



WESTERN GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

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May 10, 2005

The Honorable Saxby Chambliss
Chairman
Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition & Forestry
RSOB, Room 328A
Washington, DC 20510-6000

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition & Forestry
RSOB, Room 328A
Washington, DC 20510-6000

Dear Chairman Chambliss and Senator Harkin:

On April 14, 2005, Senator Domenici and Senator Baucus introduced the *National Drought Preparedness Act of 2005*, S. 802, which was referred to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. The Western Governors' Association strongly supports this bill, and we urge you to schedule a hearing on it as soon as possible. Ultimately, we urge that S. 802 be enacted this session of Congress.

Drought is a complex and widespread natural hazard, affecting more people in the United States than any other natural hazard and accumulating annual estimated losses between \$6 and \$8 billion. The magnitude and complexity of drought hazards have increased in association with growing population, population shifts to drier climates, urbanization, and changes in land and water use.

Although drought visits some part of the country every year and causes billions of dollars in impacts, **there still does not exist a permanent national policy to prepare for and respond to drought disasters**. This lack of a coordinated, integrated federal drought policy causes confusion at the state and local levels and results in actions being taken mainly through special legislation and ad hoc measures, rather than through a systematic and permanent process, as occurs with other natural disasters that fall under the Stafford Act.

The Western Governors believe there is a better way to do business. We advocate the approach taken by the Domenici-Baucus bill, which would establish a comprehensive national drought policy through statutorily authorizing USDA as the lead federal agency for drought, and delineating the responsibility for coordinating and integrating federal drought assistance programs to a National Drought Council. S. 802 would encourage drought preparedness planning at all levels, and, as droughts emerge, would focus federal funding on the implementation of the preparedness plans in order to proactively mitigate the drought's impacts.

The Honorable Saxby Chambliss
The Honorable Tom Harkin
May 10, 2005
Page 2

The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) authorized by the bill would coordinate and integrate a variety of observations, analysis techniques and forecasting methods in a system that will support drought assessment and decision-making at the lowest geopolitical level possible. NIDIS is intended to 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 decisions that may mitigate a drought's impacts.

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 21st Century: The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS)*. The report describes the vision for NIDIS and offers recommendations for its implementation. It is available online at www.westgov.org.


As we approach summer, many of our western states are seeing areas in their fifth, sixth, and seventh straight years of drought. The May 3, 2005, U.S. Drought Monitor designated seven states with "Extreme" drought (Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, South Dakota, and North Dakota). Three of those states (MT, ID, WY) have significant areas in "Exceptional" drought, the worst designation.


The costs of response efforts for this ongoing drought have been staggering. Last September, Congress appropriated \$3.1 billion in disaster relief, primarily agricultural aid. Federal wildfire suppression costs have averaged \$1.16 billion per year since 2000. Additionally, much time and money have gone into trying to address the water conflicts arising in many of the large river systems in the West, including the Missouri River, the Colorado River, the Rio Grande, the Klamath River Basin, and the Snake River Basin.

We believe that enactment of the National Drought Preparedness Act of 2005 would move the country toward a proactive approach that will avoid conflicts and minimize the damage caused by future droughts, thereby saving taxpayers money. 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 high time that we have a comprehensive national policy for drought.

Sincerely,


Mike Rounds
Governor of South Dakota
Lead Governor on Drought


Bill Richardson
Governor of New Mexico
Lead Governor on Drought


Brian Schweitzer
Governor of Montana
Lead Governor on Drought

cc: The Honorable Pete Domenici and the Honorable Max Baucus
Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry