

**Written Testimony of James D. Ogsbury, Executive Director
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**Submitted to the United States Senate
Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food
and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
May 5, 2022**

Fiscal Year 2023 Appropriations

Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Hoeven, 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 and productive working relationship between states 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 2021-01, Strengthening the State-Federal Relationship. WGA also commends your attention to other Western Governors' resolutions that articulate policy positions relevant to the Subcommittee's work. These include Policy Resolutions 2020-06, Western Agriculture; 2020-07, Rural Development; 2020-08, Broadband Connectivity; 2021-03, National Forest and Rangeland Management; and 2019-06, Biosecurity and Invasive Species.

Agriculture in western states faces a variety of challenges, including extreme variations in soil, climate, terrain, commodity and specialty crops, production practices, and water availability. Amid these difficult conditions, 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, including open space, wildlife habitat, and water supplies, and support a diverse suite of rural economic opportunities in the recreation, food, fiber, energy, and bio-based product industries.

In December 2018, WGA and USDA signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to establish a framework to allow the USFS and WGA to work collaboratively to accomplish mutual goals, further common interests, and effectively respond to the increasing suite of challenges facing western landscapes. Under this agreement, WGA and USDA have pursued several collaborative campaigns to improve the management and restoration of western forests and rangelands. It has also led to positive engagement between individual states and the Department: USDA has now executed Shared Stewardship agreements with 28 states, 15 of

which are within the WGA footprint. These agreements provide states a useful tool to discuss land management priorities and coordinate on priority land management projects.

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 through permits and fees to sustain their operations. Western Governors support targeted, voluntary, and collaborative conservation to address locally identified natural resource issues affecting farms, rangelands, and forests on private and public lands. These issues include soil health, air and water quality, drought and wildfire resilience, wildlife habitat conservation, and invasive species. WGA supports the role of conservation title programs in promoting voluntary solutions to the challenges of threatened and endangered species, water quality impairments, and groundwater recharge. Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to support appropriate funding levels for programs addressing these critical concerns.

The work of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is especially important to western states, and WGA encourages you to provide adequate funding for the 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:

- Stimulating economic activity and creating jobs in local communities;
- Conserving habitat for the greater sage-grouse and lesser prairie chicken, among other species;
- Mitigating wildland fire potential in western states;
- Improving water quality;
- Reducing the threat of invasive species on western lands; and
- Responding to imminent hazards caused by floods, wildfire, windstorms, and other natural disasters through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program.

Western Governors also support adequate funding of the NRCS Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting (SSWSF) program. Sufficient funding is required to ensure the long-term viability of the program's continued and uninterrupted collection of snowpack and water data, the full operation and maintenance of all snow survey sites, the hiring of needed program staff, and technological and software upgrades. The SSWSF program provides integral information for water supply management decisions in agricultural production, hydroelectric power generation, reservoir operations, industry, recreation and economic development, and international treaties. The program's forecasting and predictive capabilities are critically useful throughout the arid West, where snowpack accounts for the vast majority of the region's annual water supply.

Western Governors support adequate funding for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). APHIS works in partnership with state departments of agriculture to monitor, prevent and control infestations of invasive pests and diseases and curtail or minimize wildlife conflicts, which can cause widespread environmental and economic damage, as well as safety hazards. APHIS is a key

agency protecting the West from invasive species and was an active participant in the Western Governors' Biosecurity and Invasive Species Initiative. APHIS also works in cooperation with other federal agencies, states, territories, counties, and private entities to implement invasives management programs. Western Governors recognize the valuable role NIFA plays in research on biosecurity and invasive species and support further research to understand the potential spread of invasive species and to develop geographically appropriate control measures.

The West's network of land grant universities and colleges, including Cooperative Extension Service programs and Agricultural Experiment Stations, provides national leadership in research to develop more resilient seeds and crops, manage soil health, advance technology deployment in the bio-based economy, and conduct on-farm research experiments that help farmers and ranchers be more effective and efficient. 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 effective use of extension and other partnerships to deliver practical tools, technologies, and information to farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners.

Healthy, vibrant, and prosperous rural communities are critical to western states. Rural communities, however, face a variety of challenges with respect to economic development, infrastructure, and quality of life. Western Governors support USDA's Rural Development programs, which address those challenges, and request an increased emphasis on rural capacity-building efforts. Building local capacity through training, technical assistance, and consistent support for institutions that serve rural communities is fundamental to economic and community development and maximizes the effect of state and federal resources. It will be especially important to maximize the benefit of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, Pub. L. 117- 58) for rural communities. At the same time, rural development programs should be designed in a manner that recognizes the limited resources and capacity of rural applicants. Western Governors continue to call for an examination of whether COVID-19 business stabilization funds, including grants and loans, were sufficiently accessible to rural businesses.

Western Governors support rural development programs aimed at fostering small businesses, entrepreneurs, and cooperative business models. Western Governors also remain committed to creating new opportunities for rural job seekers and for young people to pursue careers in their rural communities. WGA supports solutions that leverage public universities, community colleges, and the business community to provide the appropriate training and skills for the 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 the West's farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. WGA also supports adequate funding for the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, which provides critical research, education, and promotion tools to fruit and vegetable producers.

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. 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 and Agriculture.

Western Governors support the continued efforts of the Rural Utilities Service to provide financial assistance for drinking water and wastewater facilities, renewable energy projects on agricultural lands, and broadband connectivity in rural and remote areas, particularly in communities that have minimal or no such infrastructure. Western Governors support dedicated funding to develop innovative solutions for communities and tribes that cannot be served by traditional drinking water and wastewater systems. Governors also remain concerned by the nationwide shortage of certified water system operators, and support measures in IJA to invest in water infrastructure workforce solutions. Ongoing and coordinated efforts to develop these skilled workers are necessary to ensure that existing water access in rural communities can be maintained.

Expanding broadband access to rural America empowers citizens to compete in a global market and access electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support and promote telehealth and distance learning, which have proven to be especially important amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Western Governors note the significance of programs such as the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Program and the ReConnect Program, which support broadband deployment to underserved or wholly unserved rural communities, and appreciate the funds awarded to the ReConnect Program and the Rural Broadband Program under IJA. Continued funding of these programs is critical to closing the digital divide.

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 the store where food is purchased all the way back to the farm. 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 pursue transparency and accountability in program administration.

Western states and federal agencies deal with a complex web of interrelated agriculture, conservation, and economic development priorities. It is an enormous challenge to judiciously balance competing needs in this environment, 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.