Outside Witness Testimony of Gerald Iwan Re: USEPA

Submitted to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

Gerald R. Iwan, Ph.D., Executive Director
National Environmental Services Center
West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV
March 26, 2015

Chairperson Murkowski, Ranking Member Udall, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony to the Subcommittee on Interior Environment and Related Agencies. We recommend that within existing funding levels, the USEPA Office of Wastewater Management (OWM) be directed to provide at least 20% of the Clean Water State Revolving Fund annually to support the use of onsite and decentralized wastewater treatment systems. We further recommend that 20% of the EPA's OWM budget be dedicated to providing staffing and resources for the Office of Decentralized Wastewater. Implementing this recommendation will help address the lack of federal support for the 85 million people in the US dependent on decentralized wastewater treatment, many in small, rural and disadvantaged communities.

Introduction:

I am Gerald Iwan and I am the executive director of the National Environmental Services Center (NESC), at West Virginia University. Since 1976, NESC has been home to the National Small Flows Clearinghouse (NSFC), National Drinking Water Clearinghouse (NDWC) and National Environmental Training Center for Small Communities (NETCSC). These centers have distributed comprehensive drinking water and wastewater information and services nationally to small rural and disadvantaged communities. Since their inception, they assisted communities with developing and maintaining onsite septic or decentralized wastewater treatment systems. In 1999, NESC began administering the State Onsite Regulators Alliance (SORA), the only national association of State onsite wastewater regulators in the US. SORA provides the resources and venues for state regulators to share information among each other and the wastewater industry on decentralized wastewater regulatory and technology issues. SORA was instrumental in collaborating with the USEPA in developing guidance for the management of decentralized wastewater systems following EPA's 1997 report to Congress on the use of decentralized wastewater treatment systems. It is currently, along with NESC, an original member of the EPA Decentralized MOU Partnership, which advises EPA on decentralized wastewater management.

NSFC, NETC and SORA were products of the 1977 Clean Water Act (CWA) and its subsequent reauthorizations. CWA mandated the NSFC to collect, distribute information, and provide training about wastewater treatment to small and rural communities. Thousands benefited from our water and wastewater technical assistance. EPA programs and management account funding for these activities ceased in 2005 along with much of the services previously provided.

Need

State regulators, technical assistance providers and the decentralized wastewater industry have long recognized a number of positive benefits provided by decentralized wastewater systems, including: job creation, water quality protection, aquifer recharge, affordability, low maintenance and the ability for people to live where municipal wastewater treatment is not feasible or available. For smaller communities, decentralized and onsite systems can usually be built and maintained more economically then municipal wastewater treatment plants and sewers. Larger utilities often consider decentralized systems as an option to help offset the costly replacement of aging wastewater infrastructure. Properly designed, sited, constructed and maintained decentralized systems supported by well-trained professionals and knowledgeable state regulators, is a fiscally responsible approach to public health and environmental protection.
A recent survey of SORA regulators, conservatively estimated that approximately 27% of the US population or 85 million people are served by onsite systems. Onsite or decentralized systems are a permanent and necessary part of the US wastewater infrastructure for over a quarter of our population. However, EPA provides relatively little funding or support for decentralized wastewater compared to that directed to municipal wastewater treatment. As examples, less than 1% of Clean Water State Revolving Loan funds is distributed to decentralized projects annually, there is no direct federal funding available to States for decentralized wastewater regulatory programs, and EPA's own decentralized wastewater program has only one full time staff person.

Request

Having 35 years of expertise in decentralized wastewater treatment and management, and from our daily interactions in providing water and wastewater services to small, rural and often-disadvantaged communities, we are recommending that:
1. At least 20% of EPA's annual contribution to the Clean Water State Revolving Fund be designated to supporting the construction and use of onsite and decentralized wastewater treatment systems. Those funds should be distributed by the regulatory authority in each state that directly oversees and enforces onsite wastewater treatment,
2. At least 20% of the Office of Wastewater's funding be dedicated to increasing staffing and programmatic resources for the Office of Decentralized Wastewater.

NESC believes that by redirecting OWM funding as recommended above, positive results can be realized for the nation's wastewater infrastructure, economy and the population dependent on onsite systems by:

- Significantly expanding EPA's training of industry professionals through grants to entities, which exclusively specialize in decentralized training.
- Providing the resources that assure homeowners, business owners and industry professionals have an up-to-date source of information on decentralized technology.
- Providing direct financial and staff support to state onsite wastewater programs to increase training and support better development and enforcement of state regulations.
- Expanding research grants and onsite wastewater training centers and demonstration projects to help local decision-makers and design engineers better understand the benefits of onsite and decentralized wastewater treatment systems and technologies.