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119TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. 3792

To provide for the establishment of a Water Project Navigators Program, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

FEBRUARY 5, 2026

Mr. HICKENLOOPER (for himself and Mr. MORAN) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources

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A BILL

To provide for the establishment of a Water Project Navigators Program, and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the ''Water Project Navigators Act''.

SEC. 2. DEFINITIONS.

In this Act:

(1) DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITY.—Except as otherwise defined by the Secretary of the Interior based on current methodologies, the term ''disadvan-

taged community'' means a community (including a city, town, county, or reasonably isolated and divisible segment of a larger municipality) with an annual median income that is less than the statewide annual median income for the State in which the community is located, according to the most recent decennial census.

(2) ELIGIBLE ENTITY.—The term ''eligible entity'' means—

(A) a State;

(B) an Indian Tribe;

(C) any acequia, land grant-merced, local government, water supplier, special district, conservation district, or municipal water district located in an eligible State;

(D) any State, regional, or local authority located in an eligible State, the members of which include 1 or more organizations with water or power delivery authority;

(E) a nonprofit conservation organization with a demonstrated history of working in partnership with 1 or more entities described in any of subparagraphs (A) through (D); or

(F) a combination of entities described in subparagraphs (A) through (E).

(3) ELIGIBLE STATE.—The term ''eligible State'' means—

(A) a State or territory described in the first section of the Act of June 17, 1902 (43 U.S.C. 391; 32 Stat. 388, chapter 1093);

(B) the State of Alaska;

(C) the State of Hawaii; and

(D) the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

(4) INDIAN TRIBE.—The term ''Indian Tribe'' has the meaning given the term in section 4 of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (25 U.S.C. 5304).

(5) MULTI-BENEFIT WATER PROJECT.—The term ''multi-benefit water project'' means any project in an eligible State that—

(A) enhances the overall resilience of a community or region to climate-related impacts on water supplies, including through activities—

(i) to increase water use efficiency;

(ii) to reduce consumptive use of water;

(iii) to promote system conservation;

(iv) to reduce water supply-demand imbalances;

(v) to promote water recycling and other advanced water treatments to augment water supplies;

(vi) to improve management or delivery of water resources;

(vii) to address risks to water infrastructure from weather-related events and climate change;

(viii) to provide or improve access to safe drinking water in communities that lack reliable access to adequate clean water supplies;

(ix) to promote investment in the economies of rural communities, Tribal communities, or disadvantaged communities through water projects;

(x) to enhance water-based recreational opportunities for the benefit of community members and the local recreational economy; or

(xi) to encourage sustainable surface water or groundwater management; and

(B) provides benefits to ecosystems and watersheds, including through activities—

(i) to conserve or enhance fish and wildlife habitat;

(ii) to protect or improve water quality;

(iii) to improve watershed health and function;

(iv) to protect against invasive species;

(v) to restore aspects of the natural ecosystem; or

(vi) to maintain sustainable groundwater supplies for multiple uses, including for riparian or wetland ecosystems.

(6) NATURAL FEATURE.—The term ''natural feature'' means a feature that is created through the action of physical, geological, biological, and chemical processes over time.

(7) NATURE-BASED FEATURE.—The term ''nature-based feature'' means a feature that is created by human design, engineering, and construction to provide a means to reduce water supply and demand imbalances or drought or flood risk by acting in concert with natural processes.

(8) PROGRAM.—The term ''Program'' means the Water Project Navigators Program established under section 3(a).

(9) RURAL COMMUNITY.—The term ''rural community'' means a community or group of communities, each of which has a population of not more than 50,000 inhabitants, which may include Indian Tribes, Tribal organizations, dispersed homesites, and rural areas.

(10) SECRETARY.—The term ''Secretary'' means the Secretary of the Interior (acting through the Commissioner of Reclamation).

SEC. 3. WATER PROJECT NAVIGATORS PROGRAM.

(a) ESTABLISHMENT.—Not later than 180 days after the date of enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall establish a program to support the development and implementation of multi-benefit water projects within eligible States, to be known as the ''Water Project Navigators Program''.

(b) AUTHORITY.—In carrying out the Program, the Secretary may award grants or cooperative agreements to eligible entities to support the creation or continuation of multi-benefit water project navigator positions.

(c) CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES; PRIORITY.—

(1) CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall develop criteria and guidelines for awarding

grants and cooperative agreements under the Program that consider—

(i) the potential of the eligible entity to accelerate development and implementation of multi-benefit water projects within—

(I) the jurisdiction or service area of the eligible entity; or

(II) in the case of an eligible entity that is a nongovernmental applicant, an area in which the eligible entity has a demonstrated history of productive engagement with the community and stakeholders;

(ii) any history of development of multi-benefit water projects by the eligible entity; and

(iii) any potential multi-benefit water projects identified to meet needs in the area to be served by the multi-benefit water project navigator that the eligible entity has not yet implemented due to lack of capacity.

