

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

**Submitted to the United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies  
March 18, 2025**

**Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations**

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) appreciates the opportunity to provide written testimony on the appropriations and activities of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). 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 and collective action on issues of critical importance to the western United States.

The agencies within the Subcommittee's jurisdiction wield significant influence over vast areas of the American West. Ninety-four percent of all federal lands are located in the western states, and the federal government owns over 46 percent of the land within WGA states and territories. This Subcommittee's work is vitally important to Western Governors, as it affects public lands management and federal agency interaction with other levels of government and the public.

There is a natural tension between state and federal governments that is embedded in the U.S. Constitution. These sovereign governments must have a close and productive working relationship to promote efficiency and maximize returns on taxpayer investments. Improving the partnership between states and territories and the federal government is central to WGA's mission and is reflected in WGA Policy Resolution 2024-01, Strengthening the State-Federal Relationship.

Western Governors were encouraged by past Committee report language directing federal agencies to provide appropriate feedback and decision rationale related to tribal input received via meaningful consultation in their decision-making processes. Similar direction to federal agencies for government-to-government consultation with states and territories, which is required pursuant to Executive Order 13132, Federalism, would improve the co-sovereign relationship between states, territories, and the federal government.

Federal agencies should provide state, territorial, local, and tribal government officials with accessible and clear information on available federal resources and programs and the most effective utilization of those resources in disaster recovery. WGA has worked with federal partners to improve interagency coordination on post-wildfire restoration work, including a roadmap of assistance available to communities affected by wildfire and identification of "navigators" to help communities prioritize post-wildfire restoration needs. Western Governors

urge the Subcommittee to prioritize funding these important needs, as they should have a positive effect on maximizing the value of restoration work and, more importantly, addressing the needs of communities affected by wildfire.

Reducing wildfire risk also requires conducting active forest management at an unprecedented pace and scale. This, in turn, relies on a handful of enabling factors, including a qualified land management workforce and infrastructure to transport and realize the value of extracted biomass. Western Governors support many of the recommendations in the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission's final report. The Commission called upon Congress to provide funding for federal public health agencies to address the smoke-related impacts of wildland fire. The Commission also supported the creation of incentives for state, local, and tribal governments to invest in the development of fire- and smoke-adapted communities. Western Governors appreciate Congress' increased attention to the issue as demonstrated in recent years' appropriation acts. Western Governors also appreciate USFS's investments in forest health as part of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) and request continued funding for wildfire risk reduction within and outside of designated WCS priority landscapes.

Responsible land management can only occur when federal, state, and local stakeholders collaborate to improve the health and resilience of our lands. Likewise, proactive fish and wildlife conservation is most effective when leveraging the cooperative efforts of state, territorial and federal officials across multiple disciplines. To this end, Western Governors support funding for reasonable proactive management efforts to conserve species, including engaging stakeholders to implement early, voluntary conservation measures. Western Governors also believe that federal agencies should explore revised Government Schedule criteria and use detail positions and shared staff between nongovernmental partners, state, and federal agencies to increase interagency coordination.

Western Governors support the continued responsible use of federal lands for grazing and increased funding for grazing management, monitoring, and permit condition compliance. Grazing management can be an effective tool to achieve restoration and land management goals, including fish and wildlife habitat improvements, drought and wildfire mitigation and resilience, water quality and watershed health, soil health management, promotion of perennial plant health, and control of invasive species such as cheatgrass.

Fish and wildlife migration corridors and habitats are necessary to maintain healthy populations of species in the West. Western Governors applaud the past funding for federal agencies to advance state-supported programs and projects promoting voluntary migration corridor and habitat conservation and request the Subcommittee continue to appropriate these funds. The Governors note that any federal efforts to identify, regulate, or conserve wildlife migration corridors through administrative or legislative action must involve coordination and consultation with states and should advance voluntary, incentive-based, and locally driven initiatives to conserve key wildlife corridors and habitats.

Western Governors encourage the Subcommittee to include full funding for the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program administered by the Department of the Interior and include language that addresses a permanent and stable funding mechanism for the program. PILT

funding does not represent a gift to local jurisdictions; rather, it provides important compensation for the presence of non-taxable federal lands in the West. Similarly, payments under the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS) compensate communities whose timber industries have been negatively affected by actions and acquisitions of the federal government. Western Governors request that the Subcommittee continue to appropriate full funding annually for both PILT and SRS now and in the future.

