Opening Statement
Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)
Hearing on Western and Alaska Water Legislation
October 8, 2015

"Good morning. Thank you, Madam Chairman, for holding this important hearing. Welcome to the Californians – that's something that my Washington doesn't often say. But I certainly appreciate – Mr. Valadao, we just met this morning, but I want everyone to know that there are no more tenacious women in the U.S. Senate than the two women sitting next to you. So I know that they have worked very hard on this legislation, over a long period of time and certainly are trying to have the best interests of everybody at hand. I look forward to hearing all of your comments this morning as we try to deal with this very tough issue.

"As the chair said, communities across the West are seeing the impacts of this – not just Californians. Towns and wells have run dry. Farmers have seen billions of dollars in losses. And, the ecosystems have suffered.

"So, we know this – there are no easy solutions. However, one thing is clear – we cannot address the long-term impacts of drought by fostering short-term solutions that don't help us manage the ecosystem. And the worst thing to do, obviously, is to pass legislation that ends up in the courts and allows us not to move forward on anything.

"Drought will likely continue for the coming years. Short-term solutions that divide communities, threaten the environment and create greater uncertainty will only make the challenge harder because we know that this situation is not going away.

"There is no question that we are seeing some of the most severe drought conditions in history and California is experiencing the worst drought in 500 years.

"In the state of Washington, we've had record-breaking temperatures, low snowpacks and catastrophic wildfires that I also know my colleagues here before us today care greatly about. Farmers are facing $1.2 billion in crop losses this year in Washington alone, and nearly a quarter million sockeye-salmon died in the Columbia River this summer trying to reach their spawning grounds.

"Over the last several months, the committee has heard a lot about how to deal with drought. Today, we are hearing about these pieces of legislation before us that you have sponsored.

“I want to make clear that the Yakima Basin hearing that we had earlier this year, Madam Chairman, on drought was kind of eye-opening for a lot of people here because it included the innovation where projects are balanced and integrated with a holistic response, where tribes, fishermen, farmers and foresters all sat before us in an agreement about how to move forward. I like this approach. I like this approach because it allows you to solve problems and stay out of courts and keep moving forward.

“I want to make sure that we are developing long-term, resilient plans and we are doing that as we continue to focus on water-sustainable communities. Also, I want to make sure that we are not pitting one community against another. Madam Chairman, I should just say that I sat and chaired the San Joaquin hearing several years ago, and so I sat through the 18 years of litigation on that case and finally, there are solutions of people coming together. I know well some of the challenges that California has tried to push through in the past. My point is just this – that lengthy court battles resolve nothing.

“Instead, what we need are solutions that take an integrated and basin-scale approach, that take into account all needs within a watershed. And, we need to make sure that there are locally-driven solutions - collaborative and consensus-based.

“We need to make sure that we are doing everything we can to make sure that we are protecting our environment. Clean water and healthy ecosystems are fundamental to the well-being and prosperity of our communities. We must not manage water and ecosystems to the brink of collapse.

“I say this because we are reminded every day about the iconic salmon population in our state and how trading one for the other doesn’t work for us. It doesn’t work for fishermen.

“I want to make sure that we are not overriding considerations of the National Environmental Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act. Drought and water management solutions should work with nature and seek to increase benefits for both humans and the environment.

“Lastly, I want to make sure that how we are responding to drought improves how we manage water, not make it more complicated.

“I do believe in modernizing our federal approaches. I want to make sure that we are not creating uncertainty, but we’re embracing locally-based solutions that incent people to work together, getting the best science available and leveraging the power of innovation to help us solve this problem.

“I know that there are many things that we are going to talk about today, Madam Chairman, on this issue, but I hope that as we talk to the witnesses today, we’ll keep these priorities in mind and make sure that we are improving our existing infrastructure and have nature-based solutions so that all of these parties are all working together on these solutions.

“Thank you.”

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