



WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL

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Web Page: www.westgov.org/wswc

August 10, 2007

Senator Tom Harkin, Chair
Senate Agriculture Committee
Room SR-328A Russell Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-6000

Dear Mr. Chairman:

On behalf of the Western States Water Council, appointed by the Governors of eighteen states, I am writing to express our strong support for the proposed Regional Water Enhancement Program (RWEPP) as part of the 2007 Farm Bill, and to stress the need for increased funding for the Rural Utilities Service's (RUS) Emergency Community Water Assistance (ECWA) grants for small communities. The proposed RWEPP, under the Conservation Title's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), builds on the existing success of the present Ground and Surface Water Conservation Program by expanding opportunities for broader watershed or basinwide or aquifer-wide partnerships to include, among other entities, State and local government units and Tribes. It is designed to replace the current program and achieve multiple conservation benefits related to ground and surface water supplies, water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, wetlands, etc. Unfortunately, the House Agriculture Committee has narrowed the reach of eligible activities to exclude current state programs designed to reduce total water use to sustainable levels.

In past comments (attached), the Council has emphasized the important role of agriculture, particularly irrigated agriculture, in the economic, environmental and social panorama of the West. Our growing population continues to put pressure on scarce water resources, including agricultural uses, which account for around 80-85% of withdrawals and consumptive use in the West. Water conservation is increasingly important, but shifts in uses are inevitable. Maintaining agricultural production and rural economies and communities, while accommodating other growing water needs and uses (including biofuels production), will be challenging. Farm bill programs and resources should be used to the maximum extent possible to help address related water supply and water quality problems.

In this regard, the Council supports the requested authorization of \$175 million per year in mandatory funding for the RWEPP activities by eligible entities. Moreover, we believe the list of eligible activities should be broadly defined to allow the most flexible mix of various incentives to promote greater water conservation and reduce use, including incentives for producers to "convert to the production of less water-intensive agricultural commodities; or dryland farming." This language is taken from the list of allowable activities under the present

EQIP Ground and Surface Water Conservation Program. However, the House Agriculture Committee removed this language from H.R. 2419. Reducing total net consumptive water use is a practical necessity in some parts of some states in the West where existing uses, given current ground and surface water supplies, are not sustainable. Program participation among producers and water users is voluntary.

As the Council has also stressed, in its position on the Farm Bill reauthorization, rural communities are at risk with respect to a wide range of drinking water shortages and water quality problems. We wish to reiterate our support for increasing authorization for Emergency Community Water Assistance (ECWA) grants over present Farm Bill levels. ECWA grants help provide a safety net for some of the Nation's most at-risk small water systems, systems having limited financial capacity to respond to significant public health concerns regarding their drinking water.

We appreciate your consideration of our concerns. We hope the Senate will retain language under the Farm Bill's proposed Regional Water Enhancement Program to support existing state programs designed to reduce ground and surface water use to sustainable levels without sudden and serious impacts to rural communities due to avoidable water shortages. Further, we hope the Senate will augment authorization of funding for Emergency Community Water Assistance grants.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Duane A. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Duane A. Smith, Chair
Western States Water Council

Enclosure