

Western Farmers Look for Leadership From New Interior Secretary

By Dan Keppen, Executive Director
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Last May, I accompanied a small group of Western ranchers and farmers on a trip to Washington, D.C., as part of my organization's annual "farmer lobbyist" visit. This trip is one of the Family Farm Alliance's "cornerstone" programs, which brings family farmers and water professionals to Washington, D.C. to meet with legislators and Administration policy leaders on critical water issues. The Alliance philosophy has long held that the most effective voice in Washington, D.C. is the individual family farmer.

Our group was fortunate this year to meet directly with new Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar, a former U.S. Senator and rancher from Colorado. We were encouraged by our conversation we had with Secretary Salazar about the critical water challenges facing the West. It appears that he wants to address these challenges from a perspective that recognizes the importance of irrigated agriculture and rural communities.

Wyoming rancher Patrick O'Toole, Alliance President, told the Secretary that he agrees with the Interior Department's focus on "big-picture" solutions for the water supply challenges presented by population growth, environmental demands and climate change. Pat warned the Secretary, however, of our fear that, without careful planning, the future of the West will look much like the regulatory drought situation in California's Central Valley today, where the people suffering the most are on farms and in rural communities. Pat and farmers and ranchers like him want to know how agriculture fits into the Department's planning for this big picture.

Pat and the other farmer lobbyists urged the Secretary of the need for an overarching, proactive plan for the West that avoids the scenario where inaction leads to crisis and hasty, reactive and ineffective solutions. Such a plan must quickly and effectively address communities impacted by environmental regulations and court rulings; emphasize the development of new water supply enhancement projects; employ sound decision-making, high ethical standards, and respect for scientific integrity; and propose lasting, high-priority solutions to the problems posed by our aging Western water infrastructure.

The Obama Administration has publicly expressed its view that agency resource decisions must be grounded in sound science and transparent decision making. Pat O'Toole told the Secretary that this sort of commitment must be applied objectively, since, unfortunately, not all of the science supported by the environmental movement and some public agencies is sound.

For example, the current U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Biological Opinion (BO) for the Delta smelt imposes severe restrictions on the operations of water projects in California. We believe there are dozens of errors and procedural violations woven into the USFWS' BO. Chris Hurd, a San Joaquin grower, told the Secretary that failure to correct the BO will exacerbate the ongoing hardships suffered by Central Valley producers, farm workers and their communities.

The situation in California wasn't created by this Administration, but the rural West is watching closely to see how this Administration responds to the current crisis. They will see their future in the response of Mr. Salazar's department.