Opposition to the Voluntary Water Partnerships for Distressed Communities Act (S. 2596)

Dear Senate Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Chairman Barrasso and Ranking Member Carper

We, the undersigned organizations, strongly oppose the “Voluntary Water Partnership for Distressed Communities Act.” Despite the title, the bill will serve to coerce communities into privatizing their public water systems. It is inappropriate, unjust and unreasonable. Furthermore, this bill will most likely lead to more water privatization, poor water quality, and higher rates that would disproportionately impact Black, Brown and Indigenous communities. We urge you to OPPOSE this legislation and OPPOSE adding it to the America’s Water Infrastructure Act of 2020 (S. 3591).

This bill provides perverse incentives for communities to privatize water systems while failing to ensure long-term compliance with drinking water quality standards. The bill would allow a water system with drinking water quality violations to avoid fines and penalties for those violations by privatizing the system through an asset sale or operations and management contract. While states should have the flexibility to help municipalities address water quality violations through public sector collaboration and municipalization of struggling private systems, large water corporations are more likely than public sector entities to exploit the changes and grants proposed in this bill. A large corporation will likely seek to use this enforcement preference as a hammer to force privatization on a community that would otherwise reject it.

This bill unjustly authorizes a privatized water system to provide unsafe water for three years. After privatizing, the water system has an additional three years to comply with federal regulations for drinking water quality before facing enforcement mechanisms. But even after this period of providing unsafe water, there are no additional penalties or any “strings attached” to ensure that the privatized system will comply in the future to provide safe water beyond the enforcement mechanisms that the existing system faces.

The bill unreasonably gives grants to support the expansion of a water corporation’s business. This waste of American taxpayer dollars will likely benefit a small number of corporations, which operate only in a handful of states. Grant dollars should support only publicly owned or nonprofit systems and providers. Nearly 9 of out 10 Americans receive their tap water from a publicly owned system.
This bill wrongly assumes that privatization will necessarily improve water quality. In many cases, for systems large and small, private control of water systems has resulted in worse drinking water quality. For example, Pittsburgh’s water quality violations followed a chemical treatment change that occurred after the city hired a large multinational firm to provide management and consulting services. Similarly, in Oklahoma, a large international firm received the largest water quality fine in the state’s history for a laundry list of violations of federal and state law that occurred while it operated and managed the water system of the small city of Hugo.

We are concerned that this legislation is being promoted as helping our most vulnerable communities. No provision within the legislation protects vulnerable communities from being forced into privatization against their own wish. Privatization, poor water quality, and higher rates disproportionately impact Black, Brown and Indigenous communities. In addition to not necessarily improving water quality, privatization leads to higher rates and worse service, in order to maximize corporate profits. Private utilities typically charge 59% more for water service than local government utilities. Higher rates lead to more shutoffs when people can’t afford to pay their bills. Private utilities often reduce their workforce; on average 1 in 3 jobs is lost when a utility goes from public to private. This leads to maintenance backlogs, other service problems, and lost jobs in these communities.

Finally, this bill detracts from real solutions that can address the serious public health consequences of drinking water quality violations. Instead, we ask that you support nonprofit technical assistance and robust grant funding for struggling water systems through the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund program. These are tried, true, proven and reliable ways to directly improve drinking water quality for Americans.

Again, we urge you to OPPOSE the Voluntary Water Partnerships for Distressed Communities Act and OPPOSE adding it to the America’s Water Infrastructure Act (S. 3591).

