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**Testimony Before the United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife**

**Oversight Hearing  
“The Status of Drought Conditions Throughout the Western United States”  
Conducted via Cisco WebEx online video conferencing**

**May 25, 2021**

Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to share our observations on the growing catastrophic drought conditions across the American West. The Family Farm Alliance (Alliance) is a grassroots organization of family farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts, and allied industries in 16 Western states. We are committed to the fundamental proposition that Western irrigated agriculture must be preserved and protected for a host of economic, sociological, environmental and national security reasons – many of which are often overlooked in the context of other national policy decisions. The American food consumer nationwide has access to fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains and beef throughout the year largely because of Western irrigated agriculture and the projects that provide water to these farmers and ranchers.

I have also been asked today to advance the concerns and recommendations of the Klamath Water Users Association (KWUA), a long-time member of the Family Farm Alliance, and an organization I worked for as executive director from 2001-2005. KWUA is a non-profit organization whose members are irrigation districts that deliver water in the Klamath Project, which straddles the California-Oregon state line.

My testimony today will focus on this year’s drought – a disaster in the making. Irrigated farms in the federal Klamath Project face the worst year in the Project’s 116-year history, with essentially no water from the Klamath River system. The federal Central Valley Project in California will receive almost zero supply. The Colorado River Basin is in its 21<sup>st</sup> year of drought and its reservoirs will end up at their lowest levels since they were initially filled. Watersheds in the American Southwest are parched, and wildfires are predicted to be at record levels this season.

Yet there are things that Congress and this subcommittee can do to alleviate this disaster. Federal investments in improving and building new water supply infrastructure - partnering with non-federal water users - can help prevent or reduce the impacts of future droughts. Moving away from knee-jerk single species management to collaborative watershed-based approaches that respect all uses will help prepare Western water stakeholders for a more predictable and secure future. We need to act, and act now to accomplish these tasks.

## THE WESTERN U.S. DROUGHT CRISIS

At a time when Western water projects typically begin diversions, allowing irrigation delivery canals to be charged with water to bring essential water supplies to the headgates of thousands of farmers and ranchers, crushing drought conditions are leaving millions of acres of productive farm and ranch land without water this spring. Many of our farmers and ranchers this year are going to be hit hard by this drought. When you look at the U.S. Drought Monitor for May 18, 86 percent of the West categorized as being under some degree of drought. For some states, including Arizona, California, and New Mexico, that figure is nearly 100 percent.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in early April reported widespread dry conditions in the West and the potential for a severe 2021 wildfire season. More than half of the large wildfires are in Oklahoma, and North Dakota declared a state of emergency due to wildfires and wildfire risk. The National Interagency Fire Center reported large fires were also burning in Arizona, Colorado, Montana, and Texas.

Farmers in recent weeks have witnessed dust storms in Oregon and Northern California and blowing dust in eastern Washington. The lowest snowpack percentages are in Arizona and New Mexico, where conditions are much below normal. I'll summarize how the drought is impacting farmers and ranchers across the West, below, beginning with an update of the crisis facing my community in the Klamath Basin.

### 1. Klamath River Basin

Farmers served by the Klamath Irrigation Project along the California-Oregon border, where I live, are facing historically low water allocations. The Klamath Project was authorized in 1905 under the 1902 Reclamation Act, which encouraged settlement and irrigated agriculture to feed a hungry nation. The Project was a resounding success, built out to its current 200,000 acres by the early 1940s, producing food and supporting strong rural communities.

For Klamath Project irrigators, this year is “déjà vu all over again” as the poor hydrology and single species agency management of fish protected by the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) will leave agricultural lands with little to no water.

A similar situation occurred in 2001, and the resulting impacts to local rural communities and national wildlife refuges were immediate and far-reaching. Even with a later release of a small percentage of needed water over a 30-day period in July and August 2001, thousands of acres of valuable productive farmland were left without irrigation water. The wildlife benefits provided by those farms – particularly the food provided for area waterfowl – were also lost with the water. The National Academy of Sciences National Research Council later concluded that there was insufficient scientific evidence used by federal fisheries agencies in 2001 to support changing the preceding historical water operations of the Klamath Project.

I have neighbors and friends who will no longer farm, victims of attrition caused by 20 years of court-directed mismanagement that has done little to improve ESA-listed fish populations. Earlier this month, the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) announced that no water would be diverted at the Klamath Project's A Canal for irrigation in 2021. The first water delivery from the A Canal was in 1907. This is the first year ever it will deliver zero water.

Although there is enough water in Upper Klamath Lake to supply all irrigation needs, current federal agency management of the Klamath Project is driven by allocation to fish species protected by the ESA. In past years of similar drought conditions, there have been full irrigation deliveries. This year, regulation under the ESA will result in essentially all water being retained in Upper Klamath Lake or released downstream for salmon in California. Water users are extremely upset with what the federal government is doing to them, and with good reason. Taking water from Project irrigators for ESA species is a failed experiment in the Basin that has produced no benefit for the species.

There are critical legal issues that need to get fixed. Farmers and irrigation districts have strong objections to the re-allocation of stored water. Everyone in the West knows that we build dams and reservoirs to capture water during the wet time of year, when there are high flows, in order to have water available at the dry time of year, typically in mid- to late summer. In the Klamath Project, irrigation districts pay for the infrastructure that provides that storage. But the government is requiring that irrigators keep stored water in the reservoir they paid to build and direct the release of that stored water away from their farms in order to artificially increase the amount of flow in the Klamath River. During the irrigation season, the Klamath Project will be providing much more flow in the Klamath River than would have occurred in nature, especially in this abnormally dry year, before the Project even existed.

We must also get away from the paradigm of federal agencies regulating the Klamath Project and other Western federal water projects for ESA species management simply because of the federal nexus. This federal nexus at the Klamath Project results in Project farmers and ranchers being looked to for water without adequate scientific basis in an attempt to cure and mitigate whatever factors are affecting fish populations. That is not fair, and it has not worked for farms or fish.

For long-term stability, a basin-wide settlement agreement is needed that would address water management for irrigation and fish and provide a fair and legal treatment of the Klamath Project irrigators and their families. There are critical parties in the Basin that could help make this happen, and Klamath Basin interests need support for this effort from the state and federal governments and our local communities. It can be done; it has been done elsewhere.

For the very immediate term, local farmers and ranchers need financial resources to try to hold their farming operations together this year and try to avoid an absolutely catastrophic meltdown. They need that help immediately. We are almost past the point where a "stitch in time can save nine." Local water users did not ask to be in this cycle of crises but this year they face a terrible fate that makes it essential to receive disaster funding support immediately. They have asked that

I respectfully seek support from each of you as our communities try to cope with a very grave situation.

