communities, can help rural America become more resilient to natural disasters.

Strategic investments from U.S. Department of Agriculture-Rural Development (USDA-RD) in disaster planning, response, and recovery can significantly improve the resilience of rural communities. These investments focus on the specific needs of rural areas, aiming to build sturdy infrastructure, enhance access to emergency services, and provide financial support for disaster mitigation projects. Tailored resources empower rural counties to develop and implement effective disaster response plans, ensuring they are better prepared for future events. This targeted approach not only saves lives and property but also supports the long-term sustainability of rural communities across America.

Among the current suite of USDA-RD programs, the Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program is crucial for maintaining infrastructure and enhancing natural disaster resilience in rural communities. This program provides essential funding for the construction, expansion, or improvement of critical community infrastructure, ensuring that rural areas have the necessary resources to effectively prepare for, respond to, and recover from natural disasters. Additionally, the program supports the acquisition of emergency equipment and vehicles, enhancing the capability of rural communities to protect lives and property during disasters.

USDA-RD's Water and Environmental Programs (WEP) provide funding for water and waste disposal systems in rural areas. These programs are essential for maintaining public health and safety during and after disasters. The Emergency Water Assistance Grants Program (EWAGP) is also critically important for rural communities planning for, responding to, and recovering from natural disasters. This program provides much-needed financial support to ensure access to clean and safe water during and after disaster events. By funding the repair and maintenance of water systems, the program helps prevent the spread of waterborne diseases and ensures that communities can maintain essential water services in the face of adversity. This crucial support safeguards public health and enables a quicker, more effective recovery process. Additionally, the Predevelopment Planning Grants (PPG) assist communities in preparing for future water infrastructure projects, enhancing their resilience against potential disasters.

Rural Utilities Service (RUS) programs offer significant support for broader infrastructure needs. The Telecommunications Infrastructure Loan and Loan Guarantee Program and the ReConnect Program focus on expanding rural broadband, essential for modern communication and disaster response. Reliable internet access is crucial for coordinating emergency services, disseminating information, and enabling telehealth services. Funding is also available through RUS programs for maintenance and repair of existing telecommunications infrastructure. The Electric Infrastructure Loan and Loan Guarantee Program rebuild and modernize the electrical grid in rural areas, ensuring continuous power supply, which is critical during recovery efforts. Moreover, the Distance Learning



and Telemedicine Grant Program facilitates access to education and medical services through improved telecommunication networks, enhancing community resilience.

Regarding economic recovery, the Rural Business Development Grants (RBDG) program and Intermediary Relending Program (IRP) support local businesses in resuming operations post-disaster. By offering both immediate relief and long-term recovery support, USDA RD ensures that rural communities can recover more quickly and effectively, building resilience against future disasters. The comprehensive approach of combining financial assistance, technical support, and infrastructure development underscores RD's commitment to sustaining rural America's vitality and safety.

Adequate funding levels and flexible eligible usages for these programs are crucial to their effectiveness. Ensuring that these programs are well-funded allows for timely and comprehensive support to rural communities in times of need. Flexibility in the use of these funds enables communities to address their unique challenges and priorities, whether it be infrastructure repairs, emergency response upgrades, or public health interventions. By providing both ample resources and the discretion to use them where they are most needed, these programs can maximize their impact and foster resilient, self-reliant rural communities.

The 2024 Farm Bill Reauthorization provides an opportunity to improve rural disaster resilience.

The Farm Bill authorizes a series of resources that support rural communities to build resilience, and respond to and recover from natural disasters. However, without adequate investments in rural capacity building, rural communities will continue to face obstacles in accessing the resources they need to protect residents from natural disasters.

Counties support the inclusion of new rural capacity-building resources in the 2024 Farm Bill, including the Rural Partnership Program and other provisions put forward in the *Rural Partnership and Prosperity Act (S.3309)*. We applaud Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and the members of the Senate Agriculture Committee for including the Rural Partnership Program (RPP) in both the majority and minority frameworks for the 2024 Farm Bill. This innovative initiative would provide multiyear, flexible funding awards to partnerships of two or more rural stakeholders, including county governments, to address urgent needs in a particular rural community.

Funding distributed through this competitive grant program would invest in the expertise and capacity of rural governments to plan, implement, and measure the impact of locally-led community development strategies, enhancing their resilience to natural disasters. By strengthening local governance and increasing access to expert resources, RPP ensures that rural communities are better prepared for, can effectively respond to, and can swiftly recover from natural disasters.

We firmly believe that investing in rural capacity building is not only essential for the success of our rural communities but also for the long-term resilience of our nation. A rural capacity-building program designed to meet the needs of rural communities should incorporate direct assistance to local governments and their partners, support for non-federal technical assistance providers working in rural areas, and enhanced resources to put additional federal representatives on the



ground in rural areas through the Rural Partners Network or similar initiatives. RPP accomplishes these objectives.

We also want to express our strong support for the historic inclusion of \$50 million dollars per year in mandatory funding for RPP in Chairwoman Stabenow's Farm Bill proposal. This substantial funding commitment demonstrates a meaningful investment in the resilience of rural communities across the nation. With this sustained financial and technical assistance, RPP will empower rural communities and our partners to effectively address urgent needs and provide essential resources to rural stakeholders, further enhancing their ability to prepare for and respond to natural disasters.

Relatedly, **counties support efforts to permanently authorize and expand the Rural Partners Network (RPN)**, a cross-departmental pilot initiative spearheaded by USDA Rural Development that embeds federal employees in rural communities to facilitate more robust collaboration between local and federal partners operating in rural America. RPN is collaboration amongst 25+ federal partners who have prioritized working with 36 cohorts of rural communities across 10 states and Puerto Rico to provide one front door for the federal resources they need to thrive. We would like to see this successful effort expand and request increased resources. Since its launch in 2022, RPN has been allocated around \$11.5 million through USDA Rural Development's budget. This modest \$11.5 million program has leveraged over \$300 million in awards—a direct result of RPN engagement at the community level. Additionally, federal agencies intentionally prioritizing RPN communities has strengthened investments in these areas. Since RPN began nearly \$3 billion in federal investments have been made across the RPN Community Network footprint. Chairwoman Stabenow's proposal for the 2024 Farm Bill included a permanent authorization of the Rural Partners Network. **Counties support the permanent authorization and expansion of the Rural Partners Network in the final version of the 2024 Farm Bill.**

Further, counties support the inclusion of the bipartisan *Streamlining Federal Grants Act (S.2286) in the 2024 Farm Bill.* This bill will allow local governments across the country, including small and rural communities, to take advantage of federal resources and grant opportunities more easily by simplifying the federal grant administration process. The bill would address the barriers that communities face in applying for complex federal grants due to resource constraints. Any simplification of the process will go a long way to improving uptake of grant programs by rural communities.

Conclusion

Chair Welch and Ranking Member Tuberville, thank you for inviting me to share Blue Earth County's story. Counties stand ready to work with Congress and our federal partners to reimagine how federal policy can support rural counties and protect our rural communities from the growing threat of natural disasters. Counties continue to serve as essential intergovernmental partners in disaster response and recovery. We look forward to partnering with you to achieve our shared priorities as we work toward the passage of a new, bipartisan Farm Bill this year. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.

