

**Written Testimony of Jack Waldorf, Executive Director
Western Governors' Association**

**Submitted to the United States Senate
Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food
and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
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Fiscal Year 2027 Appropriations

Chair Hoeven, Ranking Member Shaheen, and Members of the Subcommittee, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) appreciates the opportunity to provide written testimony on the appropriations and activities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). WGA is an independent organization representing the Governors of the 22 westernmost states and territories. The Association is an instrument of the Governors for bipartisan policy development, information sharing, and collective action on issues of critical importance to the western United States.

USDA programs have a significant effect on the American West and the economic viability of its rural communities. Western Governors recognize the importance of a close and productive working relationship between states and the federal government and understand that effective cooperation depends on federal recognition of states as co-sovereigns and partners. The promotion of greater partnership between states and the federal government is central to the mission of WGA.

Agriculture in western states faces a variety of challenges, including extreme variations in soil, climate, terrain, commodity and specialty crops, production practices, and water availability. Amid these difficult conditions, the western agricultural sector provides a vast array of high-demand, high-quality food products for American and foreign markets. Western agricultural lands also serve as primary sources of crucial ecosystem services, including wildlife habitat and water supplies, and support a diverse suite of rural economic opportunities in the recreation, food, fiber, energy, and bio-based product industries.

USDA conservation programs promote responsible land management in western states and are of crucial importance to the agricultural sector, including livestock producers dependent on using federal allotments through permits and fees to sustain their operations. Western Governors support targeted, voluntary, and collaborative conservation to address locally identified natural resource issues affecting farms, rangelands, and forests on private and public lands. These issues include soil health, air and water quality, wildlife habitat conservation, invasive species, and drought and wildfire resilience. WGA supports the role of conservation title programs under the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (Pub. L. 115-334) in promoting voluntary solutions to the challenges of threatened and endangered species, water quality impairments, and groundwater recharge. Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to support appropriate funding levels for programs addressing these critical concerns.

The work of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is especially important to western states, and WGA encourages the Subcommittee to provide adequate funding for conservation programs administered by the agency. NRCS empowers private landowners to work with states and the federal government on large-scale management priorities across landscapes with different land ownerships. NRCS programs provide multiple benefits to western communities:

- Stimulating economic activity and creating jobs in local communities;
- Conserving habitat for the greater sage-grouse, lesser prairie chicken, and other species;
- Mitigating wildland fire potential in western states;
- Improving water quality;
- Reducing the threat of invasive species on western lands; and
- Responding to imminent hazards caused by floods, wildfire, windstorms, and other natural disasters through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program, which has been historically underfunded and should be revisited and strengthened.

Western Governors also support adequate funding of the NRCS Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting (SSWSF) program. Sufficient funding is required to ensure the long-term viability of the program's continued and uninterrupted collection of snowpack and water data, the full operation and maintenance of all snow survey sites, the hiring of needed program staff, and technological and software upgrades. The SSWSF program provides integral information for water supply management decisions in agricultural production, hydroelectric power generation, reservoir operations, industry, recreation and economic development, and international treaties. The program's predictive capabilities are critically useful throughout the arid West, where snowpack accounts for the vast majority of the region's annual water supply.

Western Governors also support adequate funding for the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). Western Governors recognize the valuable role NIFA plays in research on biosecurity and invasive species and support further research to understand the potential spread of invasive species and to develop geographically appropriate control measures.

The West's network of land grant universities and colleges, including Cooperative Extension Service programs and Agricultural Experiment Stations, provides national leadership in research to develop more resilient seeds and crops, manage soil health, advance technology deployment in the bio-based economy, and conduct on-farm research experiments that help farmers and ranchers be more effective and efficient. Western Governors support efforts to expand research funding to address drought, a changing climate, and extreme weather risks facing western producers. WGA also encourages the effective use of Extension services to deliver practical tools, technologies, and information to producers, respond to the changing needs of rural communities, and advance bioeconomic and agricultural research.

Healthy, vibrant, and prosperous rural communities are critical to western states, but face economic development, infrastructure, and quality of life challenges. Western Governors support USDA's Rural Development programs, which address those challenges, and request an increased emphasis on rural capacity-building efforts. Building local capacity through training, technical assistance, and consistent support for institutions that serve rural communities is

fundamental to economic and community development and maximizes the effect of state and federal resources. Western Governors urge the Subcommittee to increase the proportion of rural economic development and infrastructure funding that goes toward capacity building and allow agencies to negotiate the percentage of financial versus technical assistance within appropriations.

