

# Making a difference by being involved

I was very pleased to speak at the 2008 Annual Conference of the Kansas Rural Water Association. I appreciate this opportunity to submit my remarks for those who could not attend.

Over the years, Elmer and the Association have helped me keep my staff informed about water-related issues important to our state and our region. You know Congress deals with a lot of issues every year. In fact, every new Congress, which is every two years, we have over 8,000 legislative items to consider when you add all the bills, amendments and resolutions, and things we do on the floor of the House. I cannot possibly keep track of all that information, so I need groups like the Rural Water

Association here in Kansas and people like Elmer to come and tell me when something that affects all of us in rural Kansas is occurring. I don't want to get blindsided and I know that you guys want somebody on your side as well.

I want to tell you that I know from personal experience how critical access to rural water is. I lived in west Sedgwick County and in part of Sedgwick County Rural Water District No. 4. When I first moved out there I didn't have access to rural water, in fact we were just working together with an engineer at Boeing named Carl Kroger. Carl was essential and

instrumental to Water District No. 4, and he was my contact when we went through the process of all the hearings, of raising money and of looking at the estimates and doing all the work. I was very glad to play an active role.

When we moved out there my beautiful wife had some concerns about how the hard well water did different things to her hair, things she did not like. Her hair got larger, and so she said, "We've got to have a better water softener."

And so we called up a local Culligan man, and he came out and he says, "Where's your water sample?"

I gave him it to him. And he sampled it and said, "Where did you get this water?"

And I said, "Right over here, out of this tap."

And he replied, "This goes off my charts."

He started talking about the grains of hardness. At that time Wichita water was around nine grains of hardness. According to his schedule, ours was over 160. So I was very glad when we dug that trench through my front drive to my basement, where I drilled a hole through my house, let a few snakes in, and got rural water that we still enjoy today.

Not everyone is aware of how important water is in rural areas, as everyone in my family knows. We have families in Kansas who do not have access to dependable water. And we want to keep Kansas open and beautiful, but still we want to make sure that we don't discourage people from living in rural areas, because they don't have access to water.

2007 was a rough year for Kansas. We had all of our 105 counties declared as federal disaster areas due to winter storms at the beginning and end of a tragic year that included the tornadoes in Greensburg and other towns, and horrible flooding down in southeast Kansas. Kansas Rural Water Association was always there to help, especially at Greensburg and at last summer's flooding in southeast Kansas. Without your assistance, our fellow Kansans would not have had the ability they had to overcome the tough situations they were facing. And it would have taken a lot longer to get back on their feet.

I cannot think how they could have done it otherwise. So let me personally thank you because I have met these people and I have talked to them. Thank you for what you have done. You have made Kansas a better place and I know you will in the future as well.

In Washington we have all kinds of members; it is a representative form of government. We have people from rural areas; we have people from urban areas. We are seeing a big shift from rural to urban areas. In fact, it is reflected in our farm bill. In the farm bill, more than two-thirds of the money goes to the cities, instead of the farmers. Think about that. This reflects a shift and what's going on in America. There are some Members in Washington, like Ways and Means Committee Chairman, Charlie Rangel, who is from Harlem, New York.



U.S. Representative  
Todd Tiahrt

Now, I don't know if very many of you have been to Harlem. I have. Life is a little different there than Sedan, Kansas. They don't understand the problems we're facing in rural America. So when it comes to advocating for smaller communities, sometimes the Members of Congress representing these big cities and urban areas forget, or just don't know how important it is to have access to clean dependable water for rural America.

Last year I was named ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee on Interior and Environment. Serving on this committee allows me to be in a position to advocate for rural water issues. The issues I work on in the Committee include the Department of the Interior, the Forest Service, the Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Smithsonian, the Indian Tribes, the offshore resources we have, like offshore drilling, and the EPA.

Last year, the new leadership had an especially tight budget, and some people did not think we ought to have a specific line item for rural water. Some members of Congress just wanted to trust the EPA. Well, the people at EPA are dedicated and they work very hard. But from my perspective, I do not want to give them that consideration. I want to have more input and I want to make sure rural water has a designated line item, so it does not get diverted elsewhere.

When I found out in the Environmental Protection Agency that over half the budget goes towards lawsuits and is spent on lawyers and court fees but not providing one drop of clean water, I wanted to make sure they had the right perspective on rural water.

Chairman Norman Dicks, a Democrat from Washington State,

has been very good to work with. He represents Olympia, which is just right around the Puget Sound, and he has some understanding of the necessity of rural water. We worked together, to ensure that

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this line item remained in the entire Conference process when we sat down and negotiated with the Senate. And I am looking forward to being an advocate for rural water in the next Congress and through the 2009 appropriations cycle – and hopefully for a couple of years after that.

But here in Kansas, as you may know, we have 903 public water systems. 93 percent of these are designated by the EPA as small systems, which mean they serve less than 3300 people. 650 actually serve populations of less than 500. That's 68 percent of our state's public water systems. There is perhaps no more important state association in the Sunflower State than the Kansas Rural Water Association.

Dependable and affordable access to clean water is basic for our very survival. You know we all want to have the highest quality water possible, and that is a common goal that we share with your customers. It is a goal our state officials and the federal government should share as well.

often takes an adversarial role. As I said earlier, the money ends up getting spent in a lawsuit instead of providing good, clean water.

I am sure each of you probably has your own story about dealing with the EPA. We continue to raise standards without providing the funding to meet those standards. It is a challenge, not only for the rural water districts, but also for our municipalities and our cities. I expect the challenge will continue into the future. The EPA regulates some 91 drinking water contaminants and more regulations are pending – regulations that do not rely on what I consider sound science. And these regulations definitely do not rely on a cost-benefit ratio. Complying with these federal regulations is disproportionately expensive for smaller water systems. Connecting with neighboring water systems is not just as simple as welding two pipes together or using PVC pipe and a little glue so the water can flow.

