
January 19, 2022

The Honorable David Scott
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture
House of Representatives
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Glenn "GT" Thompson
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture
House of Representatives
1010 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Thompson:

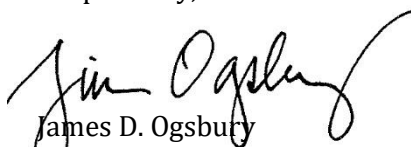
In advance of the Committee's January 20, 2022, hearing on the State of the Rural Economy, attached please find four Western Governors' Association (WGA) policy resolutions:

- WGA Policy Resolution 2020-07, Rural Development;
- WGA policy Resolution 2020-06, Western Agriculture;
- WGA Policy Resolution 2021-06, Disaster Preparedness and Response; and
- WGA Policy Resolution 2020-08, Broadband Connectivity.

I request that you include this document in the permanent record of the hearing, as it articulates Western Governors' policy positions and recommendations on rural economic health and development and related matters.

Thank you for your consideration of this request and your attention to this subject. Please contact me if you have any questions or require further information. In the meantime, with warm regards and best wishes, I am

Respectfully,



James D. Ogsbury
Executive Director

Attachments



Policy Resolution 2020-07 Rural Development

A. **BACKGROUND**

1. Vibrant and prosperous rural communities are essential components of western states and the nation. Rural communities in the West grow and supply food, steward natural resources, contribute disproportionately to the armed services, and are critical to state economies.
2. Rural communities in the West are richly diverse and face varying threats and opportunities. They do, however, share common characteristics, such as low population density and distance from urban centers, that create challenges for economic development.
3. Nationally, the rural population is increasing slowly after a period of decline from 2010-2017, although there is great variation in demographic trends at the county level. Many rural western counties are experiencing population growth due to net migration of retirees as well as people seeking quality of life and amenities.
4. Most rural communities have a higher proportion of older residents than urban and suburban communities. Rural communities are preparing for an anticipated wave of retirements, leading to a reduction in skilled workforce and potential closure of local businesses.
5. Western states have many of the highest per-capita veteran populations in the nation. It is estimated that approximately 25 percent of all veterans live in rural areas. These veterans have lower rates of employment compared to veterans living in urban areas and to their non-veteran rural colleagues.
6. Most rural communities have experienced slower economic and job growth than their urban counterparts and have not yet fully recovered from the 2008 recession. Many rural economies rely heavily on a few industries. This makes these communities more sensitive to trends affecting those industries and can make it more difficult to recover from disruptions. Rural communities have also been significantly affected by the COVID-19 public health threat and will suffer distress from any associated economic downturn.
7. Federal programs for rural development are spread across multiple agencies. Some agencies are responsible for rural infrastructure investments while others focus on economic development. The multiplicity of administrating entities and the lack of consistency across agencies: renders it difficult for rural stakeholders to navigate federal programs; compounds time and expense needed to apply for funding opportunities; and creates inefficiencies in the distribution of resources.
8. The vast majority of federal loan and grant programs for rural communities are targeted to physical infrastructure. Little funding exists to support development of local capacity, including strengthening community organizations, nonprofit entities, and other groups serving rural communities.

9. By offering opportunity, connectivity, and quality of life, rural communities can thrive and prosper while improving economic stability and protecting the rural character and natural resources that draw people to these areas.
10. Small businesses, including farming and ranching, are the foundation of rural economies, generating tax revenue, creating jobs, providing essential goods and services, and contributing to the culture and character of small towns. Building a successful business in a rural community is particularly challenging due to limited access to capital, available workforce and smaller customer bases. Many successful rural businesses operate on thin margins and if they close, are extremely difficult to replace.
11. High-speed internet, commonly referred to as “broadband,”¹ is the critical infrastructure of the 21st century and a modern-day necessity for individuals, businesses, schools and government. Many rural western communities lack the business case for private broadband investment due to the high cost of infrastructure and the low number of customers in potential service areas. This has left many rural businesses and citizens at a competitive disadvantage compared to urban and suburban areas with robust broadband access.
12. Transportation connectivity is critical to strengthening economies and improving quality of life. Air service is particularly important to connect remote western communities to urban hubs. Pilot shortages, infrastructure constraints, and airline consolidation have negatively impacted rural air connectivity. The airline industry has been significantly impacted by COVID-19 and rural service, which is typically the least profitable, has been reduced.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors believe that strengthening social infrastructure in rural communities is the best strategy to ensure rural quality of life and prosperity. Congress and federal agencies should increase the proportion of rural economic development and infrastructure funding that goes toward capacity-building. Accordingly, Western Governors call for ample and consistent federal funding for institutions, training, and technical assistance. Robust social infrastructure is fundamental to economic and community development and maximizes the impact of state and federal resources.
2. Social infrastructure is especially critical during disasters or crises. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic crisis have illustrated the challenge of rapidly deploying resources to the most urgent needs. Western Governors are committed to strengthening the resilience of rural communities by helping to foster local leadership and strengthen networks and connections within and among rural communities across the West.
3. Western Governors believe that many federal programs for rural development and distressed communities include unintended barriers for rural individuals and entities that need assistance most. Western Governors urge federal agencies to work with states to: thoroughly evaluate program requirements; identify barriers for rural applicants; and revise onerous requirements in a manner that recognizes the limited resources and capacity of rural applicants. In particular, Western Governors are concerned by:

¹ The Federal Communications Commission defines fixed “broadband” as service offering minimum speeds of 25 Megabits per second (Mbps) down and 3 Mbps up.