I want to add that this is also going to be a very bad for salmon fishermen, tribal and non-tribal. There may have been disagreements with those communities about the cause of the low salmon returns, but those people are not at fault. We hope Congress will be receptive to their information and needs as well.

KWUA and irrigation districts in the Project are committed to actions that will steer things in a better direction. There are important legal issues crying out for resolution. We also need a dose of common sense. The Project stored water is the only knob that can be turned by Federal agencies, but they are not helping species. Federal decision-makers must commit to getting a better handle on the science behind what is happening to the fisheries in the Klamath Basin in order to support future actions that can actually help these fish. But they seem to be stuck on the same actions and science debunked in the 2001 NAS study. We can do better for farmers and fish in the Klamath Basin, and we need to do it now.

## **2. Southern and Central Oregon**

In Oregon's Rogue River Valley, farmers will experience a short season due to water shortage. Talent Irrigation District's (TID) entire water system stores a total of 115,800 acre-feet of water, and this year, the district announced the reservoir is at 16% capacity, causing a delayed start and an early cut-off for farmers this season. This year, after discussion with several different crop operators (hay growers, cattlemen, orchardists, vineyard operators, etc.), TID's Board of Directors decided to look at a middle-of-the-road date and tentatively start the system on June 1 and run the system as long as they can. It is hard to predict when the water will run out, but TID leaders say would be good news if it can last to mid-August. This is bad news for local orchardists, who typically just begin to pick their fruit in August. The last time the system was this low was in 1961.

Ongoing dry years and extreme drought, along with ESA requirements for the Oregon spotted frog, has created a perfect storm of water shortages in the Deschutes and Crooked River Basins in Central Oregon. Conditions in the region have been so dry for so long that a 100+% snowpack this winter and spring was not enough to resolve ongoing dry conditions. The region is so dry that snowmelt runoff is not reaching the reservoirs or tributaries, but is instead being absorbed into the dry soil.

North Unit Irrigation District (NUID) relies on stored water from Wickiup Reservoir to service nearly 60,000 acres of Central Oregon farmlands, of which nearly 40% currently sit idle due to water shortages. Today, Wickiup Reservoir sits at 39% of capacity, well below its historical average of 86% of capacity for this time of year. Some NUID farmers have been allotted as little as 0.50 acre-feet per acre and will likely run out of water in early September.

NUID farmers are predominately known for producing forage and various grass seed crops, in addition to a variety of vegetable seed crops. NUID farmers grow approximately 55% of the U.S.

domestic and 45% of the global market carrot variety seed. If you eat a carrot today, it likely originated from an NUID farmer. NUID is critical to supporting an extensive network of agriculturally related jobs and the Central Oregon economy. Without help, NUID and its farmers have little hope of remaining productive economic drivers of the regional economy, as they have been for decades.

### **3. California**

Further south, neighboring California is in a critically dry year, the same as in 2015. The California Department of Water Resources has marked 2021 as the third-driest water year (measured from October to March) on record for the state. The department's annual snow survey released last month recorded precipitation levels at 50 percent of the annual average for the water year. The dry conditions can also be seen in the state's water supply, with the department reporting that California's major reservoirs are at just 50 percent of overall capacity. In response to deteriorating conditions across much of California, Governor Newsom expanded the drought emergency declaration to cover 39 additional counties across the state, including counties in the Sacramento and San Joaquin River watersheds.

The sparse timing of rain that has occurred this season has contributed to especially poor growth of the annual grasses that are needed for livestock feed. The amount of forage on rangelands is low, with producers in Ventura County already shipping whole herds of cattle out of the county because there is almost no forage. About 2 million acres of California's irrigated farmland has already had its water supply cut by 95 percent. Another million acres has lost 80 percent of its water supply this year. Much of the remaining farmland will see cuts of 25 percent or more.

The Friant Division of the Central Valley Project was designed and is operated as a conjunctive use project to convey surface water for direct beneficial uses, such as irrigation and municipal supplies, and to recharge groundwater basins in the southern San Joaquin Valley (the Valley). The ability to move significant water through the Friant Division's canals in wetter years to store in groundwater recharge basins is critically important for the project to work as intended, and these operations sustain the primary source of drinking water for nearly all cities, towns, and rural communities on the Valley's East side.

Over the past 30 years, increasingly stringent federal and state environmental regulations have redirected water away from the Valley in an attempt to aid struggling fish populations dependent on the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta (Delta). As water exports through the Delta declined, many San Joaquin Valley water users relied heavily on pumping groundwater supplies to maintain economic viability for their communities. The resulting groundwater overdraft damaged the Friant-Kern Canal, as well as the Delta-Mendota Canal and the California Aqueduct, and compromised their ability to deliver water in the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California.

The southern third of the Friant-Kern Canal has lost 60% of its design capacity, which translates to 100,000 – 300,000 acre-feet of water per year that does not flow to farms and communities. Additionally, by reducing the canal's ability to deliver water to aquifers in the south Valley, the

conveyance constriction also worsens existing water supply and water quality problems in dozens of rural and disadvantaged communities who rely entirely on groundwater as their only source of drinking water. While these losses are recoverable if the canal is repaired, time is of the essence, and current drought conditions do not bode well for such challenges.

During extreme drought years like 2021, subsidence and the effects of groundwater overdraft are likely to intensify in the San Joaquin Valley. One reason for that stems from the historic water rights that the Federal government obtained to supply the Friant Division with water, combined with how it operates the dams in Northern California and the pumps that export water south through the Delta. Part of those agreements allow for the historical water rights holders on the San Joaquin River to call on their reserved rights to some of the river's flow when Delta exports do not meet their demand. This has happened twice in Friant Division history – in 2014 and 2015 – and may occur again this year if the State Water Resources Control Board orders Reclamation to operate Shasta Dam for the benefit of salmon in the Sacramento River. The consequences of this could be disastrous for the Valley.

Not only would such a “call” on Friant water supplies reduce the irrigation and municipal supplies for contractors in the Friant Division, it would also increase the rate of land elevation subsidence, reduce water supplies, and worsen water quality conditions for the Valley's most vulnerable communities, and squander the past investments Friant water users have made in restoring fisheries and habitat along the river.

Of particular concern is the impact of reduced surface water supplies to the more than 1 million Californians who live in the 55 disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities in the Friant service area, many of them already dealing with unsafe drinking water or experiencing their wells going dry during 2014 and 2015. Both of these problems will inevitably be exacerbated with fewer surface flows infiltrating the valley's groundwater aquifers.

CVP and State Water Project (SWP) operations for the remainder of 2021 should be governed by decisions that consider the “whole field” of possible impacts. Unfortunately, the projects are operated to rob Peter in order to pay Paul. In a painful year, we must share the pain equally.

