



Eric Volk, Executive Director

ND Rural Water Systems Association

In Support of Senate Bill 2239

Senate Workforce Development Committee

January 30, 2025

Chairman Wobbema and members of the Senate Workforce Development Committee, my name is Eric Volk. I am the executive director of the North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association (NDRWSA). Our vision is to ensure all of North Dakota has access to affordable, ample, and quality water. NDRWSA is committed to completing and maintaining North Dakota's water infrastructure for economic growth and quality of life. We work with all the state's small/rural water and wastewater systems to help them increase their technical, managerial, and financial capacity. Today, I am submitting testimony in support of Senate Bill 2239, which seeks to create an apprenticeship grant program and to provide an appropriation of \$1,100,000.

The Need for Water and Wastewater Apprentices

Nationwide, it takes more than 380,000 highly skilled water and wastewater professionals to ensure the public supply of safe drinking water and to protect our lakes, streams, and groundwater. If there are water and wastewater services in your community, state laws require that there must be certified operators in direct responsible charge of those facilities. This means that even in the most rural of communities, job opportunities exist in the water and wastewater industry.

Over the next decade, the water sector is expected to lose 30 – 50 percent of its workforce to retirement. Many of these water professionals have worked at the same utility for the majority of their careers and they will depart with decades of valuable institutional knowledge. Furthermore, advancements in water treatment and supply technology have increased the skills and training required of this workforce. Our industry must address the need to train the next generation of skilled workers to protect and provide what is arguably the most valuable resource that is essential to all life—clean water.

About the NDRWSA Apprenticeship Program

The NDRWSA Apprenticeship Program, recognized by the U.S. Department of Labor, provides guideline standards for apprenticeship. Apprentices will attend an approximate 2-year training program comprising classroom technical instruction and on-the-job training, providing apprentices with the tools to become successful operations specialists in their communities. During the apprenticeship program, apprentices will earn while they learn from knowledgeable, passionate people who strive to deliver clean drinking water to their community and treat wastewater before returning to the environment. Students start the program with a job and emerge with a solid and secure career as a Water Operations Specialist or Wastewater Operations Specialist. Currently, our program has seven enrolled apprentices.

Cost to the Apprentice/System

The two-year NDRWSA Apprenticeship Program costs approximately \$4,000. The system and/or the apprentice pay for that cost. Funding provided by this bill would cover up to 50% of the program's cost. The system and/or individual would still have a financial stake in the process. The proposed state grant is a minimal investment to address our industry's workforce issues and to help provide safe, clean water to our residents.

Thank you for allowing me to provide testimony on behalf of the NDRWSA members. If you have any questions, contact me at ericvolk@ndrw.org.