Statement of the
National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA)

The Obama Administration’s
Climate Change Policies and Activities

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Energy and Power
U.S. House of Representatives
September 18, 2013
The National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) is pleased to have the opportunity to provide the House Subcommittee on Energy and Power with comments for the record in connection with the Committee’s hearing entitled, “The Obama Administration’s Climate Change Policies and Activities.”

NACWA represents the interests of more than 350 municipally owned wastewater treatment agencies and organizations. Our members are dedicated environmental stewards who treat and reclaim more than 18 billion gallons of wastewater each day while working to carry out the goals of the Clean Water Act.

NACWA would like to thank the Subcommittee for holding this hearing to consider the President’s Climate Action Plan (CAP). Climate change poses one of the most significant challenges to America’s wastewater sector, and it is vital that communities facing more frequent and extreme weather get the support they need to build resilient wastewater systems. It is also important to consider the wastewater sector when looking at opportunities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Adapting to the Effects of Climate Change and Improving Utility Resilience
In many ways, climate change is all about water—either there will be too much in wetter regions or not enough in dry regions—which is forcing our wastewater managers to become key first responders to climate-related events. As we witnessed with Hurricanes Katrina, Irene, and Sandy, flooding, sea level rise, and storm surges can lead to severe service disruptions at wastewater treatment plants and billions of gallons of sewage overflows. In the southwest, where drought conditions threaten to dry up many water supplies, communities are reclaiming wastewater to meet demand.

Improving the resilience of wastewater treatment plants in wet weather areas will involve raising pump stations, developing alternative treatment systems, having backup power generation capacity, building additional storage capacity, and potentially relocating treatment facilities above floodplains. It is also critical to understand that when basic water and wastewater infrastructure is offline, business and industrial disruptions are inevitable causing serious economic impacts.

In regions where extreme drought conditions persist, wastewater reuse and recycling operations will need to be expanded and improved. Warmer water conditions may cause water quality
degradation which may lead to more stringent and more costly treatment standards for wastewater discharges. Such actions to mitigate or adapt to changing weather patterns will be very expensive for local ratepayers and a 2009 report released by NACWA and the Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies (AMWA) estimates these resilience-related costs could reach between $448 billion and $944 billion by mid-century.

NACWA urges Congress to integrate considerations of climate change impacts and adaptive measures into water-related infrastructure investment programs such as the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF). NACWA also supports the establishment of a State, Local, and Tribal Leaders Task Force on Climate Preparedness and urges that at least one representative from the wastewater sector be included in this task force to advise on how best the federal government can support local preparedness and resilience-building efforts.


The wastewater sector stands ready to become partners with Congress and its work to promote the use of renewable energy sources that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote energy efficiency, and help lead our country toward energy independence. Wastewater utilities are one of the largest consumers of power. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), four percent of national electricity consumption is used to provide water and wastewater services each year. For local municipalities, water and wastewater utilities are typically the largest consumers of energy, often accounting for 30 to 40 percent of total energy consumed at the municipal level. Making our wastewater systems more energy efficient and less reliant on traditional fossil fuels is a critical step towards reducing operating costs and reducing our urban footprint.

Motivated by hefty energy costs and a desire to become more resilient, many of NACWA’s clean water agency members are generating their own renewable energy from biogas and biosolids produced during the municipal wastewater treatment process. This is indicative of a shift we are seeing among utilities as they transform from basic providers of wastewater services to full blown resource recovery agents, generating renewable energy from biosolids and liquids, capturing waste heat and energy, and reclaiming and reusing water.
Despite this transition, the energy generating potential at wastewater treatment plants is still much greater than current levels of production. For instance, combined heat and power systems, which are state-of-the-art in many utilities, are underutilized. EPA reports that out of the 1,500 utilities that use anaerobic digesters around the country, only 104 are fitted with combined heat and power (CHP) systems. If the remaining 1,351 utilities were to produce onsite renewable energy using CHP systems, it would displace more than three million metric tons of CO2 - the equivalent to taking 600,000 cars off the road – and making a significant contribution toward the Administration’s goal of reducing U.S. greenhouse gas emissions in the range of 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. As Congress targets investments in new renewable energy sources, we urge you to consider developing locally-grown energy from the wastewater treatment process.

We also encourage Congress to look toward the renewable energy wastewater can provide as it works to help meet the Administration’s goal of generating 20 percent of federal agencies’ energy needs through renewable energy sources by 2020. Energy from wastewater can provide federal agencies with a reliable and clean energy source for many of its installations and buildings and we encourage Congress to consider this sector as it works to increase national renewable energy production.

Wastewater utilities play a critical role in helping our nation adapt to climate change. As Congress works to address climate change and its devastating impacts, NACWA looks forward to working with you to ensure that the wastewater sector is fully engaged.