

Congress Starting to Look at Aging Water Infrastructure

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Last July, I was invited to testify before the Senate Water and Power Subcommittee on legislation introduced by Senator Harry Reid of Nevada. Senator Reid has said that his “Aging Infrastructure and Maintenance Act” is intended to provide the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) with resources and the direction to inspect and maintain aging water facilities so that canal failures like the one last January that flooded Fernley, Nevada can be avoided. My organization – the Family Farm Alliance – was asked to testify because many of our members include irrigation districts and water agencies that are responsible for the operation and maintenance of some of Reclamation’s largest and most complex facilities.

Reclamation built and manages the largest part of the critical water supply infrastructure that is the foundation of the economic vitality of many Western States. Much of this federally-owned infrastructure is now 50-100 years old, approaching the end of its design life, and needs to be rebuilt and rehabilitated for the next century.

In the American West, Federal water supply systems are essential components of communities, farms, and the environment. These facilities are part and parcel of the nation’s food-production system and their operation helps ensure our ability to provide reliable and secure food for our own citizens and the rest of the world.

Aging public infrastructure across the Nation is a growing critical problem. Throughout Reclamation's history, canals have been constructed in the West to deliver project benefits. When these canals were constructed, they were located generally in rural areas, where the major impact of canal failure was the loss of project benefits. However, with increased urbanization occurring on lands below many canals, loss of life or significant property/economic damage can now result from failure. Such a failure occurred in Fernley, Nevada this past January. Thankfully, no lives were lost, but hundreds of homes were damaged, causing millions of dollars of damage to the local community.

Senator Reid’s bill is timely, and it helps shed light on a critical problem that our members have become increasingly concerned with in recent years. While our members expressed concern with certain components of Mr. Reid’s original bill, as written – notably, the manner in which it will mesh with ongoing canal maintenance operations undertaken by local water agencies – they appreciate Mr. Reid for focusing high-level political attention on this matter. There clearly is a need for Congress to address the deterioration of aging Reclamation facilities, and preventing failures like the one in Fernley should be an immediate priority.

The Family Farm Alliance is interested in this bill because it helps to underscore what is becoming a growing concern in the Western United States. It is imperative that we find creative ways to provide for the operation, maintenance, and modernization of existing water supply infrastructure. With some clarifying changes, Senator Reid’s bill could provide an important first step towards solving our aging water infrastructure problems.