September 17, 2021

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
1236 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
311 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Broad Support for Water and Environmental Infrastructure to Increase Water Security

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader Schumer, and Minority Leaders McCarthy and McConnell:

Thank you for all your work to advance bipartisan infrastructure legislation that makes significant investments in water and environmental infrastructure critical to increasing water security for water users and the ecosystems across the West.

Nearly two-thirds of the West is currently experiencing extreme or exceptional drought conditions. More than 2.2 million acres have burned in 104 large fires and complexes in 12 Western states. With this crisis as the backdrop, Trout Unlimited, Environmental Defense Fund, The Freshwater Trust, Irrigation Association, and the Steering Committee representing over 220 Western urban, agricultural and water organizations support prompt enactment of the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. We further urge Congress to include resources for additional water, forestry, and ecosystem restoration programs as it considers another package of investments using the reconciliation process.

The Western Water Infrastructure Coalition includes over 220 organizations from 15 states that collectively represent $120 billion in agricultural production—nearly one-third of all agricultural production in the country—and many of the local and regional public water agencies that supply water to more than 75 million urban, suburban and rural residents. The Steering Committee driving this effort consists of the Association of California Water Agencies, California Farm Bureau, Family Farm Alliance, National Water Resources Association and Western Growers Association

While the bipartisan infrastructure package provides significant resources, funding gaps remain in areas critical for historic drought and wildfire that currently grip the West. Additional resources are necessary

to improve the long-term management and resilience of water resources and the natural environment amongst changing climate and hydrologic conditions.

We support additional funding for the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of the Interior (DOI) ***to accelerate the pace and scale of restoration that improves ecosystem resiliency, reduces the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire, deploys water technology, boosts conservation programs, and responds to the ongoing drought emergency.***

Double USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service Program Funding

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) promotes a variety of practices that can aid in drought protection of agricultural operations. The need for doubling funding for farm bill authorized conservation programs and program delivery through the budget reconciliation effort is vivid in landscapes across the country: nearly two-thirds of the western United States is currently experiencing extreme or exceptional drought; other regions of the country are experiencing significant flooding; and, more than 2 million acres have burned in 104 large fires and complexes in 12 states so far this year.

We call attention to three programs in particular that are important for responding to unprecedented drought in the West:

Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (P.L. 566) - This funding will be used to build on the current program, which works through local government sponsors and assists participants in solving natural resource and related economic problems on a watershed basis. Across the Western U.S., agriculture relies on century old irrigation infrastructure to deliver water to farms and ranches. Open canals lose extensive amounts of water through seepage and evaporation, have mounting operation and maintenance costs, limit water availability for fish and aquatic species, and create public safety risks due to breaching. Changing climatic conditions and recent droughts are further testing this aging infrastructure creating serious water shortages this year across the West. P.L. 566 funds projects like irrigation modernization, flood prevention and damage reduction, development of rural water supply sources, erosion and sediment control, fish and wildlife habitat enhancement, wetland creation and restoration, and recreational opportunities.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – EQIP provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural and non-industrial forest managers seeking to implement voluntary on-farm conservation measures. In the West, EQIP is particularly important for drought preparation. For the first time, the 2018 Farm Bill provides the authority for EQIP to invest in water delivery systems, providing the opportunity to deliver water more efficiently and reliably while mitigating the stress on aquatic systems during drought through conserved water. EQIP's broad array of eligible conservation practices can help deliver a variety of benefits to farmers, foresters, ranchers, and the environment including, but not limited to, improved water and air quality, conserved ground and surface water, improved wildlife habitat, and mitigation strategies against drought and weather volatility. Additional funding under EQIP

should be allocated to those regions experiencing drought and practices should focus on assistance for drought mitigation.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) - RCPP promotes collaborative and coordinated conservation activities between producers and partners at a scale larger than a single farm or ranch. Like EQIP, RCPP has the potential to provide support for drought preparedness and resilience, particularly with its 2018 Farm Bill provision allowing grant agreements to promote conservation innovation and basin-scale action. Through partner agreements, the RCPP can assist with drought mitigation in drought impacted states through unique combinations of NRCS conservation practices and complementary partner strategies. We support a substantial increase in funding to RCPP as a way for partners to help deliver conservation practices and investments in drought resilience at scale

USDA Forest Service - Forest Restoration - $30 billion

Western forests provide multiple benefits ranging from clean water and wildlife habitat, to recreational opportunities and rural jobs. Unfortunately, many of these forest are no longer representative of their historic fire regimes and the resulting uncharacteristic wildfires are impacting all of these values. The short and long-term impacts to management and sustainability of water supplies are especially troubling. The current, disastrous drought coupled with damage from severe wildfires like California's Dixie Fire and Oregon's Bootleg Fire underscore the importance of accelerating restoration actions that reduce hazardous fuels on the landscape and improve overall forest and watershed health. These investments also directly benefit watersheds our communities and environment depend upon.