Sincerely,

Food & Water Action
1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East MD/DC
350 Central Mass
350 Chicago
350 New Orleans
350 NJ - Rockland
Action Center on Race and the Economy (ACRE)
Active Hope Group Gallup NM
Advocates for Cherry Valley
African Heritage Economic Initiative
AFSCME
AFSCME Council 3
AFSCME Council 31
Alliance for Democracy
American Family Voices
American Family Voices
American Indian Center INC
Assateague Coastal Trust
Autntic Occupational Therapy, Inc.
Aytzim: Ecological Judaism
Bees On Board
Berks Gas Truth
Better Building Institute Inc.
Better Path Coalition
Blue Water Baltimore
Build A Movement 2020
Cahaba River Society
Campaign for Lead Free Water
Carbondale Spring Food Autonomy Project
Catalyst Beer Company
Center for Biological Diversity
Central Illinois Progressive Democrats of America
Central NJ Chapter - The Climate Reality Project
Chicago Against Privatizing Our Water (CAPOW)
Chicago Area Peace Action
Chicago Asian Americans for Environmental Justice
Chicago Democratic Socialists of America
Chicago Greens
Chicago Women Take Action
Church Women United in New York State
Citizen Action/IL
Citizens Act to Protect Our Water
Citizens for a Greener Illinois
Citizens for Water
Citizens United for Renewable Energy (CURE)
Clean Power Lake County
Cleanwater Lingsnare Inc.
Coalition Against Pilgrim Pipeline
Coalition for Economic Justice
Coalition to Protect New York
CodePink Long Island
Color of Change
Come Together Rockford
Comite Dialogo Ambiental, Inc
Community Action Works
Conceivable Future
Conejos Clean Water
Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes
Cook County Democratic Party
Corporate Accountability
Corporate Campaign, Inc.
CT Working Families Organization
Damascus Citizens for Sustainability
Deep Time Chicago
Delaware Riverkeeper Network
Derechos Humanos y Medio Ambiente
Detroit Jews for Justice
Director Deignan Institute for Earth and Spirit at Iona
District Council 37, AFSCME, AFL-CIO
Dominican Sisters of Springfield, IL Leadership Team & Justice Committee
Don’t Gas the Meadowlands Coalition
Earth Action, Inc.
Earthwise365!
East End Action Network (EEAN)
Eco-Poetry.org
Edwards & Jennings, PC
Embodied Wholeness
Empire State Consumer Project, Inc.
Environmental Advocates NY
Environmental Justice Taskforce of the WNY Peace Center
First Congregational Church
Flint Rising
FLOW (For Love of Water)
Food & Water Action
Fox Valley Citizens for Peace & Justice
Frack Free Four Corners
FrackBustersNY
Franciscan Response to Fossil Fuels
Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement
Freshwater Future
Freshwater Lab
Friends of the Earth U.S.
Friends of the Moshassuck
FruitBelt Advisory Council
Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Greater Highland Area Concerned Citizens
Green Glen Cove
Green Party of Nassau County
Green Party of New Jersey
Green Sanctuary, Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading
Greyspace Collective
Grounded Strategies
Hall's Choice Farm LTD
Hill District Consensus Group
Hilton Head for Peace
Hinenu: The Baltimore Justice Shtiebel
Hip Hop Caucus
Hunger Action Network NYS
Illinois People’s Action
Imagine Water Works
In the Public Interest
Indivisible Cranbury
Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of Baltimore City
Interfaith Power & Light (DC.MD.NoVA)
Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement
Iowa Citizens for Responsible Agriculture, Worth County
Ironbound Community Corporation
Jubilee Farm
Junction Coalition
Just Harvest
Justice Action Mobilization Network
Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice
Lady Freethinker
LI Clean Air Water & Soil, Ltd
Long Island Progressive Coalition
Lower Raritan Watershed Partnership
Maryknoll Sisters
Maryland Legislative Coalition
Massachusetts Avenue Project
Maurice & Jane Sugar Law Center for Economic and Social Justice
Metro East Green Alliance (IL)
Metro New York Catholic Climate Movement
Mi Villita Neighbors
MI/Welfare Rights Organization
Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation
Michigan Coalition for Human Rights
Michigan Interfaith Power & Light
Michigan Nurses Association
Milwaukee Riverkeeper
Milwaukee Water Commons
MLK Coalition of Greater Los Angeles
MoveOn.org Hoboken
Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment
NAACP Chicago Southside
Nassau Hiking & Outdoor Club
National Lawyers Guild, Maryland Chapter
National Lawyers Guild, Michigan/Detroit Chapter
National Organization for Women, Northern New Jersey Chapter
Nature Coast Conservation, Inc.
Neighbors for Environmental Justice
Network of Holistic Activists
New Energy Economy
New Jersey Appleseed Public Interest Law Center
New Jersey Tenants Organization
New Mexico Environmental Law Center
New Paltz Climate Action Coalition
New York Communities for Change (NYCC)
New York State Nurses Association
Newburgh Clean Water Project
Nine Mile Run Watershed Association
NJ Skylands Sunrise Movement Hub
NJ State Industrial Union Council
NJ Student Sustainability Coalition
No Sharon Gas Pipeline | Clean Energy Now
Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson
North American Climate, Conservation and Environment (NACCE)
North County Watch
North Jersey Sierra
North Star Special Events
Northern Illinois Jobs with Justice
Northern Michigan Environmental Action Council (NMEAC)
Northern New Jersey NOW
NY Water Action
NYC Grassroots Alliance
NYC H2O
NYC Labor Council for Latin American Advancements
NYPIRG
Occupy Bergen County
Office of Life, Peace, Justice & Creation
Office of Peace, Justice, and Ecological Integrity, Sisters of Charity of St. Elizabeth
Open Buffalo
Orange Residents Against Pilgrim Pipelines
Oregon Environmental Council
Our Revolution
Our Revolution Butler
Our Revolution Maryland
Our Revolution New Mexico
Park Watershed
Partner for Health
Partnership for the Public Good - Buffalo Niagara
Pass It On Network
Pax Christi Metro New York
Peace Action of Staten Island
Penley Global Law
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
People Demanding Action
People Over Pipelines
Peoples Climate Movement, NY
Permaculture Institute of North America
Philadelphia DSA
Physicians for Social Responsibility, AZ Chapter
Pittsburgh United
Plumbers Local Union 200
Prince George's County Peace & Justice Coalition
Progressive Democrats of America
Promoting Health and Sustainable Energy (PHASE)
Public Justice Center
PUSH Buffalo
Raritan Headwaters
Reach Out America
Recode.org
Reconstructing Judaism
Redemptoristine Nuns
Refund America Project (RAP)
Religious Organizations Along the River (ROAR)
Resist the Pipeline
Restore the Delta
Rio Grande Valley Broadband
Rural Justice Network
Rutgers University Progressive
San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council
Sana Global-Mujeres de la Tierra /Women of the Earth Collective
Sanford-Oquaga Area Concerned Citizens (S-OACC)
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SANIPLAN
Santoni, Vocci & Ortega, LLC
Save Our Water CT
Se Acuílló?
Seneca Lake Guardian, A Waterkeeper Affiliate
Shawnee Forest Sentinels
Show Up Long Island
Sisters of Charity Federation
Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Congregational and Western Province Leadership
Sisters of Charity of New York
Sisters of St. Dominic of Blauvelt, New York
Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, New Windsor, NY
Skylands Group, NJ Sierra Club
SoCal 350 Climate Action
Social Eco Education-LA (SEE-LA)
SOUL In Action
South Baltimore Community Land Trust
Southeast Side Coalition to Ban Petcoke
Southern Illinoisans Against Fracturing our Environment (SAFE)
Straits Area Concerned Citizens for Peace, Justice and Environment
Sullivan Alliance for Sustainable Development
Sunrise Movement Baltimore
Sustainable Food Trade Association
Take Back the Grid
The Banner Newsletter
The Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice
The Climate Mobilization - Hudson Chapter
The Color of Water Project
The Democracy Collaborative
The People’s Lobby
The Story of Stuff Project
The WASH Project
The Water Collaborative
The Wei LLC
Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue at Iona College
Tikkun
Top Hat Tech LLC
Topanga Peace Alliance
Toxics Information Project (TIP)
Ujima Company, Inc.
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sussex County Social Action Team
United Church of Christ Detroit Metro. Assoc. Social Justice Team
United Nations Association of Greater Chicago
United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples
United Parents Against Lead & Other Environmental Hazards (UPAL)
Ursulines of the Roman Union - Eastern Province