- a. Scoring criteria that relate to numerical size and impact, such as the number of jobs created or the number of people served, which disadvantage small and isolated communities;
 - b. Requirements that applicants partner with other institutions like community colleges or foundations, which may not operate in the rural community seeking assistance;
 - c. Financial match or cash-on-hand requirements that rural organizations cannot meet; and
 - d. Overly complicated or technical applications that deter rural customers from applying.
4. Western Governors also urge federal agencies to use state data for eligibility determinations when requested by states. States often have more up-to-date and granular data for rural communities than federal sources.
5. Western Governors recognize and support efforts at the federal and state level to coordinate the deployment of resources, leverage funding, and create one-stop application processes for rural customers. Western Governors are interested in exploring strategies to expand those models to include more funders and further enhance coordination between agencies and between states and the federal government.
6. Western Governors believe that changes in our economy, labor force, and technological innovations require fundamental changes in economic development strategies. Western Governors promote rural development policies that focus on quality of life and the support of small businesses and entrepreneurs. This will develop rural communities that are attractive places to live and work while protecting their rural character, natural resource-based industries, and natural areas.
7. In the wake of disasters in rural communities, including the COVID-19 pandemic, providing small businesses with the tools and resources to survive disruption and prosper again is critical for economic recovery and social stability. The impacts of COVID-19 mitigation measures have illustrated the urgent need for working capital to stabilize rural businesses and ensure their continued viability during periods of prolonged disruption related to disasters and emergencies. The federal response to declared disasters must include sufficient and accessible business stabilization funds, including grants and long-term, forgivable loans. Congress should also examine how such funds are distributed by the Small Business Administration (SBA), U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA RD), and the Economic Development Administration (EDA) to ensure that adequate systems are in place to handle demand during widespread emergencies.
8. During COVID-19 response, many small lenders could not access federal funds to support their communities because they did not meet program thresholds or were unable to compete against large banks. Small lenders, including community development financial institutions (CDFIs), community banks, and credit unions, are often the only lender serving rural and tribal communities. In the ongoing response to the economic impacts of COVID-19, Western Governors encourage Congress to set aside emergency relief funds for small

lenders and consider program requirements that allow those entities to participate through a streamlined process to rapidly distribute resources while maintaining fiscal accountability.

9. Western Governors are eager to work with public universities, community colleges, and the business community to expand opportunities for young people to stay in their rural communities. There is a high demand for skilled workers in rural communities and states should work together on regional solutions that provide the appropriate training and skills for the jobs that are available in rural communities where possible. Western Governors are also committed to increasing employment among veterans and the disabled community in the rural West.
10. Western Governors encourage increased flexibility in the use of federal economic development resources (particularly EDA funds) to facilitate investments in quality of life and amenities in rural communities. Governors believe that metrics based solely on the absolute number of jobs created do not reflect the important economic benefits of investments in community assets that make rural communities attractive places to live. Nor do they account for the relative impact of job creation in less populated rural communities or areas with high unemployment or poverty rates.
11. Western Governors strongly support improving and increasing broadband connectivity in the rural West through significant federal investments in mapping, deployment, and adoption. The Governors have highlighted substantive policy recommendations in the Western Governors' Association policy resolution addressing broadband connectivity.
12. Western Governors have developed robust policies addressing the challenge of providing services and maintaining infrastructure essential to communities across the vast expanse of the rural West. These policies address broadband access, healthcare, surface transportation and water quality. Western Governors are committed to working with Congress and federal agencies to improve the efficacy of federal and state programs to support critical infrastructure in the rural West.
13. Western Governors recommend further changes in approach to supporting water and wastewater infrastructure in the West:
 - a. Funding for communities not served by water systems is critically needed. Western Governors recommend set-asides to develop innovative solutions for communities and tribes that cannot be served by traditional systems.
 - b. Western Governors are concerned about shortages of certified water system operators and request a coordinated effort to increase training opportunities through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of Labor and college and university programs that develop these skilled workers to ensure that existing water access in rural communities can be maintained.
14. Western Governors emphasize that air service is a necessity in many rural communities. As the airline industry recovers from the economic impacts of COVID-19, Western Governors urge Congress to consider measures to address challenges in rural air connectivity, including funding for infrastructure and service subsidies.