California is the No. 1 farm state in the nation producing tens of thousands of agricultural jobs with wages at all income levels covering all 58 counties. When farms aren't growing food for people, it affects jobs, personal income, and the quality of life in these rural areas of the state. In addition, farm-related jobs contribute hundreds of millions of dollars annually to state and local tax revenue which provide services local communities value, like police, firefighters and teachers. With the uncertainty over water, some Central Valley farmers are destroying their crops ahead of the summer season in order to for their operations to survive. It's impacting jobs and will likely soon impact grocery shelves and food prices.

The California Farm Water Coalition (CFWC) last month posted a blog that explains what the devastating drought of 2015 can tell us about the impacts of a drought in 2021. Taking a look back at a similar water year can help us understand what is likely to be in store for us through the rest

of this year and possibly beyond.

#### **4. Colorado River Basin**

Reclamation recently issued a report indicating available water supplies on the Colorado River, which feeds several western states, will continue to be affected by ongoing severe drought conditions. The Colorado River Basin is entering its 21<sup>st</sup> year of drought conditions. The projections released by the Reclamation show that Lake Mead, the largest reservoir in the country and a vital water supply to millions of residents and farmland across the Southwest could fall later this year to its lowest levels since it was filled in the 1930s. Reclamation will release its next major Colorado River study in August. If that study projects water levels in the lake will be below the critical threshold of 1,075 feet on January 1, 2022, some water users in Arizona and Nevada would begin to see their water deliveries cut significantly next year.

One of the farmers who stands to see his Central Arizona Project water deliveries reduced is Dan Thelander, who served on the Family Farm Alliance board of directors for three years. He farms cotton, alfalfa and other crops in the desert of Pinal County, Arizona. He recently told CNN that he will have to lay off employees, cut down on purchases of seeds, fertilizer and tractors, and overall just scale down and operate a smaller farm. Meanwhile, local water managers are looking for infrastructure funding to move groundwater through his district to locations that are not served by groundwater now.

Also in Arizona, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is reporting a drought-related die-off of juniper trees across portions of central and northern Arizona in Prescott and Kaibab National Forests. In addition, reports are coming in from northern Arizona that ranchers on the Coconino Plateau have been hauling water for cattle and wildlife for the past month because dirt stock tanks are completely dry. One of our ranchers in Central Arizona has had his cattle permit issued by the USFS reduced by 50%. He has now been forced into a situation of having to sell about 40% of his breeding herd and will need to feed some of the rest on his deeded land. If the Southwest summer monsoons fail to arrive again this year, his operation will have to move completely off his USFS permit in September.

In the Upper Basin behind Glen Canyon Dam, historically low water levels caused the closure of some launch ramps on Lake Powell, where water storage is at the lowest since it filled in 1980. The pool is dropping towards the level where power generation will cease. The Colorado River Energy Distributors Association (CREDA) is a non-profit organization representing consumer-owned electric systems that purchase federal hydropower and resources of the Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP). The CREDA board of directors last month passed a resolution encouraging Reclamation and Western Area Power Administration (WAPA) to implement cost-cutting measures and strategies to improve the status of the Upper Colorado River Basin. CREDA encourages the passage of federal legislation which would make available non-reimbursable appropriations to Reclamation and WAPA, to ensure ongoing funding of CRSP operations and other required annual funding obligations.

The Dolores Project, located in southwestern Colorado in the “Four Corners” region experienced the fourth worst runoff ever. Anticipated water supplies are between 5 and 10 percent of normal, but with only a 34% supply from last year, there is no carryover water this year. The Dolores Project Municipal and Industrial (M&I) commitments are prioritized and will be met. Senior rights that predate the Project will receive about 50% of their supplies.

The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe (UMUT) Farm and Ranch Enterprise will only receive about 2,500 AF of their normal 23,300 AF allotment. Farm operations will be limited to only 900 acres of the overall 7,600-acre enterprise, with partial season irrigation focusing on export dairy alfalfa hay and providing enough corn to keep the mill and markets supplied. Dolores Project “Full Service” irrigators will only receive about 1.5 inch of delivered water per allocated acre. Those water users are setting up joint pooling arrangements and will irrigate only about 10% of the total 29,000 acres for a partial season.

Downstream fisheries that share Dolores Project shortages are also looking at reduced releases. There is no water available to lease and groundwater supplies are also limited. Full impacts to the fisheries likely will not be known until next year’s surveys conducted by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Department.

Local farmers and the Dolores Water Conservancy District (DWCD) are bracing for tough financial times. Some farmers may risk some dry land farming, while others will just fallow and hope that perennial crops make it through to next year without replanting. Continued lack of water supply since 2000 has generated financial challenges for producers and organizations. UMUT & DWCD recently approached Reclamation with a formal request for help under UMUT Project contracts and Reclamation Drought Emergency Authority.

Farmers and ranchers served by the nearby Mancos Water Conservancy District are facing a zero percent allotment from Jackson Gulch Reservoir. Poor hydrology is expected in other parts of Colorado this year.

## **5. Rio Grande**

For the first time in 30 years, the stretch of the Rio Grande that winds through Albuquerque could go dry this summer. The “Great River” is one of North America’s longest rivers and a major water source for millions of people and thousands of square miles of farmland in Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and Mexico. Flows are reduced this year because of below-average snowpack in the mountains along the northern border of the state that feed the river. Spring precipitation has been minimal, and reservoirs are at a fraction of their capacity and continue to shrink. The Pecos River that delivers water to parts of eastern New Mexico and West Texas is in a similar situation.

April is always a critical decision making month across New Mexico’s Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID) and this year was no exception. Dr. Phil King, EBID’s Hydrology and Engineering consultant on April 14 reported to the EBID board of directors that Elephant Butte Reservoir inflow had “plummeted” and that EBID and its agricultural producers should continue to plan for

a critically short year, with an allotment of just four inches of water, or less.

In 2013, a previous difficult water year, EBID learned that it was better to operate based on demand. This time around, EBID is equipped with high tech software that aids in the entire surface water management and delivery process. By bulking up farm deliveries and running them fast, EBID will be able to minimize the fill and dry cycle in the canals, greatly improving delivery efficiency. However, it will be vitally important for farmers to cooperate by getting water orders submitted in a timely manner.

## **6. Idaho**

Idaho also faces challenges related to drought conditions. Water supplies are particularly stressed in the Wood River and Big Lost River Basins in central Idaho, and the Portneuf basin in southeastern Idaho. These basins have very little to no storage capacity to offset the drought conditions. In the Wood River basin, the Director of the Idaho Department of Water Resource (IDWR) has initiated administrative proceedings to curtail junior priority surface and ground water rights. These proceedings will cost water users significant time and money – and will likely result in many farmers having to forego irrigation during some portion of the 2021 season.

