

**Remarks: Natural Resources Committee  
Water, Oceans, and Wildlife Subcommittee Hearing  
H.R.4891, Western Water Security Act of 2019  
Congresswoman Xochitl Torres Small  
January 28, 2020**

Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member McClintock, and the entire subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on the *Western Water Security Act of 2019*, **bipartisan legislation** to help stabilize and improve water infrastructure in the Western United States.

Climate change poses an existential threat to our way of life in New Mexico and the West. The droughts we face are among the most severe in recorded history, and the continued diminished flows in the Colorado River and Rio Grande indicate that this is **not a one-time occurrence**.

These challenges are not new for the West. For decades, we have negotiated to ensure that all geographies and users have equitable access to water. I became a **water attorney** to be part of the challenging but meaningful decisions we face around water.

As politics become increasingly partisan and progress is increasingly stunted, water remains a key area where Democrats, Republicans, Independents, industry, agriculture, conservation groups and Native American Tribes can come together to **reach a compromise** that works for everyone.

In 2012, when I was a **field representative** for Senator Tom Udall, I recognized that while progress was being made in individual projects, New Mexico wasn't using statewide collaboration to deal with these historic droughts.

With this realization, I organized Senator Udall's **first statewide water conference** to bring stakeholders together to find the ideas everyone could agree on and pursue those in a cooperative way.

In the following years, Senator Udall was able to **implement many** of these consensus items through larger legislative packages, including reauthorizing and expanding the Emergency Drought Relief Act and restarting annual funding to the Transboundary Aquifer Assessment Program, which authorizes scientific research for aquifers that span the U.S. – Mexico border to manage these sensitive water resources.

It's now time to implement the **next generation** of consensus water policies for the West. *The Western Water Security Act of 2019* has its roots in that conference in 2012, updated and expanded to meet today's needs. This legislation reauthorizes and expands the Emergency Drought Relief Act to include entities that are engaged in collaborative processes to restore the environment, and it reauthorizes and expands the Transboundary Aquifer Assessment Program by increasing the number of aquifers Arizona can study.

Based on conversations we had at that conference, we helped the Bureau of Reclamation begin a **leasing program of water rights** in the Middle Rio Grande. This bill would increase the flexibility to manage this program, including acquiring water rights to enhance wildlife and ecosystem restoration. This provision also calls for a plan to more efficiently provide a stable source of water for Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.

Using the lessons we learned at the 2012 conference, this bill improves the **popular WaterSMART program** by increasing funding from \$480 million to \$600 million, expanding eligibility to include environmental NGOs, and allowing for funds to be used for aquifer recharge infrastructure.

*The Western Water Security Act* also puts local voices front and center, recognizing their vital role in providing water infrastructure. For example, this legislation adds \$65 million in funding for desalination and makes eligible projects from irrigation districts, water districts, and Native American Tribes, setting aside \$15 million and increasing the proportion of federal funding for **rural desalination** to help communities like mine access the water that is nearly within reach.

Desalination can be a vital part of the water supply mix for the Southwest. For example, in my district, the water supply for the City of Alamogordo and Holloman Air Force Base was radically disrupted when the 2012 **Little Bear fire** poured ash into the water supply. A new brackish desalination will help diversify their water supply.

As well, this legislation reauthorizes **Rio Grande Pueblo Irrigation Infrastructure grants** through Fiscal Year 2029, ensuring these communities can continue to build their economies, preserve cultural traditions, and maximize water conservation in the Rio Grande Basin.

New Mexicans know that *agua es vida* – water is life. As the West continues to chart a new normal of drier years and more intense droughts, we must lay the groundwork for long-term adaptation strategies.

I am grateful to have **Gary Esslinger**, Treasurer-Manager of Elephant Butte Irrigation District, here to testify on the importance of this legislation. Gary was integral in developing this bill and has long been a champion on water issues in southern New Mexico.

This legislation has received widespread support. I'd like to submit for the record this **letter of support** for the *Western Water Security Act of 2019* from six organizations representing millions of hunters, anglers, and conservationists.

Chairman Huffman and Ranking Member McClintock, **thank you** for your consideration of the *Western Water Security Act of 2019*, and I urge your support for this important legislation. I look forward to working with you all on implementing these necessary policies for water in the West.