15. Western Governors support the use of cooperative business models to preserve rural businesses and fill community needs for childcare, homecare, main street businesses, housing, and more. Western Governors recognize the need for substantial technical assistance and education in developing new cooperative businesses and support federal funding of such efforts.
16. Western Governors are concerned by food security challenges in rural communities. Rural grocery store closures jeopardize livability and community health. Western Governors are interested in exploring strategies to ensure rural food security by strengthening local agricultural economies and developing regional approaches to rural food supply chains.
17. Housing remains a critical challenge in rural communities across the West. Western Governors are committed to working together to share best practices and effective solutions for housing preservation and development in the rural West.
18. The Cooperative Extension System, which serves every county in western states, is an important asset for rural development. Western Governors believe that Cooperative Extension can play a more meaningful role in economic development efforts in distressed communities and support continued investment in the system as it responds to the changing needs of rural communities. Western Governors are committed to maximizing the efficacy of Cooperative Extension in their states.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

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Policy Resolution 2020-06 Western Agriculture

A. BACKGROUND

1. 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, production practices and water availability. That difference is even greater for Alaska, Hawai'i and the U.S. territories.
2. Farms and ranches are important contributors to the economies and quality of life of western states. 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.
3. Agriculture and food industry members support vibrant local economies and robust and stable food security systems across the West.
4. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), through the National Agricultural Statistics Service, conducts the Census of Agriculture every five years. Census of Agriculture data provides valuable insights on the average age of producers, new and young entrants to the agriculture sector, net cash income, crop insurance payments, specialty crop production and other useful metrics. State-acquired data must also be considered when evaluating industry metrics.
5. The 2017 Census of Agriculture includes many useful findings regarding the agricultural workforce in western states. Notably, only 6 percent of primary producers are age 35 or younger, while over 25 percent are between 65 and 74 years old. Additionally, approximately 14 percent of primary producers in western states have served or serve in the U.S. military. Women's role in agriculture has grown substantially as well, constituting over 38 percent of the agricultural workforce in 2017, versus under 33 percent in 2012. Minority communities and seasonal and temporary workers also make significant contributions to agricultural production and distribution across the West.
6. The 2017 Census of Agriculture illustrates the importance of specialty and high-value crop production in western states. In terms of total cash value of agricultural production, the top ten producing counties are all located in western states.
7. Trade promotion plays an important role in ensuring that western agricultural products have an opportunity to compete with products produced and subsidized internationally. The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement and programs offered by USDA and the Small Business Administration (SBA) all help improve international market opportunities for American growers and value-added product manufacturers.
8. The West's network of land-grant universities and colleges, as well as Cooperative Extension Service programs and Agricultural Experiment Stations, provide national leadership in research to develop more resilient seeds and crops, manage soil health,

improve the health of public lands, advance technology deployment in the bio-based economy and conduct on-farm experiments that help farmers and ranchers be more effective and efficient.

9. Precision agriculture technologies are helping deliver increased crop yields and farm productivity while reducing the use of water, fertilizer, pesticides and other agricultural inputs. Certain advanced agriculture technologies require fixed or mobile broadband connectivity while others utilize Global Positioning System tools.
10. Proper integration of many advanced agriculture technologies requires producers to have robust broadband connectivity at both their residences and across their operating areas. Wireless technologies and access to wireless spectrum can help support cost-effective technology adoption by agricultural producers. USDA and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) have recently launched efforts to promote on-farm connectivity and the growth of the precision agriculture sector.
11. Beyond the integration of advanced technologies, broadband access allows producers to conduct necessary agricultural business functions like online advertising and livestock auctions.
12. 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; and education and technical assistance.
13. Western Governors recognize that nutrition assistance programs are necessary to 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.
14. Agricultural production throughout the West requires integrated water management and robust state, federal, and private cooperation and investment in water delivery infrastructure, predictive and adaptive capabilities for extreme weather variability, and data relating to water resource availability.
15. The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant issues across food supply and distribution networks. Growers, value-added businesses, processing facilities, distribution companies and food retailers, including farmers markets, have all faced costly disruptions to their standard operations.
16. Without governmental action, the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on growers, farmworkers, manufacturers, delivery networks, and other agricultural entities are likely to be long-lasting and severe. Circumstances that are likely to affect the economic viability of producers, farmworkers and agricultural businesses include: restaurant, hotel and school closures; reduced consumer spending; seasonal and migratory workforce disruptions; and disease outbreaks within the agricultural community.
17. The COVID-19 pandemic is stressing state departments of agriculture and the Cooperative Extension Services and Agricultural Experiment Station networks. Many state agricultural and food programs which are relied upon for food safety and market development are likely

to be disrupted or canceled due to COVID-related challenges. The Cooperative Extension Services and Agricultural Experiment Station Networks are facing similar impediments to important agricultural and food network research projects due to data collection interruptions, personnel changes and other issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

