

October 27, 2015

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Chairwoman
Senate Energy & Natural Resources
Committee
304 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member
Senate Energy & Natural Resources
Committee
304 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell, and Members of the Committee:

We appreciate your leadership in conducting the Oct. 8, 2015, hearing on Western drought legislation. On behalf of the thousands of Western farmers, ranchers and businesses we represent, as well as the millions of urban, suburban and rural residents that our organizations collectively provide water to, we urge that Westerners in the Senate put aside partisan differences and work together to produce compromise legislation that can be passed by both the Senate and the House, and signed into law by the president this year.

Your committee can draw upon a strong foundation to create this legislation. Over the course of this year your committee has heard a multitude of bills that would address short, medium and long-term aspects of the drought both on a West-wide as well as state specific scale. Your October drought hearing looked at legislation that would impact New Mexico as well as two bills – H.R. 2898 (introduced by California Rep. David Valadao) and S. 1894 (introduced by California Sen. Dianne Feinstein) – that could have positive impacts in California and other Western states. Further strong leadership will be required in order to find consensus on this legislation intended to address the drought in California and across the West.

Water challenges in the West are significant and daunting. The Colorado River Basin has experienced the driest 15- year period since the 1960s with above-average flows in only three of the last 15 years.¹ According to research evaluating tree rings the ongoing drought in California is the worst to hit the region since the 13th century.² Drought conditions in the Pacific Northwest are the worst seen in decades with no end in sight. Drought also exacerbates already declining forest health, increases the risk and severity of devastating mega-fire and threatens the origin of water supplies for millions in the West.

In order to respond to current and future water shortages, Congress must provide federal agencies with more flexibility under existing environmental laws and regulations to encourage a more

¹ US Bureau of Reclamation, "US Bureau of Reclamation Upper Colorado Region," 11 July 2014. [Online]. Available: <http://www.usbr.gov/uc/water/crsp/cs/gcd.html>.

² Evidence Suggests California's Drought is the Worst in 1,200 Year, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, News Release, Dec. 14, 2014 found at <http://www.whoi.edu/news-release/California-drought>.

cooperative approach toward achieving multiple goals. And, where such flexibility currently exists in laws, Congress should demand that agencies use those flexibilities to act with the urgency and promptness that this drought crisis demands.

Western drought legislation should shift the regulation of water resources away from the current adversarial structure that regards agriculture as a harmful activity that must be minimized in order to maximize environmental benefits. We must move toward an approach that encourages cooperation and innovation to produce better results for both agriculture and the environment. This includes promoting the use of new technology in water management. Real-time monitoring and data collection can be used to more closely align water supply operations to actual fishery and environmental needs.

As a nation we must invest (and reinvest) in the Western water infrastructure necessary to meet current and future demands. Our existing water infrastructure in the West is aging and in need of rehabilitation. We need new water storage in order to adapt to a changing hydrology and develop usable and sustainable supplies to meet growing demands for water. Failing to improve infrastructure and expand useable supplies will inevitably result in more conflict as pressure grows to ‘solve’ urban and environmental water problems by taking water from agriculture.

Streamlining permitting processes and alignment of regulatory agencies will help increase water storage and improve water management. The federal government can continue to be a partner in solving these water problems in the West by using financing mechanisms that have a very low cost to the Treasury and make water resources investment more attractive and affordable for non-federal interests.

Both H.R. 2898 and S. 1894 are intended to address counter-productive regulatory practices and expedite new water storage projects, and both measures would facilitate the use of water management tools such as voluntary transfers. While the House and Senate bills take sometimes starkly different approaches to achieving their common goals, these differences should not be irreconcilable for members of Congress working together to bring effective relief to the West as quickly as possible.

While many of the above ideas are found in the separate bills your committee has heard, multiple competing bills are of no help to the drought-stricken West. We need the committee to bring these ideas together in a single, effective compromise bill that can be signed into law before the end of the year. We’re counting on you to work together to make that happen. We’re counting on you to ensure that Western water users have every tool available to survive and recover from the current drought and to prepare for the hard, dry years that the future may hold.

We stand ready to assist you in any way that leads to a unified legislative response to the critical drought crisis our communities are facing.

