



# THE SPIGOT

from the NORTH DAKOTA RURAL WATER SYSTEMS ASSOCIATION

## a RALLY TO REMEMBER

National Rural Water Association (NRWA) members gathered in Washington, D.C., in February to advocate for rural water.

A packed crowd greeted Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.) and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack with standing ovations during the opening of NRWA's annual Rural Water Rally.

Cole praised the quality of rural water programs and the "bang for the buck" they provide. He warned, however, that growing federal deficits were forcing Congress to make difficult spending choices.

"The programs that you're interested in, again, these are high value for low cost," he said. "It shouldn't be something that we have to struggle for, but we do, because entitlement programs keep squeezing out discretionary spending."

Cole insisted that Congress and the next president would have to make hard choices about issues like Social Security, the deficit, and the tax code. He added they would have to make those choices without limiting critical programs like those that support clean drinking water. "The people in Flint, Mich., can tell you that if someone isn't doing this job, the consequences of it are terrible," he said.



Rural water systems meet with Sen. John Hoeven to discuss crucial water issues facing North Dakota.

Vilsack also spoke about budget difficulties, though his remarks explained how funding choices, even within the same department, could impact other programs. "One of the challenges is budget," he said. "You may not think your situation is related to the Forest Service budget, but it is. When we increase spending on fire suppression, it means we have to reduce resources and investment in another part of our budget."

## RALLY ATTENDEES

Several representatives from the North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association (NDRWSA) and rural water systems across the state attended the Rural Water Rally in Washington, D.C. They were:

**Eric Volk**  
Executive Director, NDRWSA

**Joe LaFave**  
Treasurer, NDRWSA  
Director, South Central Regional Water District

**Dave Lang**  
Director, South Central Regional Water District

**Mary Massad**  
Manager/CEO, Southwest Water Authority

**Jon Nelson**  
President, NDRWSA  
Director, All Seasons Water Users District

**Michele Schommer**  
National Representative, NDRWSA  
Vice President, Northeast Regional Water District

**Gordon Blixt**  
Director, Cass Rural Water Users District

**George Saxowsky**  
Director, Southwest Water Authority

He also explained the challenge was not just encouraging Congress to fully fund the water programs, but to also fix the fire budget. In response to the demands of the tightening budget, the U.S. Department of Agriculture started an effort to recruit investment banks and pension funds to invest in rural water projects.

Vilsack explained how important it is to preserve and promote rural America. He explained that unemployment is slightly higher in rural areas and poverty is more persistent – 85 percent of persistent poverty counties are rural counties.

“Rural America is not just the place where we get our food, not just the place almost all the feedstock for the energy we consume comes from, it’s also the place where a disproportionate number of our men and women serving the military come from,” he said. More than 44 percent of military recruits come from rural communities. Vilsack believes rural young people are enlisting not only to find economic opportunity, but because of a value system in rural America. “People who work the land understand that you have to give something back,” he explained. “It’s a value worth keeping.”

NRWA President Charles Hilton opened the rally by recounting how the community of Breezy Hill, S.C., started a water utility in 1968 with a \$500,000 loan. At first, that system served 297 taps, but it has grown to service 5,500 customers and is now valued at more than \$10 million. That water system, in Hilton’s hometown, has also brought in more than a billion dollars in economic development.

Hilton reminded the gathered utility professionals that their voice is what has made rural water so successful. “National rural water has no power or credibility on its own,” he explained. “It is through the grassroots efforts of our members that we have been successful.”



*(Above) Sen. Heidi Heitkamp and NDRWSA President Jon Nelson.*



*(Right) Sen. Hoeven takes a selfie with Ella Strutz, the granddaughter of South Central Regional Water District board member Greg Larson and State Representative Diane Larson.*

## North Dakota Rural Water Systems Tell Their Stories

Rural water system representatives from across North Dakota made the long journey to Washington, D.C., to help promote the value of rural water. They met with Sens. John Hoeven (R-N.D.) and Heidi Heitkamp (D-N.D.) and Mark Gruman, Rep. Kevin Cramer’s (R-N.D.) chief of staff to discuss the need for the continuation of federal funding to complete the state’s rural water infrastructure. They also encouraged each member to continue their support of key training and technical assistance programs critical to the state’s water and wastewater systems.

The North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association thanks North Dakota’s congressional delegation for its past and future support of the state’s water and wastewater systems. It is truly appreciated!

### **Jack Hancock**

Vice President, NDRWSA  
President, Agassiz Water Users District

### **Dan Rouse**

President, South Central Regional Water District

### **Dan Schaefer**

Manager, All Seasons Water Users District

### **Greg Larson**

Assistant Secretary/Treasurer, South Central Regional Water District

### **Jon Gregoire**

Director, Grand Forks-Trail Water District