

U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
“Build Back Better: Water Infrastructure Needs for Native Communities”
Testimony of Raymond Tsumpti
Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs
March 24, 2021

Thank you for this opportunity to share the dire situation we are experiencing on the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon. My name is Raymond Tsumpti and I serve as the Chairman of the Warm Springs Tribal Council and have served on Council for seven of the eight last terms since 1992.

The Warm Springs Reservation is the largest in Oregon at 640,000 acres. That’s about 15 times larger than the District of Columbia. It spans from snow-capped Cascade mountains to the salmon-bearing Deschutes River – with forests and high desert between.

The Tribe provides water to approximately 4,500 people on reservation. For years, we have dealt with harmful and expensive obstacles in water storage, water delivery and water treatment. In 2019, the EPA issued an emergency order regarding our 40-year old water treatment facility. Later that summer, a primary waterline broke. For three months, residents were advised not to drink water from their taps without boiling it first.

There are many federal programs to assist tribes. But they have not individually or collectively been able to meet the magnitude of infrastructure challenges on our reservation. Three of our four water delivery systems require major upgrades or replacement. The Tribes are facing a minimum cost of \$5-6 million to simply maintain existing systems at status quo. To provide for future improvements to meet the growing population, the Tribes face a cost of \$40-50 million for water infrastructure.

Paying for the physical infrastructure is one problem. Maintaining it over the long-term is another. Even if we replaced every foot of water pipe and our treatment facility, we will be challenged to afford repairs and maintenance into the future.

Most of our tribal population lives in an arid portion of Oregon’s high desert. The town of Warm Springs has the second highest incidence of poverty in Oregon. The reservation is suffering from dramatically high unemployment – which has exceeded 60% for many years. Our forest products mill closed, our resort closed and other tribal enterprises have been crippled by COVID. The pandemic has hit us hard at Warm Springs.

After some patchwork repair on our water system, water system failures returned in summer 2020 in the midst of COVID-19. Many of our families are crowded into small dwelling units. We have places on the reservation where people can’t even wash their hands. The water infrastructure is literally crumbling. Some of the pipes are made of wood and clay. We regularly face “low pressure” or “no water” events that trigger boil-water notices.

With the extreme poverty on the reservation, we simply do not have a ratepayer base to invest in water infrastructure. We have worked with an array of federal and state agencies just to cobble together a “band-aid” approach to keeping clean water flowing in the near term.

We have worked with the Oregon congressional delegation to provide new authorities to help tribes like Warm Springs. They have introduced many bills, including Senator Wyden's "Western Tribal Water Infrastructure Act" – which has been referred to this committee.

We know that Warm Springs is not alone facing these water challenges. We also know there must be a better way for Tribes to seek emergency assistance from the federal government to provide basic clean water to our members. Likewise, many tribes will need help maintaining and operating that infrastructure over time.

Again, thank you for holding today's hearing and jump-starting a federal dialogue about the ongoing water emergency facing tribes like Warm Springs all across the country.