

May 2, 2005

Family Farm Alliance Statement on

Secretary Norton's Colorado River Announcement

“New demands for water on the Colorado River and other Western basins will be met either with new supplies....or with water taken from agriculture” says Alliance President.

Today, Pat O'Toole, the president of the Family Farm Alliance who operates a ranch on one of the tributaries to the Colorado River, issued the following statement regarding a Colorado River operations decision made by Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton earlier in the day.

“The water storage projects on the Colorado River are the main reason why the Western states that rely on the river were able to weather the recent prolonged drought,” said O'Toole. “There are many feasible supply enhancement projects out there that can be developed to satisfy growing urban and environmental water demands and to make sure that every future year does not, in effect, become a drought year.”

A year ago, federal officials told the seven states in the Colorado River Compact that they had until April 30 to work out a mutual agreement for water flows in 2005. At a meeting in Las Vegas last week, the states conceded that they could not agree, and handed the issue to Secretary Norton, who today announced her decision to maintain Colorado River water releases from Lake Powell at their scheduled level for the next five months because drought conditions in the Colorado River Basin have eased during the 2005 water year.

Explosive population growth in the West and Southwest is placing unprecedented demands on the existing supplies at the same time that environmental demands are reducing the

amount of water available for human use and consumption. In the past, the nation responded to the need for more water and power in the West by building large dams, which now form the most impressive water supply infrastructure in the world. But many policy makers apparently agree that the "era of the big dam" is over.

For some, the answer is to regard agriculture as "the reservoir" that will provide all the water necessary to meet urban and environmental needs. Water currently used for agriculture can be freed up for other uses by buying out farmers or forcing them to surrender their supplies through regulatory means.

"New demands for water on the Colorado River and other Western basins will be met either with new supplies...or with water taken from agriculture", said O'Toole.

So how will we meet the ever-increasing demand for water in the West? O'Toole and the Family Farm Alliance believe improved conservation and efficiency by urban and agricultural water users is certainly part of the solution, but only part.

"It's simply ludicrous to believe that conservation alone will supply enough water for the tens of millions of new residents expected to arrive in Western cities during the coming decades," said Bill Kennedy, a rancher from Klamath Falls, Oregon who serves as the Chairman of the Board for the Alliance. "This approach will destroy irrigated agriculture in the West. Jobs, homes and whole communities will be lost, and along with them that part of our national security that depends on a diverse and vibrant domestic food production industry."

Yet, despite its harsh human and economic consequences, mining the agricultural water supply is, by default, our national water policy because we are not creating new supplies to meet the demands that are already upon us.

O'Toole two weeks ago appeared before a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee, where he introduced the "*Western Water Supply Initiative*" data base, an effort to identify potential opportunities to enhance water supplies for communities throughout the Western United States. The purpose of the *Initiative* is to stimulate a dialogue on how to expand and enhance water supplies in a manner that is both timely and respectful of environmental values. Eighteen months ago, the Alliance asked its members for their ideas for expanding, enhancing or stabilizing water supplies in their areas.

"We received more than 80 responses," said O'Toole. "Some of them are just ideas, others are projects in the planning stages, and some are ready to be implemented. They include groundwater as well as surface storage, new projects and improvements to old ones, large undertakings and small."

The Alliance has compiled them into an interactive data base that is available on CD ROM.

O'Toole stressed that the *Initiative* is not a "plan," and it is not a list of projects recommended for implementation by the Family Farm Alliance.

"The Alliance does not endorse any specific project in the data base," he said. "Rather, this is a "book of ideas," intended to stimulate discussion on this critical issue."