

The Western Governors' Association (WGA) called for significant changes in water management in the West at its annual meeting June 29-July 1 in Jackson, Wyoming. At a session on "Managing Water in the West," the Governors heard from Brad Udall, Director of the Western Water Assessment (a joint effort of the University of Colorado and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) and from WSWC Chairman Duane Smith.

Mr. Udall described the potential for substantial changes in water availability in the West due to climate change. "Water has long been a zero sum game in the West," Udall said. "Climate Change introduces the possibility that it will become a negative sum game." Udall explained that traditional water storage solutions, like reservoirs, will play a role in the future of water management in the West, but added that new solutions will also be necessary. These might include broader implementation of gray water recycling systems, increased municipal water use efficiency and a new focus on water when planning power plants and other energy generating facilities that often consume large quantities of water.

In preface to his remarks, Mr. Smith noted that "...the success in addressing the increasing challenges associated with water management in the West will depend in large part on state initiative and innovation, since states have the pivotal role in water planning, as well as allocating and protecting the resource." Mr. Smith described major recommendations in a report later adopted by the Western Governors' Association following the session.

The report, "Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future: Next Steps," urges that state and local participation be moved back into the process of federal decision making before too much momentum has built towards planning and policy decisions. To that end, the report urges Congress to require federal resource agencies to include "Integrated Water Resources Planning Assistance" as one of their primary missions, with the goal of: (a) changing the way water planning is conducted by encouraging more comprehensive plans developed under state leadership with federal assistance; and (b) reducing inefficiencies caused by the present mode of project-specific responses to competing demands, contradictory actions by multiple agencies, and hastily conceived reactions to the latest real or perceived crisis. In the future, federal agencies should use state water plans to help determine national policy and priorities that best align federal agency support to states and to inform decision making regarding regional water issues.

The report also addresses challenges associated with water and growth, meeting future demands, water infrastructure needs and strategies, resolution of Indian water rights, climate change impacts, and coordination and cooperation in protecting aquatic species under the Endangered Species Act. In adopting the report, the Governors noted that it represents an important step in what will be an ongoing process to address the West's water needs and challenges.

With respect to water and growth, the report recommends that states take steps to identify innovative ways to allow water transfers from agricultural to urban uses, while avoiding or mitigating damages to agricultural economies and the environment. Further, states should offer technical and financial support to local and watershed groups dealing with growth-related issues. States should also consider steps to better integrate water and land use planning.

To meet future demands for water, the report calls for immediate steps by Congress to augment water information, asking state and federal water resource agencies to work together to provide universal access to water-related data collected by all state, local, and federal agencies. Moreover, federal agencies should work cooperatively with state and local governments to improve drought planning and response. Promising technologies and strategies related to both innovative water conservation and water supply augmentation measures should also receive federal support.

The report underscores the significant needs related to water infrastructure and calls on all levels of government, as well as the private sector, to work collaboratively to address these needs. In doing so, with

federal technical and financial assistance, states should identify, restore and preserve high value watersheds and natural features (such as wetlands) that provide ecological services and that may minimize the need for structural alternatives.

To address the potential for substantial climate change impacts, the report emphasizes the need to improve monitoring and data collection. As part of this process, water managers must better communicate their needs for applied science and technology to the climate research community. The report also emphasizes the need to improve planning and incorporate climate variability at all levels. Furthermore, states must anticipate an increased need to address the forecast effects of climate change in administrative, regulatory, and legal agreements involving water resources.

While recognizing the existence of tools and remedies under federal law, the Governors' report recommends that those seeking to protect and enhance flows for endangered species and other purposes first consider using existing state tools to address their concerns, as this approach can not only avoid conflict, but provide enhanced protection within the regime of state water laws and water rights administration.

Following the presentation, the Governors discussed state-specific water challenges. Governor Dave Freudenthal (WY) noted that it often takes decades to put water storage plans into effect by constructing new reservoirs. For example, it took 13 years to obtain federal approval for the last project built in Wyoming. Freudenthal also raised concerns about how western water law fundamentally lacks incentives for conservation and efficiency. Governor Dave Heineman (NE) discussed Nebraska's efforts to manage conflicts over water and the role of local governments in water planning. Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter (ID) described Idaho's efforts to build additional water infrastructure and to more closely examine existing aquifers in the state. Governor Bill Ritter (CO) discussed Colorado's reliance on water and the state's active drought planning efforts. Governor Napolitano (AZ) said she had created a new Growth Cabinet comprised of the secretaries of agencies that address growth and development in her state. Arizona now requires developers to show proven access to long-term water resources before they can move forward on developments.

Copies of the Governors' report can be downloaded at the WGA website (currently available at <http://www.westgov.org/wga/meetings/am2008/indFex.htm>).