



**Testimony of Samantha R. Barncastle  
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**Before the  
Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife  
and Fisheries  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C.**

**Legislative Hearing on H.R. 338, the *Every Drop Counts Act*  
November 19, 2025**

Dear Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Family Farm Alliance (Alliance), thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony today on the *Every Drop Counts Act* (H.R. 338), introduced by Congressmen Jim Costa, Russ Fulcher and David Valadao. H.R. 338 would reauthorize and modify the Bureau of Reclamation's (Reclamation's) Small Storage Program to increase the size cap for groundwater recharge projects. The bill also provides additional eligibility criteria, such as aquifer stabilization, to ensure more groundwater projects are eligible for funding and are incentivized to recharge depleted aquifers. The Alliance strongly supports H.R. 338, and we thank Reps. Costa, Fulcher and Valadao for their leadership on this important bill.

### **About the Family Farm Alliance**

The 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.

It takes water to grow our food in the West. When water supplies fall short, it sets off a cascade of food-related challenges, including higher prices for consumers. Farmers across the West depend on both surface and groundwater to irrigate their crops. When surface water is plentiful, it's the go-to resource. But in times of scarcity, groundwater (where available) can become the lifeline that sustains agriculture, and in turn, the nation's food supply.

## **Sustainable Groundwater Management Practices and Local Solutions**

Western farmers have long recognized the importance of managing groundwater wisely. The story of groundwater and food production in the West is one of resilience, innovation, and adapting to sustainable management. Here are just a few examples from a handful of Western states.

### **Arizona**

In Arizona, a state equally reliant on agriculture as a large part of their economy, farmers have implemented water-saving practices such as drip irrigation and soil moisture monitoring. The state's 1980 Groundwater Management Act was one of the first comprehensive efforts in the nation to regulate groundwater use. It mandates strict controls on groundwater pumping, with agricultural users leading the charge in implementing water conservation technologies. These efforts are bolstered by leveraging surface water supplies from the Central Arizona Project during wet years for groundwater recharge, ensuring a balanced and sustainable approach to water use. In certain rural areas of the state, stakeholders are looking for locally based solutions to deal with currently unregulated groundwater pumping. Arizona agriculture is taking a lead in these discussions to ensure continued viability for rural economies. Arizona's farmers continue to lead in water efficiency, demonstrating that sustainable agriculture is not just a goal but a reality in the desert climate.

### **California**

The Central Valley in California is a shining example of agricultural success, where hundreds of food and fiber crops are cultivated on over 7 million acres, including fruits, vegetables, nuts, dairy, and beef. This incredible productivity is a testament to efficient water use and advanced irrigation technologies that ensure every drop counts. However, in the absence of once reliable surface water supplies provided by the federal Central Valley Project (CVP), many of California's farmers over the past 25 years have been forced to rely on pumping groundwater from underlying aquifers. Ironically, one of the original purposes of the CVP was to shift San Joaquin Valley well users away from groundwater by developing and delivering surface water supplies. Replacing surface water irrigation with groundwater pumping imposes a "double whammy" on the underlying water resource. Not only is groundwater being used in place of surface water, the recharge once provided by surface water application is also lost.

Westlands Water District has long been served by the CVP and is actively engaged in groundwater recharge projects. Between March 2023 and April 2024, when surface water from flooding winter

storms was plentiful, the District recharged nearly 400,000 acre-feet of water, far surpassing its original goal of 200,000 acre-feet for the year. Prioritizing groundwater recharge allows Westlands to not only store and preserve water but also strengthens the sustainability of water supplies in the San Joaquin Valley.

In Ventura County, United Water Conservation District's (UWCD) Oxnard Basin over the past two years has ranked first in the State for groundwater recharge, according to the California Department of Water Resources' (DWR) 2025 Semi-Annual Groundwater Conditions Update. Beyond the Oxnard Basin, UWCD manages six additional groundwater basins throughout the Santa Clara River Valley. Its efforts support water reliability for agriculture, industry, and more than 400,000 residents in Ventura County and beyond.

During Water Year 2024, UWCD successfully replenished 80,533 acre-feet of groundwater, or more than 26 billion gallons, across 57,888 acres, resulting in a recharge rate of 1.39 acre-feet per acre, or nearly half a million gallons per acre, the highest in California. While Water Year 2023 was historically wet, 2024 presented less predictable conditions, making the capture and storage of available flows even more critical. UWCD's ability to efficiently harness stormwater, surface water and imported water; and direct it into managed aquifer recharge underscores the UWCD's role in strengthening regional and statewide water security.

These types of recharge projects are crucial for complying with California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), which aims to restore and maintain healthy groundwater levels. By helping to refill and replenish aquifers, these initiatives are pivotal to the long-term viability of the region's water resources. Groundwater levels are stabilizing in many parts of the state, and the sustainability of water use among farmers is improving.

