

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of**

Subcommittee on Environment Ranking Member Paul Tonko

***Hearing on " From Source to Tap: A Hearing to Examine Challenges and Opportunities for
Safe, Reliable, and Affordable Drinking Water "***

February 24, 2026

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Working on drinking water issues is one of my favorite things this Subcommittee does. I know many Members, on both sides of the aisle, have backgrounds in local government and are incredibly familiar with the responsibilities and challenges that water systems are facing.

At the end of the day, the buck stops with local governments to make sure that the infrastructure and people are in place to deliver safe, reliable, and affordable drinking water. It is a public health and economic necessity. And we, at the Federal level, have a responsibility to be good partners to our local and state counterparts in their efforts.

In December 2024, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the enactment of the Safe Drinking Water Act. Without a doubt, SDWA (“sid-wah”) has been an incredible public health success story. But we must recognize just how much more work is left to do, as well as the changing nature of our drinking water challenges.

50 years ago, no one was worried about cyber threats. Lead pipes, fittings, and solder were still used. And our ability to detect and treat emerging contaminants, like PFAS, at health-protective levels was virtually impossible. These challenges, on top of a major backlog of infrastructure maintenance projects, put financial stress on local governments and water authorities, which translates to rate increases for water users.

According to EPA’s most recent needs assessment, drinking water systems are expected to require \$625 billion in investment over the next 20 years to maintain operations— an estimate which has grown considerably over the years. That is why in 2021 Congress made a serious effort to begin to tackle these issues with the enactment of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

I am so proud of this Subcommittee’s role in developing and passing the drinking water provisions of the IIJA. It provided more than \$50 billion for water systems, including \$11.7 billion to supplement the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund’s annual appropriations, \$15 billion for the replacement of lead service lines, and \$4 billion to address emerging contaminants, such as PFAS.

It is hard to believe, but the programs authorized in the IJA, including the supplemental funding, will expire at the end of the fiscal year. Now is a perfect opportunity for us to consider how we should reform SDWA (“sid-wah”) for the next 50 years.

First, we need to continue a strong Federal financial commitment to our water systems. Those additional IJA resources enabled many projects that would not have occurred otherwise. We should be continuing these higher funding levels and reject proposals, like the one included in President Trump’s last budget request to Congress, that would decimate the SRF. If the Federal Government pulls back from its commitments, that means more projects will need to be paid for entirely by local governments, resulting in an impossible choice of increasing water bills or more deferred maintenance, which ultimately results in higher costs anyway due to emergency repairs.

I understand that the SRF isn’t perfect, and that there could be accusations of a relatively small number of issues with EPA’s ability to conduct proper oversight of these dollars. Let’s keep in mind that reduced staffing levels at EPA are not helping the situation. Fewer people are now responsible for overseeing more financial awards. We should be coming together to reverse the downsizing of EPA, which has heightened the risk that waste, fraud, and abuse will go undetected. Because ultimately with so much investment needed, we should all want every available Federal dollar to find its way to projects that will improve systems and enable better compliance with the law.

Second, we should establish a clearer set of criteria for EPA to use when determining whether or not to set a national drinking water standard. Specifically, does a contaminant pose a public health threat and is it affecting a significant number of people. Our current regulatory system isn’t working. I believe everyone here wants to protect people from unsafe water, but without giving EPA the ability to set timely, health-protective standards, we know some Americans will not have access to safe drinking water.

Finally, we all recognize that many households are struggling with affordability issues. Nearly 20 million Americans lack access to affordable water. I have long supported utility assistance for low-income households for energy bills through LIHEAP. It is past time for us to authorize a similar, permanent program for water bills.

Mr. Chair, I want to thank you again for holding this hearing. I hope we’re able to work together to build upon the IJA and support safe, reliable, and affordable drinking water for all Americans.

With that, I yield back.