

**Written Testimony of James D. Ogsbury, 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 2019 Appropriations

Mr. Chairman 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 19 western states and three U.S territories in the Pacific. 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 our rural communities. Western Governors recognize the importance of a close and productive working relationship between states and the federal government and understand that more effective cooperation depends on the treatment of states as full and equal partners with the federal government. The promotion of a greater partnership between states and the federal government is central to the mission of WGA and is reflected in the Governors' Policy Resolution 2017-01, *Building a Stronger State-Federal Relationship*, which I commend to your attention. You may also be interested in WGA Policy Resolutions 2017-09, *Western Agriculture*, and 2017-10, *National Forest and Rangeland Management*, which contain policy positions that are relevant to the Subcommittee's consideration of agricultural funding priorities.

Agriculture in the western states and territories is significantly different from that in other regions of the country. The West has greater variations in soil, climate, terrain, commodities and production practices, and water availability. Among other important values, western agricultural lands are primary sources of open space, wildlife habitat, water supplies, and diverse rural economic opportunities in the recreation, food, fiber, energy and bio-based product industries. Trade promotion plays an important role in ensuring that western agricultural products and food have an opportunity to compete with products produced and subsidized internationally.

The West's network of land-grant universities and colleges, including Cooperative Extension Service programs, continue to provide 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. We also encourage the effective use of extension and other partnerships to deliver practical tools, technologies and information to farmers, ranchers and forest landowners.

With respect to funding for specific programs, the following recommendations are intended to ensure that taxpayers realize a meaningful return on the investment of limited discretionary resources. This goal will be more readily achieved to the extent that federal agencies better leverage state authority, resources and expertise.

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.

WGA also supports adequate funding for the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program that provides critical research, education, and promotion tools to fruit and vegetable producers.

Western Governors recognize that nutrition assistance programs can 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. We acknowledge recent efforts to reduce rates of nutrition program fraud and abuse, deliver programs under budget, and improve program effectiveness. Nutrition assistance programs should continue to allow flexibility for states to respond to unique economic conditions, serve all eligible participants without drastically reducing benefits, and encourage continued pursuit of transparency and accountability in program administration.

Rural Development is also a priority for Western Governors. Workforce development is the initiative of our current Chair, Governor Dennis Daugaard of South Dakota, and the initiative's goals are enumerated in WGA Policy Resolution 2017-12, *Workforce Development in the Western United States*. Economic development challenges are particularly acute in rural communities, which are commonly characterized by a lack of economic diversity, geographic isolation, a less educated work force and job demand volatility. Western Governors are committed to creating new opportunities for rural students, returning veterans, workers and industries. USDA's Rural Development programs address many of the challenges rural communities face and promote economic development opportunities; Western Governors support adequate funding for these programs.

Western Governors support the continued efforts of the Rural Utilities Service to provide financial assistance for drinking water, wastewater facilities and broadband connectivity in rural and remote areas, particularly in communities that have minimal or no such infrastructure. Expanding broadband access to rural America will allow citizens to compete in a global market and have access to IT health care, education and public safety resources.

Western Governors support adequate funding for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and Agriculture Research Service (ARS). As WGA Policy Resolution 2016-05, *Combating Invasive Species*, describes, APHIS works in partnership with state departments of agriculture to monitor, prevent and control infestations of invasive pests and diseases and curtail or minimize wildlife conflicts, which can cause widespread environmental and economic damage and safety hazards. APHIS also works in cooperation with other federal agencies, states,

territories, counties and private entities to implement management programs. ARS conducts research to develop solutions to agricultural problems of high national priority, and shares information to ensure safe, high quality food and other agricultural products. ARS research helps to: sustain a competitive economy; enhance the natural resource base and the environment; provide economic opportunities for rural communities and society as a whole; and provide the necessary infrastructure to create and maintain a diverse workplace.

Western Governors continue to support collaborative, targeted and voluntary conservation to address locally identified natural resource issues for farm, range, and forest resource concerns on private and public lands. These issues include soil health, air and water quality, drought and wildfire resilience, wildlife habitat conservation and invasive species. We support the role of conservation title programs in providing voluntary solutions to threatened and endangered species, water quality impairments, groundwater recharge, and other regulatory concerns potentially facing producers.

In this context, the work of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is significantly important to western states, and we encourage you to provide adequate funding for the conservation programs administered by the agency. NRCS empowers private landowners to work with states and the federal government on large-scale management priorities across areas 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 (affecting 11 western states) and lesser prairie chicken (affecting five western states), among other species;
- Mitigating wildland fire potential in western states;
- Improving water quality, including drinking water in many communities;
- Reducing the threat of invasive species on western lands; and,
- Through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program, responding to imminent hazards caused by floods, wildfire, windstorms, and other natural disasters.

Western Governors also support adequate funding of the NRCS Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting program, which provides integral information for water supply management decisions in agricultural production, hydroelectric power generation, reservoir operations, recreation and economic development, and international treaties. The data provided by this program also forms a foundation for predicting snowpack runoff. This predictive capability is critically useful throughout the arid West, where snowpack accounts for the vast majority of annual water supply.

Western Governors 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 as you discharge these critical and challenging responsibilities.