Given the restoration backlog and magnitude of need, it is imperative that the Forest Service is provided with the financial resources they need to reduce exposure in high-risk areas and maintain these treatments over time. While the funding included in the bipartisan package is much appreciated, former U.S. Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen has testified that $20 billion is needed to restore and reduce fire risk on USFS lands, and Senator Bennet's Outdoor Restoration Partnership Act authorizes $40 billion in supplemental funding for federal agencies to carryout projects that enhance forest and watershed health. As such, we encourage $30 billion in funding for the Forest Service to make transformative investments in our Western forests, with those monies focused on the following programs:

Hazardous Fuels Reduction - This provides funding for treatment of hazardous fuels utilizing a variety of tools including prescribed fire, mechanical vegetation treatment and targeted grazing on rangelands. Significantly scaling up ecologically sound treatments on the landscape, while prioritizing the highest risk areas, can reduce wildfire intensity therefore reducing risk to communities and valuable infrastructure while also safeguarding fish and wildlife habitat and our water resources.

Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration - The Collaborative Landscape Restoration Program supports collaborative, multi-year restoration projects on national forest system lands targeted at achieving a range of benefits, including wildfire risk reduction. These projects bring together local governments, timber and utility stakeholders, and conservation groups. Because of this collaborative nature, it has a proven track record in improving ecosystem health, safely restoring fire to fire adapted ecosystems, mitigating wildfire risk, and supporting rural economies.

Watershed Condition Framework and Water Source Protection Program – These two programs were established in the 2018 Farm Bill to carry out watershed protection and restoration projects on National Forest System lands. These programs are designed to foster collaboration and provide multiple benefits for the public and watershed health.

Collaborative-based, Aquatic-focused, Landscape-scale Aquatic Restoration Program – Included in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is a new program that will increase watershed resiliency and water quality on both federal and non-federal forest lands. Of the 15,078 watersheds on National Forest System lands, the Forest Service's Watershed Condition Framework classifies approximately 44% are functioning at risk and 3% have impaired function. This new program will help to increase the resiliency of watersheds to withstand and recover from fires.

Stewardship Contracts - Public funds can pay for the cost of some of the needs but much more needs to be done to find revenue sources from forest management. Stewardship contracts are an important tool to increase the capacity to undertake forest treatments through partnerships and accelerate the pace and scale of forest restoration. This tool provides a way to sustainably harvest wood products while also financing thinning, road obliteration, riparian restoration, and stream restoration work. Stewardship contracting is a tool available on public lands that allows timber revenue from an ecosystem restoration site to be returned to that site to cover the total bill for the project. Several successful pilot projects have been implemented over the last couple of decades, but the time is right to scale up the use of this and complementary tools to accomplish fuel treatment and restoration goals. This scaling up will also create jobs and stimulate forest products businesses in rural communities.

State and Private Forestry

- *Good Neighbor Authority* – The Good Neighbor Authority allows the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to enter into agreements with state forestry agencies, counties, and Tribes to complete management work on their behalf. Congress expanded GNA authorities for forest management projects in 2008 and the number of projects and participating states continues to grow.
- *Landscape Scale Restoration* - A competitive grant program that promotes collaborative, science-based restoration of priority forest landscapes and priorities identified in State Forest Action plans. With wildfire risk reduction as one of the program objectives, projects are developed in partnership with diverse stakeholders, leverage local expertise and contribute to healthier, more resilient landscapes.

Vegetation and Watershed Management - This program incorporates a variety of restoration-related management functions that contribute to forest and watershed health both before and after wildfire. These include, but are not limited to, improving fish and wildlife habitat, planting, forest thinning and reforestation. This program is particularly important for post-fire recovery as it can includes strategies to restore water and soil resources, preventing post-fire sedimentation of water infrastructure systems while also improving forest ecosystem function and habitat.

Forest Products – One of the major hurdles to increasing the number of forest acres treated is cost. Pairing adequate funding for forest products with hazardous fuels reduction and ecosystem restoration would help create healthy, resilient landscapes while promoting safer communities and rural job creation. Tools like stewardship contracting reinvest the value of forest products back into the land to

help achieve additional forest management and restoration goals, while also supporting economic development needs in rural, forested regions.

DOI Water Technology Deployment Programs- $170 million

The Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) and United States Geological Survey (USGS) have several technology programs that allow for better water management and decision making. The coalition encourages you to include $170 million for water technology deployment, directed at the programs detailed below.

Reclamation Airborne Snow Observatory (ASO) Program –The ASO program allows for a more accurate understanding of the snowpack and expected runoff of a region. Having more accurate projections of runoff allows water managers to make better decisions and maximize storage at existing reservoirs. This funding would enable additional ASO flights, data analysis and accelerated deployment of program including computing infrastructure.

Reclamation Brine Management - This amount would fund the new authority provided in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 for Reclamation to undertake a program related to desalination brine management, which ultimately will aid deployment of desalination facilities.

