

Testimony of Christine Compton before the
House Natural Resources Committee: Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
HR 338, Every Drop Counts Act
November 19, 2025

Thank you, Chair Hageman and Ranking Member Hoyle for scheduling this hearing and for inviting me to testify in support of H.R.338, the *Every Drop Counts Act*. I also wanted to thank Representative Jim Costa for his unwavering support in this effort; Representative David Valadao for his support, not only of this effort, but for the Kern Fan Groundwater Storage Project; and Representative Adam Gray who is a cosponsor of the bill.

My name is Christine Compton, and I am the Director of Strategic Communications and Advocacy, and the Deputy General Counsel for the Irvine Ranch Water District.

The Irvine Ranch Water District, or IRWD, is a local government that provides retail water service to approximately 20 percent of Orange County, California. We provide 445,000 residents and a daytime population of roughly 600,000 with high-quality drinking water, reliable sewage collection and treatment, ground-breaking recycled water, and environmentally sound urban runoff treatment services.

We are known for our leadership in water resource management and planning— especially in the areas of water supply diversification, resiliency, efficiency, infrastructure planning, and recycled water. In fact, the purple pipe most commonly associated with non-potable recycled water started as IRWD purple, as the color was selected by a staff member in the 1980s.

Customers Expect Water Reliability

Our customers— as do most Americans— expect that water will come out of their tap when they turn it on, regardless of weather, drought, or the most recent natural disaster.

Ensuring a reliable water supply for our customers is one of IRWD's primary missions. This is why IRWD has worked tirelessly to create one of the most diverse water supply portfolios in Southern California. Today, about 85 percent of our water comes from local sources, and more than 50 percent comes from reused water.

Even with this high level of diversification, we realized that to achieve the water reliability our customers expect, we needed to do more to capture water when it is available and store it for drier times.

Groundwater Storage and Water Banking

We are doing just that in partnerships with others and have developed groundwater banking projects in the Central Valley. IRWD's partnership with the Rosedale-Rio Bravo Water Storage District in Kern County is a good example.

IRWD and Rosedale have been working together for many years to capture and store low-cost flood flows. We are capturing water when it is plentiful and banking it in the underground aquifer for later use— similar to saving money in the bank.

The partnership has resulted in significant benefits for both IRWD’s urban customers and Rosedale’s agricultural community. Our water banks provide an urban-agricultural-environmental triple win— water is stored for agricultural needs, opportunities are created to address environmental water requirements, and the banked water provides reliability for urban customers.

Building on our joint success, IRWD and the Rosedale-Rio Bravo Water Storage District have designed and are developing the Kern Fan Groundwater Storage Project. IRWD and Rosedale are also partnering to develop the South Valley Conveyance and Storage Project (South Valley Project), a new regional water bank in Kern County, which will continue their joint legacy and bring regional reliability benefits to both Kern and Orange Counties. The projects’ joint triple-win benefits are so great that IRWD and Rosedale’s partnership is only one of a small handful of storage projects funded by the State of California’s Water Storage Investment Project. (*For more on the two projects, please see Attachment 1.*)

Small Storage Program and Every Drop Counts

The Bureau of Reclamation’s Small Storage Program has been a very useful funding tool for water agencies developing local and regional water storage projects across the West. While the Program is a relatively new competitive grant program, it provides up to a 25 percent cost-share grant for selected surface and groundwater storage projects between 200 and 30,000 acre-feet that will increase water storage or move water to or from a storage project.

While the Small Storage Program has been a helpful resource for groundwater projects like those in Kern County, the Bureau of Reclamation has unfortunately interpreted current law in a way that unrealistically limits its application to groundwater storage and banking projects.

The current program uses the volume of storage created as a pass/fail test. This works well for surface storage, but not for groundwater storage because with groundwater storage there is no new storage capacity created. It is using the natural storage of the groundwater aquifer, which can neither be created nor expanded. Instead, a more appropriate measurement for the size of a groundwater storage project is its average annual recharge capacity because this is the true limit of how much water can be stored by a project.

The *Every Drop Counts Act*, in recognizing this, will make it easier for the Bureau to work effectively with local water agency sponsors to support groundwater storage and aquifer stabilization projects because the bill draws a bright line between the criteria for small surface water projects and small groundwater storage projects, and tailors the eligibility criteria to better reflect the differing capabilities and needs of these two categories of water storage projects. The legislation will put into place an average annual recharge cap for groundwater storage and add aquifer stabilization as an eligible criterion by which a groundwater project may apply for funding.

We believe these changes are fully consistent with the original Congressional intent of the program, to provide a useful increment of federal support for the small water storage projects that make sense for local communities to pursue. Tailoring the Small Storage Program in this way would strengthen the program so that more groundwater storage projects across the Western United States can participate.

Thank you for your time today. I want to again thank Representative Costa, Representative Valadao, Representative Gray and the other cosponsors of this important bipartisan legislation. As I've described in this testimony, groundwater storage and recharge projects are an increasingly important strategy for water agencies like IRWD and others, and they help all of us – agricultural and urban water agencies alike – to better prepare for drier years. *Every Drop Counts* will make an important change to a vital program, and we encourage the Committee to report the bill favorably.

Thank you, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

Attachment 1

Kern Fan Groundwater Storage Project

Building on our joint success, IRWD and the Rosedale-Rio Bravo Water Storage District have designed and are developing the Kern Fan Groundwater Storage Project. This project will provide water supply reliability and emergency response benefits for both agencies and their partners through better capture, storage, and management of surplus supplies from the State Water Project while also providing significant environmental benefits for Chinook salmon. In fact, the project's triple-win benefits are so great that it is one of only a small handful of storage projects funded by the State of California's Water Storage Investment Project.

South Valley Conveyance and Storage Project

IRWD and Rosedale are also partnering to develop the South Valley Conveyance and Storage Project (South Valley Project), a new regional water bank in Kern County. The South Valley Project will create new groundwater storage and construct new, much-needed conveyance facilities that will add capacity within the region to maximize the capture of flood flows for storage within the Central Valley.

The South Valley Project will:

- Create approximately 300 acres of new critical intermittent wetland habitat along the Pacific Flyway;
- Improve water supply reliability, including during drought periods and emergencies;
- Enhance groundwater levels; thereby improving long-term groundwater sustainability in the Kern County Subbasin, which benefits agricultural and rural communities;
- Help achieve compliance with and support the goals of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act;
- Provide a firm water supply for the preservation of existing agricultural land in the Central Valley; and
- Alleviate existing conveyance capacity constraints during periods of high demand within the Central Valley, allowing for additional water to be stored during periods when excess water supplies are available.

Upon project completion, IRWD and Rosedale will integrate South Valley Project operations with IRWD's and Rosedale's other water banking project operations.