



January 22, 2026

U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
2165 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Subject: Delta Regional Authority's Written Testimony Regarding "Smarter Spending, Stronger Results: Reducing Duplication and Ensuring Effectiveness Through Economic Development Reforms"

On behalf of the Delta Regional Authority (DRA), I am pleased to submit the Authority's written testimony.

The DRA was established in 2000 to address economic distress in and around the Mississippi River Delta and the Alabama Black Belt. Member states include Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee. Home to more than 10 million residents, the DRA region is among the most economically distressed parts of the United States. Among the DRA region's 255 counties and parishes, most are characterized as distressed and persistently in poverty.^{1,2} Despite these economic conditions, millions of Americans across the country rely on the DRA region for agriculture, manufacturing, textiles, and supply chain logistics, as well as natural resources.

Throughout its history, the DRA has responded to the region's challenges through programs and strategic investments. The DRA invests in a broad range of initiatives that support its four overarching goals: investing in public infrastructure, developing local workforces, promoting business growth and entrepreneurship, and supporting sustainable communities.

Research from the Brookings Institution, including its report, *Unlocking Investment in*

¹ As of FY 2025, 228 (89 percent) of DRA's counties and parishes are economically distressed. In compliance with the statute, the DRA calculates distress criteria on an annual basis. To be deemed distressed, counties and parishes must meet the following criteria: 1. An unemployment rate of one percentage point higher than the national average for the most recent 24-month period. 2. Have a per capita income of 80 percent or less of the most recent national per capita income level.

² As of FY 2023, 136 (54 percent) of DRA's counties and parishes are in persistent poverty. The DRA follows the definition of persistent poverty the definition of persistent poverty provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service that designates persistent poverty counties as those in which poverty rates of 20 percent or higher have persisted for 30 years or more.

Distressed Rural Places, finds that federally chartered regional commissions allocate a higher share of their infrastructure funding to distressed rural communities than many federal programs.³ Brookings further notes that regional commissions are often more effective at directing resources to places that face persistent barriers to accessing federal investment, reflecting their grant-based structure, explicit distress-targeting missions, and deep regional knowledge.

The information presented below highlights the Authority's investments, activities, and outcomes since its last appearance before this Committee in September 2023, reflecting the most recent period of program implementation across the Delta region.

Key highlights include:

- The States' Economic Development Assistance Program (SEDAP), one of DRA's main investment tools, provides direct investments for basic public infrastructure, transportation infrastructure, business development, and workforce development. From FY 2024 to FY 2025, project investments in SEDAP resulted in approximately 157,000 families positively impacted by infrastructure projects, about 3,000 individuals trained in workforce development programs, and over 6,700 jobs either created or retained in the region.
- The Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF) supports projects that address flood control, basic public infrastructure, and transportation infrastructure improvements. From FY 2024 to FY 2025, CIF investments have resulted in nearly 120,000 families positively impacted by infrastructure projects, about 1,100 individuals trained in workforce programming, and approximately 14,200 jobs created or retained in the region.
- The Delta Workforce Grant Program (DWP) is an initiative designed to build long-term community capacity and increase economic competitiveness by providing grants to support workforce training and education programs throughout the lower Mississippi River Delta and Alabama Black Belt regions. From 2024 to FY 2025, project investments in the DWP resulted in over 5,200 individuals trained in workforce development programs and nearly 7,900 jobs either created or retained in the region.
- In collaboration with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Delta Region Community Health Systems Development Program provides technical assistance to critical access hospitals, small rural hospitals, rural health clinics, and other healthcare organizations. Since 2017, the program has supported 68 organizations in 66 DRA communities across all eight Delta states. Participants in the program's 2022 cohort increased their net patient revenue and total operating revenue by an average of 9.8 percent, with 89 percent also reporting improvements

³ Anthony F. Pipa, Heather M. Stephens, David Nason, and Zoe Swarzenski, “*Unlocking Investment in Distressed Rural Places*,” Brookings Institution, January 13, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/unlocking-investment-in-distressed-rural-places/>

in both financial position and quality of care.