18. USDA launched the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program and Farmers to Families Food Box Program in order to address challenges facing producers, agricultural businesses, and food insecure families as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
19. As western communities struggle to cope with disruptions to our food supply chains and historic job losses due to COVID-19, Governors continue to pursue solutions to connect surplus agricultural products with the growing number of food insecure families in our states. State and local leaders are best positioned to strategically direct food purchasing and distribution due to their understanding of unique challenges facing farmers and food assistance providers in their communities.
20. Local communities and food banks can face capacity issues, such as staffing shortages and refrigeration and storage challenges, while managing the preparation and distribution of emergency food supplies. Many are also adjusting to new packaging and distribution strategies, including grab-and-go meals and home deliveries.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors support funding for the USDA Market Access and Foreign Market Development Programs and SBA State Trade Expansion Program to promote opportunities for western producers to increase export revenues and encourage trade agreements that maximize benefits for the West's farmers and ranchers. Western Governors appreciate the increased alignment between USDA and SBA agricultural trade promotion programs.
2. Western Governors support adequate funding for the USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, which provides critical research, education, and promotion tools to fruit and vegetable producers with an annual re-evaluation of funding formulas and eligible crops.
3. Western states have experienced sharp declines in farm income and farm prices since their peaks in 2013. Western Governors support a farm safety net that recognizes past deficit reduction contributions of the agricultural sector and maintains funding for other key commodity, conservation, crop insurance, research, energy, and export promotion programs.
4. Western Governors encourage the expansion of programs that can meet the unique educational, training, technical and financial needs of new, beginning and veteran farmers and ranchers and other USDA programming that can help returning veterans develop and expand business opportunities in rural communities.
5. Western Governors emphasize that the agriculture industry has a growing need for workers with science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) skills. We support efforts to develop a diverse and skilled agricultural workforce, by increasing awareness of career opportunities, expanding education and training programs, and other means, in order to meet the needs of this increasingly high-tech industry.

6. Western Governors support the expansion of research and implementation funding to address drought, a changing climate and extreme weather risks facing western producers.
7. Western Governors encourage the effective use of Cooperative Extension Services, Agricultural Experiment Stations and other partnerships to deliver practical tools, technologies and information to farmers, ranchers and forest landowners. We support Congressional and Administrative efforts that provide support to the Cooperative Extension Services and Agricultural Experiments Station networks as they address research, staff capacity, and agricultural and food system challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.
8. Western Governors emphasize the importance of supporting the growth of the precision agriculture sector and highlight the substantive policy recommendations contained in our policy resolution addressing broadband connectivity issues.
9. Western Governors support funding for federal programs that provide assistance to agricultural cooperatives across the West. These include USDA Rural Cooperative Development Grants and Value-Added Producer Grants, and programs administered by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service and National Institute of Food & Agriculture.
10. 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, efficiency, and accountability in program administration.
11. Existing federal assistance options that help build connections between growers with surplus products and food insecure families lack the flexibility to nimbly address needs in many western communities. Western Governors support Congressional and Administrative efforts to provide states with emergency funding to purchase goods from local producers who lack a market for their surplus crops, and provide them to food banks and nutrition assistance programs who are facing unprecedented demands.
12. Western Governors encourage USDA to coordinate with state departments of agriculture and local governments in the delivery of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program and other federal efforts focused on addressing food insecurity challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Strong partnerships across federal, state and local agencies can help ensure that food is not wasted due to logistical and capacity constraints at local food banks.
13. Western Governors support legislative measures that provide states with access to flexible funding to respond to urgent and emerging issues in the agricultural economy and food supply chain. Additionally, we support legislative efforts that address agricultural supply chain disruptions; increase food banks and nonprofits' capacity to address growing nutrition demands; provide personal protective equipment and COVID-19 testing capacity to producers and processing facility employees; and promote the ability of producer and business cooperatives, state departments of agriculture, and Cooperative Extension Services to strengthen local food networks.
14. Western Governors recognize that the Farm Bill includes titles and issues not contemplated in this resolution. We encourage Congressional committees, federal agencies and the executive branch to review Governors' existing policy resolutions addressing national forest

and rangeland management; species conservation; voluntary conservation programs; biosecurity and invasive species management; rural development; and broadband connectivity.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

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Policy Resolution 2021-06

Disaster Preparedness and Response

A. BACKGROUND

1. Major disasters, emergencies and extreme weather events are devastating to the people, property, economy, and natural environment of the communities in which they occur. The outcomes of disasters and emergencies can often be far-reaching, with effects on the national economy, infrastructure, and the import and export of commodities.
2. In the United States, disasters and emergencies and their economic and public costs have increased significantly in recent years. Federal disaster declarations (including emergency declarations, major disaster declarations, and fire management assistance grants) have surged since they were first utilized in 1953. From 1953 to 1989, the average number of annual federal disaster declarations was 27.8. That number escalated to an annual average of 108.7 from 1990 to 2016. The year 2020 saw a record 308 disaster declarations by the federal government. Of these declarations, 230 were for emergencies or major disasters, surpassing the previous record of 128 dating back to 2011.
3. The federal government plays a critical role in disaster and emergency response and long-term recovery efforts. Accompanying the greater number of disasters has been an increasing level of federal disaster aid. From 1980 to 2009, the number of federally declared disasters which resulted in costs exceeding \$1 billion averaged approximately 4.5, annually. That number has surged. From 2016 to 2020, the numbers rose with an average 16.2 disasters exceeding \$1 billion in costs each year. In 2020, there were a record-setting 22 disasters that exceeded \$1 billion in costs.
4. Proactive emergency management efforts, such as hazard mitigation and risk reduction activities, have an incredible return on investment. Research has shown that actions taken before a disaster to reduce hazards save, on average, six dollars in future response and recovery costs for every dollar spent on hazard mitigation. At a time when state budgets are struggling to keep up with more frequent and costly disasters, investing in hazard mitigation could have a profoundly positive effect on state and local budgets.
5. Certain types of disasters pose unique threats to western states and have occurred with greater frequency in recent decades. These include floods, droughts, tornadoes, mudslides, earthquakes, hurricanes, and, particularly, wildfires. Wildfires consumed approximately three million acres nationwide in 1960. In three of the past six years, over ten million acres have burned annually. 2020 saw 10.1 million acres affected by wildfire, of which nearly ninety-five percent were in western states. Federal agencies' wildfire suppression costs have increased from less than \$240 million in 1985 to over \$2.2 billion in 2020. Experts project that wildfires will continue to worsen, in terms of acreage burned and in economic effects.
6. Disasters and emergencies have disproportionate effects on different populations and communities. Race and ethnicity, language, education and economic barriers, and immigration status can negatively affect the outcomes of those experiencing an emergency