For the first time in Idaho’s history, IDWR has commenced administrative proceedings in the Portneuf Basin in southeastern Idaho in order to satisfy senior priority water rights along the Snake River. As drought conditions persist, water rights administration is being pushed further into tributary basins that have historically avoided such measures. These actions could disrupt farming and ranching operations throughout the State.

Other Idaho river basins like the Boise, Payette and Upper Snake River have sufficient carryover storage from 2020 and will survive the 2021 irrigation season – although with reduced water supplies. However, if drought conditions persist, the 2022 irrigation season could be catastrophic.

## **7. Northern Cascades and Yakima Basin**

The Cascade Mountains of northern Oregon and Washington registered above-normal snow conditions this winter. However, the drought is working its way back into the Yakima River Basin (Washington State) that supports a \$4.5 billion agricultural economy and historically produced significant salmon and steelhead runs. The overall Basin is at about 100% average precipitation for the water year beginning in October 2020, due in part to the good fortune of a few storms that dropped snow in the right places. The high elevation snow in 2021 should help get the Yakima Basin through the year without shortages. However, there was very little low- elevation snow, and the Yakima Basin precipitation in March and April was the third driest in 110 years. The US Drought Monitor now lists the farming areas of the Yakima Basin as either in D0 (Abnormally Dry), D1 (Moderate Drought) or D2 (Severe Drought).

## **8. Western Drought Summary Conclusion**

It is clear that water users in nearly every region of the West are scrambling, looking for creative ways to stretch scant water supplies. In mountain watershed areas from the Sierra Nevada to the Rocky Mountains, the driest of conditions have prevailed. Forecasting has been an incredible challenge, and much of what runoff there has been, has been consumed by dry upstream soils. These severe drought conditions, coupled with the arid nature of many parts of the West, make for a trying, shortened water year. And for many water managers, like Rusty Jardine, the district manager of Truckee-Carson Irrigation District in Nevada, these trying times may not end soon.

“My greater concern isn’t for now,” said Mr. Jardine, who is a member of the Family Farm Alliance Advisory Committee. “I am worrying more about next year.”

### **IMPORTANCE OF WESTERN AGRICULTURE AND WATER INFRASTRUCTURE**

Water is the lifeblood of the American West. Without reliable water, every sector of our economy would suffer – from agriculture, to manufacturing, to high-tech. Food cannot be grown, businesses cannot operate, and homes and schools cannot be built or operate without water. Critical water infrastructure must be maintained and modernized to ensure the delivery and safety of water today and for future generations. As Congress discusses the development of a potential infrastructure legislative package, it is of paramount importance that development, maintenance and rehabilitation of Western water infrastructure is a high priority.

Water managers throughout the West are actively investing in new water supply options, embracing new technology, and looking to use water as efficiently as possible. Thanks in large part to these efforts, water usage in the U.S. for agricultural, industrial and municipal uses has declined since the mid-1980’s while at the same time populations, crop production, and demands for water have increased. Local water managers are looking to their federal partners to ensure that this impressive track record of water innovation can continue and even be improved.

Western irrigated agriculture is a significant contributor to the national economy. The Family Farm Alliance in 2015 published “The Economic Importance of Western Irrigated Agriculture” (prepared by the Pacific Northwest Project), a white paper specifically drafted for policy makers seeking to better understand the direct economic impact of Western irrigated agriculture and to acknowledge the growing chorus of voices bringing attention to food security and irrigated agriculture as a national economic issue.

For the 17 Western states studied in the 2015 report, the total household income impacts from irrigated agriculture, associated service industries, and food processing sectors was \$172 billion annually. Irrigated farming and ranching is a huge economic driver in the West, particularly in rural communities. Further, the fact that Americans spend less of their disposable income on food than any other nation in the world ensures a vibrant, consumer-driven economy. However, this economic force would virtually disappear, along with the rural American communities dependent on farming and ranching, if the aging water infrastructure that supports it crumbles or once-reliable

water supplies are threatened. Given the magnitude of the food security issue to the nation's economic and social wellbeing, policy makers must prioritize protection of our water supply infrastructure.

## **KEY CHALLENGES**

The key challenges Western irrigators face in times of drought include competition for scarce water supplies, insufficient or aging water infrastructure, growing populations, endangered species, increasing weather variability/climate change, and energy development. Across the West, several key water policy challenges stand out.

### **1. Water Infrastructure (Both Existing and New) Is Needed to Protect Future Water Supply Reliability**

It is critical that our country continues to invest in the aging Western water infrastructure necessary to meet current and future demands for water. Our existing water infrastructure in the West is getting older and is in desperate need of rehabilitation and improvement. Most of the federally backed water infrastructure projects that continue to benefit large cities, rural communities and small farms in the West were built over 50 years ago. Some are much older. In fact, some Reclamation projects, including the Klamath Project, Nevada's Newlands Project, and others originally authorized by the Reclamation Act of 1902 are now more than 100 years old. Derby Dam, Reclamation's first structure in the Newlands Project, was built in 1905. Elephant Butte Dam in New Mexico - at one time the largest and highest structure in the United States - was authorized in 1906 and completed in 1916.

As hydrological conditions in the West continue to change and populations expand, failure to address water security has become increasingly critical. Failing to improve our aging water infrastructure and to develop new sources of usable water supply will inevitably result in additional conflict as pressure grows to 'solve' growing urban and environmental water demands. Moving water away from Western irrigated agriculture to meet these growing needs will surely contribute to the decline of rural communities dependent on farming, as well as negatively impact our Nation's food security.

While some critics of new storage projects focus on perceived negative impacts associated with new facility construction (e.g. loss of habitat, disruption of "natural" stream flow patterns, and potential evaporative losses), these perceived impacts must also be compared to the wide range of multi-purpose benefits that storage projects can provide. Properly designed and constructed surface storage projects provide additional water management flexibility to better meet downstream urban, industrial and agricultural water needs, improve flood control, generate clean hydropower, provide recreation opportunities, and create additional instream flows that can benefit downstream fish and wildlife species.

In addition to prioritizing new groundwater and surface water storage development, we believe that investments in improving water conservation, water recycling, watershed management,

conveyance, desalination, and water transfers are all needed for a diversified, resilient, and successful water management portfolio. We are not alone on this platform. A national coalition of over 200 agricultural organizations and urban and rural water districts led by the Family Farm Alliance, Association of California Water Agencies, National Water Resources Association and Western Growers Association urged then President-elect Joe Biden and congressional leadership in early January 2021 to address aging Western water infrastructure in any potential infrastructure or economic recovery package<sup>1</sup>. The coalition includes organizations from 15 states that collectively represent \$120 billion in agricultural production, nearly one-third of all agricultural production in the country, and tens of millions of urban and rural water users.