(B) PUBLIC COMMENT.—Before finalizing the criteria and guidelines developed under sub-

paragraph (A), the Secretary shall make the criteria and guidelines available for public comment.

(2) PRIORITY.—In awarding grants or cooperative agreements under the Program, the Secretary shall prioritize applications from eligible entities that would directly serve Indian Tribes, disadvantaged communities, rural communities, and other eligible entities with limited resources and capacity to develop multi-benefit water projects, including—

(A) applications from eligible entities—

(i) with a demonstrated intent and ability to incorporate improvements to the condition of a natural feature or nature-based feature in multi-benefit water projects designed under the Program;

(ii) with demonstrated support from multiple stakeholders, including Indian Tribes, representatives of irrigated agricultural production, hydroelectric production, municipal and industrial water users, local governments, community-based organizations, and nonprofit conservation organizations;

(iii) that may promote job creation and retention in Tribal communities, disadvantaged communities, and rural communities; and

(iv) with the capability to work in coordination with other projects that have been funded under, or help advance the objectives of, other Department of the Interior programs, including programs focused on drought resilience and watershed health; and

(B) applications that address any other priorities that the Secretary determines to be appropriate.

(3) PROHIBITION.—The Secretary may not award a grant or cooperative agreement under the Program that would fund activities to meet existing environmental mitigation or compliance obligations under Federal or State law.

(d) DUTIES OF NAVIGATORS.—A multi-benefit water project navigator funded under the Program shall assist the eligible entity in planning, developing, and implementing multi-benefit water projects, including—

(1) grant writing;

(2) project management;

(3) technical assistance, such as feasibility, design, preliminary environmental review, and engineering; and

(4) any other necessary activities.

(e) DURATION OF GRANTS AND COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS.—

(1) LIMITATION.—Subject to paragraph (2), a grant or cooperative agreement under the Program shall be limited to a period of not more than 3 years.

(2) CONTINUATION AND EXTENSION.—At the discretion of the Secretary, the Secretary may issue a continuation grant or extend a cooperative agreement awarded under the Program for not more than 2 additional years, with additional funding to be awarded, as determined to be appropriate by the Secretary, if the recipient of the grant or cooperative agreement has demonstrated satisfactory performance with implementation of the proposal under the initial grant or cooperative agreement, as determined by the Secretary.

(f) CONTINUOUS ENROLLMENT.—The Secretary shall make funding opportunities for the Program available on a regular basis.

(g) COST SHARE.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Except as provided in paragraph (3), the Federal share of the cost of any activity awarded a grant or cooperative agreement under the Program shall not exceed 75 percent of the cost of the activity carried out under the grant or cooperative agreement.

(2) FORM OF NON-FEDERAL COST SHARE.—The non-Federal share of the cost of an activity awarded a grant or cooperative agreement under the Program may be in the form of cash or in-kind contributions.

(3) REDUCTION; WAIVER.—With respect to a grant or cooperative agreement awarded to an Indian Tribe, acequia, land grant-merced, disadvantaged community, or any other eligible entity working in partnership with or on behalf of those entities, the Secretary may reduce or waive the non-Federal share of the cost of any activity that is the subject of the grant or cooperative agreement if the Secretary determines that contribution of the non-Federal share would result in a financial hardship for the entity.

(h) COORDINATION.—In administering the Program, the Secretary shall coordinate, to the maximum extent practicable, with other Federal, Tribal, State, and local

government technical assistance programs to enhance multi-benefit water project development.

(i) COMPLIANCE.—A multi-benefit water project navigator funded under the Program shall comply with all applicable Federal and State laws in carrying out the duties of the multi-benefit water project navigator under the Program.

(j) REPORT TO CONGRESS.—Not later than 5 years after the date of enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall submit to the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources of the Senate and the Committee on Natural Resources of the House of Representatives a report that describes—

(1) the ways in which the Program assists the Secretary in—

(A) reducing basin-wide or aquifer-wide water supply-demand imbalances;

(B) enhancing drought and ecosystem resilience; and

(C) supporting multi-benefit water project development and capacity building by disadvantaged communities, Indian Tribes, rural communities, and other eligible entities; and

(2) the benefits that the Program provides, including, to the maximum extent practicable, a quan-

titative analysis of the multiple benefits advanced under the Program.

SEC. 4. AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.

There is authorized to be appropriated to carry out this Act $15,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2027 through 2032, to remain available until expended.

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