

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 20, 2023

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

The Honorable Michael Regan
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20460

Dear Secretary Vilsack, Secretary Haaland, and Administrator Regan:

We are writing to request that you take steps to collect and publish data needed to meaningfully address the lack of access to water and sanitation that exists here in the United States. This Administration has recognized that as the source of both life and livelihoods, water is central to the dignity and security of everyone, everywhere. Yet today, an estimated 2.2 million Americans lack access to running water or basic sanitation, and this figure appears to be growing. Worse, we do not know exactly where the problem exists or is growing, and this lack of data compounds the problem and leaves it unaddressed. Allowing the water access gap to grow, will result in significant long-term negative economic, physical and mental health, and labor consequences.

Within your respective agencies, there are programs that are working to address failing infrastructure and chronic underinvestment. The recent influx of federal funding to address infrastructure issues nationwide is a boon to struggling communities. However, this new wave of funding fails to significantly address the water access gap, leaving millions behind without sustainable, accessible running water or sanitation.

In 2022, DigDeep, a human rights nonprofit working to close the water access gap in the U.S., published an economic impact study. This study featured contributions from more than 30 WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) organizations and estimated that the water access gap costs the U.S. economy roughly \$8.6 billion every year. These economic losses take the form of decreased household earnings, higher healthcare costs, lost tax revenues, and labor market disruptions.

We are writing to ask you to collaborate in leveraging the federal government's research and data collecting abilities to critically examine this problem. Addressing the domestic water access gap will require more information. Government agencies and nonprofit organizations alike will fail to deliver fast and meaningful interventions if we do not know the breadth of our communities' water, sanitation, and hygiene needs. That is why we believe that we must update the Census to add water, sanitation, and hygiene questions to accurately measure affected individuals nationwide. This should include reinstating a previously removed question on the

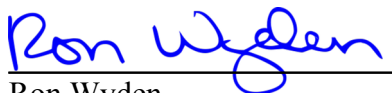
number of households without working toilets (Question H8B). In 2016, the Census Bureau removed toilets from its definition of complete plumbing.

We would further suggest that your agencies work together to establish a dedicated Water and Sanitation Needs Working Group. This group could use the data collected by Census, utilities, and other existing data (i.e., the United States Geological Survey) to identify communities where drinking water and sanitation services are lacking or insufficient. More actionable data—for example, information showing the location and nature of infrastructure deficits—could help jumpstart governmental and non-governmental interventions to address the water access gap. Your own agencies already have programs aimed at addressing the water needs of disadvantaged communities, but more data would be helpful in identifying which communities are currently affected, how affected they are, and which communities might be affected by lack of water access in the future.

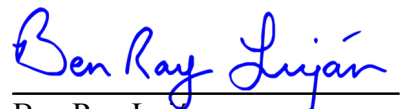
A lack of drinking water and basic sanitation threatens public health and is not consistent with individual safety or dignity. Last year, this administration issued a White House Action Plan on Global Water Security, detailing important goals for applying a whole-of-government approach to addressing global water insecurity. This is a good model for the efforts that we urge you to start making here in the United States.

This crisis cannot wait to be solved; more Americans face the threat of water insecurity every day. The first step toward collecting actionable water, sanitation, and hygiene information is to make sure we know the scope and location of current problems. Federal data collection, that your agencies have the ability to collect, will help address the water access gap, and bring relief to vulnerable families across our nation.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator