

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 17, 2023

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

We write to ask the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to study (1) efforts at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to identify areas of the country that are unserved or underserved by water and wastewater infrastructure and (2) the costs associated with installing and improving wastewater systems. This is an under researched and often neglected issue in American politics. All Americans—no matter where they live—deserve access to high-quality water infrastructure, and the federal government must more effectively collect data to ensure that federal dollars are targeting the communities of greatest need.

During a recent hearing before the United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry’s Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy titled “Rural Water: Modernizing our Community Water Systems,” we heard from experts about the disparity between water systems in urban and rural areas. In urban areas, water and wastewater services in homes are often provided by large, centralized treatment facilities that involve expensive fixed infrastructure such as tanks, pumps, and pipelines. In contrast, residents in rural areas access water and wastewater services from smaller facilities, or through private wells with wastewater treated through septic systems. In some cases, houses in rural areas do not have adequate water or sanitation service.¹

These disparities threaten access to safe drinking water. A 2019 report by the U.S. Water Alliance and Dig Deep found that more than 2 million Americans lack access to safe drinking water and sanitation.² Inadequate and failing water and wastewater infrastructure poses direct health risks to families and limits economic and community growth. For example:

- According to the EPA, yards regularly flood with sewage from straight pipes and lagoons in Alabama and across the Southern Black Belt. This standing sewage has contributed to increased hookworm and related disease.

¹ Committee On Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry, Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy, *Hearing on Rural Water: Modernizing our Community Water Systems* (July 19, 2023) (online at <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/hearings/rural-water-modernizing-our-community-water-systems>).

² *Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States*. U.S. Water Alliance. (Nov. 2019) (The data underlying this study are based on American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the only national estimates available. The data are inconsistent and underestimate the numbers, according to the study).

- Other rural areas, such as Appalachia, colonias and Tribal Nations in the Southwest, and the Central Valley struggle to provide both safe drinking water and sanitation through wastewater treatments.
- Cities and towns, particularly those experiencing population decline and economic problems, also face challenges providing adequate water and sanitation service. For example, the drinking water crisis in Flint and Benton Harbor, Michigan resulted in at least a doubling of elevated blood lead levels in children.³

Investment in water and wastewater infrastructure across the country is credited with greatly increasing life expectancy and reducing waterborne diseases.

The federal government currently invests in programs to support the provision of water and wastewater infrastructure. For example, USDA's Rural Utilities Service provides funds to rural communities serving 10,000 people or fewer to build such infrastructure. EPA's Drinking Water and Clean Water State Revolving Funds (SRFs) provide grants to states to establish their own revolving funds and loan money to local governments to build and maintain water and wastewater infrastructure. EPA's Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act program provides federal credit for loans to state, local, and tribal communities for projects to replace, rehabilitate, or construct water and wastewater infrastructure, among other activities.

In order ensure federal investments in rural water infrastructure are targeting the areas of greatest need, we ask that GAO study how USDA and EPA are identifying and prioritizing areas that are unserved by water and wastewater utilities. We also ask GAO to gather information on the cost of improving waste and wastewater systems in homes to better inform how the government invests in rural water infrastructure. In particular, we ask GAO to examine the following:

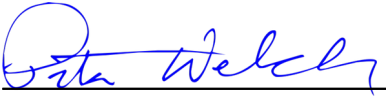
- 1) What do USDA and EPA know about the populations—including location, income, demographics, and other characteristics—unserved by water and wastewater utilities?
 - a. How do USDA and EPA identify and prioritize such unserved and underserved areas for providing water and wastewater service?
- 2) What are the range of costs for (1) replacing systems or (2) providing water and wastewater service in a home, including the costs associated with installing, and providing warranties to cover potential failures of, decentralized wastewater systems in areas with complex environmental challenges?

³ Environmental Protection Agency. *Closing America's Wastewater Access Gap Community Initiative*. (online at: <https://www.epa.gov/water-infrastructure/closing-americas-wastewater-access-gap-community-initiative#:~:text=Wastewater%20Challenges%20in%20Rural%20America&text=An%20estimated%202.2%20million%20people,indoor%20plumbing%20in%20their%20homes.>) (accessed July 19, 2023)

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Please coordinate with our staff Juliet Walsh at (202) 603-3373 and Matt Thomson at (202) 228-3918 on this request.

Sincerely,



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator