



Testimony of Mae Wu
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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Environment

Hearing entitled
“Reliable Water in the Digital Age: Examining Legislation to Strengthen
Drinking Water Systems and Protect Ratepayers.”

September 3, 2026

Summary of Major Points

- Safe drinking water is fundamental to public health, strong communities, and everyday life. Americans should be able to turn on the tap in their homes and trust that the water that comes out is safe and that they can afford it. Water systems cannot meet this promise

alone. They need a strong and sustainable federal partner, and Congress has the opportunity right now to provide that support.

- Over the next 20 years, meeting the drinking water infrastructure needs could cost between \$625 billion to \$1.6 trillion. Because federal funding is also important to keeping monthly water bills affordable, Congress should reauthorize the Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund, one of the most effective tools to support drinking water investments, at \$3.25 billion, or better yet, \$10 billion.
- Monthly water bills have been increasing, and many low income families are struggling to afford to pay for this basic fundamental right. Congress should create a permanent program to provide assistance so that low income households can continue to have access to safe water.
- Congress should reauthorize the lead service line replacement funding at \$3 billion per year.
- Congress should reauthorize the funding for emerging contaminants, including PFAS, to at least \$4 billion over 5 years.

Good morning Chairman Guthrie, Chairman Palmer, Ranking Member Tonko, and members of the subcommittee. I am Mae Wu, founder and principal of Health and Environment Advising, LLC and a former Deputy Assistant Administrator in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Water. I have worked on drinking water issues for 20 years, beginning with my work at the Natural Resources Defense Council. I served on the EPA's National Drinking Water Advisory Council and on the Federal Advisory Committee for the Total Coliform Rule and Distribution System Rule revision. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today.

My good friend just returned from a trip to Puerto Rico to visit his friend, who lives in a high rise condo building in San Juan. Beginning a few weeks ago, the water in his building is turned on only three times a day: 7:15 AM to 8:00 AM, 1:15 PM to 2:00 PM, and 7:15 PM to 8:00 PM. People living in the building have to schedule doing their dishes and laundry, taking showers, flushing the toilet, and meeting their other water needs around these 45 minute slots every day. For everything else like making baby formula, cooking, or drinking, they rely on buying bottled water. If you turn the tap on at 8:05 AM, nothing comes out. All day long, every day, water trucks drive up and down the streets, delivering water to storage tanks in buildings and homes, because the pipes leak too much and cannot distribute what water there is. Due to the convergence of extreme drought conditions and San Juan's aging water infrastructure, hundreds of thousands of people each day have to calculate how much water to use for drinking, cooking, bathing, laundry, and flushing the toilet. It's 2026, and they are rationing water in Puerto Rico.

What's happening in Puerto Rico is something that Americans should never have to go through. And yet, as of August 25, 2026, more than half of the lower 48 states are experiencing drought, affecting 96.6 million people.¹ And many water systems in these areas are served by pipes that are at or nearing the end of their useful life. So if we don't do more to significantly fund necessary improvements to our drinking water infrastructure, we could see this same scenario being replayed in other American communities across the country in the near future. Americans have enough to worry about: putting food on the table, paying bills, and keeping their families healthy and safe. We should not have to add another basic question to that list: When I turn on the tap in my home, will clean, safe water come out?

¹ National Integrated Drought Information System, National Current Conditions, available at <<https://www.drought.gov/current-conditions#main-content>>, last accessed on September 1, 2026.

For more than 20 years, the American Society of Civil Engineers has been grading our drinking water infrastructure. For more than 15 years, the U.S. received a D on drinking water infrastructure; in 2021 and 2025, the grades improved to a C minus.² But the marginal gain is not sustainable in the next 20 years without at least \$625 billion of funding. In fact, some industry reports suggest that the 20-year need to bring our drinking water infrastructure up to date may be as high as \$1.6 trillion, or roughly \$80 billion every year.³ Even with the significant infusion of \$30 billion from the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (also known as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act), federal funding for drinking water infrastructure has fallen compared to state and local resources. This means that the burden of maintaining and upgrading drinking water infrastructure falls to the states and local resources. And when more local funds are used for critical water infrastructure projects, that cost falls to ratepayers and translates into higher monthly water bills.

