Testimony: House Water and Power Subcommittee
On Alaska Water Resources Act S. 1338
Wednesday, March 8, 2006, Longworth HOB 1324

By Senator Lisa Murkowski

Chairman Radanovich, thank you for scheduling this hearing on S. 1338, the Alaska Water Resources Act and thank you for letting me testify on its behalf. It is expensive to fly from Alaska to Washington and you are most kind to accept me as a witness compared to the better qualified supporters of this bill in my home State. I promise to be brief.

Alaska has a great deal of water. It is estimated that one third of our nation's fresh water resources reside in Alaska. But, even given this abundance, we do have concerns regarding water in Alaska that this bill seeks to remedy.

First, there is practically no information on the size or recharge capability of aquifers anywhere in the state – a growing problem in the populated "Railbelt" whose citizens draw their potable water increasingly from groundwater supplies. Without better data it is impossible to know how to design public water systems that will have enough water in the urbanizing areas to handle water needs during our occasional summer droughts.

Second, while Alaska has 12,000 rivers, including the third largest in North America – the Yukon – there are only about 100 steam gaging stations operated by the U.S. Geological Survey to provide information to the National Weather Service to use in flood forecasting. To equal the stream gage density of the Pacific Northwest States, Alaska would need to have over 1,600 total gage sites. This bill will require an impartial study of the need for more gages, but not mandate any money to install any additional gages, if they are found to be needed.

Third, rural Alaska is served by the least developed potable water distribution system in the country. Alaska, according to the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, still has some 16,000 homes in 71 generally Native villages not being served by piped water or enclosed water haul systems. The state has an estimated need for nearly $650 million in additional funding to complete installation of a modern water-sanitation system.

Given all the new technology that is available, including desalination equipment that might help meet water needs in the more than 80 towns and villages along the state's nearly 34,000 miles of coastal shoreline, and new purification systems, it only makes sense to have a study of potential new technology before final designs by Alaska are finished for installation of new water systems in rural areas.

And fourth, it takes water and sometimes large quantities of it to fight forest fires or run industrial or natural resource extraction industries. Having accurate information on the amount of water safely available for fire fighting or mining, for example, would help public safety and likely also the development my the state's economy.

This bill simply directs the U.S. Geological Survey and the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation to conduct the same type of water reconnaissance studies already finished for every other state and region in the nation. It is a survey of water treatment needs and technologies, including desalination treatment, which may be applicable to water resources development, including potable water systems, in rural Alaska.

There is literally "water, water everywhere" in Alaska, but too often, especially in communities such as the rapidly growing Mat-Su Valley, there may be less water to drink during unusually dry summers. There is a real and growing problem of maintaining an adequate supply of sufficient, pure water. This problem is only going to increase with a growing population and economy.

This bill is designed to provide more information to help communities plan for future water needs and to help state officials plan for flood and fire safety concerns and economic development. It is informational only and does not authorize any spending to design or build anything.

That concludes my testimony and I'll be happy to answer any questions members of the committee might have.

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