or disaster. These factors have effects beyond the initial response and extend to recovery, risk reduction, and preparedness program accessibility and equity.

7. The National Response Framework and National Disaster Recovery Framework describe how the federal government, states, territories, localities, tribes, and other public and private sector institutions should respond to and recover from disasters and emergencies. Local emergency agencies – police, firefighters, and medical teams – are to be the first responders in a disaster or emergency. State, territorial, local, and tribal governments have the lead roles in disaster response and recovery. Federal agencies can become involved in disaster and emergency response when resource capacity or effective emergency management is beyond the capabilities of a state, territory or tribe. These federal efforts are primarily directed through the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).
8. Governors have a key role in managing emergency response. Governors typically are the state or territorial elected official responsible for making a state disaster declaration and directing disaster response in their jurisdiction. Governors are also responsible for deploying their state National Guard in emergency situations. Governors hold the sole authority to request federal assistance when a disaster overwhelms state and local capabilities, and are responsible for negotiating and implementing interstate mutual aid agreements.
9. Disaster and emergency response and long-term recovery create a significant financial burden. When authorized by FEMA, the Public Assistance, Individual Assistance, and Hazard Mitigation programs provide federal funding which can alleviate this strain. Affected homeowners may seek Individual Assistance; state and local governments may seek Public Assistance to reimburse for costs incurred from debris removal, emergency protective measures during the response, and permanent repair of damaged public infrastructure; and Hazard Mitigation funds can help communities rebuild and become more resilient against future disasters. Other federal agencies, such as the Small Business Administration, Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Federal Highway Administration also have programs designed to assist in disaster and emergency recovery efforts. For example, the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Emergency Watershed Protection Program is designed to protect people and properties from flooding that often follows wildfire events.
10. In recent years, some petitions for long-term federal recovery aid have been denied. This has been most apparent in petitions for Individual Assistance to counties affected by disasters and emergencies, but has also occurred in connection with state requests for Public Assistance. A denial of federal aid compounds problems for affected communities struggling to recover from the devastation of a disaster or emergency and slows recovery efforts in many western states.
11. While most disasters affect a specific local area, the COVID-19 public health emergency was national in scope. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for close coordination between federal, state, territorial, local and tribal governments in emergency management. The pandemic continues to cause significant disruption across the world, requiring ongoing attention from Governors and emergency management and public health officials, affecting the lives of all Americans, and complicating the flow of goods and services across international borders.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Governors need maximum flexibility to respond to disaster and emergency circumstances that may evolve quickly over the course of a disaster through the initiation of recovery. Therefore, we should expeditiously remove any barriers limiting a Governor and their executive branch agencies' ability to save taxpayer money and expedite response and recovery efforts while safeguarding lives, property and the environment. Western Governors recognize that planning processes and disaster and emergency protocols are important aspects of emergency management, but that Governors also need significant freedom to adapt those plans to changing circumstances during the evolution of a disaster or emergency.
2. Federal, state, territorial and tribal efforts to prepare for, mitigate against, respond to, and recover from emergencies and disasters must ensure programs and response efforts are inclusive, equitable, and accessible and representative and reflective of the affected communities. Concepts of inclusivity, diversity, equity and accessibility must be included from initial development of programs, policies and procedures to reduce risk in our communities and address post-disaster survivor needs.
3. Western Governors recognize that community resilience is key to ameliorating the effect of many disasters and emergencies. Hazard mitigation and risk reduction are the most cost-effective ways to protect lives, property, infrastructure and the environment from the effects of natural and human-caused hazards. Effective risk reduction strategy development and implementation leverage broad stakeholder input across multiple disciplines, sectors and levels of government. Infrastructure planning should include consideration of risk reduction measures for known hazards as well as address the dynamic hazard profile created by a changing climate. We must plan for tomorrow, not yesterday.
4. Western Governors encourage Congress and federal agencies to reassess the structure of disaster mitigation grant programs, which can be too restrictive or narrowly tailored to address community needs. Additionally, establishing consistent administration standards for different federal grant programs, including the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, the State Homeland Security Program, and the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities and Emergency Management Performance Grant programs, would streamline application processes and eliminate confusion at the local level.
5. Federal agencies conducting disaster recovery and assistance, as well as the programs which they administer, should receive adequate and consistent funding and allow Governors and their designated executive branch agencies to have critical input on where those funds are needed most. The lack of speed, certainty and consistency in appropriation of federal disaster funding, such as HUD Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) funds, are a hinderance to coordinated recovery efforts and effective utilization of public funds. For example, there is no current appropriation (or public consideration) of funding for the 2020 California wildfires, which occurred more than seven months ago. Additionally, the inconsistent incorporation of HUD mitigation resources (CDBG-MIT) is an obstacle to effective coordination of mitigation efforts across program areas.

