

Stimulus Proposed For Reclamation Should Focus More on Aging Infrastructure

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While it remains to be seen how history will remember the effectiveness of the massive economic stimulus package, I applaud the willingness of the Obama Administration and Congress to apply economic stimulus funding to the critical condition of aging water infrastructure in the Western United States.

One billion dollars in economic stimulus funding will go to projects and programs of the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation). This plan will fund some vitally important projects that will ensure the security of water supplies in several states. For example, a “shovel-ready” fish passage improvement project at Red Bluff Diversion Dam in Northern California will provide great benefit to endangered and threatened fish species in the Sacramento River. More importantly, this project will benefit water users statewide by providing near-term benefits to the fishery resource, thereby helping to resolve some of the regulatory issues that are crippling the ability to effectively manage water in California.

However, it is disappointing to see that the proposal allocates only about \$130 million to the rehabilitation of Reclamation’s existing infrastructure, which the agency estimates is in need of approximately \$3 billion worth of repairs. It is also a concern that the proposal does not provide a more aggressive response to the water supply crisis in California.

Reclamation built and manages the largest part of the critical water supply infrastructure that is the foundation of the economic vitality of the 17 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.

Protecting this national asset is absolutely essential to American economic security.

The \$1 billion in stimulus money that Congress provided to Reclamation offers 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.

Allocating only \$130 million for high priority infrastructure projects across the entire West is a tough pill to swallow for many Western irrigators, especially when the same plan proposes \$13.5 million for “green” buildings in Nevada.

Meanwhile, farmers within Reclamation service areas in California are receiving only 10% of their water supplies in a not-so-dry year. This allocation is an unprecedented, record low delivery amount for Central Valley Project agricultural contractors. These producers – as well as the communities and consumers who rely upon them – will all suffer as a result.

Success of the Reclamation stimulus proposal is important to Western family farmers and ranchers. The Family Farm Alliance will monitor initial progress on Reclamation stimulus-funded projects and will engage with Congress and the Obama Administration as required in the coming months to ensure that these funds best help these folks.