In separate letters to then President-elect Biden and your congressional leaders, the coalition said existing Western water infrastructure is in desperate need of rehabilitation and improvement. Without immediate attention, the coalition said, the Western water supply and delivery system will quickly prove inadequate to meet the needs of urban and rural users and the environment. The coalition encouraged the federal government to invest in a diversified water management portfolio that enhances water supply and quality for urban and environmental uses while keeping water flowing to Western farms. Specific recommendations include funding and support for:

- Water conservation.
- Water recycling, reuse, and desalination projects.
- New water storage facilities, both surface and groundwater.
- Watershed management, fish passage and recovery, and habitat restoration.
- Federal financing mechanisms (like WIFIA) for water projects.
- Loans for local districts operating and maintaining federally owned irrigation projects.
- Water quality improvement for rural communities.

Beyond financial support, the coalition also called on the federal government to ensure the timely construction of water projects by improving the efficiency and timeliness of federal regulation and permitting processes.

As Congress and President Biden consider an infrastructure package, it is of paramount importance that extraordinary maintenance, rehabilitation and development of water infrastructure is made a high priority. As you are already aware, water infrastructure investments not only provide immediate short-term economic benefits and create jobs that are vital to a nation facing massive job loss, but they are also the foundation the economy will need for the foreseeable future. If and when additional infrastructure funding is discussed as part of a larger economic stimulus package, we need your help to ensure that federal dollars flow, and timely improvements are constructed to

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<sup>1</sup> The coalition letter to Congressional leaders was previously shared with the Subcommittee in testimony we prepared for the March 11, 2021 oversight hearing “*Building Back Better: Building Resilience for the Economy, Climate, and Ecosystems.*”

our nation's critical aging water infrastructure needs. We look forward to working with you to address this critical need and national security interest.

## **2. Water management in the West is becoming increasingly inflexible.**

We need a new way of looking at how we manage our limited water resources, one that includes a broader view of how water is used, along with consideration of population growth, food production and habitat needs. The goal should be to integrate food production and conservation practices into water management decision making and water use priorities, creating a more holistic view of water management for multiple uses. We must begin to plan now in order to hold intact current options. Planning must allow for flexibility and consider all needs, not just focus on meeting future needs from population growth.

In many parts of the West, litigation stemming from citizen suit provisions of environmental laws including the ESA and Clean Water Act (CWA) is producing federal court decisions (or court approved "settlements") that direct federal agency "management" of state water resources. Congress should recognize that this type of litigation and resulting settlements can actually harm the overall health and resilience of landscapes and watersheds by focusing on single species management under the ESA. We should seek solutions that reflect a philosophy that the best decisions on water issues take place at the state and local level. Finding ways to incentivize landowners to make the ESA work is far more preferable than what we have been seeing in recent years, where the ESA has been used by special interest environmental groups and federal agencies in court as a means of "protecting" only a single species (such as the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta smelt in California, coho salmon on the Klamath River, and spotted frogs in central Oregon) without regard for other impacts, including those on other non-listed species.

The negative environmental impacts and public health and safety impacts associated with moving water away from irrigated agriculture to single species protected by the ESA can be significant, as evidenced by what we are seeing in the Klamath Basin this year. The waterfowl, reptiles and amphibians that rely on canal system, ditch banks, and irrigated fields will simply not be there as there no water in the canals or on the fields. There have been, and will continue to be dust storms in the Klamath Basin. Two national wildlife refuges rely exclusively on the Klamath Project water infrastructure will receive zero water for those wetlands and habitats this year. There are also serious human health and safety concerns. There are 1,800 domestic wells in Oregon alone that are within the geographic area served by the A Canal. Ordinarily, that canal water recharges those shallow domestic wells, but this year it will not. Meanwhile the limited irrigation groundwater pumping will continue to draw down groundwater levels. Local water managers and community leaders are currently engaged in a grand experiment to find out how many domestic wells will go dry, and no one has even a guess how many that will be.

Droughts occur routinely in the West; that is why Reclamation made such important investments in water supply infrastructure over the past century. However, this infrastructure was never designed to meet the burgeoning demands of growing urban communities and environmental needs, while continuing to help farmers, ranchers and rural communities make it through periodic

droughts. Unfortunately, droughts in the West are predicted to be deeper and longer than we have historically experienced in the 20th century, and these added demands for water will intensify the impacts of these droughts on already marginalized rural agricultural communities.

We believe Congress should provide federal agencies with more flexibility under environmental laws and water management regulations to respond to drought conditions. And where such flexibility currently exists, Congress should demand that agencies use it promptly and with a minimum of bureaucratic nonsense. The Alliance also believes Congress should rein in the environmental litigation “industry” that so often is the cause of inflexible federal decision making in water resource management.

Another effective way to prepare for and deal with Western droughts is to use our existing water supply dams and reservoirs to maximize carryover storage while continuing to protect communities from floods. Congress has provided the Army Corps of Engineers with authorities to review and modify existing federal flood control manuals on both federal and private dams and reservoirs, some of which are decades old. The Alliance is supportive of these reviews and want Congress to continue to be vigilant with the agencies to make sure our water infrastructure is managed more effectively to meet future needs in drought and flood.

### **3. Forests must be managed to promote watershed health.**

The number of acres burned by wildfire in the U.S. last year broke a modern record, according to data published by the National Interagency Fire Center, as extreme heat and dryness fueled major conflagrations across many populated areas in the West. Wildfire burned over 10.3 million acres in 2020, breaking the calendar-year record of 10.1 million acres, set in 2015. From August through October, the most extreme conditions caused thousands of evacuations, homes and structures lost, and tragic fatalities of 11 people in Oregon and 34 people in California. Last year marks the third year that wildfire has burned more than 10 million acres in the U.S., according to fire center records going back to 1983. All three of those years have been since 2015.

Increasingly fierce Western wildfire disasters are becoming an annual occurrence and underscore the importance of improving on-the-ground management actions that can lead to improved forest health. Improving the condition of our nation’s forested lands is of primary importance to water providers. National Forest lands are overwhelmingly the largest, single source of water in the U.S. and, in most regions of the West, contribute nearly all of the water that supplies our farms and cities. In addition, our already fragile water infrastructure can be severely damaged or rendered useless by fire and post-fire flooding and debris flows. The unhealthy state of our national forests, which were initially reserved specifically to protect water resources, has led to catastrophic wildfires that threaten the reliability, volume, and quality of water for tens of millions of Americans, along with the wildlife, recreational, and multi-purpose values of these lands.

