



**Remarks by Under Secretary Lisa Mensah for National Rural Water Rally Day
National Rural Water Association**

February 10, 2015 • Washington, DC

Good morning! I am so pleased to be here with you today. Thank you very much for inviting me to this great Rural Water Rally Day! Thank you Charles and Sam for inviting me to address you who are leading the way and all who are doing the heroic work of bringing the most precious resource we have to rural America: water.

I bring greetings from President Obama and Secretary Vilsack. I want to say thanks to Chairman Aderholt and his great support of USDA and Rural Development. I was very happy to have Alabama be my first trip as the new Under Secretary and it was wonderful to see all the great work we are doing on the ground there.

Yesterday marked the start of my tenth week at Rural Development. During these past few weeks, I've had the chance to meet with important stakeholder groups, and none more important than the National Rural Water Association. I heard directly from your great leaders Sam and your president Charles Hilton about the vital work you do in your communities, often without much pay or glory, to bring this life-saving resource to those who need it most. Charles told me all about his efforts in Breezy Hill, South Carolina to grow his customer base and make sure his community is getting the water supply it needs and how his circuit riders are now helping the rest of the state upgrade their water systems. Just like me, he's going to be traveling the country hearing from you all about what is working and what we can all do better.

Just so you know my background, I have worked finance, rural advocacy and hard work to improve peoples' lives. I spent summers picking strawberries in Oregon because my parents wanted me to know the value of hard work. That experience also led to appreciation and respect



for the rural way of life, and the values I learned then have stayed with me, driving career decisions and ultimately leading me to Rural Development to stand in front of you today.

I have spent most of my career in finance, developing tools to improve opportunities for jobs and economic growth. I strongly believe that investment in rural communities creates opportunities for our country.

As founder and director of the Aspen Institute Initiative on Financial Security, I know from experience that policies and financial products that encourage critical infrastructure investment can strengthen rural economies. And all of you are leaders here in providing that one critical infrastructure resource that we literally know we can't live without: water. I know businesses can't grow, houses can't be built, and crops can't be planted if we don't have the precious resource of being able to provide water.

I'm so excited and honored to work for what I think is America's most innovative, biggest and best rural development bank! You all know that working together with Rural Development, we are spurring growth and drive economic opportunities, and I appreciate the historic role that the National Rural Water Association has played in creating successful rural economies.

Under Secretary Vilsack's leadership, Rural Development is working hard to create partnerships that leverage the strength of rural areas, build new markets to increase regional economic sustainability and expand investment opportunities to create prosperous communities.

I have been so impressed with the quality and commitment of our RD staff. In partnership with all of you here today, our water team works to improve the quality of our country's network of water and waste systems to better serve the more than 55 million people who live and work in rural America.



I would like to take a moment to thank Jasper Schneider for serving as the RUS acting administrator for the last five months. For those of you who do not know, Jasper has served for more than 5 years as our state director in North Dakota. He is deeply committed to our rural mission and has sacrificed time with his four beautiful children and wife to ensure that RUS programs continue to serve the best they can. Thank you Jasper.

I would also like to recognize our assistant administrator and the staff of our water and environmental programs for all that they do every day. In my first week, I had the opportunity to spend time with the entire water team. They are the real deal. Working with your interests, and those you serve, in mind as they administer this nearly 8 decades young program.

For most of my career, I have developed tools that improve opportunities for jobs and economic growth. I strongly believe that by investing in our rural communities, we create opportunities for our country.

As founder and director of the Aspen Institute Initiative on Financial Security, I know that policies and financial products that enable all Americans to save, invest, and own are foundational to rebuilding our economy. Under Secretary Vilsack's leadership, rural development is working to create new partnerships that leverage the strength of rural areas, build new markets to increase regional competitiveness, and continue to expand investment opportunities that create prosperous, sustainable communities.

Given my background, I appreciate the powerful work that rural development does to spur growth and support economic opportunities in rural areas through the mission area's suite of programs.