Western Governors support rural development programs that foster small businesses, entrepreneurs, and cooperative business models, and encourage the Subcommittee to include full funding for the Rural Business-Cooperative Service. Western agricultural cooperatives perform many important functions for their members and rural communities. These include provision of seed, feed, and fertilizer to growers; product storage, processing, and transportation; trade and market promotion; supply chain solutions; and education and technical assistance. Cooperative business models can also help meet rural community needs for child and home care, main street businesses, and housing.

Separately, Western Governors emphasize the need for Congress to appropriate sufficient resources to support and finance housing development in rural areas. Western Governors also encourage the federal government to promote flexibility in the design and administration of these programs to better reflect rural conditions and needs.

In many rural communities, rental housing options are limited and continue to decline. Properties financed by USDA, particularly Section 515 properties, are a key source of affordable rental housing and in some areas represent the only options available. However, no new USDA direct-financed rental housing has been developed in years, and many existing properties are losing affordability protections as loans mature. When these properties exit USDA programs, they are often lost as affordable housing, further reducing the supply of affordable homes for low-income households. Addressing this will require dedicated preservation financing tools to support rehabilitation of the existing housing stock. It will also require separating USDA mortgages from rental assistance and permanently authorizing a stand-alone rental assistance program.

Western Governors support funding for the Market Access and Foreign Market Development Programs to promote opportunities for western producers to increase export revenues and encourage trade agreements that maximize benefits for the West's farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. Governors also support funding for programming that improves access by small producers, including USDA Rural Cooperative Development Grants and Value-Added Producer Grants, and programs administered by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service and NIFA. WGA also supports adequate funding for specialty crop production and research, especially efforts to mitigate the effects of disaster events on specialty crop producers.

Western Governors support the continued efforts of the Rural Utilities Service to provide financial assistance for drinking water and wastewater facilities, renewable energy projects on agricultural lands, and broadband connectivity in rural and remote areas, particularly in communities that have minimal or no such infrastructure.

While broadband is a modern-day necessity, many rural communities still lack access to this critical infrastructure. Expanding broadband access to rural America empowers citizens to compete in a global market and use electronic information and telecommunications technologies to receive vital health care and education services. Western Governors are supportive of the Rural eConnectivity Program, commonly known as the ReConnect Program, which plays a key role in closing the digital divide by facilitating broadband deployment to underserved or wholly unserved rural communities. The Governors appreciate the Subcommittee's commitment to improving rural broadband and request that the Subcommittee provide consistent funding for the ReConnect Program. In addition, Western Governors are pleased with USDA's commitment to keeping minimum speeds for ReConnect eligibility at 100/20 Mbps and recommend scalability to 100 Mbps symmetrical.

Western Governors recognize that nutrition assistance programs can help meet the needs of children and the most vulnerable, while creating economic opportunity across the agriculture supply chain from the store where food is purchased all the way back to the farm. Nutrition assistance programs should continue to provide flexibility for states to respond to unique economic conditions, serve all eligible participants to the greatest extent practicable, and pursue transparency, efficiency, and accountability in program administration.

Additional detail on these and other issues in the purview of the Subcommittee can be found in WGA policy resolutions 2024-01, Strengthening the State-Federal Relationship; 2023-05, Western Agriculture; 2024-02, National Forest and Rangeland Management; 2025-08, Biosecurity and Invasive Species Management; 2024-09, Water Quality in the West; 2024-03, Species Conservation and the Endangered Species Act; 2026-05, Disaster Preparedness and Response; 2023-06, Rural Development; 2023-07, Broadband Connectivity; and 2026-04, Housing is Foundational to the Success of the West.

Western states and federal agencies deal with a complex web of interrelated agriculture, conservation, and economic development priorities. It is an enormous challenge to judiciously balance competing needs in this environment, and Western Governors appreciate the difficulty of the decisions the Subcommittee must make. The foregoing recommendations are offered in a spirit of cooperation and respect, and WGA is prepared to assist you in discharging these critical and challenging responsibilities.