The Family Farm Alliance believes a responsible level of continuous fuels reduction includes a combination of robust mechanical thinning and prescribed fire. This can be employed to significantly reduce evapotranspiration, tree stress, disease, and pest infestation, preserve health

forest conditions, and protect species and habitats. Failure to employ this approach will continue the downward, accelerating spiral of fuel accumulation, drought, disease, and invasive insects. This will lead, inevitably, to additional high-intensity fire events in the future.

It appears that there is growing recognition that improved funding and agency cooperation are needed to tackle this critical problem. However, even in the region I live in, it is still not clear how this policy recognition is translating to action taken in Western forests. We have members in Northern California who report that the fuel load in many forests is staggering, and Forest Service efforts to even access downed trees in burned riparian areas - such as the Forest Glen area on the South Fork of the Trinity River - are moving too slow.

We believe active forest management can increase water yield, improve water quality, provide for jobs, and reduce the cost of firefighting, while increasing forest resiliency. This can be done, in part, by increasing the productivity of national forests and grasslands; employing grazing as an effective forest and grassland management tool; increasing access to national forest system lands; expediting environmental reviews to support active management; and designing West-wide studies to quantify water yield.

#### **4. Now is the time for collaboration, not confrontation.**

The Alliance has worked diligently in the creation of the Western Agriculture and Conservation Coalition (WACC), a collaborative effort to improve the environment, protect Western irrigated agriculture, and keep farmers and ranchers in business. Members of the WACC include Audubon, The Nature Conservancy, California Farm Bureau, Environmental Defense Fund, Public Lands Council, Western Growers Association, Wyoming Stockgrowers, and the California Agricultural Irrigation Association, to name a representative few. The WACC was formed in February 2012 to support the common interests of agriculture, conservation, and other interests tied to resources on behalf of a viable and sustainable rural West. No other national coalition combines industry and conservation interests to advocate for resource sustainability for all.

We believe that unless agricultural producers and conservation come together, the public policies and resource management strategies necessary to maintain a viable and sustainable rural West will be impossible to achieve. In the context of Western water, this means the WACC supports multi-stakeholder processes to address basin-scale water scarcity conflicts. To make such efforts successful, the WACC earlier this month sent a letter to Congress, urging support for investments in irrigation and municipal water infrastructure that provide important co-benefits of enhanced drought resilience and aquatic habitat. That letter – attached as “Appendix A” to this testimony - details ways to make these essential and successful western water infrastructure investments.

The threats to a viable and sustainable rural West are numerous, complex, and varied. The Alliance and the farmers and organizations we work with are dedicated to the pragmatic implementation of actions that sustainably balance environmental protection and economic prosperity. The foundation for collaborative solutions will be driven from the constructive “center”. These solutions steer away from the conflict that can ensue from the extremes of grassroots activism

intended to resist any changes to existing environmental and natural resource laws, regulations, and policies. Similarly, they will not be driven purely by economics, unfettered by reasonable environmental protection.

### SILVER LINING?

Perhaps the only silver lining is that this looming crisis will hopefully draw public and political attention to Western agriculture's critical role to provide a quality food supply, boost the national economy, and continue the country's stature as the world's premier food basket. We can only hope that this leads to necessary, reasonable policies that support farmers and investment in rural communities, including water infrastructure and increased water-storage capacity. The Family Farm Alliance and other Western agriculture and water organizations believe the drought underscores the urgent need to take immediate action to help better manage impacts to water resources from drought in the West.

Western irrigated agriculture has been dealing with changes in climate and hydrology for over a century. But the prognosis for water supplies in the future is not positive and will continue to negatively impact this important source of our Nation's food supply, the economic engine for most of our rural Western communities. Coupled with the growing demand for existing water supplies from burgeoning cities and the environment, irrigated agriculture is fast becoming a target for one thing – water. The Alliance believes we must look to several solutions in order to maintain food security for the nation and economic wellbeing of the Western landscape:

- Invest in Western water infrastructure – new water storage and improved conveyance facilities, groundwater recharge, water conservation, water management improvements, water reuse and desalination can all help alleviate the stress on our existing water supplies, especially for agriculture in the growing West;
- Invest in technology – we must manage our water supplies better – more efficiently and effectively use technology to improve the modeling and predicting weather patterns, snowpack, and runoff forecasting, as well as using technology to manage our water storage and distribution to improve efficiencies in utilizing our precious water resources; and,
- Improve regulatory processes at the federal level to expedite permitting and get projects to construction within a reasonable period of time at a reasonable cost, as well as create collaborative partnerships between federal, state and local entities interested in finding solutions to our water-climate problems through adaptive strategies that can work on the ground.

Congress has helped this past year by including Reclamation provisions in the *Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020* (omnibus) last Congress. The creation of an aging infrastructure account in Treasury for loans to local water user entities will help fund and affordably finance improvements and rehabilitation of our aging federal facilities, some of which are over 100-years old. Broadening WaterSMART grants, authorizing a new collaborative program for snowpack monitoring and runoff forecasting, and improving the efficiency of authorities for the use of

federally owned facilities for aquifer recharge will be extremely helpful in managing impacts to water resources from climate change in the West.

But we have more to accomplish in this Congress, including:

- Reauthorizing and funding federal programs to partner on new federal and non-federal water storage and groundwater recharge projects (such as extending provisions in the WIIN Act of 2016 – P.L. 114-322);
- Providing funds to the aging federal infrastructure account created last year; and
- Partnering with Western water organizations through collaborative solution-oriented programs and using new technology to improve the management of water supplies for agriculture, cities, and the environment.

The Congress and the federal government certainly cannot change the hydrology of the West, but there is a role it can play to support family farmers and ranchers. Policy makers should understand the following observations and principles as they develop new solutions to the Western drought:

- State water laws, compacts and decrees must be the foundation for dealing with shortages.
- Water use and related beneficial use data must be accurately measured and portrayed.
- Benefits of water use must reflect all economic / societal / environmental impacts.
- Water conservation can help stretch water supplies, but has its limits in certain situations.
- Public sentiment supports water remaining with irrigated agriculture, and developing strategic water storage as insurance against shortages.
- Technologies for water reuse, desalination and recycling are proven effective in stretching existing supplies for urban, environmental and other uses.
- Urban growth expansion should be contingent upon sustainable water supplies; using irrigated agriculture as the “reservoir” of water for municipal growth is not sustainable.
- Planning for water shortage in the West must look to the long-term in meeting the goals of agriculture, energy, cities, and the environment.
- A successful water shortage strategy must include a “portfolio” of water supply enhancements and improvements, such as water reuse, recycling, desalinization, conservation, water-sensitive land use planning, and water system improvements. New infrastructure and technologies can help stretch water for all uses.
- Unintended consequences associated with reducing productive agricultural land/groundwater recharge/riparian habitat benefits should be avoided and, if unavoidable, minimized and fully mitigated.

