

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 26, 2023

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We write today regarding the need for an evaluation of the safety and integrity of dams constructed, supported, maintained, repaired, reconstructed, or otherwise operating under the authority of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Watershed Program. The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (Public Law 83-566) allowed the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to implement watershed projects, including dams, to store flood water and reduce flood damages.

Some estimates show that, by 2030, 7,829 of these dams under the Watershed Program authority will exceed their service life¹ and will likely need significant repairs or reconstruction in order to operate safely. The age of these dams presents concerns about their condition. For example, five dams failed in Wisconsin in 2018,² becoming hazards rather than providing flood protection. In New Hampshire, 18 of 24 PL-566 dams are currently classified as High-Hazard dams, while Wisconsin has 27 of 88 dams with a High-Hazard classification level.³ The safety of downstream communities is of serious concern when there is a risk of failure from high-risk dams, and coordination between federal, state, and local governments is critical to protect against and mitigate those risks.

We request that the Government Accountability Office carry out an evaluation of the USDA Watershed Program, and include the following items in the report:

1. Does USDA maintain records of the current ownership distribution of the dams? If yes, in what format are those records maintained, and what entities have access to them?

¹ U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, *USDA Watershed Programs Facts and Figures* 11 (2020).

² *Id.* at 121.

³ *Id.* at 13.

2. How does USDA assess the safety and effectiveness of dams in the Watershed program, including the extent to which the dam continues to meet its intended purpose?
3. Does USDA maintain records on the number and causes of failures of USDA Watershed Program dams? Does the USDA determine, analyze, or otherwise maintain records of the economic costs of dam failures, either per dam or collectively?
4. How does USDA make investment decisions for Watershed Program dams and to what extent does its process align with applicable federal guidance?
5. Does the decommissioning evaluation process for a given USDA Watershed Program dam to be rehabilitated using Watershed Program funding include a benefit-cost analysis? To what extent does USDA consider existing federal guidance and standards for assessing dam function, benefits, life cycle costs, cultural impacts, environmental impacts, and other impacts?
6. Does USDA maintain records on how many USDA Watershed Program dams have been decommissioned? Do those records include whether decommissioned dams are removed from rivers or any local, safety, or environmental impacts from non-removed dams?

I thank you for your attention to this request. If you have any questions regarding this request, please have your staff contact Nicholas Malatesta at nicholas_malatesta@hassan.senate.gov and Cayden Connally at cayden_connally@ronjohnson.senate.gov.

Sincerely,



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Ron Johnson
United States Senator