I want to applaud the extraordinary efforts of those of you here today, and those that came before you, to build and sustain high quality systems and service for those who:

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- Grow the food we put on our tables,
 - Make the clothes we wear,
 - Produce the energy we rely on to heat and cool our homes,
 - And build innovative, affordable products and services that fuel the American economy.

You are rural Americans. Built tough and resilient out of necessity. Leading the way because you care.

Our water and waste loan and grant program are the core from which a community's wellbeing and economic development are made possible. We are extremely proud of this program and its effectiveness.

Our program started as a partnership with rural communities. It was designed with an understanding of how good, clean, affordable and reliable service interconnects with every other aspect of life in rural America and the knowledge of how important rural contributions are to the national economy. 78 years later - the issues surrounding water are no less critical to our country. And the need for programs like rural development's water program remains high.

Understanding our approach to assistance matters as much as the funds that back it do. The way technical assistance is woven into the fabric of the water program has not only improved its effectiveness and performance, but has strengthened rural water and waste service and communities for the future.

I am a firm believer that for our country to be strong, every American must participate. The opportunity for low interest loans and grants for infrastructure, particularly in areas of high poverty is critical. Equally important is the availability of technical, managerial and financial training for those who will operate, manage and lead the efforts to sustain service and make the most of the infrastructure investment made through the government.



The National Rural Water Association understands this too. You have been our partner for 39 years and your efforts are making a real difference. You too are adapting to the changing needs of the communities you serve and our increasing emphasis on long-term sustainability of the systems they operate.

Last year, rural water associations across the country hosted sustainability workshops using our workshop-in-a-box guide. Thank you to rural water Georgia, Massachusetts and Kansas for leading the way on this effort. Hundreds of circuit riders and rural water staff were trained last year and will be conducting workshops through grants provided by USDA and EPA. You are working with us now to improve the impact of the tools you helped us to develop.

Last year rural water was also awarded a grant to conduct energy reviews of systems in seven states. Through this work you will help reduce energy costs and improve the bottom line for rural systems. Thank you for all that you are doing to improve the sustainability of rural systems.

The emergency assistance circuit riders provide serves as the safety net for rural systems impacted by forces of nature and other disasters. Yesterday, the acting administrator recognized the efforts of rural water associations in Arkansas, Illinois and Mississippi for the extraordinary efforts they made in the past year to assist rural communities in keeping the water flowing to rural residents.

A few weeks ago, I traveled to Mississippi and had the pleasure of meeting Kirby Mayfield of Mississippi rural water. I was truly impressed. Thank you Kirby for representing the NRWA network so well. I look forward to seeing the good work that all of you are doing as I travel to your states in the years ahead.

In my time at the helm of rural development I will support the water programs and the team that runs it so well.

Investment in key infrastructure is essential to ensuring rural America is a place where families can thrive.

In FY 14 Rural Development invested \$1.5 billion to enable you to provide cleaner, safer water and sewer service to 1.8 million residents. And more than 15 million rural residents will benefit from the nearly \$11 billion in infrastructure investments that rural development has funded since 2009. More is needed.

Today, rural areas suffer from stalled job growth, declining populations, and the highest rural poverty rates in nearly 30 years. These challenges make growth and prosperity more difficult to achieve. What I understand about poverty in rural America is that this is not the time to give up on rural America. I am convinced that the potential exists for rural America's economy to continue to grow and compete globally.

I will challenge our programs to adapt and innovate to enable that growth and to meet your evolving needs. As you work to meet the demands on you to more quickly provide service that leads to opportunities for your communities, we will work to be more agile.

I will continue to ensure that we are serving all of rural America, particularly those areas struggling economically where infrastructure investment can change their fate.

I will work to bring you as many options for affordable financing of water and waste infrastructure as possible

And I will continue to be an advocate for rural America. As I know you will too.



I welcome your input and thank you for your continued support of this and all of the very special programs that Rural Development administers.

Thank you for your time today—I look forward to working with you in the years ahead!