What we do not need is more federal regulatory red tape and added environmental requirements for new federal programs.

## **BIDEN ADMINISTRATION DROUGHT RESPONSE**

In response to the worsening drought conditions in the West, a rare "Joint Statement" was issued last month from U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland and USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack. The

Biden-Harris administration later in the month announced the formation of an Interagency Working Group to address worsening drought conditions in the West and support farmers, Tribes, and communities impacted by ongoing water shortages. The Working Group will be co-chaired by the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture to build upon existing resources to help coordinate across the federal government, working in partnership with state, local, and Tribal governments to address the needs of communities suffering from drought-related impacts. We are pleased to see the Administration place priority on the drought, and we hope that they can quickly identify immediate financial and technical assistance for impacted irrigators.

We hope the Working Group will solicit our input as it develops longer-term solutions. We certainly respect the Administration's intent to develop measures to respond to climate change, build more resilient communities, and protect the natural environment. To be successful, the Working Group also needs to heed the recommendations in this testimony, developed with input from experienced and knowledgeable producers and water managers throughout the West.

### **SHORT-TERM NEEDS**

We are at the beginning of a serious unprecedented West wide drought. This requires a level of reaction that is immediate and sustainable. Recent discussion by Congressional committee members express frustration at the slow pace of the emergency disaster aid. The slow and delayed response to reacting to and addressing this disaster is exacerbating the immediate and ongoing crisis. We recommend a fast-track response capability from the USDA and Interior that enables a localized response by farmers and ranchers. Farmers and ranchers need programs through their local NRCS offices to assist with the purchase of infrastructure-- including solar panels, pipeline materials, well-drilling, tanks, gated pipe and projects to develop water. Such projects can benefit wildlife and wetlands as well as food production. An immediate and local response is imperative.

We appreciate the efforts of Chairman Huffman and Rep. Mike Thompson to recent organize a virtual summit to discuss the severe drought facing Northern California. Sonoma County farmers who participated in that summit also called for immediate financial assistance for drought losses to keep farmers farming. Other projects and actions recommended by Sonoma County farmers included:

- Increased Water Storage - funding for new reservoirs/ponds, pond liners, cleaning out of existing storage vessels
- Water Recharge - funding for technology, infrastructure
- Desalination technology and infrastructure
- Rural broadband infrastructure to allow for more use of technology
- Educational programs to teach farmers about technology/conservation using Resource Conservation District staff as the "teachers"
- Stormwater and flooding capture basins with defined distribution system that could possibly link into the existing surface and recycled water delivery systems
- Recycled water infrastructure - and legislation to require municipalities to recognize agricultural users as an "uninterruptible" customer

We recognize that many of these types of proposed actions and projects fall under the purview of USDA and the House Committee on Agriculture. However, given the urgent need of this matter, we wanted to use the forum provided by this hearing to amplify its importance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Why is protecting Western irrigated agriculture so important? There are three key reasons: 1) Agriculture is the only U.S. sector that has posted a trade surplus for well over 50 years; 2) As diets evolve and the global population continues to expand, our position as the world's largest food exporter will play an increasingly significant role in the global economy; and 3) Maintaining food independence is more than just providing a healthy, abundant, and transparent food supply – it is also a matter of national security.

Some Western producers are starting to feel that their way of life is being written off by a segment of the public that appears to believe that the tragedy occurring in the Central Valley or in the Klamath Basin is a comeuppance that farmers somehow deserve. We still hold a sliver of hope that critical thinkers and leaders will easily distinguish this nonsense from reality.

Western producers need to manage water as if every year is a drought year. We need to invest in storage facilities to capture water in wet years, we need to look to innovative technology to enhance supplies and delivery and we need to get the most benefit from the water we have available. The ability to measure, assess and show value for how that water is used is incumbent on every water manager - environmental, urban and agricultural.

The Alliance looks forward to working with your Subcommittee to address the issues we have identified in this testimony and those we have not. It is going to be a tough year for many of our producers and the rural communities they support. At the Alliance, we'll continue our efforts to ensure that irrigated agriculture continues to play a vital role in feeding our Nation, while keeping our rural communities and the environment healthy. At a time of unprecedented change, one certainty holds firm and true – our nation's most valuable natural resource must be preserved.

Thank you for this opportunity to present this testimony today.

Encl. "Appendix A": May 17, 2021 Western Agriculture and Conservation Alliance Letter to Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and House Committee on Natural Resources

**Appendix “A”: WACC Letter**



May 17, 2021

**Western Agriculture and Conservation Coalition**

Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works  
Chairman Thomas Carper, Ranking Member Shelley Moore Capito

Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Chairman Joe Manchin, Ranking Member John Barrasso

House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
Chairman Peter DeFazio, Ranking Member Sam Graves

House Committee on Natural Resources  
Chairman Raul Grijalva, Ranking Member Bruce Westerman

**Re: WACC—Enact Western Water Infrastructure Priorities this Year**

Dear Chairmen and Ranking Members,

The Western Agriculture and Conservation Coalition (WACC) urges your committees to enact legislation this year that invests in western water infrastructure that supports our working lands and our rivers. Our group has been working together for almost 10 years to develop the programs for such investments that meet the needs of diverse stakeholders and that will be durable through the passage of time. We look forward to working with you all to create effective infrastructure investments to meet the challenges of extended drought and water scarcity for both producers and fish and wildlife.

The WACC was formed in February 2012 to support the common interests of agriculture, conservation, and other interests tied to resources on behalf of a viable and sustainable rural West. No other national coalition combines industry and conservation interests to advocate for resource sustainability for all. We believe that unless agricultural producers and conservation come together, the public policies and resource management strategies necessary to maintain a viable and sustainable rural West will be impossible to achieve. In the context of western water, this means the WACC supports multi-stakeholder processes to address basin-scale water scarcity conflicts. To make such efforts successful, the WACC urges you to support investments in irrigation and municipal water infrastructure that provide important co-benefits of enhanced drought resilience and aquatic habitat. Below, we detail ways to make these essential and successful western water infrastructure investments.

## **1. Invest in Multi-Benefit Irrigation Infrastructure Repair and Modernization.**

The WACC supports increased investment in irrigation infrastructure projects that not only provide needed upgrades to aging water-delivery systems, but that can also enhance stream flows for better conveyance of surface water to points of diversion and better aquatic habitat. Our water supply and delivery systems are not getting any younger, and in some cases are becoming less reliable without significant additional investment in rehabilitation and upgrades. Congress recently authorized an aging infrastructure revolving account at Treasury as a way to provide affordable financing to fund such projects that can help keep our water flowing to farms and ranches across the West as well as providing helping to protect the environment through more efficient and modernized infrastructure.

