

June 17, 2002

To: Senator Pete Domenici
Senator Max Baucus
Representative Alcee Hastings
Representative Dennis Rehberg

From: Donald A. Wilhite, Director
National Drought Mitigation Center
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Re: Letter of Support, National Drought Preparedness Act, S. 2528/HR 4754

This letter is written in support of the National Drought Preparedness Act, introduced in both the Senate and the House on May 16, 2002. Drought occurs somewhere in the United States each year, resulting in serious and complex economic, environmental, and social hardships. In the period since 1996, the United States has been particularly hard hit by the devastating effects of drought in virtually all parts of the nation; many regions have been affected in several consecutive years. Although a single season or year of drought can have serious consequences, these multi-year droughts can be catastrophic by exacerbating conflicts between water users and limiting resource management options for individuals and government.

The National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska was formed in 1995. Our mission is to lessen societal vulnerability to drought through a risk-based management approach. One point is clear: as our population increases and becomes more urbanized, greater pressure is being placed on our limited water and other natural resources and on water supply systems. Since its formation, the NDMC has been focusing on providing better and more timely information to decision makers at all levels on the need to plan for drought events and to conduct systematic risk assessments of vulnerable sectors, groups, and regions. We have worked with virtually all of the 39 states that have or are developing drought plans and most of the tribal governments that have recently developed plans. The NDMC's web site (drought.unl.edu) is expected to receive nearly 8 million hits in 2002 in response to increased demand for drought-related information. We have emphasized the critical importance of an integrated approach to drought monitoring through creation of the weekly U.S. Drought Monitor map (drought.unl.edu/dm) in partnership with USDA and NOAA. I feel that our program has been a catalyst for action and has

promoted a positive national dialogue and debate on a wide range of drought management and policy issues.

I believe this bill has the following strengths: First, the bill emphasizes risk management by encouraging planning at all levels of government and the incorporation of mitigation programs and actions aimed at reducing the impacts of future drought events. Our nation's traditional approach to drought management has been through reactive, *ad hoc* programs implemented during times of crisis. This approach has proven to be ineffective, untimely, and poorly coordinated. More importantly, this approach has done little, if anything, to reduce the impacts of the next drought and, in fact, may have increased vulnerabilities through greater dependence on government programs to "bail out" at-risk communities, groups, and regions. Second, the National Drought Council has as one of its goals the development of a national drought policy. The development of this policy will require a coordinated and collaborative approach within and between all levels of government to address our nation's vulnerabilities to drought through a more risk-based management approach. This will be a significant challenge, requiring a complete paradigm shift in how we currently manage droughts. Third, the creation of a Drought Assistance Fund could stimulate development of preparedness plans, mitigation programs, and other actions necessary to improve drought assessment, preparation, and response activities in the United States. Certainly the lack of funding for these activities in the past has been a significant constraint to progress on drought preparedness. Fourth, another critical need addressed by this bill is a greater investment in research directed at reducing the impacts of drought events. A competitive grant program needs to be implemented to stimulate research on monitoring tools, impact assessment techniques, planning and risk assessment methodologies, and mitigation actions. Fifth, the bill's recognition of the importance of a "National Drought Monitoring Network" is critical to the implementation of a risk-based management approach. A national drought policy and drought mitigation plans must be based on timely and reliable information, which can only be provided by a comprehensive and integrated monitoring system, involving federal, state, and other networks and resources. Additional investment in this "network" is essential.

Recognizing the strengths listed above, I have reservations about this bill in two critical areas. First, although FEMA has considerable experience in responding to the impacts of quick-onset natural hazards, their designation as the lead agency is of serious concern to many. FEMA lacks knowledge and experience with drought, a slow-onset hazard that covers large geographical areas, produces largely non-structural impacts, and persists for months/years. Their designation as the lead agency will certainly be a significant challenge for the agency. In my involvement with drought issues over the past two decades and, more importantly, since 1996, FEMA's lack of interest in providing strong leadership on this issue has been apparent. To address this concern, it is imperative that USDA be placed in a strong co-leadership or partnership role in the implementation of the National Drought Preparedness Office and the National Drought Council. USDA has significant experience and expertise in drought issues and administers most of the federal government's drought assistance programs. The strengths of USDA and FEMA complement one another and, in my view, a co-leadership role would be an asset to achieving the goals of the bill. Second, I am very concerned about the lack of science representation on the National Drought Council. Any attempt to formulate a national drought policy that is not based on the "best" science available will

certainly fall far short of the goals outlined in the bill and this policy will ultimately fail. For example, the National Drought Mitigation Center has worked with all levels of government on drought monitoring, planning, and policy issues and is widely viewed as the most credible source of scientific information on the subject. Many of our clientele have expressed serious reservations to us regarding their support for a bill that does not recognize and incorporate this expertise. To address this concern, the NDMC and other science-based groups must be formally linked with the National Drought Preparedness Office and actively involved with the National Drought Council from the outset.

I appreciate the strong leadership that each of you have shown with the introduction of the National Drought Preparedness Act. Even with the reservations expressed above, I strongly support S. 2528/HR 4754. I trust that my comments will assist Congress in deliberations about this important legislation. If the National Drought Mitigation Center can provide further information or assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me directly (402/472-4270 or dwilHITE2@unl.edu) or our office.