By leveraging its annual appropriations alongside the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act funding, DRA expects 2024 and 2025 investments to impact over 177,000 families through improved access to infrastructure, create or retain nearly 19,000 jobs, and train approximately 9,400 individuals.

For example, one of these projects includes a DRA SEDAP investment of more than \$300,000, leveraged by \$945,000 in additional public investment, to support the Electrical Distribution System Upgrade at Ochsner LSU Health Monroe Medical Center in Northeast Louisiana. This infrastructure project will modernize aging electrical systems at a Level III Trauma Center and Primary Stroke Center that serves more than 348,000 residents across a largely rural and economically distressed region. The upgraded system is expected to improve reliability and safety for a facility that delivers more than 134,850 inpatient and outpatient services annually, manages over 37,000 emergency department visits, and supports more than 1,000 births each year. By reducing the risk of power outages and ensuring uninterrupted operation of life-saving medical equipment, the project will strengthen access to essential healthcare services, help retain more than 700 healthcare jobs, and reinforce the medical center's role as a critical regional healthcare hub for communities across Northeast Louisiana.

Additionally, DRA awarded a CIF investment of more than \$662,000 to support comprehensive water, sewer, and roadway improvements in the City of Union Springs, Alabama, a persistent poverty community in Bullock County. This public infrastructure project will upgrade aging waterlines and sanitary sewer systems and resurface roadways on Abercrombie Street, Baskin Street, and Fourth Street, improvements that directly serve more than 140 households and businesses and benefit approximately 3,350 residents citywide. By replacing deteriorated infrastructure that has contributed to service disruptions, water loss, and public health risks, the project is expected to improve access to safe drinking water, enhance sanitation, reduce environmental hazards, and increase transportation safety. In addition to improving quality of life for residents, the project will support local economic stability by improving conditions for existing businesses, enhancing the city's attractiveness for future investment.

Under P.L. 118-158, Congress provided \$1.51 billion in supplemental funding to the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA), including \$10 million transferred to the DRA for economic adjustment assistance related to flood mitigation, disaster relief, long-term recovery, and infrastructure restoration in areas with presidential major disaster declarations during calendar years 2023 and 2024. DRA will invest over \$9.8 million across five communities in Alabama, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee, supporting recovery efforts that impacted more than 1,700 households.

As DRA continues to assess FY 2025 project and impact data, some highlighted regional investments include:

- DRA awarded more than \$7 million in investments to 25 projects across

Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee through the DWP. One of those investments included approximately \$300,000 to the Center for Rural Innovation in Arkansas for a workforce initiative that will provide information technology training and industry-recognized certifications to address critical workforce challenges in Phillips County.

- DRA awarded approximately \$6 million in investments to three projects across Arkansas, Louisiana, and Missouri through its partnership with the EDA. One of these investments, with funds provided through EDA's Economic Adjustment Assistance program, included \$1.9 million to the City of Poplar Bluff, Missouri, to make improvements to the transportation infrastructure within the Poplar Bluff Industrial Park, ensuring safer and reliable roadways for employees and freight trucks accessing the five manufacturing companies within the park, while also attracting new businesses to the park.
- DRA awarded nearly \$2.5 million to 44 local development districts (LDDs) through the LDD Community Support Pilot Program to strengthen local capacity and technical assistance for communities across the region. Designed to enhance the Delta's ability to compete and leverage resources, the program supports LDDs in advancing projects in economically distressed communities. On average, participating LDDs submit 28 grant applications per fiscal year, securing approximately \$54 million annually in combined DRA, federal, and state investments, nearly 90 percent of which support critical infrastructure (e.g., utilities, transportation) and human infrastructure (e.g., workforce training, health care).
- DRA awarded over \$3.3 million to 29 communities in Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee through the Strategic Planning Program, including \$150,000 to the City of Grenada, Mississippi, to develop a comprehensive GIS mapping and condition assessment of its entire water distribution system to modernize infrastructure management, reduce service disruptions and attract economic growth.
- DRA awarded more than \$44 million in investments to 33 projects in Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee through its CIF program. One of these investments included \$600,000 to the City of Pangburn, Arkansas, to improve its water infrastructure system to ensure residents are provided with a safe and affordable water supply.

