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Climate Change Will Impact Western Agriculture: New Climate Report Recommends Realistic Measures to Safeguard our Food Supply

KLAMATH FALLS, OREGON (September 4, 2007) – At a time when Western water supplies are already inadequate to meet the demands of agriculture, future energy needs, urban growth and environmental enhancement, climate change is expected to further reduce those supplies, according to a new report by the Family Farm Alliance (Alliance). Water experts recommend that, with dire long-term hydrologic forecasts predicted for the West, maintaining the status quo simply isn't sustainable. To meet the needs of cities and the environment without sacrificing Western irrigated agriculture, there must be more water stored and made available to farms and cities.

The Alliance climate change report is entitled "Water Supply in a Changing Climate: The Perspective of Family Farmers and Ranchers in the Irrigated West". A PDF version of the report can be downloaded at the Family Farm Alliance website: www.familyfarmalliance.org.

"Working with farmers has made us incredibly sensitive to the big picture ramifications facing the future of Western agriculture, and the critical role reliable water supplies play in that big picture," said Dick Moss, Chairman of the Alliance Advisory Committee that contributed to the report. "We must immediately begin to address the critical challenges we face."

Despite the highly variable and uncertain nature inherent with climate change predictions, the Alliance report concludes that, in the West, there will be less water stored in the biggest "reservoir" - the snow pack. More water in the form of rainfall and runoff will come at farmers and ranchers sooner in the season, when it may not be useful and may even present a threat.

Irrigators and agricultural consultants who contributed to the Alliance report have identified several impacts to crops and livestock— both good and bad - that climate change may generate in the coming decades. The report summarizes anticipated overall hydrologic impacts in the form of the "triple threat": 1) increased evaporation of snowpack and surface water; 2) increased crop evapotranspiration and consumptive use; and 3) decreased groundwater recharge and surface runoff. The net result in summer months will mean less water to work with and higher water needs.

The report identifies the positive steps irrigators are taking to address water shortages caused by climate change and other stressors. For example, along the Columbia River, irrigators are developing water exchange programs to increase supply reliability while improving salmon habitat. And in California's Sacramento River Valley, producers and local governments are working to develop a regional water management program that will help address not only water quantity challenges, but also water quality and environmental issues. Those same growers 15 years ago were key players in a state-

managed drought water bank that temporarily transferred local water to southern California to meet other statewide needs.

“Even with proactive measures like these, Western water supplies are already inadequate to meet the demands of agriculture, future energy needs, urban growth and environmental enhancement,” said Patrick O’Toole, a Wyoming rancher and president of the Alliance. “Global climate change, we’re told, will further reduce those supplies. We must begin to plan for that now, and not wait until we are forced to make decisions during a crisis.”

O’Toole was invited to testify on this matter before the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in June 2007.

The Alliance report calls on the federal government to work in partnership with the states and local water managers to prioritize research needs and quantify projected West-wide hydrologic impacts.

“Our country has tremendous, but limited, resources available to fix our problems, so we must prioritize and sequence our actions,” said Dan Keppen, Executive Director of the Alliance.

The report highlights the need for state and local water management agencies to take the lead on developing and implementing a balanced suite of conservation and supply enhancement actions. The federal government can help by streamlining the regulatory process to facilitate development of new infrastructure by these agencies.

“We are facing unstoppable population growth, diminishing snow pack, increased water consumption to support domestic energy, and increased environmental demands,” said O’Toole. “It is 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.”

The Alliance report notes that the U.S. recently became a net importer of food, and the safety of that food is becoming increasingly suspect. As food production moves off shore, a large part of our security is moving with it. The Alliance report urges Congress and the Bush Administration to make self-sufficiency in food production a national priority. The report further recommends that, at all levels of government and in our communities, we must find ways to protect farmland.

A consistent theme in the report is that climate change will simply further strain fresh water supplies in the American West. It provides realistic and critical steps needed to plan for plan for that now, rather than being forced to make decisions during a crisis.

“Relying on agriculture to be a shock absorber to soften or eliminate the impending water shortage is not planning,” said O’Toole. “It is a choice to put our heads in the sand and hope for the best. It is a decision that could worsen the overall impact of climate change on our nation’s economy and security.”

The Family Farm Alliance is a grassroots organization of family farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts and allied industries in 16 Western states. The Alliance is focused on one mission: To ensure the availability of reliable, affordable irrigation water supplies to Western farmers and ranchers. For more information on the Alliance, go to www.familyfarmalliance.org