



## Western Governors' Association Policy Resolution 08-14

### *Future Management of Drought in the West*

#### **A. BACKGROUND**

1. Over the last decade, several severe and long-term droughts have occurred in the Western United States.
2. Severe drought conditions across the nation and in particular in the West have created life-threatening situations, as well as financial burdens for both government and individuals.
3. Extremely dry conditions have led to numerous forest and rangeland fires, burning hundreds of thousands of acres of land, destroying homes and communities, and eliminating critical habitats for wildlife and grazing lands for livestock. The subsequent ash and sediment loading threatens the health of our streams. In addition to the millions of board-feet of timber lost, these fires have cost hundreds of millions of dollars to fight and have put thousands of lives at risk.
4. The droughts have caused shortages of grain and other agricultural products resulting in soaring prices that will be passed on to consumers. In addition, deteriorating soil conditions and lack of forage are devastating the farm and ranching communities. The droughts have negatively affected livestock market prices and caused the premature sell-offs of herds.
5. The droughts have threatened municipal water supplies, causing many communities to develop new water management plans which institute water restrictions and other water conservation measures.
6. Drought causes social, economic and environmental consequences including negative effects on commerce and industry, tourism, air, water and other natural resources, and quality of life for our citizens, ranging from limits on recreational opportunities to loss of employment.
7. The fiscal impacts of the drought on individuals and governments are significant. According to the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the federal government spends on average \$6-8 billion per year on drought. The most devastating of these was the 1988 drought in the central and eastern U.S. which caused severe losses to agriculture and related industries totaling \$40 billion and an estimated 5,000-10,000 deaths.

8. Unlike other natural disasters such as floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes, the effects of drought creep up over a period of several years. Federal drought programs historically have been slow and fragmented, and have never been guided by a coordinated, integrated national policy. In contrast, federal programs to address other natural disasters are well coordinated under the Stafford by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), emphasizing mitigation and preparedness.
9. The National Drought Mitigation Center dubs the current approach to drought as the “hydro-illogical cycle” This cycle is characterized by the way we ignore water shortages until the situation becomes dire. We then yell for help and beg Congress for emergency funding. But as soon as it rains, we forget that there was ever a problem and the cycle starts all over again.
10. In the 1996 report by the Western Governors’ Association, Drought Response Action Plan, the Governors recommended developing “a national drought policy or framework that integrates actions and responsibilities among all levels of government.” This led to the creation of the National Drought Policy Commission (NDPC), which issued its report to Congress and the President with recommendations for a national drought policy in May of 2000.
11. During the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, the WGA Drought Working Group developed draft legislation based on the Governors’ and NDPC’s reports. “The National Drought Preparedness Act of 2002” was introduced in May 2002 by Senators Domenici (R-NM) and Baucus (D-MT) in the Senate, and a companion bill by Rep. Hastings (D-FL) and Rep. Rehberg (R-MT) in the House. The bills were introduced again in the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, and as S. 802 and H.R. 1386 in the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress.
12. In July 2003, the U.S. hosted the first Earth Observation Summit. More than 30 countries and over 20 international organizations came together to discuss the need for integrating surface, airborne and space-based Earth observations. The summit sparked the formation of an international Group on Earth Observations (GEO), charged with developing a 10-year implementation plan for the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), a mechanism for linking the individual networks of satellites, ocean buoys, weather stations and other instruments scattered across the globe.
13. On June 21, 2004, the Western Governors unanimously adopted a report developed in partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) entitled, *Creating a Drought Early Warning System for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS)*. The report describes a vision for improving drought monitoring and forecasting. In November 2007, Congress passed and the President signed legislation authorizing NIDIS. As the lead federal agency, NOAA has subsequently established a NIDIS Implementation Office to create NIDIS.
14. Following the first Earth Observation Summit, the U.S. established the Interagency Working Group on Earth Observations (IWGEO), structured to mirror the work of GEO but on a national level. The IWGEO (now the U.S. Group on Earth Observations) has

drafted a strategic plan for the U.S. Integrated Earth Observation System (IEOS), the U.S. contribution to GEOSS. The IEOS Strategic Plan recognizes the WGA report on NIDIS, and it identifies NIDIS as one of six “near-term opportunities.”

15. Large, damaging wildfires are costly to suppress, and they can also cause severe economic impacts to communities and state economies. Based on the experience over the last decade, 98% of wildfires are successfully extinguished during initial attack, however 80% of wildfire costs are incurred when managing the 2% of wildfires which grow into large fires. Over the 5-year period from 2000-2004, federal wildfire suppression costs averaged \$1.16 billion per year and are rising.
16. Currently the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has authority to reimburse states for pre-positioning to combat wildfires. Yet, this reimbursement is available for only two-weeks following a FEMA declaration. Further, this current authority is actually a disincentive to states. When states proactively and effectively extinguish a fire before it becomes an emergency, they do not qualify for reimbursement. Conversely, when states efforts fail at initial containment and a large fire ensues, they are rewarded by FEMA.
17. In order to effectively and cost-efficiently manage and suppress wildfires, including through the use of prescribed fire, it is critical that fire managers have timely, accurate and detailed information regarding current and predicted fire weather and associated climate services. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA’s) National Weather Service (NWS), through its fire weather program, is the national agency in the Department of Commerce (DOC) which provides this critical information. The federal wildland fire agencies’ Predictive Services integrate weather, climate and fuels information into fire environment products for the allocation and prioritization of fire management resources. The fire environment refers to those elements comprising fire meteorology, fire climatology, fire danger, fire behavior and fuel conditions as derived from weather and climate.