Every five years, the DRA, by statute, is responsible for creating a regional plan with public input and is approved by our board of governors. In February 2023, the Authority approved and released *Navigating the Currents of Opportunity: DRA Regional Development Plan IV*. Our strategic goals for the next five years include:

- DRA will expand and invest in the resiliency of the region's public

infrastructure to improve residents' quality of life and increase economic opportunity.

- DRA will improve networks of agencies, organizations, businesses, and educational institutions providing workforce development opportunities. It will promote access to services, funding, and programs that enable career stability.
- DRA will strengthen the competitiveness of the region's employers, attract new employers to the region, and support the long-term growth of micro and small businesses.
- DRA will invest in and support local placemaking and regional capacity building that improves opportunities for capital and federal investment in the DRA region to support economic development.

As part of DRA's commitment to build upon these priorities to expand its impact in the region, it includes outreach to DRA stakeholders, including local governments, nonprofit organizations, LDDs, community colleges, and four-year institutions of higher learning. Some of these outreach and technical assistance efforts have included:

- LDD Trainings: DRA conducted 14 in-person training sessions augmented by virtual training sessions focused on providing technical assistance and capacity-building support for LDDs. Virtual sessions were recorded and provided to LDDs for additional access.
- Delta Leadership Institute Executive Academy: In September 2025, DRA celebrated the graduation of 35 regional leaders from the Delta Leadership Institute (DLI) Executive Academy. This intensive nine-month leadership development program unites leaders from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors across the Mississippi River Delta and Alabama Black Belt regions. The 2025 DLI Executive Academy class was selected through a highly competitive application process overseen by DRA's federal co-chairman and the governors of the Authority's eight member states. The program equips the region's leaders with the skills and knowledge needed to inspire change within their communities and accelerate prosperity throughout the region.
- DRA-supported *Capacity-Building Hub*: DRA continues to support regional capacity building through a suite of targeted technical assistance initiatives delivered in partnership with leading regional organizations, including the University of Memphis, Hope Enterprise Corporations, the Southern Rural Development Center, and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. Through these partnerships, communities across the lower Mississippi River and Alabama Black Belt regions receive grant-writing assistance, project development support, and project management training to strengthen local capacity and improve project readiness. As part of this broader

technical assistance portfolio, DRA-supportive initiatives have helped communities advance locally driven planning efforts, including the adoption of strategic development plans in several Alabama Black Belt communities, positioning them to pursue future economic and community development investments.

- Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) Initiative: DRA provides technical assistance and capacity-building support to both prospective applicants and grant recipients through the WORC Initiative, which is a partnership between the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration and three regional commissions - the Appalachian Regional Commission, DRA, and the Northern Border Regional Commission. In 2024, DRA delivered a technical assistance webinar and a series of instructional videos to support applicants in the DRA region, and it continues to provide direct technical assistance to grant recipients throughout the grant period. Since 2019, the WORC Initiative has awarded 67 grants to recipients in the DRA region across the first six funding rounds.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. We appreciate the opportunity to discuss the DRA's work in the region and look forward to your questions.

Respectfully submitted,



Corey Wiggins,
Ph.D. Federal Co-
Chairman

**Regional Headquarters
(Mailing Address)**

236 Sharkey Avenue, Suite 400
Clarksdale, MS 38614
T 662.624.8600
F 662.624.8537

**Alabama • Arkansas • Illinois • Kentucky
Louisiana • Mississippi • Missouri • Tennessee**

www.dra.gov

Washington, DC Office
444 North Capitol, NW, Suite 546
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.434.4870
F 202.434.4871