



## Closing America's Wastewater Access Gap Community Initiative

### Wastewater Challenges in Rural America

**Too many communities in the United States are still living without the basics—including safe and reliable drinking water and wastewater systems.** An estimated 2.2 million people in the U.S. lack basic running water and indoor plumbing in their homes. For example, yards regularly flood with sewage from straight pipes and lagoons in Alabama and across the Southern Black Belt. In Appalachia, families live by streams polluted with wastewater. In Puerto Rico, communities struggle to rebuild wastewater and septic systems damaged by hurricanes. In the Southwest, colonias and tribal nations lack indoor plumbing. Small, rural communities from the Central Valley in California to Alaskan Native Villages struggle to provide adequate sanitation services to their residents. These are just some of the countless stories of inadequate sanitation impacting rural America. Inadequate and failing wastewater infrastructure poses direct health risks to families and stymies economic growth and community vitality.

**The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) presents a historic opportunity to invest in communities and leverage existing federal infrastructure programs to address wastewater infrastructure needs in underserved communities across America.** For example, the BIL provides \$11.7 billion through the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF), with 49% of funding available as grants or principal forgiveness, which can provide a pathway for underserved communities that might not otherwise be able to access traditional CWSRF loans to address their wastewater infrastructure needs. BIL funding can also be leveraged with other key federal funding sources such as USDA's Rural Development (USDA-RD) Water and Environmental Programs funding.

### A Partnership Approach

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA-RD), in collaboration the states of Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, West Virginia, as well as the tribal nations of Santo Domingo Pueblo and San Carlos Apache are partnering on the *Closing America's Wastewater Access Gap Community Initiative*. EPA and USDA-RD will jointly leverage technical assistance resources to help historically underserved communities identify and pursue federal funding opportunities to address their wastewater needs.

The initiative will be piloted in 11 places across the southern regions of the country that have demonstrated significant need:

- Bolivar County, Mississippi
- Doña Ana County, New Mexico
- Duplin County, North Carolina
- Greene County, Alabama
- Halifax County, North Carolina
- Harlan County, Kentucky
- Lowndes County, Alabama
- McDowell County, West Virginia
- Raleigh County, West Virginia
- San Carlos Apache Tribe, Arizona
- Santo Domingo Pueblo, New Mexico

The *Closing America's Wastewater Access Gap Community Initiative* will also provide a roadmap that can be scaled to additional communities across the country.

## Key Activities

1. **Conduct a Community Wastewater Assessment.** The pilot initiative will bring together state, tribal, and local collaborators and technical experts to assess the current status of wastewater infrastructure in the 11 communities. The assessments will include engagements with state, tribal, and local government officials, wastewater systems, community-based organizations, and impacted residents. In addition to a physical infrastructure assessment, the pilot will support capacity assessments to identify what additional support may be needed to build the technical, managerial, and financial capacity of local governmental agencies to steward the project.
2. **Develop a Wastewater Community Solutions Plan.** Using information secured during the assessment, the pilot initiative will support development of Wastewater Community Solutions Plans. The Community Solutions Plan will include preliminary technical recommendations for a sustainable wastewater solution, based on local conditions. Solutions will generally fall into three categories: for homes located near to but not connected with an existing centralized wastewater system, facilitate connections into the system; for clusters of homes on individual decentralized systems, facilitate development of new and sustainable shared systems; for geographically isolated homes, facilitate conversion into reliable individual, decentralized systems. The Community Solutions Plan will also identify the technical assistance necessary to help the community access the CWSRF, USDA-RD, and other funding sources for infrastructure projects. State and local officials, as well as community members, will help shape the development of these plans.
3. **Help Underserved Communities Identify and Pursue Funding Opportunities.** The pilot initiative will collaborate with states to support underserved communities in identifying and applying for federal funding. Potential funding programs include BIL funding provided through the CWSRF and USDA-RD's Water and Environmental Loan and Grant programs. Focus will be given to combining and harmonizing EPA BIL CWSRF funding with USDA-RD funding and other potentially applicable funding sources, including state funding.
4. **Build Long-Term Capacity.** Many communities with inadequate infrastructure may struggle to operate and maintain new infrastructure without support. EPA and USDA-RD will collaborate with states and tribes to provide capacity building services, such as trainings and technical programs, to help build long-term capacity in communities that need it. A central issue will be training to identify funding and support structures for the long-term operations and maintenance of the wastewater systems. EPA and USDA-RD will engage and work closely with on-the-ground technical assistance providers supported through EPA and USDA-RD programs. EPA and USDA-RD will also utilize the recently announced Rural Partners Network—an alliance of federal agencies and civic partners working together to expand rural prosperity through job creation, infrastructure development, and community improvement.