

**Written Testimony of Jack Waldorf, 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
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Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations

Chair Heinrich, 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; 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

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.

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 under the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (Pub. L. 115-334) 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 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:

- Stimulating economic activity and creating jobs in local communities;
- Conserving habitat for the greater sage-grouse, lesser prairie chicken, and 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 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 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 National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). 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 to deliver practical tools, technologies, and information to farmers, ranchers and forest landowners and to respond to the changing needs of rural communities.

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 benefits of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Pub. L. 117-58) for rural communities. At the same time, Western Governors urge USDA to evaluate rural development programs, identify barriers for rural applicants, and revise onerous requirements in a manner that recognizes the limited resources and capacity of rural applicants.

Western Governors support rural development programs aimed at fostering 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. These include provision of seed, feed, and fertilizer to growers; product storage, processing, and transportation; trade and market promotion; supply chain solutions; and education and technical assistance. Cooperative business models can also help meet rural community needs for childcare, homecare, main street businesses, and more. Western Governors recognize the need for substantial technical assistance and education in developing new cooperative businesses and support funding to promote these 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 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 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. 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. 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 Subcommittee's continued commitment to the ReConnect Program and rural broadband. Consistent funding for these programs is critical to closing the digital divide. 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 with the requisite download and upload speeds necessary to support modern internet needs.

Given the numerous federal agency programs, policies, and regulations directly affecting the collective states, agency coordination with states and the integration of state data into federal programs for policymaking is paramount to their success. Western Governors support full and consistent federal funding for agencies to carry out the requirements of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Pub. L. 115-435) and encourage the Subcommittee to direct federal agencies to improve their internal processes and coordinate with states on federal data policies and procedures, as required in the Act.

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.