The WATER Act would provide $35 billion a year to drinking water and wastewater improvements. Most of the water pipes under our streets were built at least a half-century ago in the years immediately following World War II. This infrastructure is wearing out, and many water pipes have already reached the end of their usefulness. Every year, there are 240,000 water main breaks, wasting more than 2 trillion gallons of drinking water, while billions of gallons of untreated wastewater spill into waterways. In total, our drinking water and wastewater systems need at least $744 billion over the next 20 years, or more than $35 billion a year.

The WATER Act would create a water trust fund. The WATER Act would roll back a small portion of the Trump administration’s corporate tax cuts by increasing the corporate income tax rate by 3.5 percentage points. It would dedicate $35 billion each year to grant programs and to the Drinking Water and Clean Water State Revolving Fund (SRF) programs. Since peaking in 1977, federal funding for water infrastructure has been cut by 74 percent in real dollars. On a per capita basis, this is an 82 percent drop. In 1977, the federal government spent $76.27 per person (in 2014 dollars) on water infrastructure, but by 2014 that support had fallen to $13.68 per person. The WATER Act would help restore the federal government’s commitment to safe water and safeguard this support from annual congressional appropriations battles.

The WATER Act would create up to nearly 1 million jobs and protect American workers. The WATER Act would create an estimated 700,000 to 945,000 jobs across the economy. It also requires the use of U.S.-made iron and steel, applies prevailing wage law to all projects and encourages union labor. The bill would limit drinking water funding to publicly run water systems and small locally owned systems to ensure that all federal dollars go to the public benefit and not to for-profit water corporations.
The WATER Act would help small, rural and Indigenous communities. It provides funding for technical assistance to help rural and small municipalities and Native American communities improve their water and wastewater systems. It creates a new grant program for residential septic tanks and drainage fields, and it dramatically expands funding to upgrade and install rural household drinking water wells. It also dedicates 3 percent of Drinking Water SRF funding as grants to Indigenous Nations.

The WATER Act would help address water contamination from per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFASs). It would provide funding to update treatment systems or find alternative water supplies when community water systems or household water wells are contaminated with PFOA, PFOS and other PFASs, which are widespread, persistent toxins.

The WATER Act would help get the lead out of drinking water at home and school. It would expand a grant program to replace all lead piping and plumbing in public schools, and it provides grants to homeowners to replace lead service lines on their property. Nationwide, over 6 million lead service lines deliver water to millions of people. Replacing these pipes could cost up to $30 billion. For a household, it can cost more than $2,000 to replace their service line.

The WATER Act would promote affordable water service for all. It would require that no less than half of SRF funding be given as grants and additional subsidization to disadvantaged communities. It would also help prevent water shutoffs by requiring the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to produce guidance about promoting universal access to safe water and to coordinate a study about water affordability and shutoffs, discrimination and civil rights violations by water providers, and public participation in water regionalization efforts.

Support the WATER Act. Other measures to address our water infrastructure challenges that incentivize the take-over of municipal water systems by for-profit entities are not the answer. We must restore our nation’s confidence in its water, and that starts with restoring federal funding to local water systems. That is the best option to help communities upgrade and maintain their water infrastructure, replace lead pipes, conserve water and ensure that everyone can afford and trust their water service.

Endnotes


8 For more information, see Food & Water Watch, “These Chemicals Are Forever: Water Contamination From PFOA, PFOS and other PFASs.” February 2019.