WACC members' deep experience in multi-benefit water delivery infrastructure projects have led them to emphasize **five keys to unlocking multi-benefit infrastructure**:

- **Define Shovel-Ready** such that it includes projects that can proceed to construction between 1-3 years from date of project application so that the best projects have time for project permitting and final design work to incorporate co-benefits such as improved streamflows, fish-friendly hydropower, or co-locating fiber optic cable along ditch easements;
- **Invest in Project Planning** for some projects so that project planning dollars enable projects that meet high goals for providing multiple benefits through water infrastructure projects;
- **Provide Higher Federal Cost-Share** for those best-in-class projects to produce benefits such as burying energy transmission lines along with buried pipe in order to reduce wildfire risk from exposed lines;
- **Delay Match Repayment** for the non-federal share over a decade, creating a revolving fund of incoming reimbursement dollars for federal funds advanced to cover full project costs initially, to enable support for additional projects over time; and
- **Coordinate Permitting across Federal Agencies** and facilitate state and federal agency coordination to advance project planning and execution.

Examples of WACC members implementing these principles include the Three Sisters Irrigation District (TSID) piping 55 of 64 miles of canal, installing a fish screen, building fish-friendly hydropower, and permanently returning 34 cubic feet per second (cfs) to the creek so

that salmon and steelhead can swim through Sisters, Oregon for the first time since 1885. Agricultural benefits from TSID's modernization [story](#) include drastically-lower pumping costs, high-efficiency sprinklers, reliable water delivery, higher crop yields, and generation of 4 million kilowatt hours of green energy. Another example is the ambitious fish screen to allow the return of native Lahontan cutthroat trout to their historic spawning grounds, a \$34-million Bureau of Reclamation partnership with WACC-member Farmers Conservation Alliance completed in just one year, as described in this [Derby Dam Fish Screen Video](#).

## **2. Invest in Municipalities' Water Efficiency, Re-use, Recycling, and Conservation.**

Reducing consumptive water use ("water conservation") is one of the most cost-effective actions that can positively affect water supply stability and is one of the best tools for meeting the growing water demand of expanding western municipalities. There is broad consensus that optimizing and reducing demand for municipal, institutional and industrial (M&I) water use is critical to ensuring that limited water supplies can equitably meet the needs of people, agriculture, business, and nature. Water conservation needs to continue to be aggressively pursued in conjunction with other actions, such as water re-use and recycling, including capture and aquifer recharge of storm water, where such actions do not harm downstream water uses or natural flows. New funding will be needed to kick-start new water recycling, reuse and desalination projects, where appropriate, and currently being studied or that are ready for construction. Making municipal water use more efficient increases the reliability of water supplies for multiple uses, benefitting agriculture and balancing environmental needs.

## **3. Invest in Water Supply Security through Watershed Restoration and Hydrologic Function on Public and Private Lands.**

Drought resilience and flood-risk reduction start with intact hydrologic processes and healthy forest conditions at the landscape scale. This requires investment in watershed restoration projects that re-connect incised stream channels to their historic floodplains, restore riparian wetlands, wet meadows, and riparian corridors. The [story](#) of Cedar Creek on the Lolo National Forest in Montana demonstrates that restoration is not only good for watershed health and water security, but like irrigation infrastructure projects, it invests in local jobs and rural communities. Trout Unlimited's restoration of Cedar Creek put 96 percent of the \$486,033 budget to local firms, who put a dozen people to work on the job. All fuel, grass seed, and road gravel were purchased locally. Investment in such projects is critical not only to drought resilience and flood-risk reduction, but also for local communities and their small businesses, workers, and families.

## **4. Invest in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Water Storage.**

Environmentally and hydrologically sound investments in new water storage—both surface water and groundwater will be needed to adapt to a changing hydrology and develop usable and sustainable supplies to meet growing demands for water. We believe that water storage projects should be geared to local circumstances and needs. In some cases, storage projects will be above ground, in others they will be below ground. Additionally, some will be traditional construction using American steel and concrete, while others will be 'green' natural infrastructure projects - all dependent on the wide variety of local needs in place across the West. Natural infrastructure can be used alone or in combination with structurally engineered approaches to provide cost effective water storage that achieves multiple benefits. The

strategic investment and use of natural infrastructure investments that uses, restores, or emulates natural ecological processes can help to conserve and restore ecosystem functions, enhance watershed resiliency in the face of increasing drought and wildfire risks, improve water quality, and reduce climate risks to communities. Congress should also authorize a cost-shared funding program similar to the Water Infrastructure for the Nation (WIIN) Act that can help provide important timely federal matching funding for environmentally sound and collaboratively driven water supply and storage projects across the West. Additionally, we urge Congress to look for ways to reduce, simplify, or eliminate procedural requirements for project approval that do little to change or improve the environmental consequences constructing or operating the projects.

## **Conclusion**

In announcing the American Jobs Plan, President Biden acknowledged the deep drought that Western communities are facing. The President also indicated a desire to ensure that disadvantaged communities are not ignored. We agree with both of those thoughts and there is perhaps no better way to help address disadvantaged rural communities in the West than to support a vigorous water infrastructure investment. Rural communities in the West have been impacted by changing weather conditions and been ravaged by the twin horrors of drought and wildfire. These communities are often ignored and under pressure from larger population centers in a growing tensions over water supplies. A vigorous water infrastructure portfolio with multiple aspects- as we suggest above- would go a long way toward helping the short and long-term stability of these communities. In the short-term well-paying jobs would materialize often resulting in immediate benefits. Over the long-term the types of projects we have described above can lead to stabilizing a community with benefits spread out to all of its inhabitants as well as the natural environment in which they live.

The WACC is particularly well-suited to your assist committees achieve goals around water sustainability for working lands and western rivers. We would like to meet with you to discuss our recommendations for water infrastructure investment.

Do not hesitate to contact the WACC Director, Jeff Eisenberg, if you wish to discuss this further. He can be reached at [jeffeisenberg@rockspringrs.com](mailto:jeffeisenberg@rockspringrs.com), and 571-355-3073.

Yours truly,

CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURAL IRRIGATION ASSOCIATION  
CALIFORNIA FARM BUREAU  
ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND  
FAMILY FARM ALLIANCE  
FARMERS CONSERVATION ALLIANCE  
IRRIGATION ASSOCIATION  
MONTANA STOCKGROWERS ASSOCIATION  
NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY  
OREGON WATER RESOURCES CONGRESS  
PUBLIC LANDS COUNCIL  
TROUT UNLIMITED  
WESTERN GROWERS  
WYOMING STOCKGROWERS ASSOCIATION