

**Written Testimony of James D. Ogsbury, Executive Director
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**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 2020 Appropriations

Chairman Hoeven, Ranking Member Merkley, 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 3 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 of the federal government. The promotion of 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 other WGA resolutions that contain policy positions relevant to the Subcommittee's consideration of agricultural funding priorities, including: 2017-09, Western Agriculture; 2017-10, National Forest and Rangeland Management; and 2018-04, International Trade.

Agriculture in the western states and territories is unique. The West has extreme variations in soil, climate, terrain, commodities, production practices, and water availability. Moreover, 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 and the stability and predictability of federal trade policies play an important role in ensuring that western agricultural products have an opportunity to compete with products produced and subsidized internationally.

Land Management

WGA has been supportive of USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue's Shared Stewardship initiative, which emphasizes the importance of state-federal collaboration in making progress on land management challenges throughout our states. Western Governors and the Secretary signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Shared Stewardship at WGA's Winter Meeting in December 2018. WGA is currently engaged in working with USDA to identify mutually-agreed projects that will improve forest and rangeland conditions in western states.

USDA conservation programs are an important element of responsible land management in most western states. Western Governors support collaborative, targeted and voluntary conservation to address locally-identified natural resource issues for farms, rangelands and forests on private and public lands. These 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 promoting voluntary solutions to threatened and endangered species, water quality impairments, groundwater recharge, and other regulatory concerns.

The work of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is especially 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 provide 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 the region's annual water supply.

Western Governors support adequate funding for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and Agriculture Research Service (ARS). As explained in WGA Policy Resolution 2016-05, Combating Invasive Species, 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 is a key agency protecting the West from invasive species and has been an active participant in the Western Governors' Biosecurity and Invasive Species Initiative. APHIS also works in cooperation with other federal agencies, states, territories, counties and private entities to implement management programs. ARS researches solutions to agricultural problems of high national priority and shares information to ensure production of 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.

The West's network of land-grant universities and colleges, including Cooperative Extension Service programs, 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.

Rural Development

Rural development is a priority for Western Governors. Economic development challenges are acute in rural communities, which are commonly characterized by a lack of economic diversity, geographic isolation, insufficient broadband access, a less educated work force and job demand volatility. Western Governors are committed to creating new opportunities for rural students, workers and jobseekers. Recommendations are enumerated in WGA Policy Resolution 2018-13, Workforce Development in the Western United States. USDA's Rural Development programs promote economic development opportunities and address many of the challenges confronted by rural communities. Western Governors support adequate funding for these programs.

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, which provides critical research, education, and promotion tools to fruit and vegetable producers.

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 access electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support and promote long-distance health care, education and public safety resources. Western Governors are particularly encouraged by the recent launch of USDA's ReConnect Program, which supports broadband deployment to underserved or wholly unserved rural communities.

Nutrition Assistance

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 provide 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.

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 as you discharge these critical and challenging responsibilities.