Western Governors support NPS in its efforts to preserve iconic landscapes, habitats, and cultural resources. Western Governors are concerned, however, about the significant maintenance backlog affecting National Parks, especially in the context of increasing visitation rates. Western Governors appreciate recent investments in maintenance for national park infrastructure and urge Congress to extend funding for the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund. Ultimately, longer term solutions to the deferred maintenance backlog will be necessary. In addition to NPS, Western Governors urge Congress to appropriately fund federal land management agencies to provide for the routine maintenance and operational costs of important visitor infrastructure, particularly roads and utility systems.

Western Governors applaud the passage of the Good Samaritan Remediation of Abandoned Hardrock Mines Act (Pub. L. 118-155). The establishment of a pilot program and Good Samaritan Remediation Fund is the first step to cleaning up tens of thousands of abandoned hardrock mine features that pose physical and environmental hazards to communities and ecosystems across the West. Similarly, Section 40704 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Pub. L. 117-58) authorized the Abandoned Hardrock Mine Reclamation program (AHMR) to inventory, assess, and reclaim abandoned mine features. Western Governors support full appropriations to the AHMR program to address the backlog of abandoned hardrock mine inventory through both federal and state programs.

Data for water management and drought response planning is critical to western states. Western Governors stress the importance of funding for the Groundwater and Streamflow Information Program administered by the U.S. Geological Survey and request full funding for the program. The data generated by the program is integral to water supply management decisions of states, utilities, reservoir operators, and farmers. It is also essential for risk management, disaster mitigation, and drought and flood forecasting throughout the West.

Infrastructure management is another crucial element of water resource management, and federal investments in our nation's aging water and wastewater facilities are essential to our nation's continued economic prosperity and environmental protection. EPA's Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (SRFs) provide necessary support for communities to maintain and enhance their water infrastructure. Western Governors urge the Subcommittee to ensure that authorized SRF funding levels are fully appropriated and distributed to states under the program formula. Congressionally directed spending and community grants should not diminish resources otherwise made available to states.

States have exclusive authority over the allocation and administration of rights to groundwater located within their borders and are primarily responsible for protecting, managing, and otherwise controlling the resource. The regulatory reach of the federal government was not

intended to, and should not, be applied to the management and control of groundwater resources. Western Governors encourage Congress to include express and unambiguous language protecting states' authority over groundwater resources in any water-related legislation, as well as clear direction to administrative agencies to respect such authority. Federal agencies should also work within existing state authorities to address their groundwater-related needs and concerns. Western Governors urge the Subcommittee to ensure that federal efforts involving groundwater recognize and respect state primacy and comply with all statutory authorities.

States also possess delegated authority from EPA to manage air quality within their borders. Congress and EPA should recognize state authority under the Clean Air Act (CAA) and accord states sufficient flexibility to create air quality and emissions programs tailored to individual state needs, industries, and economies. State CAA programs require financial support from Congress, yet funding has declined since the CAA's enactment. In addition, given the unique character of the West and the region's attainment challenges, funding should be appropriated for EPA to assist western states in research on background, interstate, and transported ozone. This is especially important as smoke from wildfires causes air quality to exceed the National Ambient Air Quality Standards for particulate matter and ozone, affecting public health, safety, and transportation. The Exceptional Events Rule creates a process for excluding wildfire smoke from regulatory significance; however, this process is presently burdensome and demonstrating a given wildfire's contribution of pollutants to the local airshed creates a strain on state resources. As a result, Western Governors support funding for technical assistance, grants, and state personnel to support exceptional event demonstrations that exclude wildfire smoke from regulatory significance.

The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) crisis continues to affect communities across the West. Sufficient tribal and BIA law enforcement personnel ensure timely responses and adequate resources for MMIP cases, while victim support services provide crucial assistance to survivors and their families. Western Governors support funding to increase the number of tribal officers and victim services advocates while strengthening state-level initiatives.

Western Governors also recognize the critical role of the Indian Health Service (IHS) in providing health care services to tribal nations in the West and urge Congress to continue to appropriate advance funding for IHS to avoid the undue hardship associated with lapses in federal funding. Western Governors believe additional support for IHS is needed to combat the opioid crisis, which disproportionately affects tribal nations. The Governors request adequate IHS and BIA resources for treatment and behavioral health to help stop opioid-related deaths, including resources for tribal law enforcement efforts to combat drug-related offenses.

Western Governors and federal land management agencies deal with a complex web of interrelated natural resource issues. It is an enormous challenge to judiciously balance competing needs in this environment, and Western Governors appreciate the difficulty of the decisions this Subcommittee must make. The foregoing recommendations are offered in a spirit of cooperation and respect, and WGA is prepared to assist the Subcommittee in discharging these critical and challenging responsibilities.