## **Idaho**

In Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer (ESPA) and elsewhere in Idaho, the state has developed a fairly robust program of managed aquifer recharge (MAR) and aquifer-stabilization efforts to counter long-term groundwater decline. The Idaho Water Resource Board (IWRB), working with the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR) and local irrigation/canal companies, has created legal mechanisms—such as “Aquifer Recharge Districts”—that allow petitioning water-right holders to form districts for managing recharge facilities. The IWRB also runs an “Aquifer Stabilization Program” to study and finance projects aimed at slowing the rate of aquifer decline.

A major focus has been the ESPA in southern Idaho: the aquifer underlies about 10,000 to 11,000 square miles, supplies irrigation, municipalities and ecological flows, and is hydraulically connected to the Snake River. The managed recharge program there began in pilot form around 2009 and went full-scale by 2014, with an original target to recharge roughly 250,000 acre-feet per year. For example, in one winter the state achieved about 317,000 acre-feet of recharge.

## **New Mexico**

In New Mexico, where stormwater is abundant in certain months of the year as a result of high intensity thunderstorms that occur during the annual monsoon season, the only real opportunities for recharge in an otherwise arid state lacking in surface water, comes from capture and storage of the stormwater when it is available.

This water source is unlike snowpack. Snowpack trickles down the system slowly, allowing maximum opportunity for the surrounding landscape to absorb what is needed. In New Mexico, however, the wild and torrential arroyos that carry water from high intensity storms that occur on the high mesas or mountain ranges, are known for their deadliness because of how quickly water and debris rushes through them. They are also the most natural mechanism for recharge. To make recharge work in a scenario of fast moving, debris laden water, small storage reservoirs (also referred to as reregulating ponds) may be strategically placed to not only protect local communities, but to capture the water as it rolls through the desert landscape, slowing it down, allowing debris to settle, before it is ultimately able to be either delivered for agriculture use, and thus on farm recharge, or otherwise left in the reregulating pond to allow for direct recharge to local aquifers.

These high intensity storms are capable of dropping a few thousand acre-feet of water on a local landscape within hours, and while it is not easy to capture stormwater, it is becoming New Mexico's ticket to survival. For many years groundwater withdrawals have increased in New Mexico due to the lack of snowpack and resulting surface water, but groundwater recharge projects focused on capturing and using stormwater have proliferated, because the need is clear – more small storage allows for more groundwater recharge, and a longer life for New Mexico's aquifers.

## **Oregon**

Recharge projects in Oregon vary widely in scale, geologic setting (alluvial vs basalt), objective (groundwater supply, instream flow support, temperature amelioration), and method (spreading basins, galleries, injection wells).

In the transboundary basin shared by Oregon and Washington, decades of groundwater-level decline and over-appropriated surface water created low summer streamflow and degraded fish habitat. The local non-profit Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council and regional partners implemented dozens of infiltration basins and infiltration galleries starting in the early 2000s to recharge the alluvial aquifer underlying the valley floor. For example, the "Johnson site" (near Milton-Freewater, OREGON) includes 10 spreading basins and 3 infiltration galleries, and from 2004 to 2020 had recharged over 51,000 acre-feet. The main objectives: increase groundwater storage, sustain summer baseflows (which help fish habitat) by reducing groundwater losses to streams, and reduce pumping pressure on surface water/groundwater systems.

In other parts of northeastern Oregon (such as the Umatilla Basin), deep basalt aquifers underlie alluvial systems but have relatively low vertical recharge rates and long residence times (thousands of years) for water to move through. Projects here have explored using artificial recharge and aquifer storage and recovery to inject or infiltrate water into basalt or deeper aquifer zones to buffer irrigation supply or offset summer pumping.

The Walla Walla project stands out as a successful example of using infiltration basins to recharge an alluvial aquifer tied to surface-water/groundwater interaction and fish habitat benefit. Projects in more geologically challenging settings (e.g., basalt aquifers) illustrate the importance of detailed hydrogeologic understanding—recharge is not equally feasible everywhere.

The use of groundwater in these Western regions is governed by a deep understanding of sustainability, driven by necessity and innovation. The experience of our members suggests that localized, science-based solutions tailored to the unique needs of each region offer the most effective path to sustainable water management. Ongoing research and investment, coupled with sustainable practices and state-level initiatives, can maintain groundwater levels and secure the future of Western agriculture. While challenges remain, the agricultural communities of the Western U.S. are not standing still. Through innovation, collaboration, and sustainable practices, farmers across the West are effectively managing groundwater resources, ensuring a stable food supply, and contributing to the nation's food security. But the resources it will take to finance these small storage opportunities are slim, and the Reclamation Small Storage Program has and will continue to provide much needed cost sharing opportunities to ensure these problem-solving small storage projects are constructed.

### **Previous Alliance Engagement with the Small Storage Program**

Reclamation's Small Storage Program was authorized by sections 40901(1) and 40903 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) to promote Federal assistance to enhance water storage opportunities for future generations in support of the Department of the Interior's priorities. The Family Farm Alliance played a pivotal leadership role in securing this and other Western water infrastructure provisions within the IIJA of 2021. Serving as a key convener and advocate, the Alliance helped organize and lead a steering committee representing over 230 organizations—including agricultural, water, and conservation groups—that collectively urged Congress to prioritize water investments for the Western U.S. Through coordinated outreach, testimony, and coalition-building, we advanced the case for modernizing aging water delivery systems, expanding water storage and conveyance projects, improving drought resilience, and funding rural water and ecosystem restoration initiatives. These efforts were instrumental in ensuring that the final IIJA included approximately \$8.3 billion in Western water provisions, directed to Reclamation for projects addressing long-term water reliability and infrastructure renewal, including authorization and funding for the Small Storage Program.

In 2022, we submitted formal written testimony to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in support of S. 4176, which also addressed small water storage project size criteria.

The small storage and groundwater storage grant program created in the IIJA was limited to water storage projects that were between 2,000 acre-feet and 30,000 acre-feet in size. It became evident that the 2,000-acre-foot minimum size would eliminate small regulating reservoirs on water delivery canals (typically sized between 100 and 500 acre-feet) that essentially conserve much more water than they can physically store through providing efficiencies in the operation of a canal system. S. 4176 reduced the minimum size of an eligible small surface and groundwater storage facility from 2,000- to 200-acre-feet, making these small regulating reservoirs eligible for grant funding under the program. The bill would also have expanded eligibility for any remaining funding provided by the IIJA for rehabilitation of additional Cary Act Projects in the West.

Although S. 4176 itself didn't become law, its key idea to lower the Small Storage Program eligibility floor from 2,000 acre-feet to 200 acre-feet was folded into the year-end omnibus: the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023* (P.L. 117-328). Reclamation now implements the Small Storage Program "in accordance with the IIJA, as amended by P.L. 117-328," requiring projects to be 200–30,000 acre-feet—a direct reflection of S. 4176's intent.

H.R. 338 – the bill under consideration today – also seeks to modify capacity criteria for the Small Storage Program, this time, with a focus on groundwater recharge. It raises the size limits for qualifying projects — up to 150,000 acre-feet of annual recharge over a project's life. This change makes more recharge projects eligible, which were previously too large to qualify under the "small storage" program.

### **Support for H.R. 338**

The *Every Drop Counts Act* provides meaningful and timely improvements to the Small Storage Program. Specifically, the bill:

- Reauthorizes the Small Storage Program at Reclamation for an additional five years beyond its November 2026 sunset date.
- Expands small groundwater storage project eligibility by increasing the allowable maximum size of groundwater recharge projects — from its original 30,000 acre-feet to 150,000 acre-feet of average annual recharge capacity.
- Clarifies that eligible projects include both surface water and groundwater storage, as well as conveyance systems that move water to or from storage sites.
- Protects state water rights and laws, ensuring the Act does not override existing state or federal water law, interstate compacts, or treaty obligations

These are pragmatic, cost-effective updates that make it easier for local water agencies and private landowners to partner with the Bureau of Reclamation on small surface and groundwater storage projects that build long-term resilience against drought. We particularly appreciate the bill's emphasis on local control and its explicit protection of state water rights, ensuring that this program supports — rather than supplants — local and regional water management efforts.

For our members, reliable water supply is not an abstract policy issue — it's a matter of survival. Groundwater recharge projects, small surface storage facilities, and enhanced technical assistance from Reclamation can help:

- Stabilize and enhance declining aquifers, protecting wells, rural communities, and domestic water users.
- Capture high-flow events, turning flood risk into usable water storage by utilizing small, strategic surface and groundwater storage opportunities.
- Enhance long-term drought resilience, providing security for farmers and ranchers facing unpredictable surface water allocations.
- Preserve working landscapes and food security, ensuring that California and the West can continue to feed the nation and the world.

This bill is a practical, bipartisan step forward towards these ends.

### Conclusion

Much of the Western United States is facing unprecedented water supply challenges. Chronic drought, regulatory constraints, and declining snowpack and groundwater tables have put enormous pressure on farmers, rural communities, and ecosystems. Reclamation's water management system — once the envy of the world — now struggles to provide adequate and predictable supplies for agriculture, cities, and the environment. Truly — every drop counts. The Alliance believes that targeted investments in groundwater recharge, small-scale surface water storage, and technical assistance can help secure a sustainable water future without the need for massive new federal spending or new regulatory burdens.

In closing, the Family Farm Alliance strongly supports H.R. 338, the *Every Drop Counts Act*. We urge swift passage of this bill to help ensure that Western farmers, water managers, and communities have the tools they need to secure a sustainable water future. We thank Representatives Costa, Fulcher and Valadao for their leadership and for continuing to prioritize water solutions that unite — rather than divide — our regions and stakeholders.

Thank you for this opportunity to present this testimony today. I stand ready to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,



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Executive Director