



April 9, 2020

The Honorable John Barrasso  
Chairman  
Committee on Environment and Public Works  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Carper  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Environment and Public Works  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby  
Chairman  
Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen Barrasso and Shelby and Ranking Members Carper and Leahy:

As the U.S. Congress continues to respond to the coronavirus crisis facing our nation, we urge you to ensure that future responses help those that need it most and ensure our nation recovers. We outline below our priorities and ask you to incorporate them in future legislation responding to the crisis.

First, the federal government, working with state and local agencies, must require utilities to stop water shutoffs and safely restore water service to households that have lost it. While some cities and states are already taking these steps, these decisions increase fiscal strain on communities and utilities. Federal support and assistance to help cover the costs associated with shut off moratoriums and safe reconnections is necessary. In addition to supporting efforts to safely restore and keep water turned on, we also urge you to assist community groups that are helping communicate with households regarding water shutoffs and necessary safety precautions during reconnections, such as flushing taps to prohibit consumption of lead contaminated water.

Accessing safe, affordable water is a challenge for too many people in the Great Lakes region. Some of our poorest rural and urban communities already pay the highest water rates in the country. Many of these same communities face more systemic issues like job loss, disinvestment, population loss, and failing infrastructure. These cities and towns often shift the cost burden for addressing these issues to local ratepayers who pay a disproportionate amount of their income for water service.

To maintain this service, many utilities still shut water off for people behind on their bills, leaving millions of Americans without running water in their homes. Alarming, one nationwide assessment revealed that around 15 million Americans experienced a water shutoff – one out of every 20 households across the country. In Detroit, 112,000 people had their water shut off between 2014 and 2018. In 2017 alone, it has been estimated that one in ten Detroiters experienced a shutoff. Water shutoffs disproportionately impact cities with higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and people of color.

We must end shutoffs and safely restore water to each household for the duration of this crisis. Households need access to safe drinking water for their health and safety and to combat the spread of COVID-19 throughout their communities. Safe water is necessary to follow the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations that we wash our hands regularly with soap and water and limit our time spent in public places. In short, water in the home is essential.

Even after this current pandemic ends, water shut offs and affordability will remain a crisis for too many people. Shutting off people's water has broad impacts on family health and well-being. Access to clean water is a human need. Congress must address this issue permanently for when the crisis is over.

Second, as Congress turns to longer term recovery for the nation's economy, we ask that you support investing in our communities drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure.

Communities across the Great Lakes region continue to grapple with crumbling, antiquated drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. A staggering \$179 billion over the next 20 years is needed in improvements, upgrades, and repairs in the eight-state region of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York.

While existing federal programs provide much-needed funding to help communities meet their clean water goals, some communities still simply cannot afford to bear the full weight of financing these expensive upgrades. Higher water rates, which are frequently a solution to covering infrastructure improvements at the local level, do not work for families that already cannot pay their water bills and lead to water shutoffs that jeopardize their health and the health of their children. Many urban and rural communities also face unaffordable water rates because of the high cost of operating and maintaining water systems in places with low population or wages. Others, like Flint and Milwaukee, live with lead in their drinking water or face polluted farm runoff that contaminates ground and surface water. The cost of not fixing our water infrastructure is being borne right now in the midst of this crisis by people in communities around the Great Lakes.

Fixing our region's failing infrastructure can put people to work and set the stage for economic revitalization in our towns and cities. Federal investment in our water infrastructure also can ensure safe, clean water is available to everyone in the region. To do so, we recommend:

- Increasing funding for drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater improvements. We urge you to ensure communities facing economic hardship or other public health crises (e.g., lead service lines) are prioritized and that these communities receive funds in the form of grants rather than loans through programs such as the:
  - Drinking Water State Revolving Fund
  - Clean Water State Revolving Fund
  - Small and Disadvantaged Communities grant program
  - Lead Testing in Schools program
  - Reducing Lead in Drinking Water program
  - Technical Assistance for Treatment Works program
  - Drinking Water Infrastructure Resilience and Sustainability programs
  - Sewer Overflow Control Grants program
  - School Drinking Fountain Replacement program
- Ensuring that infrastructure funding prioritizes resilient and nature-based solutions such as restoring wetlands, building rain gardens, and installing permeable roads and sidewalks.
- Investing in complete lead service line replacement. Too many households still have water that is contaminated from lead. Since no level of lead is safe, replacing this dangerous infrastructure must be a top priority. Funds should be made available for total, not partial, replacement of these service lines as partial replacement can cause a spike in contamination. Resources must also support point of use filters for households, schools, and day care centers that are waiting for their lead lines to be replaced.
- Ensuring broad community benefits by:

- Supporting workforce development and long-term maintenance of water infrastructure facilities through programs like the Water Infrastructure Workforce Development program. Great Lakes communities are fixing their drinking water and wastewater infrastructure and stopping stormwater runoff through the installation of natural and nature-based infrastructure. Many of these same communities face high unemployment and other economic disruption -- even before the current crisis. New investments should ensure local hiring and training opportunities for the next generation of local workers; and
- Supporting grants to community organizations and nonprofits to ensure investments in water infrastructure foster community engagement and emphasize community priorities. Investments in water infrastructure can be leveraged to benefit public health, workforce development, place making and identity, and environmental health. The leadership of local community organizations ensure local investments meet community needs.
- Ensuring that legislation does not undermine or weaken environmental protections.

Third, a long-term stimulus package should invest in the programs restoring and protecting the source of drinking water of more than 30 million people across the region. With warmer weather; more unpredictable, heavier rains; and higher lake levels, investments should restore resilient ecosystems that protect habitat, end urban and rural runoff, and provide clean water for all. Natural approaches and nature-based projects should be prioritized. We ask Congress to provide additional funding this year for shovel-ready projects that will restore the Great Lakes through programs like the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

As you know, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) and other programs are improving lives of people across the region. Cleaning up toxic hot spots, improving water quality, and addressing emerging contaminants has benefited public health and local economies. It has led to a resurgence in water-based outdoor recreation, increased tourism, and revitalized communities with economic returns of more than 3 to 1.

Even with the results being achieved, we still have more work to do to ensure the benefits of the GLRI and other restoration programs are shared by everyone in the region. Federal agencies and regional partners can put more people to work if additional resources are made available. Right now, there are 21 ongoing or planned projects to clean up toxic pollution in Areas of Concern that need \$364 million in federal funding. Non-federal partners are being recruited now to contribute approximately \$242 million over the next 3 fiscal years to these projects. Other priorities such as invasive species prevention, nonpoint source pollution mitigation, and habitat restoration have significant capacity to expand across the region. The broader economic downturn could create new challenges for local partners in meeting cost-share requirements. We urge Congress to allow agencies to waive cost-share requirements where appropriate for economic hardship. We also ask Congress to give agencies appropriate time and staff to obligate these resources on much-needed projects.

We stand together as a nation in responding to this unprecedented crisis. We hope Congress can continue to quickly respond to ensure households can follow CDC guidelines on how to stay healthy and safe. Once the crisis has passed, we urge you to include measures that help all our communities recover.

Thank you for considering our views. Please do not hesitate to contact Chad Lord, the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition policy director, at [clord@npca.org](mailto:clord@npca.org) or (202) 257-4365 with questions.

Sincerely,

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