

**Opening Statement**  
**The Honorable Cliff Bentz**  
**Ranking Member**  
**House Waters, Oceans and Wildlife Subcommittee**  
**Oversight Hearing on the Colorado River, Part 2**  
**October 20, 2021**

Today marks the second hearing on the important topic of drought in the seven state Colorado River basin. We heard last week from federal, tribal and state witnesses whereas today we hear from water managers, farmers and ranchers and others who are experiencing the firsthand impacts of drought. Some of the witnesses here today are literally on the front lines of the devastating drought. In the cases of water managers, they answer to their ratepayers and their boards and in the cases of farmers and ranchers, they have to put food on their own table while providing agricultural commodities for the rest of America. And, as we heard last week and as we will hear today, they and most everyone else are concerned that another year of this drought will make matters exponentially worse.

The issues facing the Colorado River Basin are identical to what communities throughout much of the West are experiencing. As I indicated last week, the development of the Colorado River has helped create the vast cities of Los Angeles, Phoenix, Salt Lake City and Denver and its hydropower historically has been a cheaper, renewable alternative to fossil energy for the over 4 million electricity customers in the basin. The River also irrigates nearly 5.5 million acres of farmland, providing an assortment of crops that have created a massive regional agricultural economy. As we heard from nearly everyone last week and what we will hear today is that the math is no longer adding up because of a 20-year long drought. The question then is over what to do about it, both short-term and long-term?

From a historical perspective, the states, their constituencies and the federal government have managed to find agreement on Colorado River matters, even on endangered species programs. In fact, they are now living under their agreed upon Drought Contingency Plans that were enacted in the last Congress. While the Drought Contingency Plans and other matters expire in 2026, the states and other stakeholders are beginning the process to find resolution beyond that time-frame and we heard general words such as the need for “collaboration” and “cooperation” last week to that end. In the meantime, the states, the water users, the hydropower interests, tribes and others are grappling with the reality of dealing with shortages in this year, potentially next and beyond. Today’s witnesses will touch on these matters.

Certainly, one message that a drought should send loud and clear to everyone is that we need to manage our forests better. A healthy forest means a healthy watershed and more water for other uses.

Mr. Pat O’ Toole, who is literally on the ground living this on a daily basis on his working ranch in Wyoming and Colorado, will tell us firsthand that forest and rangeland restoration can provide

some water supply solutions. Mr. O' Toole, Mr. Tom Davis and others will also address what's called "demand management", which could end up being water re-allocated from agriculture to other purposes. As we heard last week, this could have a negative impact on rural communities and could end up harming those downstream who rely on agricultural return flows.

The fact is that there are no easy, simple solutions here. It will take everyone in the region once again to roll up their sleeves and find solutions. Today's debate is another good start.

I appreciate everyone participating in today's hearing, look forward to the testimony and yield back.