USGS Mapping - Land subsidence is creating significant water management challenges for both flood control and water supply. In partnership with NASA, USGS can map land subsidence using satellite data and this funding would provide for the computing infrastructure and other resources needed for development of a land subsidence map and monitoring program. We also support continued participation by USGS in the OpenET Program.

USGS Streamflow Gauges and Forecasting - Future conditions may not reflect the past. Without accurate data, planning decisions regarding reservoir storage and releases are more imprecise and inefficient, reducing the ability to readily adapt to extreme weather events and shifts in climate. Accurate precipitation forecasting needs to extend beyond the current 10-to-14-day limitation. In addition to maintaining the critical USGS stream gauge network, this funding would:

- Fund advancements in weather and water supply forecasting, such as at the Colorado River Basin Forecasting Center;
- Fund subseasonal-to-seasonal (S2S) forecasting research and modeling; and,
- Advance collaborations with NASA Western Water Applications Office to prioritize and advance improvements to water supply forecasting, monitoring and consumptive water use accounting and forecasting.

Emergency Drought Response - $1.5 Billion

The drought impacting the Western United States is worsening by the day, and the probability of another dry hydrologic cycle this coming winter makes the situation even more alarming. Ag, urban and environmental water and hydropower users need federal assistance to survive these extreme conditions. To the extent national emergencies will be addressed in any reconciliation package, the

coalition urges Congress to provide at least $1.5 billion for emergency drought response activities. Some of the key impacts and programs that should be addressed include:

Emergency relief for dry ground water wells – many regions are experiencing significant numbers of wells running dry. The Reclamation States Emergency Drought Relief Act, various USDA relief programs and other authorities can be used to facilitate assistance.

Voluntary, temporary, compensated water use reductions – Reclamation can assist Western water users impacted by water shortages due to drought through voluntary, temporary, and compensated water use reductions to allow for precious water supplies to be conserved for use on high value crops and other high priority applications. Through established water banking programs, drought response agencies, and other mechanisms allowed under state water laws and contractual arrangements, Reclamation can utilize federal funds to help alleviate pressures on agricultural users impacted by drought and climate change.

Emergency Environmental Response– The Reclamation States Emergency Drought Relief Act provides the Bureau with the authority to make payments for securing and delivering flows for fisheries on an emergency basis during severe drought. This is another tool for responding to severe drought conditions, in addition to the voluntary, temporary, compensated water use reductions described above that can have co-benefits of increasing flows for fisheries in delivering water downstream or reducing diversions in stream and river reaches with flows low enough to endanger already-imperiled fish populations.

Emergency relief for temporarily-high power costs– reduced water levels at reservoirs and the resulting reduction in power generation is threatening farms, businesses and homes with massive increases in power costs at a time they are already being hurt by drought and pandemic related market disruptions. Excessively high replacement power rates are also contributing to expected dramatic rate increases. Funding to mitigate the impact of drought by assisting with purchase power or offsetting non-power costs traditionally covered by hydropower customers is needed to prevent significant harm to communities, producers, and businesses.

Focus and Speed of Fund Deployment

Communities must implement resiliency projects at a much-increased scale and speed to keep pace with climate-change induced challenges. In addition to increasing funds for these critical priorities, we urge that funds be deployed with a focus on achieving durable and quantified watershed resilience outcomes. Necessary watershed resilience can be achieved by working across federal funding silos and ensuring that projects are coordinated and combined to achieve the greatest benefit for the least cost. For example, upland forestry treatments can be combined with valley-bottom stream and floodplain restoration in the same area to reduce the costs of equipment and work-crew mobilization and deployment, along with integrated environmental review to speed the project design and permitting phases. In addition, environmental benefits quantification can ensure that the most effective actions are funded.

Conclusion

The undersigned are committed to working together to address the impact of changing climatic and hydrologic conditions on Western communities and its watersheds. Disadvantaged communities in the West have been especially impacted by changing weather conditions and have been ravaged by the twin horrors of drought and wildfire. A vigorous water and environmental investment portfolio with multiple aspects- as we suggest above- would go a long way toward helping the short and long-term stability of these communities.

In the short-term, well-paying jobs would materialize often resulting in immediate benefits. Over the long-term, the types of projects we have described above can lead to stabilizing a community with benefits spread out to all of its inhabitants as well as the natural environment in which they live.

We urge you to support funding for these programs, which will assist in addressing critical safety needs, develop new infrastructure, invest in smart water technology and conservation, and improve forest and water ecosystems. Importantly, it will spur economic recovery and prepare us to meet the water needs of the next generation in the face of a changing climate.

We need your help to ensure that federal investment and timely improvements are made to our water management portfolio. We look forward to working with you to address our economy's diverse water infrastructure needs.

Sincerely,

Association of California Water Agencies

California Farm Bureau

Environmental Defense Fund

Family Farm Alliance

Irrigation Association

National Water Resources Association

The Freshwater Trust

Trout Unlimited

Western Growers