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PVC Pipe Industry: Congress Shouldn’t Write Blank Checks for Water Infrastructure

Unsustainable Iron Pipes Leading Cause of Nation’s Corrosion Crisis and Water Main Break Epidemic

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Washington, D.C., January 6, 2012 -- “Billions needed to upgrade America’s leaky water infrastructure” was the headline in a recent Washington Post front-page story. While action must be taken, the PVC Pipe Association is urging Congress not to write blank checks to local governments and utilities with outdated, closed procurement policies that exclude corrosion-proof piping materials for water and wastewater infrastructure. Open competition, which is an American value, must be the operating principle upon which all funding is provided.

Each year, more than 300,000 water main breaks occur throughout North America – or some 850 every day – mainly as a result of the continued use of corrosion-prone iron piping in the nation’s water systems. Moreover, according to a congressional study, corrosion costs U.S. drinking water and wastewater systems over $50.7 billion annually or more than $1 trillion dollars over the next twenty years.

“Taxpayers are getting soaked by the high costs of crumbling infrastructure and repeated water main breaks. They’re also footing the costs of trillions of gallons of lost water supply on their utility bills,” said PVC Pipe Association Executive Director Bruce Hollands. “Unfortunately, the solution for many local officials is a band-aid approach of repairing or replacing our water mains with the same outdated iron pipes that currently make up much of our underground water systems. This material hasn’t stood up to the test of time so it makes no sense to waste taxpayer dollars by installing more of it.”

At a recent hearing of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee ductile iron industry representatives requested that congress provide financial aid to local governments to help replace their crumbling water mains. Hollands noted that the federal government should require that taxpayer dollars invested in local infrastructure be spent in an open and competitive manner so that all pipe technologies are considered. This will ensure that taxpayers get the best bang for the buck, driving innovation and resulting in more efficient, cost-effective, sustainable water systems.
Open procurement stipulations are not a novel idea, says Hollands, noting that the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Rural Development Office already requires rural communities receiving funding for water/wastewater infrastructure “to conduct procurements in a manner that provides maximum open and free competition.” The USDA’s Rural Utilities Service (RUS) “expects the owner and design engineer to be open to reasonable alternatives during the facility planning and design process. Contractors, manufacturers, and suppliers with acceptable equipment and materials should have a chance to participate in the project... the goal is to construct the project at the best price for the system customers and the taxpayer.” This policy should become the model for all government departments.

Hollands noted that PVC pipe is a proven and extremely durable alternative to traditional corrosion-prone piping materials. A review by Engineering News Record in 1999 found PVC pipe to be one of the top twenty engineering advancements in more than a century. An American Water Works Association Research Foundation study confirms the life expectancy of PVC pipe to be in excess of 110 years, and a European report pegged the longevity of PVC pipe at 170 years. However, despite its many benefits, PVC pipe is often excluded from bidding on local water infrastructure projects due to outdated procurement practices.

“Investing in infrastructure is critical for the nation,” commented Hollands. “With government budgets over-stretched and the country deeply in debt, we shouldn’t be writing blank checks that can be wasted on outdated technologies like ductile iron piping that simply deteriorates too soon due to corrosion. It’s now time that corrosion-proof piping technologies be considered in every bid. Free and open competition will drive innovation and ensure the best, most sustainable and cost-efficient materials are used, giving taxpayers the best bang for the buck,” he said. “We have to return to traditional American values if we are to set the country on the right course again, and open competition is one of our most cherished and defining values.”

The PVC Pipe Association www.uni-bell.org is a non-profit organization that serves the engineering, regulatory, public health and standardization communities.