



WESTERN GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

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July 24, 2003

The Honorable Pete V. Domenici
Senator of New Mexico
United States Senate
SH-328 HSOB
Washington, DC 20510-3101

The Honorable Alcee L. Hastings
Representative of Florida
U.S. House of Representatives
2235 RHOB
Washington, DC 20515-0923

The Honorable Max Baucus
Senator of Montana
United States Senate
SH-511 HSOB
Washington, DC 20510-2602

The Honorable Dennis Rehberg
Representative of Montana
U.S. House of Representatives
516 CHOB
Washington, DC 20515-2601

Dear Senators and Representatives:

On behalf of the Western Governors' Association, we commend you for introducing the National Drought Preparedness Act of 2003. This badly needed legislation will enable improved coordination across government and a proactive approach to drought management. We support this bill and urge its passage.

The Drought of 2002 was one of the worst droughts in the past century. According to the National Drought Mitigation Center (NDMC), 53 percent of the U.S. experienced "moderate" or worse drought conditions in areas covering 32 states. Impacts from the 2002 drought were far-reaching, not just across the economy, but across the environment and society as a whole. The 2002 wildfire season was the most costly and second most devastating season on the books, costing over \$1.4 billion to suppress and scorching over 7.1 million acres across the country. Congress also appropriated \$3.1 billion in disaster response aid to help farmers and ranchers recover from their losses. The total cost of the 2002 drought is difficult to ascertain, however, NDMC estimated it to be \$11.2 billion -- an incomplete figure because some states did not provide estimates.

According to the NDMC, on average, about 18 percent of the nation experiences drought each year, and, over the last 100 years, severe to extreme drought has occurred in some area of the country every year. The costs of drought can be great and are exacerbated by the lack of a coordinated federal policy. According to the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, there have been 12 different drought events since 1980 that resulted in damages and costs exceeding \$1 billion each. 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. NDMC estimates that the federal government spends \$6-8 billion per year on drought compared to \$2.5 billion on floods and \$1-5 billion on hurricanes.

Senator Pete V. Domenici
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Page 2

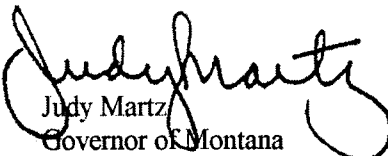
Although drought visits some part of the country every year and causes costly impacts, there still does not exist a permanent national policy to prepare for and respond to drought disasters. This lack of a coordinated, integrated federal drought policy causes confusion at the state and local levels and 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.

The governors believe there is a better way to do business. We advocate the approach taken by your 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 the National Drought Council. The bill 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 bill would also establish the National Integrated Drought Information System, a vastly improved drought monitoring and forecasting system.

In the past year, federal agencies have taken some actions to improve their approach to drought. The Department of Agriculture established the USDA Drought Coordinating Council, for example, with the purpose of monitoring ongoing drought conditions and the impact on agriculture producers. The Department of the Interior launched its Water 2025 Initiative to prevent water crises and conflicts in the West. The governors applaud these actions to improve the delivery of federal drought programs, but recognize that these actions alone will not create the federal drought policy that is needed. Congress must act to force broad cooperation among all federal agencies with drought program responsibilities, and to ensure that this cooperation and integration extends nationally to all levels of government. Additionally, new authorizations are needed to encourage drought preparedness planning, improve drought monitoring and forecasting, and shift federal investment away from response programs to proactive drought mitigation.


The Western Governors commend you for introducing this legislation. We call on the Congress and the President to enact this bill this year. It is high time for our nation to have a comprehensive national policy for drought.

Sincerely,




Judy Martz
Governor of Montana

Chair



Bill Richardson
Governor of New Mexico
Vice Chair and Co-Lead Governor



Mike Johanns
Governor of Nebraska
Co-Lead Governor