



**Testimony
Of**

**The Honorable Bob Young
Mayor of Augusta, Georgia**

**On behalf of
The United States Conference of Mayor**

**Before the House Subcommittee on Water Resources
and the Environment**

**On H.R. 135
“The Twenty-First Century Water Commission Act of 2003”**

May 7, 2003

Introduction

On behalf of the U.S. Conference of Mayor's Urban Water Council I would like to commend and thank Representative Linder, Representative Calvert, Representative Duncan and Representative Shuster for introducing H.R. 135, the "*Twenty First Century Water Commission Act of 2003*".

My purpose here today is to voice strong support for the adoption of this legislation. I hope to return to Congress later this month to discuss in more detail some of the many water related issues, problems, solutions and best practices encountered by local government.

As Co-Chairman of the Urban Water Council I have had the opportunity to meet with Mayors from around the nation to discuss their water issues. I am impressed with both the depth and breadth of those problems. Not all cities face the same problems. There are a wide variety of problems faced in dense urban cities, sprawling suburbs and rural areas.

The findings articulated in the bill are generally correct. It comes as no surprise that the supply and demand for water is reaching equilibrium. The natural next step is to find slack on the supply side through water recycling and reclamation with technology playing a key role in determining just how much water can be reclaimed at a given level of quality. Water conservation also can help maintain water supplies over the long-run, and the Urban Water Council calls on Congress to act swiftly on helping cities increase their efforts on water conservation. The future well being of our population, environment and economy, however, will depend on the ability of cost-efficient technology to provide increases in the available water supply.

Comments on the Duties of the Commission

Project Future Water Supply and Demand:

This is a critical function of the Commission. I, along with my colleague and Co-Chairman Mayor Doug Palmer from Trenton, NJ recently held a water resources seminar in Waco, Texas. The participants were surprised by a comment from the head of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality that pointed out there was no accurate quantification of water supplies in the state. Without such quantification efforts to better plan for current and future water supplies are questionable at best. Texas, we learned, also concluded that a study of water supplies and a plan for the next 50 years was worth investing in, and they did. Congress should do the same for the nation.

Some information, however, currently exists in the states. Area-wide water basin planning grants under Section 208 of the Clean Water Act provided money in the 1970s and later to develop information on land use and water resources. The reports generated through these grants and other programs could provide good information for the Commission to use.

Study Current Water Management Programs:

This duty of the Commission could prove useful, but also could drain the time and resources of the Commission and divert attention from the more important mission to identify additional future water supplies. It would be disappointing if the work of the Commission ends up being another look at the State Revolving Fund Loan program. Cities do not need another SRF study that merely results in suggestions to streamline the program. We need to collectively recognize the importance of, as well as the limitations, of the SRF program and begin to discuss alternative water infrastructure financing approaches. The SRF program provides roughly 10 percent of annual water infrastructure investment. The lion's share of investment comes from local government with some help from state government. The conundrum I face as a Mayor is that 10 percent of the investment comes from the SRF, but more than 90 percent of the policy discussion in the Congress and federal agencies involved is on the 10 percent solution. This Commission has the opportunity to go beyond the SRF program and focus its attention on other issue areas that are more critical to securing water needs.

Consultation to Develop Recommendations for a Comprehensive Water Strategy:

One of the more important items in this section is the direction to the Commission to identify incentives to ensure a dependable and adequate water supply for 50 years.

Water conservation needs to be addressed by the Commission. One example that comes to mind involves the new Pittsburgh Convention Center, which has its own water treatment system on site. Water is reclaimed, treated and reused for non-potable uses. It is estimated that the Convention Center will utilize roughly 10 percent of the expected typical total water usage. If the economic and environmental benefits of this type of project, as well as others, can be identified and tracked, it could be promoted on a much broader basis and have a real impact on extending the useful life of our current water supply.

One established technology that holds the potential to dramatically alter the current water supply curve is desalination. Desalination of brackish water and seawater offers the opportunity to literally change the "water budget". Since the mid 1900s, water supply planners have operated on the assumption that about 4 % of the water on the planet is fresh water suitable for potable supplies. Another roughly 4 % is usable for potable supply, but is either too difficult to access or is not accessible. The rest of the water on the planet is assumed to be unusable for potable supply because of brackishness or other contamination, and the economics involved with cleaning the water may not be favorable compared to other more readily usable supplies. This water quality (brackishness) constraint has led to the near equilibrium condition of supply and demand of fresh water that the sponsors of the bill point out so well.

