
July 23, 2019

Dr. Michael Strobel
Director, National Water and Climate Center
Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1201 NE Lloyd Boulevard, Suite 802
Portland, OR 97232

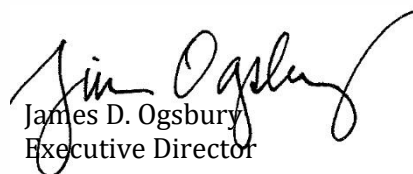
Dear Dr. Strobel:

Western Governors have historically supported the Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Western Governors' Association (WGA) Policy Resolution 2018-08, *Water Resource Management in the West*, clearly articulates this support and states that, "basic information on the status, trends and projections of water resource availability is essential to sound water management."

WGA is deeply interested in the long-term health and capability of the program. This interest is reflected in WGA's April 20, 2017 letter to the NRCS National Water and Climate Center, which included substantive inquiries and triggered an exchange of information with the agency. I now write on behalf of Western Governors to request additional information regarding the Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting program and its role in generating vital snowpack and water-related information for the western U.S. Attached please find questions about the program's funding and staffing, as well as continuity of the program's data, products, and services. Your answers to these questions will help inform the Governors as to the program's status and needs and help them promote effective water management and planning in their states.

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

Respectfully,



James D. Ogsbury
Executive Director

Additional Questions for NRCS Regarding the Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting Program

Funding Levels

In the answers provided to us in 2017, you stated that funding for the Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting (SSWSF) Program has varied over the past 15 years from \$8.55 million to \$10.97 million. During that time, the number of SNOTEL stations has increased substantially. Further, you stated that a, "SNOTEL station costs about \$30,000-\$35,000 to install. Following installation, the stations require annual maintenance in the summer, which is in the \$5,000-\$6,000 range per station." When asked about Program funding levels, you concluded that, "Current funding levels support the staff and other resources needed to maintain the present SNOTEL network."

- Have the estimated costs of installing and maintaining a SNOTEL station remained constant since your 2017 response? What factors, if any, have changed in the past two years?
- With the increased number of SNOTEL sites (and their associated installation, operations, and maintenance costs), how have the generally flat funding levels affected adequate support activities of the Program?
- Assuming that the number of the Program's data collection sites will continue to expand, at what rate would funding need to increase to keep up with such expansion and the costs associated with operations and maintenance?
- Does your conclusion that the Program is adequately funded take into account the current needs for technology and software improvements or updates to effectively implement the Program?

Staffing Issues

- In the answers you provided in 2017, you stated that, when fully staffed, the SSWSF Program has approximately 59 full time employees (FTEs). How many FTEs are currently assigned to the Program? How many of those staff are 100 percent dedicated to the Program? How do these positions break down by category (*i.e.*, forecasting, information technology, operations, administration, etc.)? What categories of positions within the Program are currently understaffed?
- What challenges are faced by the SSWSF Program in filling needed FTE positions? How long have these challenges existed, and what has NRCS done to address them?
- How does the SSWSF Program utilize private sector contractors to serve vital program functions?
 - What are the obstacles that prevent more utilization of private sector personnel? Are these obstacles common to federal agencies and programs, generally?

- Can non-federal employees serve the roles needed to keep the SSWSF Program operating and viable?
- Has NRCS considered requesting personnel from other federal agencies or programs to keep the SSWSF Program running?
- Does your conclusion from 2017 – that the Program is adequately funded – take into account the current staffing needs to effectively (and fully) implement the Program?
- Has NRCS explored transferring the management and operation of SNOTEL or other data collection sites to non-federal entities (*e.g.*, states or the private sector) as an option to maintain the data streams they generate? What potential risks, liabilities, or negative consequences would need to be mitigated to facilitate such action? If such transfer were to take place, how could NRCS ensure that data collected from the sites continues to be timely, reliable and publicly accessible?

Service Discontinuation

- The SSWSF Program has temporarily discontinued water supply forecasting services for the months of January and June.
 - How was this decision reached?
 - What states, tribes, and stakeholders were consulted in reaching this decision? Was there an opportunity for public comment?
 - What other federal agencies or programs were consulted in reaching this decision?
 - If funding reductions continue, what services or program elements beyond staffing do you anticipate will be cut from the SSWSF Program?
- Whether due to budget constraints, staffing shortages, outdated technology, or any other reason, do you believe that the continuous stream of data that has been collected by the Program is in any way in jeopardy of interruption or impairment? What changes are needed to restore and improve data, products, and services – such as those listed above – for internal and external customers?