Larson to Congress panel: rural development programs should be priority in next Farm Bill

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Brookings County, S.D. Commissioner Don Larson told a House Agriculture Committee panel that federal rural development programs in the next Farm Bill must allow counties greater flexibility to promote regional economic development.

Congress is in the early stages of considering reauthorization of the Farm Bill, which expires next year. Reauthorization and funding for key provisions such as rural development, agriculture, nutrition, research and conservation are key 2011 legislative priorities for NACo.

Larson, who chairs NACo’s Agriculture and Rural Affairs Steering Committee, testified on Feb. 15 before the House subcommittee on Rural Development, Research, Biotechnology and Foreign Agriculture, which is reviewing rural programs operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Larson testified on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO). The subcommittee is chaired by Rep. Tim Johnson (R-Ill.).

“Rural people and places are increasingly operating in dynamic regional economies and rural counties and regions are often arbitrarily placed into categories by academics and the federal government,” Larson said. “We encourage you to focus on providing enhanced flexibility for rural development’s state offices to provide assistance that fits the uniquely rural nature of their states, by focusing on serving rural regions, both multi-town and multi-county and by funding these regions’ strategic priorities.”

Larson urged Congress and the Administration to work together in a bipartisan manner to make rural development programs a priority within Farm Bill reauthorization.

“Our agricultural sector needs more investments in our rural community infrastructure to remain competitive, both from a quality of life perspective as well as the production, transport and safety of agricultural food and energy crops,” Larson said. “The agricultural sector is a primary beneficiary of just about every investment made by USDA Rural Development, whether related to improved water and wastewater treatment facilities, improved housing options for workers, more affordable access to business financing, assistance for value-added production marketing or cheaper and reliable services from rural electric, telephone and broadband cooperatives.”

The full testimony is available at www.naco.org. For more information, contact Erik Johnston at 202.942.4230.

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The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation’s 3,068 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public’s understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org.