6. Many rural western communities have less concentrated populations than eastern states, making it difficult for western states and territories to qualify for Individual Assistance and Public Assistance declarations. Additionally, certain criteria, such as considering Total Taxable Revenue of the entire state when evaluating whether to provide a major declaration for a localized event, makes it virtually impossible for large states to receive a declaration. Federal processes used to evaluate the need for access to disaster aid programs should be reconsidered. Federal agencies should reexamine the standards used to determine the provision of Individual Assistance to homeowners and the access to federal aid needed for recovery from disasters and emergencies that affect western states and territories. The historically underfunded USDA NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection Program should be revisited and strengthened.
7. Western Governors recognize that as the first responders to a disaster or emergency, states, territories, local governments, and tribes have better information about local conditions and needs in the response and immediate recovery phases of a disaster or emergency. FEMA and other applicable federal agencies should work directly with individual states and territories, through Governors or their designees, to jointly identify disaster risks and methods by which such risks may be addressed. In collaboration with Governors or their designees, federal agencies should reassess the administrative mechanisms to establish the most effective means to determine the necessity and provision of federal disaster assistance.
8. Federal agencies should provide state, territorial, local, and tribal government officials with accessible and clear information on available federal resources and programs and the most effective utilization of those resources in disaster recovery. WGA has worked with federal partners to improve interagency coordination on post-wildfire restoration work, including a roadmap of assistance available to communities affected by wildfire and identification of “navigators” to help communities prioritize post-wildfire restoration needs. Western Governors urge the federal government to prioritize the funding of these important efforts, as they should have a positive effect on maximizing the value of restoration work and, more importantly, addressing the needs of communities affected by wildfire.
9. Western Governors recognize that while aid may be provided following a disaster, the event itself could be avoided or minimized if resources were directed to pre-disaster mitigation efforts. Rebuilding is too-often provided in a delayed fashion or conducted without safeguards necessary to prevent future disaster-related damages. This compounds the vulnerability of western communities and resources in the face of disasters. Federal legislation should reconsider the important role of pre-disaster mitigation that reduces the risk and minimizes the effects of disasters and emergencies. When possible, pre-disaster mitigation should be incentivized at the state and local levels. Additionally, some western and midwestern states are at risk of catastrophic earthquake. Mitigation assistance beyond that currently administered by FEMA is needed. Finally, mitigation funds tied to Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) declarations assist fire-ravaged communities. The FMAG and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) Post Fire Grant programs should be continued.
10. Western Governors encourage the Administration to consider actions to increase communication between and cohesion of federal agencies in disaster and emergency response. The Executive Branch should consider placing FEMA in the lead role to coordinate communication between and cohesion of federal agencies in disaster and

emergency response. Strengthening federal emergency management processes to promote single, comprehensive points of contact would streamline state-federal coordination and help ensure states and territories can allocate resources where they are most needed. Western Governors support the consideration of a national emergency management strategy to provide consistent lines of communication between federal, state, territorial, local and tribal governments.

11. Federal agencies should seek to eliminate duplicative administrative processes to streamline post-disaster assistance. Multiple agencies requiring overlapping or duplicative reviews for post-disaster assistance adds time and cost to recovery efforts.
12. Western Governors recognize the need for clear, consistent, truthful and timely communication about the scope and scale of disasters and emergencies, both between all levels of governments and between governments and their constituents. Clearly articulating what is known, and what is not known, about a disaster or emergency is critical to developing and executing an effective response from governments, promoting public confidence in those response actions, and empowering citizens to make informed decisions about their safety and welfare.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

This resolution will expire in June 2024. Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a semiannual basis. Please consult <http://www.westgov.org/resolutions> for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.



Policy Resolution 2020-08 Broadband Connectivity

A. BACKGROUND

1. High-speed internet, commonly referred to as “broadband,”¹ is the critical infrastructure of the 21st century and a modern-day necessity for businesses, individuals, schools and government. Many rural western communities lack the business case for private broadband investment due to the high cost of infrastructure and the low number of customers in potential service areas. This has left many rural businesses and citizens at a competitive disadvantage compared to those urban and suburban areas with robust broadband access.
2. Broadband connectivity promotes economic prosperity and diversity. Broadband connectivity is a key element of innovations in precision agriculture, telehealth, remote work and distance learning across the West.
3. Many broadband applications that promote rural, economic and community prosperity rely on speeds greater than 25/3 Mbps. This is especially true for functions that upload large amounts of data, such as telehealth, e-learning and business applications.
4. Western states have unique factors that make planning, siting and maintaining broadband infrastructure especially challenging and costly. These include vast distances between communities, challenging terrain, sparse middle mile and long-haul fiber-optic cable, and the need to permit and site infrastructure across federal, state, Tribal and private lands. Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories face particular broadband deployment challenges due to factors involving distance, cost and applicable technologies.
5. Western Governors and states are taking significant action to accelerate broadband deployment in rural communities. These actions include direct investment of state funds, reduction of regulatory hurdles, and promotion of public-private partnerships to deliver digital connectivity to unserved and underserved areas.
6. Many western states have sought to expedite broadband infrastructure deployment by adopting “Dig Once” policies, granting non-exclusive and non-discriminatory access to rights-of-way and facilitating efficient “co-location” of new broadband infrastructure on existing structures.
7. A number of federal agencies directly support rural broadband deployment projects and data collection in western states. These include the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and Economic Development Administration.

