

**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
March 18, 2025**

Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations

Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Meng, 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 (DOC), U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), 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.

Western Governors underscore the importance of a close and productive working relationship between states, territories, and the federal government and understand that more effective cooperation depends on federal recognition of states as co-sovereigns and partners. 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 2024-01, Strengthening the State-Federal Relationship. Given the numerous federal programs, policies, and regulations directly affecting states and territories, Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to direct federal agencies to improve their internal processes and coordinate with states and territories on federal policies and procedures, as well as integrate state and territorial data into federal programs, including for policymaking purposes.

WGA also commends your attention to other Western Governors' resolutions that articulate policy positions relevant to the Subcommittee's work. These include policy resolutions 2023-06, Rural Development; 2023-07, Broadband Connectivity; 2023-09, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons; 2024-04, Combating the Opioid Crisis; and 2024-07, Water Resource Management in the West.

The Economic Development Administration (EDA) plays a critical role in supporting vibrant and prosperous rural communities across the West. Western Governors urge increased flexibility in the allowable uses of EDA funds so that rural communities can prioritize the investments that work best for them.

Western Governors recommend an increase in the proportion of economic development and infrastructure funding that goes toward capacity building, and Congress should allow EDA to negotiate the percentage of financial versus technical assistance within provided appropriations. Strengthening local capacity by providing ample and consistent federal funding

for institutions, training, and technical assistance is essential to maximize the effect of state and federal resources and ensure that assistance reaches the communities that need it most. Western Governors support efforts to facilitate improved coordination across agencies and streamlined, one-stop application processes for rural customers. The Governors believe that assessment metrics based solely on the absolute number of jobs created do not reflect the important economic benefits of investments in rural community assets that improve quality of life, nor do they account for the relative effect of job creation in small communities or areas with high unemployment or poverty rates.

Western Governors note that shifts in our economy, labor force, and technology require fundamental changes to economic development strategies. They request that the Subcommittee support small businesses and entrepreneurs; education and training programs that can be tailored to the needs of rural communities; economic diversification; and tax incentives, grants, and other financial incentives to spur innovation and attract businesses and manufacturing enterprises to rural areas. Programs like the newly authorized grant program for critical supply chain site development and the existing Regional Technology and Innovation Hubs Program help accomplish these objectives.

Many western communities, particularly rural and tribal areas, lack broadband access due to high infrastructure costs and the economic challenges of low population densities. Even where broadband is available, speeds often fail to meet bandwidth demands, or communities or individuals lack the necessary skills, technology, or capacity to fully engage in the digital economy. These challenges have disadvantaged rural businesses and limited access to telework, telemedicine, and distance learning opportunities.

Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to consider continued federal investment in broadband deployment to close connectivity gaps and supplement Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program funding, including innovative and flexible ways to redirect existing resources. They emphasize that federal funding should prioritize scalable broadband infrastructure capable of meeting future demands, including support for equipment maintenance and upgrades to ensure long-term reliability. Additionally, the Governors encourage the Subcommittee to consider how funding can better reflect the high costs and unique challenges of broadband deployment in the West and explore opportunities to improve broadband connectivity on tribal lands, ensuring adequate support to expand internet access to as many hard-to-reach households as possible. Western Governors also call on the Subcommittee to appropriate funding for unmet and ongoing digital equity needs after the expenditure of State Digital Equity Planning and Capacity Grants and Digital Equity Competitive Grants.

The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) crisis continues to deeply affect western communities. Western Governors recommend that the Subcommittee continue to provide support for communities and tribes addressing the MMIP crisis through appropriate DOJ programs.

Western Governors acknowledge the outsized harm caused by the opioid epidemic, which has become increasingly lethal and devastating to public health and safety. Reducing the

epidemic's effects involves stemming the supply of illegally produced opioids and limiting inappropriate and nonmedical uses of prescription opioids. Western Governors urge the Subcommittee to continue financially supporting state interdiction activities. The Governors appreciate past allocations to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to reimburse states for cleaning up and safely disposing of illegal substances. Western Governors also call for designations to enhance access to harm reduction strategies at low costs for teens and adults.

Opioid education and awareness campaigns, such as those managed by DEA, are necessary tools to foster public dialogue and mobilize action across communities. The Subcommittee should support DEA in further developing its campaigns and dedicate funding to states and territories for targeted and culturally specific opioid awareness and education efforts, especially efforts focused on youth awareness and education, which are complementary to those at the federal level.

Finally, western states rely on basic information on the status, trends, and projections of water resource availability to make sound water management decisions. This information allows water users throughout the West and decision makers at all levels of government to assess drought conditions and respond effectively with drought mitigation measures to reduce the risk of wildfires, ecosystem impairments, agricultural production loss, and degradation of municipal and industrial water supplies.

For these reasons, Western Governors support the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS), which informs 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 Program, and federal efforts to coordinate water data gathering and information programs across multiple agencies. Western Governors recognize the need for improved predictive capabilities for extreme weather variability and urge the Subcommittee to place a priority on improving the sub-seasonal and seasonal precipitation forecasting capabilities that could facilitate water management decision making.

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.