February 15, 2011

The Honorable Jack Reed, Chair
The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Ranking Member
Senate Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Washington, DC 20510

RE: National Ground Water Monitoring Network Funding – FY 2012

Dear Senators Reed and Murkowski:

Our collective organizations ask that you make a down payment on a national groundwater monitoring network as a critically needed investment in the nation’s future.

Currently, 78 percent of community water systems, nearly all of rural America’s private household wells, and 42 percent of agricultural irrigation water are supplied by groundwater. Groundwater is an essential resource to the nation’s people, economy, jobs and ecosystems; however, at a national scale we currently cannot answer the following three fundamental questions:

1. What is the current water quality of the nation’s major aquifers?
2. What are current water levels in the nation’s major aquifers?
3. How are groundwater levels and quality changing over time in the nation’s major aquifers?

These questions cannot be answered nationally without the basic data that a systematic national groundwater monitoring network would provide. But that can change if you act; and the time to act is now.

In 2003, water managers in 36 states told the U.S. Government Accountability Office that over the next 10 years, they anticipate water supply shortages on a local, regional or statewide basis even under normal conditions.

In 2009, Congress authorized a national groundwater monitoring network with passage of Public Law 111-11 (Omnibus Public Land Management Act).

In 2010, six states voluntarily piloted concepts for a national groundwater monitoring network developed by the federal Advisory Committee on Water Information’s Subcommittee on Ground Water.

In 2011, what remains is federal funding for initial network implementation that makes consistent, comparable nationwide data accessible through a web portal. The national network would build on existing state and federal investments, maximizing their
usefulness and leveraging current dollars. Just as one cannot effectively manage the nation’s economy without key data; one cannot manage a natural resource, especially one that is hidden from view, without understanding its current status and trends.

Specific examples of how a national groundwater monitoring network would be useful include:

Delaware and New Jersey share the Potomac and Piney Point aquifers. Increased usage of these two aquifers has caused groundwater level declines to extend beyond state boundaries, and water-supply conflicts to ensue. “Having an agreed upon and consistent dataset provides the hydrogeologic foundation from which to develop management options,” states the New Jersey pilot project report.ii

“From a national and hydrogeological standpoint, few aquifers throughout the country stop at state borders. …Whether drilling down to a local level or moving farther out in order to focus on the bigger picture, this network could be an incredible vehicle for all groundwater data users at local, regional and national levels,” notes the Texas pilot project report.iii

We ask you to support $10 million to $50 million of additional funding in the FY 2012 U.S. Geological Survey Ground Water Resources Program. This range of funding is based on cost estimates to:

1. Support the additional work necessary for USGS to manage a national groundwater monitoring network and provide national data access through an internet web portal; and

2. Provide grants to regional, state, and tribal governments to cost share increased expenses to upgrade monitoring networks for the 50 states to meet the standards necessary to understand the nation’s groundwater resources. The shared funding arrangements should be modeled after highly successful cooperative programs (e.g. STATEMAP) that already exist between the U.S. Geological Survey and states.

While recognizing the current budget realities and conflicting priorities, we believe a national groundwater monitoring network is imperative to the nation’s future and must begin to move forward. While we struggle to develop fair and equitable policies for the management of our natural and energy resources, we must remember that humankind cannot exist without water. When considering the critical and irreplaceable component that groundwater provides to our nation’s collective water supply, the relatively modest investment we are requesting for this program would yield significant benefits for our nation’s economy, food supply, recreational opportunities, and secure water supply in the future.
Please contact Bill Simmons, National Ground Water Association’s Washington representative, at 202/484-4884 or bill.simmons@dutkoworldwide.com for additional information.

Sincerely,

American Geological Institute
American Ground Water Trust
American Society for Microbiology
American Society of Civil Engineers
American Water Resources Association
Association of American State Geologists
Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies
California Groundwater Association
Food & Water Watch
Ground Water Protection Council
Interstate Council on Water Policy
National Ground Water Association
U.S. National Chapter of the International Association of Hydrogeologists
Water Environment Federation

Cc: Senate Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee Members
   Anne Castle, Interior Water and Science Assistant Secretary
   Marcia McNutt, U.S. Geological Survey Director
   William Werkheiser, U.S. Geological Survey, Associate Director for Water

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i The six pilot states were Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, and Texas. Additionally, Idaho, North Carolina, South Carolina, Washington and Wyoming volunteered as pilots but were not included given limited oversight resources.