Now, however, the economics of diminishing fresh water supply has rendered desalination as a viable alternative. If three-quarters or more of Americans live in reasonable proximity to the coast lines, then major efforts should be made to use this source rather than continue to deplete existing water sources. The sheer number of cities,

counties and citizens that could take advantage of desalination of seawater makes this an attractive option.

There are many benefits of tapping seawater for fresh water supply. One example is the arid west coast states like California. California is currently served by a mixture of ground water, streams, natural and manmade reservoirs, and long distance water pumping from eastern sources such as the Colorado River. Institutional arrangements to share the Colorado River's water with California are changing. We all know that the neighboring states also using the same water source have both a right to the water and a legitimate need for the water to sustain their citizens and economies. Long distance water pumping from the Colorado River to southern California also requires a considerable consumption of electrical energy. By gradually switching to seawater desalination in California the state can ensure an adequate and dependable supply for the future; the neighboring states can get a larger allocation of the Colorado River water; there will be some reduction in electrical consumption by abandoning or lessening the long distance pumping; and critical wildlife and endangered species in the neighboring states that depend on the Colorado River will be better protected.

There are other examples like California as well. In Texas and other south western states there is a considerable amount of brackish water that can be desalted and used for fresh water supply. Other areas that readily come to mind include the Tidewater area in Virginia and the outer banks in North Carolina where ground water wells continue to deplete the ground water aquifer and tap water is brown and brackish. The opportunity to change the old rule of thumb that only 4 % of the world's water supplies suitable for use is here right now.

The Tampa Bay project will provide one good demonstration of the benefits of desalination. The population growth in the Tampa Bay area resulted in ground water depletion and a legal requirement to develop other sources. The Bay can provide plentiful supplies, and the economics of water development and delivery using desalination are now reasonable because cheap and readily available supplies are near exhaustion.

This also points out a critical role of Congress and the federal government to lead the nation. It is, again, disappointing that Congress is now spending most of their policy development time discussing improvement of the 10% SRF solution when there is much work to be done to move the nation to a more dependable long-term water supply. The Urban Water Council believes that Congress and federal agencies should be working to make the transition to desalination technology through a few demonstration grants and other financial incentives including use of the traditional SRF approach.

The federal agencies can play a key role in helping cities switch to desalination technologies and safeguard the environment. In addition to technical assistance and some financial assistance, the agencies can and should work with the cities to ensure that desalination technology does not adversely impact the sea and flora and fauna that reside in the ocean, or other fragile ecosystems of estuaries.

Financing Options for Public Works Projects:

The Urban Water Council fully supports continuation and funding of the SRF program and its use for desalination and other emerging technologies. But as one of the past Co-Chairman of the Urban Water Council stated to this Committee in the recent past, “Mayors are responsible for ensuring a safe and adequate water supply for their communities, but there is not enough money in the world to pay for the mandated water infrastructure necessary to comply with existing Clean Water Act requirements.” Local government (including water authorities) makes the greatest expenditure in water infrastructure each year. Congress should help us in that effort by expanding the financing options available. Removing Private Activity Bonds for water infrastructure from state volume caps could provide a significant source of funding for refurbishing aging facilities and constructing new and more efficient facilities.

Avoiding Mandates:

I have one comment on this direction to the Commission. Please take it seriously! Cities will never be able keep pace with the need for water infrastructure spending. Don’t make a bad situation worse by imposing any more mandates.

Comments on the Membership of the Commission

The Urban Water Council supports a diverse Commission Membership. We urge you to allocate one or more seats on the Commission for local government representatives. It would be troublesome to have such an important body discussing the future fate of water resources in this nation and not have at the table those who currently contribute nearly 90% of the annual water infrastructure investment. The drought legislation now working its way through Congress has set the right precedent. It calls for an elected Mayor to hold one of the seats in the deliberations on drought and national water supply.

Conclusion

I want to thank the Committee again for having the foresight to introduce H.R. 135 and thereby recognizing the importance of this issue. Water is a valuable public resource and we need to treat it as such. We need to better understand the nation's water situation in order to make good public policy decisions. It is vitally important to have a point of reference for the status of water in the nation in order to determine short and long-term plans regarding water usage, conservation, as well as potential new sources of usable water. On behalf of the Conference of Mayor and its Urban Water Council, I want to commend your efforts in introducing this bill and issue our support for the bill.

The Urban Water Council
A Task Force of The U.S. Conference of Mayors

The UWC is open to all Mayors, and functions like a USCM task force – providing Mayors with a focal point for discussion of issues impacting how cities provide and protect water and wastewater services to the community. The UWC has, and will continue to develop positions on Federal legislation, regulations and policy. The UWC will continue to act through the USCM Environment Committee, and other Committees, as appropriate, to propose and adopt resolutions on water related matters.