There are approximately 50,000 community drinking water systems in this country serving 325 million Americans. Many of these systems have aging infrastructure that need to be upgraded, treatment systems that need to be modernized, and cybersecurity risks that need to be addressed. The Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund (DWSRF) is “one of the most effective water infrastructure tools Congress has ever created for public water infrastructure,” especially for small, rural communities.⁴ As you heard from a witness from the February 24, 2026 hearing, one million dollars in DWSRF funding meant his system could modernize, conduct emergency

² 2025 Report Card for America’s Infrastructure. Available at <<https://infrastructurereportcard.org/>>, last accessed on September 1, 2026.

³ Tapping Potential: The Economic Benefits of Investing in Water Infrastructure” available at: <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/67dd711d1a117219a03e4f7a/t/6917b2fbc2843b7310c7ace1/1763160827739/FIN>>

⁴ Testimony of Eric Hill before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Environment. February 24, 2026. Available at: <https://d1dth6e84htgma.cloudfront.net/02_24_2026_ENV_Hill_Testimony_3be960f4a8.pdf>, last accessed on September 1, 2026.

repairs on a water main, and upgrade its pumps to continue providing affordable and reliable service to its customers.⁵ Overall, every million dollars invested in water infrastructure supports approximately fifteen American jobs.⁶ In fact, every one dollar invested generates about \$2.63 in economic output.⁷ This investment not only protects public health, but helps build community wealth.

Every year, the funding needed to fix and modernize drinking water infrastructure continues to grow, not shrink. And for years, the authorizations for the DWSRF have also grown. But halving the authorization now, from \$3.25 billion to \$1.126 billion for the next five years, will further hamstring states and utilities around the country who are trying to provide safe drinking water to their communities. This cut sends a signal that Congress is backing away from ensuring that Americans, especially those living in small, rural, and disadvantaged communities, have safe and clean drinking water.

Instead, Congress should, at a minimum, reauthorize the DWSRF to \$3.25 billion per year. Even better, raising authorization levels to \$10 billion per year, while only reflecting 10% of the total needs across the country, would help make a bigger dent in the need. It is an important step to take towards ensuring that all Americans have access to safe and clean water.

But investing in our drinking water infrastructure is only part of the equation. We also have to make sure that safe, reliable water remains affordable for the families who depend on it.

Affordability

⁵ Id.

⁶ “Keep Investment Flowing” report, available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/68764dcacf8b24347aea5f82/t/6a1e0ac780dcfe73340f23fb/1780353735615/Keep+Investment+Flowing.pdf>, last accessed September 1, 2026.

⁷ Id.

Families, especially low income families, need help with ever increasing monthly water bills. The American Society of Civil Engineers estimated that between 2012 and 2023, monthly household water bills increased 64% due to labor costs and pressure from inflation.⁸ The aging infrastructure, cybersecurity and climate threats, as well as the need to protect people from water contamination will cause those rates to continue to increase. And people living in small communities can end up paying more than what is considered affordable for their monthly bills because the ratepayer base is so small for the water utility.

In addition to helping keep rates low by providing more federal funding, a permanent federal program that provides assistance to low-income families would mean that these families will be able to receive safe, clean drinking water even if they cannot afford to pay their water bills. Currently, most water infrastructure investments are covered by local governments, with the costs reflected through ratepayers' monthly water bills. More federal (and state) funding would relieve the pressure on local governments to raise water rates to cover the needed improvement projects.

In 2021, Congress did provide a temporary program – the Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program – that provided relief to more than 1.5 million households.⁹ This inaugural federal program helped families in 49 states plus the District of Columbia continue to have access to water, even when they couldn't afford to pay their bills.¹⁰ Nearly 17,000 utilities participated in the program, with almost half from small or very small systems serving mostly

⁸ 2025 Report Card for America's Infrastructure. Available at <<https://infrastructurereportcard.org/cat-item/drinking-water-infrastructure/>>, last accessed September 2, 2026.

