Statement by
THE WESTERN GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

Drought Preparedness
and the National Integrated Drought Information System Act of 2006

Submitted to the
Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Disaster Prevention and Prediction
April 27, 2006

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, the Western Governors' Association commends you for holding this hearing on drought. With this statement, we would like to share with you some of WGA's perspectives and experiences with regard to drought preparedness and the National Integrated Drought Information System Act of 2006.

The Western Governors' Association is an independent, nonprofit organization representing the governors of 19 states, American Samoa, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands. Through their Association, the Western governors identify and address key policy and governance issues in natural resources, the environment, human services, economic development, international relations and public management.

Drought is a normal part of the climate for virtually all regions of the United States, but it is of particular concern in the West, where any interruption of the region's already limited water supplies over extended periods of time can produce devastating impacts. Records indicate that drought occurs somewhere in the West almost every year. However, it is multi-year drought events that are of the greatest concern to the economic and ecological health of Western states.

Water scarcity continually defines and redefines the West. The steady growth that has been characteristic for much of the West today creates increased demands for agricultural, municipal and industrial water supplies. Furthermore, such competing demands as the public's rising concern for meeting "quality of life" and environmental objectives create water supply management challenges in times of normal precipitation. Drought exasperates these challenges.

National Drought Preparedness Act of 2005
During the 1995-1996 drought in the Southwest and southern Great Plains states, WGA created a Drought Working Group, which found that drought is a complex and widespread natural hazard, affecting more people in the United States than any other natural hazard, including hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes, and accumulating annual estimated losses between $6 and $8 billion. The magnitude and complexity of drought hazards have increased 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, <u>there does not exist a permanent national policy to prepare for and respond to drought disasters</u>. At the federal level, droughts have historically been treated as unique,

separate events even though there have been frequent, significant droughts of national consequences over the years. Actions are taken mainly through special legislation and ad hoc measures rather than through a systematic and permanent process, as occurs with other natural disasters. Frequently, federal funding to assist states has been unavailable, or not available in a timely manner.

In the 1996 WGA report *Drought Response Action Plan*, the Governors emphasized the need for incorporating mitigation and preparedness measures in government drought programs, and called for the development of "a national drought policy or framework that integrates actions and responsibilities among all levels of government (federal, tribal, state, regional and local)." Following on this recommendation, Congress enacted the "National Drought Policy Act of 1998, PL 105-109, sponsored by Senator Domenici. The law established an "advisory commission to provide advice and recommendations on the creation of an integrated, coordinated Federal policy designed to prepare and respond to serious drought emergencies." The National Drought Policy Commission's report was issued in May 2000.

Based on the recommendations in the National Drought Policy Commission's report, WGA worked with Senator Domenici and Senator Baucus to develop legislation that would establish a national drought policy. On April 14, 2005, Senators Domenici and Baucus introduced the *National Drought Preparedness Act of 2005*, S. 802.

The Domenici-Baucus bill 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 these plans in order to proactively mitigate the drought's impacts. The bill would also authorize the Drought Assistance Fund, which would allow the federal agencies to proactively implement drought programs, rather than having to wait for an emergency supplemental appropriation.

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.

The Western Governors' Association supports the National Drought Preparedness Act of 2005, and has urged its enactment. The Governors 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.

The National Integrated Drought Information System Act of 2006
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)*. In the report, the Governors conclude that "Recognition of droughts in a timely manner is dependent on our ability to monitor and forecast the diverse physical indicators of drought, as well as relevant economic, social and environmental impacts." The report describes the vision for NIDIS and offers recommendations for its implementation. It is available online at www.westgov.org.

On behalf of the Western Governors' Association, we commend Senator Nelson and Senator Domenici for introducing, "The National Integrated Drought Information System Act of 2006." The Western Governors urge Congress to authorize NIDIS through the Nelson-Domenici bill.

There is broad basis of support for NIDIS beyond the WGA report:

- In its May 2000 report to Congress, the National Drought Policy Commission recommended improved "collaboration among scientists and managers to enhance the effectiveness of observation networks, monitoring, prediction, information delivery, and applied research and to foster public understanding of and preparedness for drought."
- The Department of the Interior's report, *Water 2025: Preventing Crises and Conflict in the West* states, "As part of the effort to establish the National Drought Monitoring Network, Interior believes that one-stop shopping for Western water users on a single government website will aid in problem solving, particularly in critical areas. Such a site can provide information on snow pack, runoff, river operations, forecasting, and drought prediction."
- 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 the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS). The IEOS Strategic Plan identifies the National Integrated Drought Information System as one of six "near-term opportunities."
- In June 2005, the Subcommittee on Disaster Reduction—an element of the President's National Science and Technology Council—issued its report *Grand Challenges for Disaster Reduction.* The report finds "Compared to all natural hazards, droughts are, on average, the leading cause of economic losses." The SDR report states: "The slow onset of drought over space and time can only be identified through the continuous collection of climate and hydrologic data. To enhance decisions and minimize costs, drought warning systems must provide credible and timely drought risk information including drought monitoring and prediction products." The report includes a recommendation to "build and deploy a national instrument system capable of collecting climate and hydrologic data to ensure drought can be identified spatially and temporally, and develop an integrated modeling framework to quantify predictions of drought and drought impacts useful in decision-making."

- The President's FY '07 budget request includes $7.8 billion for NIDIS implementation and support.

The Western Governors believe that improved drought monitoring and forecasting is fundamental to a proactive approach toward drought and water shortages. NIDIS will allow policy-makers and water managers at all levels of the private and public sectors to make more informed and timely decisions about their water resources in order to mitigate or avoid the impacts from droughts. Again, WGA strongly supports the Nelson-Domenici bill, and we urge its enactment this Congress.

Conclusion

As we approach summer, many of our western states—and much of the country—are seeing areas in drought. According to NOAA, about 26 percent of the contiguous U.S. is currently affected by moderate-to-extreme drought. Much of the Southwest had less than normal winter snowpack at the end of March, despite heavy snow during the month of March. Additionally, the January-March period was the fifth warmest ever recorded in the U.S., largely due to a record warm January.

We are already seeing the impacts of drought in 2006. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, there have been 32,988 fires between January 1 and April 24 on 2,195,768 acres. This compares to the 5-year average for this time period of 23,639 fires on 485,308 acres.

We know from our past experiences, the costs of response efforts to drought have been staggering. The estimated cost of the 1988-1989 drought was $39 billion nationwide and was, at the time, the greatest single year hazard-related loss ever recorded. On average, the federal government spends $6-8 billion on drought response. Federal wildfire suppression costs averaged $1.16 billion per year between 2000-2005. 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.

The Western Governors' Association believes that enactment of the National Drought Preparedness Act of 2005 would move the country toward a proactive approach to drought 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 through the Stafford Act. It is high time that we have a comprehensive national policy for drought.

Furthermore, the Western Governors believe that improved drought monitoring and forecasting is fundamental to a proactive approach to addressing not only drought, but water shortages. The National Integrated Drought Information System authorized by the Nelson-Domenici bill will allow policy-makers and water managers at all levels of the private and public sectors to make more informed and timely decisions about water resources in order to mitigate or avoid the impacts from droughts. WGA strongly supports the Nelson-Domenici bill, and urges its enactment this Congress.