## **B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT**

1. The Western Governors believe that a comprehensive, integrated response to drought emergencies, including mitigation planning, is critical to the social, environmental and economic well-being of the West. Because of the interstate nature of this crisis and its impacts, the Western Governors believe it is important to work together and cooperate with other affected entities to plan for and implement measures that will provide relief from the current drought and increased prevention and preparedness for future drought emergencies.
2. The Governors continue to believe that a comprehensive national policy must be enacted which provides for a coordinated and integrated approach to future drought. Such policy should include the following critical elements:
  - Emphasize Preparedness – The policy must move the country away from the costly,

ad-hoc, and response-oriented approach to drought, and toward a more pro-active approach focused on preparation and planning.

- Improve Delivery of Drought Programs – The policy should designate a lead federal agency for drought, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and it should delineate the roles and responsibilities for coordinating and integrating federal drought assistance programs to ensure the improved and timely delivery of such programs.
  - Facilitate Drought Preparedness Planning – The policy should encourage drought preparedness planning at all levels, including watersheds, and as droughts emerge focus federal funding on the implementation of the preparedness plans in order to proactively mitigate the drought's impacts.
  - Improved Forecasting & Monitoring - The policy should coordinate and integrate a variety of observations, analysis techniques and forecasting methods in a system that would support drought assessment and decision-making at the lowest geopolitical level possible. The improved characterization of current drought conditions and forecasting of future droughts should provide a better basis to “trigger” the implementation of preparedness plans and federal drought assistance.
  - Wildland Fire Pre-Positioning – The Stafford Act should be amended so that FEMA's wildland fire prepositioning program will reimburse states for the costs of pre-positioning firefighting assets from outside their jurisdiction when certain conditions are met.
3. The Governors believe the National Drought Preparedness Act of 2005 embodies the vision for a comprehensive national drought policy as described above. Such legislation should be enacted and implemented without delay. As a nation, we have successfully applied such a proactive policy toward other natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, etc.) through the Stafford Act. It is critical that we also have a comprehensive national policy for drought.
  4. The Governors believe NIDIS will provide water users across the board—farmers, ranchers, utilities, tribes, land managers, business owners, recreationalists, wildlife managers, and decision-makers at all levels of government—with the ability to assess their drought risk in real time and before the onset of drought, in order to make informed and timely decisions that may mitigate a drought's impacts. The Governors urge Congress and the President to provide funding for NIDIS implementation.
  5. The Western Governors strongly support IEOS and GEOSS as effective mechanisms for linking Earth-related data collected by networks of instruments that exist throughout the West, the nation and the world. The Western Governors encourage state and local governments across the West to work together with federal agencies and the private sector—industry, academia and non-government organizations—in developing integrated

observations systems designed to address user needs.

6. Operational fire managers need improved products and services from NOAA's National Weather Service (NWS) which can be seamlessly infused into fire operations decision-making. To ensure the program has proper attention and funding, the Governors urge Congress to legislatively add fire weather including support for wildfire and prescribed fire management to federal, state, and local government agencies as a core mission of NWS and carry it as a funded line item in their appropriations.
7. The Western Governors urge NOAA to:
  - Incorporate a robust national wildfire and prescribed fire weather program into its strategic plan, and its 5 and 20 year research plans, and funding requests.
  - Complete a National Needs Assessment Report, by NOAA's Office of the Federal Coordinator for Meteorology, of federal, state and local fire managers needs for weather information in their wildfire and prescribed fire decision making processes and a framework to meet those needs by the NWS and Predictive Services.
  - Enhance and incorporate the fire weather observational network (RAWS) through agreements with the land management agencies into an integrated surface observing strategy, for example through ISOS and GEOSS.

### **C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE**

1. The Western Governors' Association (WGA) shall post this resolution to its Web site to be referred to and transmitted as necessary.
2. WGA shall continue to lead the effort to enact a new national policy for drought consistent with this resolution.
3. Once a national drought policy is enacted, WGA shall coordinate with the appropriate federal, state, tribal, and local government officials, as well as other entities affected by drought, to implement the new national drought policy.
4. WGA shall continue efforts to establish the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS).
5. WGA will support development of the *U.S. Integrated Earth Observation System (IEOS)* including NIDIS as one of its near-term opportunities. WGA will continue to work closely with U.S. Government efforts to ensure that IEOS and GEOSS meet the information needs of the Western Governors. WGA will share user requirements with the Administration and Congress, as appropriate.

*This resolution was originally adopted in 1999 as WGA Policy Resolution 99-023 and was readopted in 2002 as Policy Resolution 02-10 and in 2005 as 05-12.*

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