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March 8, 2004

The Honorable Pete V. Domenici
Chairman
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
SD-364 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6150

The Honorable Jeff Bingaman
Ranking Minority Member
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
SD-364 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6150

Dear Chairman Domenici and Senator Bingaman:

We commend you for holding the March 9 hearing to assess the extent and degree of drought conditions experienced across the Western United States over the last five years. As you know, and as the testimony that will be provided to you will confirm, the impacts from drought in the West – and across the nation – have been enormous. Furthermore, because variability is a natural part of the climate, and given the growth trends in the West, we should anticipate that drought could be an even greater challenge for us in the future.

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.

Western governors believe there is a better way to do business. As expressed in the attached policy resolution, we advocate the approach taken by the Domenici-Baucus-Bingaman drought preparedness bill, which would establish a comprehensive national drought policy through statutorily authorizing USDA as the lead federal agency for drought, and delineating the roles and responsibilities for coordinating and integrating federal drought assistance programs to a National Drought Council. S. 1454, *the National Drought Preparedness Act of 2003*, 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.

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An important provision in your bill would establish the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS), a vastly improved drought monitoring and forecasting system. Over the past year, WGA has managed a process under a grant from NOAA to further define a vision for NIDIS, including recommendations for its implementation. A copy of the draft report, *Creating a Drought Early Warning System for the 21st Century: The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS)*, which is currently undergoing revision, is attached to this letter. The final NIDIS report will be presented to Western Governors for our approval during the WGA Annual Meeting on June 20 - 22 in Santa Fe. We will hope to work with you on its implementation thereafter.

Western Governors recognize that timely, integrated and reliable science is key to responding proactively to droughts. The effects of a drought are not immediate and obvious, like those of a hurricane or tornado, but they are at least as damaging. As with other acts of nature, preparation can be the key to lessening the blow. Tools, like NIDIS, that will alert us to potential drought situations can help us make better mitigation decisions. And, if everyone is basing those decisions on the same information, we can work together, both locally and regionally, to be more effective in our preparation.

Again, the Western Governors commend you for holding this important and timely hearing. We urge Congress and the President to enact the National Drought Preparedness Act of 2003 this year. As represented by your leadership in introducing S. 1454, it is high time for our nation to have a comprehensive national policy for drought.

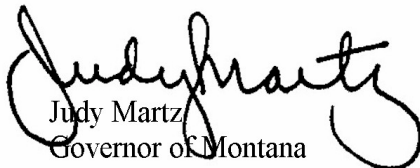
Sincerely,



Bill Richardson
Governor of New Mexico
Co-Lead for Drought



Mike Johanns
Governor of Nebraska
Co-Lead for Drought



Judy Martz
Governor of Montana
Co-Lead for Drought

Attachments (2)