Water Infrastructure Resilience: Government Accountability Office Report Assesses Efforts to Assist Communities Vulnerable to Natural Disasters

Walter Wright, Jr.
wwright@mwlaw.com
(501) 688.8839

08/12/2025

The United States Government Accountability Office ("GAO") issued an August 11 report titled:

Water Infrastructure Resilience: Agencies Could Better Assess Efforts to Assist Communities Vulnerable to Natural Disasters ("Report").

See GAO-25-107013.

The GAO Report states that the following federal agencies have provided billions in grants and loans to community water infrastructure to increase resiliency:

- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ("EPA").
- U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency ("FEMA").
- U.S. Department of Agriculture ("USDA").

Nevertheless, the Report states that:

…rural, low-income, and other vulnerable communities struggle to get access to this funding.

Despite the federal agencies attempts to address this concern, GAO concludes that they could do more to assist.

The concern concludes that maps of water service areas:

…differ in quality and may not always help agencies identify communities that could benefit from help.

Federal assistance has included provisions of the following:

- $35 billion in grants (at least 22,000 projects).
- $29 billion in direct loans (about 4,800 projects).

These funds are stated to have been provided in fiscal years 2014-2023.

"Vulnerable communities" are stated to be communities defined in some programs' authorizing statutes that may receive additional assistance under these programs.

The GAO Report examines:

1. Financial assistance that EPA, FEMA, and USDA provided to improve water infrastructure;
2. The extent to which these agencies addressed barriers vulnerable communities face accessing and participating in selected programs; and
3. How these agencies assessed the extent to which assistance reached vulnerable communities.

The eight recommendations that GAO provides include:

1. FEMA should ensure that the agency's hazard mitigation assistance programs communicate with potential applicants about USDA financial assistance that may be used to fulfill nonfederal cost-share requirements in certain circumstances.
2. FEMA should ensure that FEMA's hazard mitigation assistance programs systematically track and assess the number of, and reasons for, subapplicant withdrawals and address any related barriers.
3. FEMA should ensure that its hazard mitigation assistance programs identify and track projects related to drinking water infrastructure.
4. FEMA should ensure that its hazard mitigation assistance programs identify and track projects related to wastewater infrastructure.
5. USDA should ensure that its financial assistance programs for drinking water infrastructure consult with relevant EPA officials on how to use EPA's community water system service area mapping tool to more accurately assess the beneficiaries of assistance for drinking water infrastructure, including vulnerable communities, as defined in the relevant laws.
6. The Secretary of Agriculture should ensure that USDA financial assistance programs for wastewater infrastructure consult with relevant EPA officials on how to use EPA's wastewater system service area mapping tool, once it is available, to more accurately assess the beneficiaries of assistance for wastewater infrastructure, including vulnerable communities.
7. EPA should provide guidance and technical assistance to states on the agency's community water system service area mapping tool and how to use it to assess the extent to which the beneficiaries of the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund program are disadvantaged communities, using states' definitions of such communities.
8. EPA should provide guidance and technical assistance to states on the agency's wastewater system service area mapping tool, once it is available, and how to use it to assess the extent Page 53 GAO-25-107013 Water Infrastructure Resilience to which the beneficiaries of the Clean Water State Revolving Fund program are communities with significant financial hardship, using states' definitions of such communities.

A copy of the GAO Report can be downloaded here.