



Opening Statement: Hearing on Drought Legislation
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
October 8, 2015

Good morning. The committee will come to order. We've got a full house speaking about an issue this morning that I think is fair to say if you are from the West you get up every morning thinking about what is happening with water, with our drought situation, and what can be done to address some of the issues that have been long standing in California now and the concern that it continues to grow and be an evolving threat.

Our focus this morning is on legislation which it's good to have this discussion before the energy committee. There has been much thought. There have been many oversight and reviews. I myself have been out to California a couple of times meeting with farmers, meeting with interests that are very concerned about how we move forward but until you have some legislation in front of you that kind of defines what some of the proposals are, it makes it more difficult for us as a committee.

So today we're focusing on legislation. We've got a Senate bill that my colleague and friend Senator Feinstein has been working on for some time, the California Emergency Drought Relief Act. We have the House bill that Congressman Valadao has been working on, the Western Water and American Food Security Act. Their sponsors here along with Senator Boxer has been equally engaged on this issue on behalf of her constituents so we will hear brief comments from them this morning before we go to out panel of witnesses.

Everyone in this room is aware that we have a serious, long-lasting, and consequential drought.

California has imposed mandatory reductions on water use by its residents and its businesses. Many California farmers continue to face unprecedented reductions in water delivery and some communities no longer even have running water. And some of the stories that we have heard really make your heart sick. This is something that must be addressed.

This is not just about what we're seeing in California. It is a West-wide drought. It's being felt across the Colorado River Basin, up in the Pacific Northwest. Interior Alaska even was abnormally dry this summer. Dry conditions also contributed to a terrible wildfire season this year. So when we think about the impacts of drought it is more than just the water itself. It is the impacts.

The questions we are here to discuss is: what should we do about the drought? And our choices largely boil down to the measures before us today.

The House and Senate bills both seek to maximize water delivery to where it is most needed in California. Both reflect some common approaches – for example, requiring agencies to use real-time monitoring to

address environmental concerns associated with increased water flows through the Bay-Delta. But I think it's important to note that the bills diverge in some important ways.

The Senate bill seeks to provide guidance to federal agencies to increase flows through the Delta, while also giving agencies flexibility to make decisions on flow levels. Its sponsors have proposed substantial increases in funding for a variety of activities – including greater storage.

As we review that approach, we will need to consider the criticisms of the Senate bill: that its guidance to the agencies is perhaps insufficient, that current flexibility is not being utilized, and that it lacks necessary funding offsets.

But we will also need to consider the approach taken by our House colleagues. Their bill gives more direction, and less flexibility, to the agencies. It includes funding for storage and other activities, but is fully paid-for.

And these decisions have led some to claim the House bill is overly prescriptive, is too rigid, and doesn't provide sufficient funding for key programs.

So we could talk about Goldilocks here and which one is too big, too small, and which one is just right but I think it's important to acknowledge that these are very complicated, some very complex issues, and we need to reach a unified legislative response.

Also before us today is a bill from Senators Heinrich and Udall that includes some interesting provisions on water transfers and exchanges.

And finally, we are receiving written testimony on three hydropower bills, including my measure to authorize the expansion of an existing hydro project at Terror Lake in Alaska.

Right now, the area around Terror Lake is powered solely by clean, renewable hydropower and a small wind turbine. So we're in kind of an interesting situation. If we can't allow for the expansion, what we do then is we turn back to expensive diesel fuel instead.

The news across the country that was highlighted when President Obama was up in the state was that we're making some remarkable headway with our microgrid systems and Kodiak is always pointed out as the second largest island in the United States of America getting to the point where they can be 100 percent on renewables but we're going to have to go back to diesel if we can't get an expansion around Terror Lake.

It's a beautiful place out there surrounded by a lot of bears and if anybody is not thinking kindly about it maybe they should go take a trip out there and take a look. I'll invite you to visit our bears.

What I think we want to focus specifically on here this morning is the extent of the drought that we are facing in the West and I appreciate a great deal that the work the sponsors of these various bills have put into where we are today.

I have asked for indulgence of my colleagues that are here to testify. We're trying to get through again a pretty aggressive panel with hopefully lots of questions but I am pleased that you have joined us this morning. We'll look forward to your comments after Senator Cantwell has provided hers and then we'll move to this very important issue.

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