



Opening Statement
Hearing on Western Water Outlook and Drought Bills
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
March 22, 2018

Good morning. The committee will come to order.

We had hoped to begin this morning's meeting with a quick business meeting, but we clearly don't have a quorum present. I know that there are significant hearings underway as we speak, in various committees so we're competing a little bit.

For purposes of so many in the West, there could be not be anything more important than what we are doing here this morning, and that is to examine the western water outlook for 2018, as well as three bills related to water supply infrastructure and drought resilience.

For over a decade, the West has suffered through drought conditions. After a brief respite last year, water conditions are again poor in much of the region, particularly in California and the Colorado River Basin. Changing climate conditions and weather patterns appear to be making matters worse.

The good news is that we have potential solutions to shield our communities from harmful drought impacts. And it starts, as always, with infrastructure.

Every Committee has been talking about infrastructure in this Congress. It's an important topic because there's no question that we need to overhaul and modernize America's infrastructure. Across every sector, infrastructure is the cornerstone.

For western water, drought resilience is simply not possible with insufficient and aging water systems that do not even function properly. We understand this in my state of Alaska where, believe it or not, we actually every now and again have some water shortages. Even in the Southeast, where we're a literal rainforest. Some areas of our state have faced regional droughts, but most often, most often what happens is that water scarcity is felt by communities that have plenty of precipitation, whether it's Wrangell or Metlakatla, but without the necessary infrastructure to capture and transport it you're just kind of stuck.

The arid west, the consequences of inadequate water supply infrastructure can be even more severe. The failure to store as much water as possible in a wet year can have devastating, long-term impacts.

With infrastructure as a foundation, we can also look to flexible water management practices to build drought resilience. Tools like conjunctive management, data driven reservoir operations,

conservation, and other innovative techniques can multiply the drought resilience benefits for our communities.

In order to succeed we need to consider alternatives beyond dams and reservoirs to provide needed storage, but we must also take a critical look at the broken permitting process that can kill good storage projects in the very early stages of the planning process. We also need to aggressively pursue water conservation, without pretending like that alone can solve the severe water resource challenges we face.

The three bills before us today are important and will move us closer to our goals of modern infrastructure and a flexible, responsive water management strategy. I want to acknowledge my appreciation for the provisions in S. 2563 that allow Alaskans to access needed water efficiency and tribal technical assistance grants.

I look forward to hearing from our expert witnesses, who bring a diverse set of perspectives on water security to the table. Whatever your viewpoint – whether it’s government, irrigation, municipal water, conservation, or business – it is encouraging to see widespread agreement about the need to increase western water supplies and the importance of taking an expansive approach to water management.

Senator Cantwell?