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**Imagine a Day Without Water: Op-Ed Framework**

***Imagine a Day Without Water: Commit to a sustainable water future for all Tennesseans.***

This year, our country is facing a public health crisis from the coronavirus pandemic. Throughout this emergency, water and wastewater systems kept the water flowing in homes, hospitals, and essential businesses. This pandemic demonstrated the critical role that water and wastewater systems play in our communities, protecting public health, safeguarding the environment, and making a healthy economy possible. It is easy to imagine how much worse the pandemic would have been without widespread access to water infrastructure. Without reliable drinking water and sanitation, Americans would be unable to stay safe and limit the spread.

Today, Tennesseans come together to Imagine a Day Without Water. It’s a day to pause and notice the way that water systems impact our lives and communities, and commit to ensuring a sustainable water future for generations to come. What would your day be like if you couldn’t turn on the tap and get clean drinking water, or if you flushed the toilet and wastewater didn’t go anywhere? What would happen to restaurants, hospitals, firefighters, farms, breweries, or the hundreds of industries across the Volunteer State that depend on water?

Millions of Americans take water service for granted every day. Turn on the tap, and clean water flows out. Flush the toilet, and dirty water goes away. Washing our hands regularly is one of the most important steps to take to limit the spread of coronavirus, and we usually don’t stop to think about the impressive infrastructure and treatment required to ensure the water comes out when you open the tap, or safely returns water to the environment from your sink. Today we thank the hundreds of essential workers that manage our water across the state. Throughout the pandemic they have ensure access to clean water continued, without interruption, they are too often unseen, and their service goes unrecognized. Thank you!

While these water systems are critical to the health and safety of us all, the truth is, our water and wastewater systems are getting older. Some were installed a century ago. And everyone should be concerned with the vulnerability of those systems due to threats from weather patterns bringing record rainfalls, flooding and drought, as well as river pollution and accelerated development across the state.

The threats are real, but citizens across our state can be proud of the leadership we have seen from our government, universities, nonprofits and businesses. *(choose one regional specific message below, or insert a paragraph about a specific water challenge / collaboration in your community.)*

Here in Tennessee, the Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) took the lead in gathering a diverse range of partners to develop a statewide plan for water use – TNH2O. Stakeholders, including more than 120 participants from federal, state and local governments, as well as industry, academia, environmental advocacy groups and public utilities contributed to the report and planning process. The plan includes an assessment of current water resources and recommendations to ensure our state continues to enjoy water resources enough to support future population and economic growth. TDEC continues to implement key findings and recommendations across the state, ensuring Tennesseans have the water they need to grow for generations to come.

Here in West Tennessee, we’ve seen firsthand the value of leadership on the Memphis Sands Aquifer Project, as the state agricultural team has partnered with the University of Memphis and our regional farmers to study how we can keep this magnificent water source strong. Through a combination of high-tech precision agriculture tools and old-fashioned relationship building, this team is working to ensure that farmers across the tri-state area can access the water resources they need to keep growing healthy crops and feeding hungry Tennesseans for generations to come. This kind of large-scale investment in water resources is what it will take to make a difference.

Here in Middle Tennessee, we’ve seen firsthand the value of leadership as many government and non-profit partners collaborate to help protect the Duck River, tackle water supply challenges and expand resource planning for this essential watershed. By working together, partners have improved tools for water management and planning, improved water quality, provided recreation opportunities, and protected habitat for plants and animals. Collaborative efforts like this can be replicated across the state to keep Tennessee’s network of streams and rivers running strong.

Here in East Tennessee, we’ve seen firsthand the value of strong leadership as we’ve made rebuilding aging water system infrastructure a top priority. In West Knox County, the community has invested over $70 million in wastewater infrastructure, ensuring quality water service for existing and new neighbors in one of the fastest growing areas of the state. In Chattanooga, water and wastewater investment continues to grow as manufacturers from around the world bring factories and jobs and employees to the Scenic City. Increases in manufacturing and housing drives the need for more water treatment and wastewater facilities to manage the increased volume and demands. This kind of large-scale investment in maintaining and rebuilding water infrastructure is what it will take to protect our water resources for generations to come.

As we look at ways to lift our economy out of recession, investing in water infrastructure is a winning solution. Investing in water creates cascading economic benefits, strengthening American competitiveness, growing the economy, creating jobs and increasing wages. Investing in water provides a clear path to economic recovery.

Imagine a Day Without Water is an opportunity for Tennesseans to learn more about their local water systems and raise awareness with our elected leaders. We need continued leadership at every level to ensure a reliable water future for the generations of proud Tennesseans to come. Investing in water is investing in a future where no American will have to imagine a day without water.