

Inhofe Bill Advances Clean & Safe Water and Environmental Justice in Small and Rural Communities

(Washington, DC) The National Rural Water Association (NRWA), a nonprofit, community-based environmental organization of over 27,000 rural and small communities thanks Senators Inhofe, Cochran, Boozman, Vitter, Crapo and Risch for their efforts to help small communities provide safe drinking water and comply with federal water regulations. The Senators are the original sponsors of “The Small Systems Safe Drinking Water Act of 2011” introduced today.

The legislation would enhance public health, especially in low-income communities by allowing for the use of the Safe Drinking Water Act's (SDWA) affordability and variance provisions that allow for safe drinking water and protect consumers from unnecessary costs. The bill also requires additional assistance measures be implemented to help small communities struggling to comply with federal rules.

Currently, small communities are prohibited from utilizing economical compliance options (so-called small system variance technologies), under the SDWA because EPA adopted a policy that families can afford annual water rates of 2.5% of median household income (MHI) (or approximately \$1,200 per household). EPA's MHI standard does not consider the quantity, concentration, rural demographics, and financial abilities of low-income families or disadvantaged populations to afford the rule as required by the Agency's Environmental Justice policy [Executive Order 12898].

EPA has acknowledged their affordability policy is not appropriate for small communities. In March 2006, EPA concluded the following: “*some stakeholders have argued that the current criteria are too stringent and fail to recognize situations in which a significant minority of systems within a size category may find a regulation unaffordable. After seven years of experience with the current criteria, EPA agrees it is time to consider refinements to address the situations of communities with below average incomes or above average drinking water and treatment costs.*” (FR p.10671) EPA has not adopted a new policy after making this finding in 2006.

Senator Inhofe's bill brings equity and fairness to small towns by requiring that EPA standards – that are determined by cost (economics) – be no more expensive in rural and small communities than in large communities. It corrects the status quo; where thousands of small and rural communities are forced to spend limited public funds for federal regulatory compliance when there is not an identified health risk.

A copy of Senator Inhofe's legislation available at: www.ruralwater.org.