

Agriculture Cannot be Ignored in New Federal Water Bill

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This past March, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science and Technology conducted a hearing on a newly introduced bill - HR 1145, *The National Water Research and Development Initiative Act of 2009*. The intent of this bill is to encourage cooperation among federal agencies with respect to water-related research and development activities.

Better coordination of federal water efforts is something that Western irrigators should support. However, it is disconcerting that this bill fails to even mention how the role of agriculture - an enormously important part of the American economy that vitally depends on water - will be addressed in this coordinating effort.

In this time of economic uncertainty, it is vital that any effort involving the study, management or oversight of American water resources be done in a way that provides full recourse to, and solicits constructive input from, Western irrigators.

There is certainly a need for improved coordination of water supply activities and water resources management at the local, state and national levels. However, the system that has evolved over the past 150 years in the West assuredly does not need to be rebuilt by federal intervention. The U.S. should defer to states and local government decisions regarding water allocation and use, and should advocate constructive ways in which the federal government can support and facilitate those decisions. Right now, there are too many regulations and overlapping responsibilities. We must work together to reduce the gridlock that characterizes federal water policy decisions. This will require streamlining and coordinated application of the federal regulations that are involved in those decisions.

The federal role in this area must be re-examined to determine if a reorganization or consolidation of water management agencies would allow processes to move forward and create solutions acceptable to all stakeholders. The roles of federal agencies should be narrowly defined so as to preclude intrusion upon state allocation procedures. Rather than impose objectives for water quality, species protection and land management by fiat, the federal government should actively engage with state governments to integrate those objectives into existing state systems in a manner which does not unnecessarily or unreasonably impact vested rights.

Our country has tremendous, but limited, resources available to fix our problems. This means we must prioritize and sequence our actions.

Large-scale multi-agency approaches to resource challenges can provide great opportunities for progress. However, great care must be taken in the formulation and management of programs like the one proposed in this bill, as there is no “one size that fits all” and every approach has elements of both success and failure.

HR 1145 offers one approach that may promote coordination of federal agencies and resources in assessing, monitoring, and planning for future water supply impacts and trends. However, the ultimate effectiveness of this effort will be rendered moot if the most important and dependent users of Western water resources – family farmers and ranchers - are not addressed with priority in amendments to this legislation.