



August 25, 2022

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Camille Calimlim Touton
Commissioner
Bureau of Reclamation
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland and Commissioner Touton:

Throughout the Western United States, dire challenges are being faced by agricultural water users in the Colorado River Basin, California's Central Valley, the Klamath Basin, the Columbia River Basin and its tributaries in Idaho, Oregon and Washington, the Rogue River Basin in southern Oregon, and the Great Basin. We could dedicate reams of pages describing the agonizing plight faced by the farmers and ranchers and the rural communities in these areas.

As you know, Western water managers are actively responding to extreme drought. This is forcing unprecedented actions by local water purveyors and agricultural producers to react to significant water shortages. In the Colorado River Basin, the Bureau of Reclamation recently declared the first ever Tier 2a shortage and is calling for a total of 2 to 4 million acre-feet to protect critical levels in Lakes Mead and Powell. In recent months, many of our local producers and water managers with senior water rights have been engaged in a thoughtful effort to develop plans to protect the Colorado River system.

Like you, we were pleased to see that Congress recognized the dire situation by appropriating \$4 billion to respond to the ongoing Western drought. We now urge the Biden Administration to move

quickly to implement the *Inflation Reduction Act* (IRA) and other available drought funding to use on the ground.

Beyond the urgency of the dire hydrologic situation faced in many Western watersheds, this prompt action is essential for a variety of other reasons. Significant time and effort are being put into the development of response plans. For those to result in meaningful progress, it is essential to understand the key factors that will be considered by the Department in providing any future financial assistance. The ability of agricultural producers to participate in any voluntary, compensated water reduction program becomes much more difficult, if not impossible, if not initiated and implemented soon. This is due to the timeframes associated with contracting, purchasing, and planting of crops for the coming year. This is particularly important in areas like the Imperial Valley in California and Yuma, Arizona, where large-scale winter-time agricultural production occurs. The process and timing for distributing drought response funding must recognize and be responsive to this reality.

We write today to encourage you, as a first step, to work with our organizations and members to quickly release a Notice of Funding Availability with guidance to water managers currently developing drought response proposals and quickly deploy that funding to address the most urgent needs. As you develop a plan to deploy drought funding, we also encourage you to consider the following:

- Work with local water managers to articulate the considerations and approaches to utilizing funding so that the modification or development of viable plans results in desired and defensible outcomes for all engaged;
- In basins where voluntary water reductions might occur, any program should set goals focused on driving the participation needed to produce measurable volumes of wet water. Local water managers should also be enabled to decide what management actions will be taken to achieve targets;
- Keep the process, selection criteria, and any necessary agreements simple and transparent. Requiring prescriptive, complicated, or overly restrictive requirements or agreements will slow progress and reduce participation in programs;
- Any program designed to temporarily reduce agricultural water use must recognize the value of lost production, the extended impact on the rural community, and the cost of developing incremental new water supplies. It is also critical to avoid any actions that result in profound, long-term economic damage to Western communities as well as the long-term capacity to produce food and fiber that is relied upon across the globe. There are a limited number of places where the climate, soil, and open space overlap. We must ensure that any water solution does not lead to a food supply problem for our nation; and
- Agriculture should not be the only sector expected to reduce water use for the benefit of river systems. Urban planners and water users must also seriously address growth and reduce overall use or diversions, as opposed to per capita reductions, to protect these systems. The government must also reevaluate the true environmental water

needs of river systems in light of projected ongoing drought conditions throughout most of the Western U.S.

Adhering to the recommendations provided above will help ensure that agricultural water users can be meaningful partners in our collective effort to manage water supply and protect important supply systems in exceptionally dry times like those we face now, from the headwaters in the upper basin to the last user in the lower basin.

In addition to focusing on critically needed, near-term steps to endure the current drought, it is essential that we also continue to advance solutions that will improve water management in the long-term. These opportunities include forest restoration activities that improve the health and productivity of our watersheds that are severely out of balance, robust conservation and efficiency measures, and augmentation of supply ranging from groundwater development and recycling to new conveyance and storage, where appropriate. To this end, the immediate deployment of IRA drought response funding will perfectly complement longer-term investments made by the *Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL)*, IRA Natural Resources Conservation Service and U.S. Forest Service funding, and other programs. Together, these opportunities present an integrated approach that will boost short, medium, and long-term drought response, preparedness, and resilience for both farms and communities across the West.

Lastly, we urge you to continue to bring all water users together to develop solutions and ensure agriculture has a place at the table. There has been an unfortunate narrative lately that demonizes irrigation and minimizes the importance of domestic food production. Recent letters and comments by some in the West are clearly designed to encourage moving significant volumes of water off-farm for other uses. These unfortunate portrayals fail to recognize that in many cases their proposals will make senior water rights available as a mechanism to benefit junior water users by preventing cuts that would otherwise be required under water laws.

This also comes at a time when agricultural water users are busy developing voluntary proposals to help respond to these dire drought conditions that will result in financial losses for many individual family farms, and the rural communities in which they live, if proper compensation is not provided. In addition to the many Western communities and cultures that sustain the American food supply being at risk, we are also jeopardizing the highest labor, crop protection, and food safety standards in the world while simultaneously exacerbating climate change and food insecurity by increasing our avoidable reliance upon imports.

Protecting the agricultural economy, Western urban and rural communities, and a healthy aquatic environment not only benefits the West, it benefits the entire Nation. For that reason, our members across the West are stepping up, at their own expense, to provide solutions for the viability of their basins and the communities those basins serve. In many cases, that means making senior water rights voluntarily available in order to benefit junior water users. This prevents cuts that would otherwise be required under water laws and, in most cases, would provide immediate measurable protections for the water supply system as a whole. Urban, agricultural, and environmental water users would all benefit from such efforts in the short and long-term.

Our organizations look forward to working with you further to advance the recommendations included in this letter.

If you have questions or concerns about this letter, please do not hesitate to contact Dan Keppen (dan@familyfarmalliance.org).

Sincerely,

Agribusiness and Water Council of Arizona

Arizona Farm Bureau Federation

California Farm Bureau

Colorado Farm Bureau

Family Farm Alliance

Oregon Farm Bureau

Western Growers