Opening Statement: West-Wide Drought Hearing
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
June 2, 2015

Welcome to everyone this morning.

We're meeting today to discuss drought conditions. I don't know about the rest of you but I was completely dumped on yesterday. I've never seen it rain so hard. But I was thinking about drought as we were battling the wet here. But truly the drought conditions that are facing the Western United States have garnered the attention of so many of us.

Much of the West has been in varying degrees of drought for the past 15 years now.

According to a survey released last week by the U.S. Drought Monitor, approximately 57 percent of the West is now experiencing moderate to exceptional drought. All or parts of nine states in the worst shape range from severe to exceptional drought.

The impacts are significant. California, in the midst of its fourth year of severe drought, has for the first time, imposed mandatory 25 percent reductions on water use by residents and businesses.

Many farmers in California continue to face unprecedented reductions in water delivery by the Bureau of Reclamation and the state – which are often their primary sources of water.

These famers have contracts with Reclamation and the state, but today, in the absence of water, their livelihoods are being dramatically impacted. Drought is leaving behind hard decisions for these folks. Decisions where they are saying which fields do they lay fallow? Do they change certain crops they plant? Do they plow under crops, such as fruit trees? I was out in Fresno several months ago and saw whole fields of beautiful healthy citrus trees that were literally bulldozed over because there was no water. In certain cases, the drought has led farmers to go out of business entirely.

Of course, the impacts are not just on farmers, with some communities no longer having running water and individuals in farming communities losing jobs.

Now, there is much discussion regarding what drives water release decisions in the state. During the course of the state's four year drought, for example, many have said that the large amounts of water that have been released at various times and in various forms – or held back from release -- have been done to ensure protection of fish at the expense of cities, towns, and farmers.

Indeed, we have heard repeatedly that farmers in the state use 80 percent of the state's water. So the question needs to be asked – is that accurate? My understanding is that California Department of Water Resources has reported that statewide water use looks more like this: 10 percent urban use; 41 percent agricultural use and a

majority of 49 percent use for environmental management: wetlands, Delta outflow, wild and scenic designations, and instream flow requirements.

So, one of the very real questions we should discuss regarding California's circumstances – and potentially elsewhere – is to what extent is the very important balance between water for fish under state and federal law being given equal legal support for that of water delivery to meet the needs of people in cities, towns and farms? And if the balance is not equal, then why not? Are there regulatory imbalances? And can the federal government be helpful in addressing imbalances?

Elsewhere in the West, the situation, while not as dire, is trending that way.

In Washington, the governor declared a statewide drought emergency on May 15. In Oregon, the governor has declared a state of drought emergency in seven counties, with another eight requesting the designation.

Across the Colorado River Basin, where 40 million residents in seven states rely on water from Lake Power and Lake Mead on the Colorado for residential, industrial, and agriculture needs, the drought – in varying degrees – has been a fact of life for 15 years.

The strains are starting to show – most notably at Lake Mead, where lake levels have fallen 130 feet in the last 15 years.

At the current rate, in the next few years, users in Arizona and elsewhere could see reductions in their state allocations under the Colorado River Compact.

Hydropower operations at Lake Mead and Lake Powell could also be curtailed in coming years.

As a brief aside, the potential hydropower impacts reminds that there is a strong nexus between water and energy, and the strain drought puts on that nexus -- something I'm watching and am very concerned about.

In the face of the challenges stemming from drought, water users, federal and state officials, and others are working to ensure delivery of water where it is needed.
These actions include state and federal officials working together to facilitate water transfers and farmers agreeing to delay the date of deliveries of water to benefit species.

And of course, many farmers have turned to groundwater consumption to meet their needs. Such actions have been, arguably,

These are understandable and commendable efforts. So there are hard questions I think that need to be asked here: are current actions sustainable in the face of multiyear droughts? Are all affected parties giving sufficient attention to long-term planning and related actions? And what is the federal government's most appropriate role in addressing longer term solutions – given tight budgets, and that much of what happens with water in the West is actually managed by the states?
Are there innovative efforts on the ground that should be replicated? And then also, what new ideas for water storage, conservation, and use might we consider?

We've got an impressive panel of witnesses today. In particular, I look forward to hearing from those who are on the ground and how they are meeting the challenges, and I look forward to everyone's thoughts on how we can be helpful.

# # #