

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

**Submitted to the United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food  
and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies  
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**Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations**

Chairman Harris, Ranking Member Bishop, 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 working relationship between states and territories and the federal government and understand that more effective cooperation depends on federal recognition of states as co-sovereigns and partners as reflected in Western Governors' Policy Resolution 2021-01, Strengthening the State-Federal Relationship. WGA also commends your attention to other Western Governors' resolutions that articulate policies relevant to the Subcommittee's work: 2020-06, Western Agriculture; 2021-03, National Forest and Rangeland Management; 2022-11, Biosecurity and Invasive Species Management; 2021-08, Water Resource Management in the West; 2021-04, Species Conservation and the Endangered Species Act; 2020-07, Rural Development; and 2020-08, Broadband Connectivity.

Amid difficult conditions of soil, climate, terrain, and water availability, 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 and support diverse rural economic opportunities in recreation, food, fiber, and energy.

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 to sustain their operations. Western Governors support voluntary and collaborative conservation to address locally identified natural resource issues affecting private and public working lands, including soil health, air and water quality, drought and wildfire resilience, wildlife habitat conservation, and invasive species. 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 endangered species, water quality impairments, and groundwater recharge. Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to support appropriate funding levels for programs addressing these 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, including: stimulating economic activity in local communities; conserving habitat for threatened and endangered species; mitigating wildfire potential in western states; improving

water quality; reducing the threat of invasive species; and responding to imminent hazards caused by natural disasters through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program.

Western Governors also support adequate funding of NRCS' Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting (SSWSF) program. Sufficient funding is required to ensure the long-term viability of the program's uninterrupted collection of snowpack and water data, the full operation and maintenance of snow survey sites, the hiring of needed program staff, and technological upgrades. The SSWSF program provides integral information for water management decisions and its predictive capabilities are critically useful throughout the arid West, where snowpack accounts for most of the annual water supply.

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

Land grant universities, Cooperative Extension Services, and Agricultural Experiment Stations provide national leadership in research to develop resilient crops, manage soil health, and advance technology deployment. 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 use of Extension to deliver practical tools, technologies, and information to producers and to address changing needs of rural communities.

Rural communities face a variety of challenges with respect to economic development, infrastructure, and quality of life. Western Governors support USDA's Rural Development programs and request an increased emphasis on capacity-building efforts. Building local capacity through training, technical assistance, and support for rural community institutions is fundamental to economic and community development. Western Governors urge USDA to

evaluate rural development programs, identify barriers, and revise requirements to address the limited resources and capacity of rural applicants.

Western Governors support rural development programs which foster small businesses, entrepreneurs, and cooperative business models, and appreciate the increase in funding for the Rural Business-Cooperative Service in FY 2023. Western agricultural cooperatives perform many important functions for their members and rural communities, including provision of inputs to growers; product storage, processing, and transportation; trade and market promotion; supply chain solutions; and education and technical assistance. Cooperative business models also meet rural community needs for childcare, main street businesses, and more. Western Governors support funding to promote these technical assistance and education efforts, including USDA Rural Cooperative Development Grants and Value-Added Producer Grants, and programs administered by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service and NIFA.

Western Governors are also committed to creating new opportunities for rural job seekers and young people to pursue careers in their rural communities. WGA supports solutions that leverage public universities, community colleges, and the business community to provide appropriate training and skills for jobs that are available in rural communities.

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 farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. WGA also supports adequate funding for the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, which provides research 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 and wastewater facilities, renewable energy projects on working

lands, and broadband connectivity in rural communities that have minimal infrastructure.

Western Governors support dedicated funding to develop innovative solutions for communities and tribes that cannot be served by traditional drinking and wastewater systems. Governors also remain concerned by the nationwide shortage of certified water system operators who are necessary to maintain existing water access in rural communities.

Expanding broadband access to rural America empowers citizens to compete in a global market and access information and technologies to support and promote telehealth and distance learning. Western Governors note the significance of programs such as the Distance Learning and Telemedicine and ReConnect programs, which deploy broadband to underserved rural communities and appreciate continued commitment to the ReConnect Program and rural broadband. In addition, Western Governors are pleased that the minimum speed for ReConnect eligibility remains at 100/20 Mbps, as 25/3 Mbps does not correspond the speeds necessary to support modern internet needs.

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 farms to stores to tables. Nutrition programs should continue to provide flexibility for states to respond to unique economic conditions, serve all eligible users without drastically reducing benefits, and pursue transparency and accountability in administration.

Western states and federal agencies deal with a complex web of interrelated agriculture, conservation, and economic development priorities, 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.