

Opening Statement
The Honorable Jared Huffman
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Water, Power, and Oceans
Wednesday February 24, 2016

Oversight Hearing on “The 2016 California Water Supply Outlook During the El Niño and Three Years of Restricted Water Deliveries”

Well Mr. Chairman, if there was ever any doubt, I think it's safe to say we're now officially in election season. Like election years past, today we have a partisan, one-sided hearing aimed at bashing the Administration and rehashing the same tired arguments blaming the drought on environmental protections. Instead of focusing on real drought solutions, we're here today to wage yet another ideological battle against the Endangered Species Act and to tell people there is a “man-made” drought caused by environmental protections.

Nevermind that experts say we're likely experiencing the worst hydrological drought in twelve hundred years, or the fact that California's 2014 and 2015 water years were the warmest on record. Let's also forget that ESA protections accounted for a mere two percent of the CVP's water supply reduction in 2014 and that the State Water Resources Control Board estimates that in 2015, only 2% of all the runoff in the Bay-Delta watershed flowed to San Francisco Bay solely for environmental protection.

No, today's hearing is not about examining these and other facts. It's simply about trying to score political points and pursuing an agenda my Republican colleagues have pursued for many years now to weaken the Endangered Species Act, head and gut fishery protections that support thousands of jobs in my district and across the Pacific Coast, and redirect water from one region of the State to another.

Mr. Chairman, I hope that someday we can hold hearings examining the many real drought solutions Congress could be pursuing. I have introduced a drought response bill, H.R. 2983, which includes many of these solutions, including the promotion of innovative desalination technologies, water recycling and reuse, groundwater recharge, stormwater capture, and reduced supply losses to evaporation.

My bill also promotes water conservation through improved reservoir operations. Right now, water managers at Folsom Lake – one of California’s major reservoirs – are releasing tremendous amounts of water because of outdated, decades-old flood control regulations that don’t take into account modern weather forecasting. That’s right, these releases have nothing to do with environmental laws. My drought legislation would update these regulations, allowing water managers to use forecast-based decision making for flood control releases, so we can save precious water supplies during drought.

Mr. Chairman, this is just one common sense proposal – one of many in my bill. Yet the Committee has so far refused to even have a hearing on it. Instead we’re here today rehashing the same discredited claims about the Endangered Species Act. Time and again we hear testimony about the threatened and ecologically important Delta smelt, as if the Majority has forgotten that big fish eat little fish. Additionally, despite repeated requests from Democratic Members of this Committee, the Majority has also refused to hold a single hearing examining how best to prepare for future droughts, which we know will be more frequent and severe across the American West if we continue to ignore the dangers of climate change. We’ve also requested a hearing to look at how other arid regions of the world have managed droughts like the one we’re facing. International allies like Israel and Australia have developed innovative new technologies and drought management practices that we should examine and learn from.

Unfortunately, all that my Republican colleagues seem to want to talk about is how to roll back fishery protections that support thousands of fishing industry jobs from California and Oregon all the way to Washington State and Alaska. Mr. Chairman, many of California's anadromous fisheries are hanging on by a thread. Just one example – federal officials recently announced that there was a 97% mortality rate for juvenile Sacramento winter-run salmon in 2015. The year before, we had a 95% mortality rate.

We simply cannot weaken fishery protections any more. We know what will happen if we do. The closure of the West Coast salmon fishery in 2008 and 2009 is a recent illustration. The West Coast salmon closure caused significant job losses across the West Coast and required \$158 million in fishery disaster aid from Congress. We've already redirected millions of acre-feet away from the environment to agricultural and municipal water users during the drought, according to the State Water Resources Control Board, and any further weakening of existing fishery protections could put many of California's fisheries on the path to extinction.

Beyond the lost fishery jobs, Californians simply do not support sacrificing California's environment primarily for the benefit of a small number of agricultural water users. Recent statewide polling shows that Californians overwhelmingly oppose weakening the State's environmental protections during the drought. What Californians *do* support in overwhelming numbers is boosting our water supplies through water recycling and reuse, stormwater capture, and improving water use efficiency.

Local water districts are crying out for Congress to do something to prevent the hundreds of billions of gallons of water loss each year simply because of aging and inefficient infrastructure. They're asking for Congress' help in capturing the hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of wastewater that could be reused for agriculture, industry, even drinking water.

These shouldn't be controversial ideas. President George W. Bush's Reclamation Commissioner described the water we could tap from recycling and reuse as the next great river of the American West. Mr. Chairman, when we're done with the political games, I hope to work across the aisle to solve California's water problems through a thoughtful, science-based process instead of debating the same old proposals that create no new water and pit regions of the State against each other.

With that I yield back.