Water being transported for many miles presents unique

challenges, especially when the terrain is not cooperative. Regional systems can have great benefits as well, but they are difficult to build. That is why I believe it is important for the state and federal government to assist small communities that are not often able to comply with the costs of the regulations.

Another problem I deal with in Washington is the mentality of a one-size-fits-all regulation. Some think that is the best solution for a problem. But as you know, a rural water district is unique; it's not the same as what we have in Harlem or in Los Angeles.

We need manageable laws and regulations that are applicable to the communities that will be following them. We need to recognize that not all communities are capable of complying with costly regulations in the same time frame that better financed cities are able to do. I am working in Washington to help agencies like EPA take a more cooperative approach to helping local communities and businesses address their problems; because at the end of the day, we all want the same thing: a safe, clean environment for our children and safe, clean drinking water for our kids.

The choice is how we cooperate with each other to get to those common shared goals. I started a group called The Economic Competitiveness Caucus in Washington, D. C., and I have about 75 other members of Congress who have joined. We are working together to point out the barriers that are created by the federal government that keep American workers and businesses from being successful.

Barriers such as our tax system get buried in the cost of our products and punish success. Litigation and liability costs drive up everything we purchase. Our

energy policy is something that needs to be changed because personally, I am tired of paying three plus dollars for a gallon of gasoline. Our education system: I want to make sure our education

problems. The daily onsite help your association provides is a lifeline particularly for water operations in smaller communities that do not have the technical or financial resources available to

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system meets the needs of our future as well as today. Research and development tax credits are needed to help our companies meet new technology needs. We currently have a health care system with costs governed by bad policies that contribute to rates rising faster than we can match. For those of you managing the budgets of your rural water district, you know how difficult it is to give health care to your employees.

And of course there are federal regulations. My role as Ranking Member on the Interior Subcommittee is to point out these are barriers that are created by our federal government but that our cities and rural water districts cannot change, but have to comply with. They are very expensive, and they make it more difficult to provide the services we need.

The Kansas Rural Water Association has worked in partnership with the state and federal agencies to develop solutions to these individual public water supply system

larger cities.

Just like your association helps me, it also helps small communities. The training seminars the association conducts provides valuable information on issues ranging from operations and maintenance to management and financial issues. And participating in this annual conference gives you the chance to hear new ideas and new ways of approaching common problems faced by cities and rural water districts.

One of the programs that has benefited many rural water districts is the Kansas Public Water Supply Loan Fund administered at the state level by KDHE which is represented here today. This loan fund can help smaller communities and systems have access to the loan fund, and it helps them get the same interest rates that larger municipalities can obtain.

The capitalization grants that EPA gives begin in my Appropriation sub-committee in the House of Representatives. This budget season, Congress will

battle over the federal funding levels in terms of billions. Be assured we are going to try to secure the right amount for the line items we need for rural water. I will continue to be a voice for rural water needs in Kansas, and I want to thank you for letting me be here today.

I want to close by telling you that it is important that you stay involved in the political process, too. Being a part of this association is of great benefit to all your members, the people you serve, and it benefits our state as well.

Most people do not realize what kind of influence they have. They think, "What can I do, how can I be a positive influence?"

When people say, "I don't know what I can do to be involved," I am reminded of a story I read. It came out of George Washington's memoirs. George Washington was designated to be the leader of the Revolutionary Army, and when he took over, the army was in Boston.

As Washington was traveling there, the battle for Bunker Hill was raging. At that time, the victory, before he got there, was astounding. Shop owners and farmers were able to defeat the world's most powerful military, and it rippled around the globe.

After he got there, there was a long siege, and eventually the British got in their ships and started heading toward New York. George Washington packed up his army and cannons, and they rolled down to Manhattan Island. The British forced him to retreat from Manhattan Island; they forced him to retreat from New York.

Washington then retreated from Delaware, and he had a series of retreats from Pennsylvania until he ended up in a very cold winter in a very cold place called Valley Forge,

Pennsylvania. And in that winter, every year, it was his job to get his army to volunteer for another year of service. So one cold gray evening, he lined all the soldiers up out there, and he went out to

forward. And then rather than looking around at his soldiers, he looked down at his boots. And for him it seemed like an eternity. But in just a few moments, an elderly gentleman way down the line,

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speak to them.

According to his memoirs he gave them what he thought was the best speech he had made in his career to that point. He spoke about freedom, about liberty and about what they were giving to their families, and their posterity. And at the end of that speech, he asked them to volunteer for another year. Every one of them remained silent and remained in their standing position. And I can imagine seeing Washington there, looking shocked not knowing what to say. He looked up into the gray sky and finally retreated one more time, according to his memoirs, this time to a nearby tent, where he paced back and forth.

Washington thought, what can I tell them that will motivate them to stay in the fight, to create this country, to do the right thing? He finally went back outside and as it was getting dark, he stumbled through a second speech. This time he thought it was the absolute worst speech he had ever given.

But at the end of it he said, "And as a sign you will volunteer, I want you to take one step

who had blankets wrapped around his feet, because he had no shoes, took one step forward. Within seconds, the entire army had taken one step forward. They volunteered for another year and went on to Yorktown, Virginia, where Lord Cornwallis through a lower ranking officer, surrendered his sword to George Washington. They helped pass us this great nation. One elderly gentleman was willing to take a step forward, and it made a difference for the entire army.

You would be surprised how much influence you have with your family, your friends, with those you work with, the people you go to your church with, the clerk in the store.

They listen to you, to what you have to say. So stay involved in your political process. Stay involved in the Kansas Rural Water Association; you are making a difference. God bless you and God bless America.