¹ The Federal Communications Commission defines fixed “broadband” as service offering minimum speeds of 25 Megabits per second (Mbps) down and 3 Mbps up.

8. Federal land management agencies, particularly the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), play a crucial role in permitting and siting broadband infrastructure in western states.
9. Both the Department of the Interior (DOI) and USFS recently launched online mapping platforms identifying telecommunications infrastructure sites on federal lands. This information can be used to inform private and public broadband infrastructure investments.
10. High-quality data is necessary to ensure that public broadband deployment efforts are cost-effective and prioritize areas that either wholly or significantly lack access. Under its current Form 477 reporting protocols, the FCC considers a census block “served” if a single residence in the block has access to broadband. This practice overstates broadband availability in larger, rural census blocks common in western states. The FCC’s use of “maximum advertised,” not “actual,” speeds when mapping broadband coverage further distorts reporting on the service customers receive.
11. Whether or not an area is considered “served” has significant effects on its eligibility for federal broadband infrastructure support. Inaccurate or overstated data prevents businesses, local governments, and other entities from applying for and securing federal funds to assist underserved or unserved communities.
12. S.1822, the Broadband Deployment Accuracy and Technological Availability (DATA) Act (Pub. L. 116-130), was enacted in March 2020. This law requires the FCC to change the way broadband data is collected, verified, and reported. Specifically, the FCC must collect and disseminate granular broadband service availability data from wired, fixed-wireless, satellite, and mobile broadband providers. The FCC is required to establish the Broadband Serviceable Location Fabric, a dataset of geocoded information for all broadband service locations, atop which broadband maps are overlaid, to report broadband service availability data.
13. Given the number of federal agencies and programs involved in supporting rural broadband deployment, it can be challenging for small, rural providers and communities to identify and pursue appropriate deployment opportunities. Businesses, local governments, electric and telephone cooperatives, Tribes and other rural entities can also face burdens in applying for and managing federal funds. These barriers include areas being incorrectly identified as “served” on broadband coverage maps, excessive application and reporting procedures, and significant match or cash-on-hand requirements.
14. Wireless spectrum is a valuable resource that can help support innovative and cost-effective connectivity solutions in western states.
15. Internet Exchange Points (IXPs) are vital elements of Internet infrastructure that enable networks to exchange traffic with each other. IXPs help promote low-cost data transmission and improved overall local Internet performance in the areas in which they are located.

16. Electric and telephone cooperatives have invested in broadband infrastructure across the West. In certain states, these cooperatives are the entities principally providing broadband to rural communities, often at relatively low costs to their members.
17. The FCC's 2020 Broadband Deployment Report estimates that 27.7 percent of Americans residing in Tribal lands lack fixed terrestrial broadband coverage, compared to 22.3 percent of Americans in rural areas and 1.5 percent in urban areas. A 2018 Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report² asserts that the FCC overstates broadband coverage on Tribal lands.
18. Tribal Nations, the majority of which are in western states, face many barriers to the deployment of communications services. These include rural, remote and rugged terrain; areas that are not connected to a road system; minimal access to middle mile and long-haul fiber-optic cable; and difficulty in obtaining rights-of-way to deploy infrastructure across some Tribal lands. These factors can all increase the cost of installing, maintaining, and upgrading infrastructure.
19. Tribal Nations also face challenges securing funds through federal broadband deployment programs. A separate 2018 GAO Report³ included a review of four federal broadband programs (three FCC, one USDA), and found that from 2010 to 2017, less than 1 percent of funding has gone directly to Tribes or Tribally owned providers.
20. Access to wireless spectrum is another crucial issue for Tribal Nations. In February 2020, the FCC opened a priority filing window for rural Tribes to access 2.5 GHz spectrum in advance of an upcoming spectrum auction. This spectrum is well-suited to provide low-cost broadband service in rural areas.
21. Federal programs often direct broadband infrastructure funding to community anchor institutions such as schools, libraries and health centers. These anchor institutions can help leverage additional public and private investments in surrounding rural areas. Holistic funding approaches that support infrastructure deployment "to and through" community anchor institutions can help promote connectivity for students, patients and community members.
22. Western Governors appreciate USDA Rural Development's efforts to promote broadband connectivity across the rural West. USDA's many offerings, including the ReConnect Program, Community Connect Grants, and Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants, all help promote prosperity and quality of life in western states.
23. Western Governors have provided significant feedback on the design of the ReConnect program, launched in December 2018. Notably, Western Governors recommended that the ReConnect Program, "prioritize communities that either wholly or severely lack access to broadband," and, "reward project applications that will deliver speeds that ensure rural communities can prosper now and into the future as their data transmission needs expand."

