

Time to Put the Stimulus Money to Work...On the Ground

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Congress and President Obama in February put the finishing touches on a massive economic stimulus package. Soon, we will see how agencies within the Obama Administration will use those funds to tackle the critical challenge of aging water infrastructure in the Western United States.

In the American West, Federal water supply systems are essential components of communities, farms, and the environment. These facilities are an integral part of the nation's food-production system and their consistent operation helps ensure our farmers' ability to provide a reliable and secure food supply for our own citizens and the rest of the world. But much of this infrastructure is decades old and in dire need of rehabilitation. In addition, population growth, environmental demands and climate change are placing an unprecedented strain on water storage and conveyance systems designed primarily for agricultural use.

The economic stimulus package developed by Congress and the Obama Administration presents a unique opportunity to make the investments necessary to secure a more reliable water supply infrastructure for the West, while creating jobs and opportunities in economically distressed rural areas. Repairing and modernizing our western water infrastructure also will directly address some of the West's vexing water supply problems by improving water resource management and conservation. These in turn will produce greater energy efficiencies and will provide more flexibility to meet environmental needs, thereby alleviating conflict.

Seizing this opportunity will require that federal agencies quickly identify actions that will yield the greatest benefits to water supply security, then move decisively to carry them out. Bureaucratic stall tactics must give way to a creative "can-do" approach whose goal is to channel stimulus resources into effective action through expansive use of existing programs and rapid implementation of new authorities.

The slow pace of the federal regulatory process is likely to be a major obstacle to implementation of projects and actions that could employ stimulus funding. The goals of the economic stimulus legislation – job creation, renewed economic activity and an improved national infrastructure – could well be stymied by a protracted, duplicative and overly-complex regulatory process.

During consideration of the omnibus legislation in the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Chairman James Oberstar said, *"This is a national emergency, and business as usual is not good enough anymore. If the purpose of this legislation is to be achieved, then we must set tight deadlines, and hold everyone accountable to them, both the federal agencies and the state and local grant recipients."*

I couldn't agree more.

The Departments of Interior and Agriculture must work on an urgent basis with other appropriate federal agencies to streamline the regulatory process into one that is efficient, fair and effective.

Success of the economic stimulus legislation is important to Western family farmers and ranchers, who will be closely watching to make sure that federal stimulus dollars are used as effectively as possible.