

Costa, Edwards Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Fast-Track Emergency Water Aid for Rural Communities

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By: Press Release

FRESNO, Calif. - U.S. Representatives Jim Costa (CA-21) and Chuck Edwards (NC-11) introduced the Emergency Rural Water Response Act, bipartisan legislation to cut the red tape and deploy emergency federal water funding to rural communities.

"In the San Joaquin Valley, water emergencies don't wait for red tape," Congressman Costa said. "Whether it's drought, flooding, or wildfire, every day without clean water puts lives, farms, and local economies at risk. This bill makes sure more communities can act immediately instead of waiting weeks or months for help."

"When Hurricane Helene swept through Western North Carolina last year, it exposed just how vulnerable our mountain communities are to the destruction caused by natural disasters. One of the most critical failures was the disruption of access to safe and reliable water – a basic necessity that became a daily struggle for many residents. This legislation will streamline emergency response efforts, improve coordination, and ensure that more rural towns receive the support they need without delay when disasters strike," said Congressman Edwards.

"We strongly support and appreciate this vital change. The United States has some of the world's most robust water regulations, but they were not designed to address disaster scenarios. This legislation makes a transformative step in meeting disaster-related needs by paving the way to safe water during critical times," said George Greene IV, CEO of Water Mission.

"The Emergency Rural Water Response Act will benefit rural community infrastructure by expanding the types of water-related facilities that can be repaired using USDA emergency funds. USDA's emergency grant assistance has been a valuable resource for rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley, and the Act recognizes that after a disaster, emergency repair and response may be needed for a variety of infrastructure types," said Tom Collishaw, President/CEO of Self-Help Enterprises.

BACKGROUND

The USDA's Emergency Community Water Assistance Grants program provides critical funding to help rural communities prepare for or recover from disasters that threaten safe, reliable drinking water. These funds can be deployed for emergencies such as droughts, floods, earthquakes, wildfires, disease outbreaks, and chemical spills without the need for a federal disaster declaration.

From the return of Tulare Lake to wells running dry in East Fresno County, the Valley has been hit hard by water crises in recent years. Since the program's creation in 1972, only rural

communities with fewer than 10,000 residents have been eligible for aid. While populations in many rural towns have grown over the past five decades, the eligibility cap has not kept pace, leaving thousands of residents in small but growing communities without access to this lifeline.

In 2022, Congress temporarily raised the population limit from 10,000 to 35,000 under the Disaster Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, opening the door for more rural towns to qualify. But in 2023, that limit was rolled back to 10,000, once again shutting out many communities that still rely on small, vulnerable water systems.