Sincerely,

National and Regional Organizations

American Farm Bureau Federation
Family Farm Alliance
Klamath Water Users Association (CALIFORNIA / OREGON)
National Cattlemen's Beef Association
National Onion Association
National Potato Council
National Water Resources Association
Northwest Horticultural Council
Pacific Northwest Vegetable Association
Public Lands Council
Rocky Mountain Farmers Union
Rural & Agriculture Council of America
United Fresh Produce Association
Western Alfalfa Seed Growers Association
Western Agricultural Processors Association
Western Growers Association
Western Plant Health Association

Arizona

Agribusiness & Water Council of Arizona
Arizona Cotton Growers Association
Arizona Farm Bureau
Arizona Nursery Association
Salt River Project
United Dairymen of Arizona
Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation and Drainage District

California

African American Farmers of California
Agricultural Council of California
American Pistachio Growers
Almond Hullers and Processors Association
Association of California Egg Farmers
Association of California Water Agencies
California Agricultural Irrigation Association
California Alfalfa & Forage Association
California Association of Wheat Growers
California Bean Shippers Association
California Cattlemen's Association
California Chamber of Commerce
California Citrus Mutual
California Cotton Ginners Association
California Cotton Growers Association

California (Continued)

California Farm Bureau Federation
California Forestry Association
California Fresh Fruit Association
California Grain and Feed Association
California League of Food Processors
California Milk Producers Council
California Pear Growers Association
California Seed Association
California State Floral Association
California Warehouse Association
California Women for Agriculture
Central Valley Project Water Association
Friant North Authority
Friant Water Authority
Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District
Nisei Farmers League
North Bay Water Reuse Authority
Northern California Water Association
Pacific Egg & Poultry Association
San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors Water Authority
San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority
Santa Ynez River Water Conservation District, ID No.1
Sonoma County Water Agency
South Valley Water Association
Tehama-Colusa Canal Authority
United Ag
Valley Ag Water Coalition

Colorado

Colorado Association of Conservation Districts
Colorado Association of Wheat Growers
Colorado Cattlemen's Association
Colorado Corn Growers Association
Colorado Dairy Farmers
Colorado Farm Bureau
Colorado Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association
Colorado Onion Growers Association
Colorado Pork Producers Council
Colorado Potato Administrative Committee
Colorado State Grange
Dolores Water Conservancy District
Fulton Irrigation Ditch
Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District
Southwestern Water Conservation District

Idaho

Idaho Farm Bureau
Idaho Oregon Fruit and Vegetable Association
Idaho Potato Commission
Idaho Water Users Association

Kansas

Kansas Water Congress

Montana

Montana Farm Bureau

Nebraska

Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District
Nebraska State Irrigation Association

Nevada

Nevada Cattlemen's Association
Nevada Farm Bureau
Truckee-Carson Irrigation District

New Mexico

Elephant Butte Irrigation District
Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District
New Mexico Farm Bureau

Oregon

Deschutes Basin Board of Control
Oregon Association of Nurseries
Oregon Cattlemen's Association
Oregon Dairy Farmers Association
Oregon Farm Bureau
Oregon Potato Commission
Oregon Seed Council
Oregon Water Resources Congress
Oregonians for Food and Shelter

Utah

Davis and Weber Counties Canal Company
North Ogden Irrigation Company
Ogden River Water Rights Committee
Ogden River Water Users' Association
South Ogden Conservation District

Utah Farm Bureau
Utah Water Conservancy District
Utah Water Users Association
Weber-Box Elder Conservation District
Weber River Water Users Association

Washington

Columbia Basin Development League
Hop Growers of Washington
Washington Asparagus Commission
Washington Association of Wheat Growers
Washington Blueberry Commission
Washington Cattle Feeders Association
Washington Farm Bureau
Washington Friends of Farms & Forests
Washington Mint Growers Association
Washington Red Raspberry Commission
Washington State Council of Farmer Cooperatives
Washington State Grape Society
Washington State Hay Growers Association
Washington State Potato Commission
Yakima Basin Joint Board

Wyoming

Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts
Wyoming Farm Bureau
Wyoming Stock Growers Association

cc:

Senator John McCain
Senator Barbara Boxer
Senator Dianne Feinstein
Senator Michael Bennett
Senator Michael Crapo
Senator Jon Tester
Senator Dean Heller
Senator Harry Reid
Senator Tom Udall
Senator Jeff Merkley
Senator Orrin Hatch
Senator Patty Murray
Senator Michael Enzi