

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

**Submitted to the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
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Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations

Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Cartwright, and Members of the Subcommittee, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony on items within the jurisdiction of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies, including the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and National Science Foundation (NSF). 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.

A clean and reliable water supply is crucial for communities, industries, habitats, farms, and western communities to maintain and improve their quality of life. The scarce nature of water in much of the West makes related programs particularly important to Western Governors. Western states rely on basic information on the status, trends, and projections of water resource availability to make sound water management decisions. Water users throughout the West and decision makers at all levels of government need the ability to assess drought conditions and respond effectively. Lacking the ability to implement drought mitigation measures when needed can lead to increased wildfires, impaired ecosystems, degraded agricultural production, and threatened municipal and industrial water supplies.

For these reasons, Western Governors support strong and dedicated funding for the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) program under the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which performs a valuable role in western water management and drought response. Western Governors also support federal programs dedicated to the improvement of data on snowpack, streamflow, soil moisture and forecasting, including the NASA National Land Imaging (Landsat) Program. The Governors support federal efforts to coordinate water data gathering and information programs across multiple agencies. Western Governors also recognize the need for improved predictive capabilities for extreme weather variability and urge the federal government to place a priority on improving the sub-seasonal and seasonal precipitation forecasting capabilities that could support water management decision-making.

Many western communities, especially rural and tribal communities, lack access to broadband internet due to the high cost of infrastructure and the economic challenges of serving low customer densities in rural areas. When communities do have access to broadband, download and upload speeds are often insufficient to meet bandwidth demands. These realities have left many rural businesses at a competitive disadvantage and citizens without access to

telework, telemedicine, and distance learning opportunities. Consequently, Western Governors support efforts to adopt a federal definition of broadband that is higher and more scalable than 25/3 Mbps. In addition, the Governors support efforts to leverage state expertise through state block grants and opportunities to improve connectivity on rural and tribal lands. To ensure that tribal areas receive adequate investment, federal broadband programs should allocate a designated portion of their available funding to tribal projects.

Western Governors look forward to implementing the historic level of broadband funding in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Pub. L. 117-58), particularly the funds allocated to the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program administered by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). However, Western Governors are concerned with the process and timeline for making BEAD allocation determinations and urge Congress and NTIA to work with states to ensure they receive adequate and appropriate amounts of funding.

Deployment of broadband infrastructure to underserved and unserved communities requires an accurate picture of nationwide broadband availability. The Governors support continued investment in mapping efforts, as accurate mapping is essential to providing states with the correct levels of BEAD funding and guaranteeing that no community or household is left behind. WGA also encourages the coordination of data collection strategies among NTIA, the Federal Communications Commission, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and other agencies involved in broadband mapping and deployment.

On the subject of data collection, Western Governors are supportive of the implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (the Evidence Act, Pub. L. 115-435). The Act established a new set of comprehensive requirements for federal agencies regarding their collection, use, and management of data in evidence-building functions. One such requirement in the Evidence Act is for federal agency heads to “consult with...state and local governments.” Western Governors have been actively engaging with federal agencies as they carry out the provisions of the Evidence Act and are intent on assuring that states are robustly engaged by agencies in the required development of agency learning agendas. Overseen by the head of each federal agency, the purpose of the learning agendas, according to the Evidence Act, is “identifying and addressing policy questions relevant to the programs, policies, and regulations of the agency.”

According to a recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report (Evidence-Based Policymaking, GAO-20-119), however, “evidence-building activities are fragmented within...agencies and occur at multiple levels and entities within and across the agencies” and “uncoordinated or poorly coordinated efforts can waste scarce funds and limit their effectiveness.” The report went on to say that “[e]ffectively-coordinated [evidence building] processes can help agencies ensure they are comprehensively and systematically looking across their organizations to leverage their existing evidence and focus limited resources on building new evidence...Such processes can help ensure agencies are well positioned to meet forthcoming Evidence Act requirements related to assessing and prioritizing evidence across the entire agency.” GAO reiterated the importance of active federal agency engagement, as “through this engagement, agencies may find that external stakeholders (and states), have, or are aware of,

existing evidence that helps the agency meet its needs or provide a fuller picture of performance...[and] ensure it is meeting the evidence needs of decision makers.”

Given the numerous federal agency programs, policies, and regulations that directly affect the collective states, agency coordination with states and the integration of state data into those relevant federal programs is paramount to their success. For these reasons, Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to direct federal agencies to improve their internal processes required by the Evidence Act to coordinate with states on federal data policies and procedures and incorporate state data into federal decision-making processes. Western Governors also support full and consistent federal funding to carry out the requirements of this critical legislation and ensure that agencies have the capacity and resources required to fulfill GAO’s evidence-based policymaking recommendations.

Along with federal data coordination with states, data security is also a priority of Western Governors. Western Governors were therefore pleased to see an increase in funding for the NSF’s CyberCorps: Scholarships for Service program in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Pub. L 117-328). This program provides scholarships in the cybersecurity field for students agreeing to work for the government in cybersecurity professions upon graduation. In addition to the funding itself, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 encourages NSF to use the additional funding to increase the number of scholarships awarded at participating institutions and to increase the number of institutions that receive grants to participate in the program. Western Governors support this increase in funding, scholarships, and participating institutions and encourages the Subcommittee to continue that all-around increase for FY2024.

The Economic Development Administration (EDA) plays a critical role in rural economic development. Western Governors encourage increased flexibility in the allowable uses of EDA funds so rural communities can prioritize investments that improve quality of life and amenities. Furthermore, outcome metrics based solely on the absolute number of jobs created do not reflect the important economic benefits of such investments in sparsely populated rural communities, nor do they account for the relative effect of job creation in communities with small populations or areas with high unemployment or poverty rates.

Western Governors recommend an increase in the proportion of economic development and infrastructure funding that goes toward capacity building. Strengthening local capacity by providing ample and consistent federal funding for institutions, training, and technical assistance is essential to maximizing the effect of state and federal resources and ensuring that assistance reaches the communities that need it most. Western Governors appreciate the Subcommittee directing EDA to consider geographic equity in FY2023 appropriations so that these communities, which struggle to access federal resources, are represented among those selected for funding.

Western Governors recognize the enormous challenge you have in balancing competing funding priorities, and we appreciate the difficulty of the decisions the Subcommittee must make. These recommendations are offered in a spirit of cooperation and respect, and WGA is prepared to assist you as the Subcommittee discharges its critical and challenging responsibilities.