⁹ Low Income Household Water Assistance Program: Implementation and Impact Final Report. Administration for Children and Families. Available at <<https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocs/LIHWAP-Final-Impact-and-Implementation-Report.pdf>>, last accessed September 1, 2026.

¹⁰ Only North Dakota declined the funding. <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocs/National_0.pdf>

rural communities. Without question, there are many Americans who need a permanent, low-income water assistance program to maintain their access to safe drinking water. Congress must take the opportunity to support these families.

Affordability is one part of ensuring access to safe drinking water. Just as important is protecting families from contaminants that can cause serious and lasting harm to their health.

Protecting Public Health

There are likely at least 9 million households estimated to have lead pipes delivering water to their homes.¹¹ That represents millions of families where children are being exposed to a neurotoxin that causes serious, irreversible damage to their developing brains and nervous systems.¹² The most effective way to prevent the most substantial lead contamination in drinking water is to proactively remove and replace the lead pipes completely. That's why in 2024, EPA finalized the Lead and Copper Rule Improvements, which among other things, required the replacement of lead service lines within 10 years. The rule provides an estimated \$13 to \$25 billion per year in benefits, from improved health protections, lower healthcare costs, increased school attendance, and economic productivity.

Now, as the administration is implementing the rule, it should be providing guidance and advice to utilities on how to maximize the replacement of lead pipes. In addition, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provided \$15 billion over 5 years to identify and replace lead service lines. Congress should reauthorize the lead service line replacement funding at \$3 billion per year so

¹¹ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Updated 7th Drinking Water Infrastructure Needs Survey and Assessment." Available at <https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2024-05/fact-sheet_one-time-update_2024.04.30_508_compliant_1.pdf>, last accessed September 2, 2026.

¹² Advisory Committee on Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention, "Low Level Lead Exposure Harms Children: A Renewed Call for Primary Prevention," CDC, January 4, 2012, available at: <www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/acclpp/final_document_030712.pdf>

that cities can continue on their path to removing and replacing lead pipes and protecting their residents.

And lead is not the only contaminant threatening our drinking water. We also need to protect communities from PFAS and other emerging contaminants.

PFAS chemicals, often referred to as “forever chemicals” because they don’t break down in the environment, can cause significant health problems, including cancer, liver and heart impacts in adults, and immune and developmental impacts to infants and children. That’s why, in 2024, EPA finalized the national primary drinking water regulation for six PFAS chemicals. The rule would save thousands of lives and prevent tens of thousands of illnesses by improving the quality and safety of drinking water for Americans across the country. But this administration is going backwards, trying to roll back these important protections and provide less safe water, putting the public’s health at risk. Instead, Congress should reauthorize the funding for emerging contaminants, including PFAS, to at least \$4 billion over 5 years, as was provided by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

Conclusion

Water systems across America face many challenges: replacing aging and dangerous infrastructure, removing and replacing lead pipes, addressing emerging contaminants like PFAS, and making the investments necessary to provide safe drinking water in the face of severe weather events, cyberattacks, and increasing demand. All this must be done while keeping bills affordable, especially for families in small and low-income communities.

The challenges may be complicated, but the answer is remarkably simple and old-fashioned: **funding.**

Congress should reauthorize the critical Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund program for \$3.25 billion, at least; even better, at \$10 billion. Congress should also increase authorizations for lead service line replacements and treatment of emerging contaminants, including PFAS, at the same levels as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. And Congress should create a permanent program to assist low-income families, so they can maintain access to safe drinking water even if they cannot afford their water bills.

Safe drinking water is not a luxury. It is fundamental to public health, strong communities, and everyday life. Americans should be able to turn on the tap in their homes and trust that the water that comes out is safe and that they can afford it. Water systems cannot meet this promise alone. They need a strong and sustainable federal partner, and Congress has the opportunity right now to provide that support.