

**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
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Fiscal Year 2021 Appropriations

Chairman Hoeven, Ranking Member Merkley, 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 2020-01, Strengthening the State-Federal Relationship. I also commend to your attention to other WGA resolutions that articulate policy positions relevant to the Subcommittee's work. These include Policy Resolutions 2017-09, Western Agriculture; 2017-10, National Forest and Rangeland Management; 2018-04, International Trade; and 2019-06, Biosecurity and Invasive Species.

Agriculture in western states faces a variety of challenges, including extreme variations in soil, climate, terrain, commodity types and 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 supply.

Land Management

WGA has been supportive of USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue's Shared Stewardship strategy, which emphasizes the importance of state-federal collaboration in confronting land management challenges throughout our states. Western Governors and the Secretary signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Shared Stewardship at WGA's Winter Meeting in December 2018. WGA and USDA have been working together on an initial set of mutually agreed activities to improve interagency wildfire disaster response, vegetation management, and cheatgrass control in western states. These efforts are addressing cross-boundary, cross-

jurisdictional land management challenges, and seeking to improve outcomes for agencies and agricultural producers on both public and private lands.

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 we encourage 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.

Western Governors support the Agriculture Research Service's (ARS) research efforts to seek solutions to agricultural problems of high national priority and information-sharing to ensure production of safe, high-quality food and other agricultural products. ARS research helps to: sustain a competitive economy; enhance the natural resource base and the environment; provide economic opportunities for rural communities; and provide the necessary infrastructure to create and maintain diverse workplaces.

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. We also encourage the effective use of extension and other partnerships to deliver practical tools, technologies and information to farmers, ranchers and forest landowners.

Rural Development

Economic development challenges are acute in many western rural communities, which are often characterized by a lack of economic diversity, geographic isolation, inadequate or non-existent broadband access, a less-educated work force, and job demand volatility. Western Governors are committed to creating new opportunities for rural students, workers and jobseekers, and presented several recommendations in WGA Policy Resolution 2018-13, Workforce Development in the Western United States, as an outgrowth of its Workforce Development Chair initiative in 2018.

WGA's current Chair initiative, Reimagining the Rural West, is expanding on the workforce effort by examining a wide range of challenges and opportunities in rural economic development, infrastructure and quality of life. The initiative will identify best practices and recommend policies to support vibrant rural communities in the West. This effort has already noted the role of USDA's Rural Development programs to promote economic development opportunities and address many of the challenges confronted by rural communities. Western Governors support adequate funding for these programs.

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 lands also support a diverse suite of rural economic opportunities in the recreation, food, fiber, energy and bio-based product industries. These economic sectors are reliant on stable and predictable federal trade policies that ensure western agricultural products have an opportunity to compete with products produced and subsidized internationally.

Western Governors support the continued efforts of the Rural Utilities Service to provide financial assistance for drinking water and wastewater facilities, and broadband connectivity in rural and remote areas, particularly in communities that have minimal or no such infrastructure. Expanding broadband access to rural America will empower citizens to compete in a global market and access electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support and promote long-distance health care, education and public safety resources. Western Governors are encouraged by the recent launch of USDA's ReConnect Program, which supports broadband deployment to underserved or wholly unserved rural communities. Western Governors look forward to evaluating new broadband deployment efforts under the 2018 Farm Bill, including middle mile infrastructure funding and the Innovative Broadband Advancement Program.

Western Governors appreciate adoption by the House and Senate Appropriations Committees of report language addressing ReConnect program eligibility in H. Rpt. 116-107 and S. Rpt. 116-110, respectively. Western Governors have communicated their concerns to USDA about ReConnect Program eligibility criteria for communities slated to receive satellite service support through the Federal Communications Commission's Connect America Fund Phase II program. The current eligibility criteria severely limits the ability of many western rural communities to develop high-speed, resilient broadband networks through the ReConnect Program.

Nutrition Assistance

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. We acknowledge recent efforts to: reduce rates of nutrition program fraud and abuse; deliver programs under budget; and improve program effectiveness. 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 as you as the Subcommittee discharges its critical and challenging responsibilities.