

May 3, 2011

The Honorable Michael K. Simpson
Chairman
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Support for the National Water Quality Assessment Program in the FY2012 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill

Dear Chairman Simpson:

We represent organizations strongly dedicated to protecting water quality, which, as you know, is essential to the protection of public health as well as the economic well-being of the country. As you consider the FY2012 budget for the Department of the Interior, we strongly recommend you consider increased funding for a critically important part of the Nation's effort to protect our water resources—the National Water Quality Assessment program (NAWQA) of the U.S. Geological Survey.

We urge you to provide at least \$66.5 million for NAWQA within the U.S. Geological Survey's FY2012 appropriations, which meets the FY2010 enacted level. The President's proposed FY2012 budget calls for \$57.1 million for the Program – a total of \$9.4 million in reductions has been made including \$6.7 million from NAWQA Program funds and \$2.6 million from NAWQA publications, administrative costs, and other ancillary costs, with no adjustment for inflation.

Congress established NAWQA to provide long-term, nationally consistent information on water-quality conditions and ecosystem health at the regional and national scale. The Program provides an understanding of the status of water-quality conditions, how these conditions are changing over time, and how natural factors and human activities affect water quality. This information helps support sound management and policy decisions to safeguard our nation's water resources, better understand climate change, and assist with other critical environmental protection efforts.

Since the Program's creation in 1991, findings from NAWQA studies have aided policymakers in critical decisions to protect water resources. NAWQA assessments of nitrogen and phosphorous loadings from the Mississippi River Basin to the Gulf of Mexico are providing increasingly detailed information about the location of the specific sources of nutrients that contribute to hypoxia in the Gulf. This information allows the Environmental Protection Agency and States to develop and target nutrient pollution prevention plans to those areas. NAWQA monitoring nationwide uncovered the existence of Methyl Tertiary Butyl Ether (MTBE) in ground water which alerted the public and policy makers to unintended consequences of the compound designed to enable gasoline to burn cleaner. Congress and states have acted to remove MTBE from fuel. NAWQA scientists in the Puget Sound area identified the sources of nutrients to the Sound, enabling the state to target its pollution control efforts to alleviate low dissolved oxygen levels throughout the Sound.

A 2005 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report ([GAO-05-376](#)) titled, *Environmental Information: Status of Federal Data Programs That Support Ecological Indicators*, examined whether funding issues or other factors would affect the ability of twenty federal data collection programs to continue to generate data comparable to quality data from past years. GAO found that NAWQA was one of two programs in jeopardy of being unable to continue to generate quality data. GAO found that NAWQA's abilities have been significantly diminished due to funding constraints.

For over a decade now, presidential budget proposals and congressional appropriations for NAWQA have not kept pace with inflation. Without inflationary adjustments over time, NAWQA's scope of work has been significantly curtailed. The number of stream sites monitored has been reduced from 500, during its first ten years, to only 113 over the entire country since 2001. At even these 113 sites, only 12 are monitored every year, 15 are monitored every other year, and the remaining 86 are monitored only every 4 years. Sediments in fish tissue are no longer sampled at all leaving data gaps on impacts to aquatic biota, such as the bioaccumulation of trace elements, pesticides, and other organic chemicals, like PAHs.

To remain national in scope during the past ten years, NAWQA has relied on its earlier monitoring data plus selected additional monitoring of priority sites necessary to assess changing conditions and their causes. It also relied heavily on developing and using models to extrapolate to areas it could not monitor, assess trends, and make water quality predictions.

The proposed reduction of \$9.4 million would have significant impacts on the data and information NAWQA can provide. Among other things, these impacts would:

- Eliminate monitoring and assessments of groundwater that serves as a major source of drinking water in 76 study areas in 33 states.
- Eliminate studies to assess sediment transport to estuaries such as the Gulf of Mexico, Chesapeake Bay, and the San Francisco Bay Delta.
- Continue loss of data at almost 400 monitoring sites discontinued during years of inadequate funding. For example, information for the water quality models of the Mississippi River and other watersheds was developed with data from 435 sites. Today, only 38 of these are monitored.
- Eliminate the development of new analytical methods to assess new pesticides and other unregulated contaminants, including many pharmaceuticals, hormones, and antibiotics in our nation's streams and groundwater.
- Postpone the implementation of real-time technology for water-quality monitoring needed for timely health and recreation decisions by local, state, and federal scientists, water managers, and the public.

As NAWQA plans for the future, it is essential that NAWQA resume broader, national scale monitoring to assess water quality conditions in changing human and climatic environments, to verify modeling results, and to examine policy-related questions associated with issues of the next decade, which include the increasing levels of nutrients in our waters, anthropogenic influences on drinking water sources, and other water quality impairments that negatively impact aquatic life and human health.

For all these reasons and others, we urge you to support at least \$66.5 million for NAWQA in the FY2012 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations bill. This funding would prevent critical additional reductions in NAWQA's ability to provide information vital to protecting our nation's water resources.

Sincerely,

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Executive Director
Water Environment Federation

Brian Van Sande
President
Float Fishermen of Virginia

Ed Hopkins
Director, Environmental Quality Program
Sierra Club

Captain Bill Sheehan
Riverkeeper & Executive Director
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