² Government Accountability Office: FCC's Data Overstate Access on Tribal Lands. September 2018.

³ Government Accountability Office: Few Partnerships Exist and the Rural Utilities Service Needs to Identify and Address Any Funding Barriers Tribes Face. September 2018.

24. The ReConnect Program contains a requirement that areas designated to receive support through the FCC's Connect America Fund Phase II (CAF-II) can only pursue ReConnect funding through the entity that is receiving CAF-II support. This restriction limits deployment of adequate broadband capability in many rural areas.
25. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the importance of reliable broadband connectivity as businesses, schools and health care systems have transitioned to digital platforms and practices. The transition to digital learning has been particularly difficult for many rural and low-income communities and K-12 schools due to lack of broadband connectivity at home. Western states have employed creative strategies to address student connectivity and "homework gap" issues within our communities. These efforts include using parking lots and school and transit buses to launch public wi-fi hotspots.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors encourage Congress and federal agencies to recognize that the current definition of broadband – 25/3 Mbps – does not correspond with the requisite download and upload speeds necessary to support many business, education and health care applications that promote economic and community prosperity. We support efforts to adopt a higher, scalable standard that more accurately reflects modern innovations and bandwidth demands.
2. Regulations affecting broadband infrastructure permitting and siting vary by state and can create additional obstacles to private and public investment. Where possible, Western Governors should work together to minimize this barrier.
3. Western Governors recommend the FCC, USDA and other federal agencies involved in broadband deployment pursue strong partnerships with Governors and state agencies. Improved coordination related to broadband coverage data collection and verification and public investment can help ensure that public funds are directed to areas in most need of assistance.
4. Western Governors encourage the BLM, BIA and USFS to pursue strategies to prioritize reviews for broadband infrastructure permits on federal lands. We support efforts to improve permitting timelines for broadband infrastructure co-located with existing structures and other linear infrastructure, such as roads, transmission lines and pipelines. We encourage improved planning and permitting coordination between public lands management agencies, as telecommunications projects in western states can cross multiple federal lands jurisdictions. DOI and USFS's online mapping platforms identifying telecommunications infrastructure sites on their lands will be helpful tools to accomplish this goal.
5. Western Governors are encouraged that new data and mapping platforms established by the Broadband DATA Act (Pub. L. 116-130) incorporate state-level data wherever possible. State broadband offices and representatives can offer invaluable information and on-the-ground perspectives regarding broadband coverage in western states. We encourage Congress to provide the FCC with the necessary funds to implement the Act.

6. Western Governors encourage Congress and federal agencies to address application barriers for businesses, local governments, cooperatives, Tribes and other entities involved with broadband deployment in rural communities.
7. Western Governors appreciate the USDA and the FCC's efforts to promote on-farm connectivity and the growth of the precision agriculture sector. We encourage both agencies to engage with Governors' offices, state broadband representatives and state departments of agriculture as they pursue policy and program initiatives to support advanced agriculture technology development and adoption.
8. Western Governors recommend that adequate wireless spectrum be allocated to support advanced and emerging agricultural technologies.
9. Western Governors emphasize the growing importance of IXPs in promoting cost-effective, reliable broadband service in rural areas. We encourage Congress and federal agencies to promote investment in rural IXPs via applicable broadband deployment programs, legislative proposals addressing infrastructure, and other methods.
10. Western Governors encourage federal agencies to continue expanding the eligibility of electric and telephone cooperatives to pursue USDA and FCC broadband deployment program support, as cooperatives' existing infrastructure and access to rights-of-way can help promote low-cost connectivity solutions for rural communities.
11. Western Governors urge federal agencies and Congress to pursue policy, programmatic and fiscal opportunities to improve broadband connectivity on Tribal lands. This includes designing federal programs in a way that promotes partnerships between Tribes, states and various broadband providers. We recommend that federal broadband programs allocate a designated portion of their available funding to supporting projects on Tribal lands.
12. Western Governors encourage Congress and federal agencies to leverage community anchor institutions in rural communities to spur connectivity to surrounding areas. We support efforts to advance "to and through" policies that provide flexibility to incentivize additional private or public broadband infrastructure investment beyond connected community anchor institutions.
13. Western Governors encourage USDA to address the ReConnect Program eligibility criteria related to areas designated to receive satellite support through the FCC's CAF-II auction. This will enable many communities to pursue ReConnect connectivity solutions that will support increased data transmission needs into the future.
14. Western Governors request that FCC, USDA and other federal entities prioritize scalable broadband infrastructure investments that meet communities' increased bandwidth demands into the future. Funds for equipment maintenance and upgrades are essential to ensure federal broadband investments continue to provide high-quality service.
15. Western Governors request that Congress and the FCC leverage states' on-the-ground expertise by providing substantial block grant funds to address rural connectivity challenges. We support the use of state block grant funds to address general broadband

infrastructure issues and respond to connectivity challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic.

16. Western Governors support efforts to promote flexibility within the FCC's E-Rate Program in order to deliver home connectivity solutions for unserved and underserved students, and respond to connectivity issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. We encourage the FCC to support bus wi-fi and other creative efforts that seek to address the homework gap.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

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