Panelists Discuss Consequences of Aging Water Infrastructure

By Shawntaye Hopkins [1]
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During the “Water: Trending Issues in the States” session at the 2016 CSG National Conference on Friday, Dec. 9, a few attendees sipped the ice water poured from pitchers on the tables.

In some places—including a town in France that Tracy Mehan, executive director of government affairs at the American Water Works Association, once visited—bottled water is the norm. But in the U.S., there is not typically concern about whether or not it's safe to drink the water.

However, “we do have, in this country, a problem with our drinking water infrastructure on the pipes side of it,” said Brian Pallasch of the American Society of Civil Engineers. The problem will only get worse, and costly, if the nation doesn't invest in the aging infrastructure, he said.

“Our economy will not grow to the extent that it should,” Pallasch said.

In fact, he said, the cost to the economy has been estimated at $3.9 trillion in an unrealized gross domestic product by 2025 as the result of crumbling infrastructure in a number of areas from water distribution to transportation. For families, failing to invest in infrastructure could cost $3,400 a year, including direct costs and indirect expenses.

Fixing the problem “starts with leadership,” Pallasch said. “We need folks to stand up and say, ‘It’s time to go do something.’”

But it’s also important to build infrastructure in a way that minimizes maintenance and to prioritize, plan and fund for the future, he said.

In addition, water rates “are not where they need to be,” Mehan said.

Water rates are often tangled in politics, but they should be increased while considering affordability, he said.

Julia Anastasio, executive director and general counsel of the Association of Clean Water Administrators, or ACWA, talked about the co-regulator relationship between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and states.

She pointed to the controversial Waters of the United States rule, which resulted in most states suing, as one example of the sentiment among states that the EPA has not respected the co-regulator relationship.
“The president-elect has certainly indicated a preference for states taking the lead and having the federal government there in a support role,” she said. “ACWA really feels as though if EPA and our federal partners are engaging with the states early often and helping to prioritize...we avoid a lot of unintended consequences.”