Strange Bedfellows: New Partners Align to Address Colorado River Basin Challenges

“Holy $@&#! My mountain is on fire! Going home to pack a few clothes and let the horses out.”
6:15 p.m. June 19, 2014
About the Alliance
Colorado River Basin and Areas that Receive Colorado River Water
Source: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Colorado River Basin Study
Concerns

- Virtually every scenario assessed by the Basin Study shows a loss of Colorado River Basin irrigated acreage by the year 2060.

- This has implications for agriculture, rural communities, and the environment.
Significant shortfalls are projected between expected water supplies and demands in the Colorado River Basin in coming decades.
Basin Study Projections

- One million acre-feet of water are targeted from agriculture by the year 2060 to fill the estimated gap that will exist between water supply and demand – primarily through temporary, rotational fallowing and deficit irrigation practices.
Irrigated acreage in the Colorado River Basin will decrease by 300,000 to 900,000 acres during the time period 2015 to 2060.
Concerns

- Policy makers and Colorado River stakeholders must understand the critical implications of taking 6-15% of existing irrigated agriculture out of production.
Irrigated Agriculture is an Economic Engine

For the 17 Western states, the total household income impacts derived from the “Irrigated Agriculture Industry”, made up of direct irrigated crop production, agricultural services, and the food processing and packaging sectors, is well over $156 billion annually.
1945-2012 Period of U.S. Ag. Expansion and Productivity

U.S. Food Cost % of Disposable Income

- 2011:
  - U.S.: 6.7%
  - U.K.: 9.4%
  - Greece: 17.6%
  - China: 21.3%
  - Russia: 31.2%

Added Income Loss and Opportunity Cost Impacts?
Food Production Concerns

- Policy makers need to understand what the true cost to American security and the economy is if we continue to take irrigated agricultural land out of production.

- The American Southwest is one of the few areas that provide a significant portion of our Nation’s supply of fresh fruits and vegetables during the winter months.
Food Production Concerns

- We cannot continue to downplay or ignore the negative implications of reallocating more agricultural water supplies from the Colorado River or other Western watersheds to meet new urban and environmental water demands.
Conservation Concerns

- In Northern Colorado, a study by Colorado State University (CSU) researchers found that 92 percent of wetlands were visually connected to the irrigation infrastructure.

- Though land conversion and water diversions have led to dramatic reductions in historic wetland acreage in some places, it is clear from the CSU study that current agricultural landscapes create wetlands that rely on irrigation water.
Conservation Concerns

- In the Southern Rockies, 43 percent of the private land that is located adjacent to public lands has a public grazing lease.

- The approximately 31,000 grazing leases on BLM and Forest Service lands are connected to more than 100 million acres of private land that ranchers utilize for sheep and cattle grazing during the rest of the year.
Conservation Concerns

- Private lands provide most winter and riparian habitat for many wildlife species.
- Public lands, being less productive, cannot sustain healthy wildlife populations once the private lands rimming their boundaries are developed and reappear as housing subdivisions.
- Conservation and private irrigation interests need each other.
WASHINGTON - Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman has released an additional $7.3 million to assist producers in the Klamath Basin in Oregon and California. This funding is in addition to the $11.7 million released in January. The assistance is part of a $50 million fund for the Klamath Basin made available through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) authorized in the 2002 farm bill.
Origins of the Western Agriculture and Conservation Coalition
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Western Agriculture and Conservation Coalition

- Common Water Principles
- Have been applied to several forums, including Farm Bill conservation title negotiations.
- Now: Colorado River Basin Contingency Planning Efforts

The Honorable Frank Lucas
Chairman, Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
1121 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Collin Peterson
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture
1165 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Agriculture and Conservation Farm Bill Coalition Recommendations for Farm Bill

Dear Chairman Lucas and Ranking Member Peterson:

On behalf of the farmers, ranchers, sportsmen and women, and conservationists represented by the Agriculture and Conservation Farm Bill Coalition, we offer these recommendations for the 2012 Farm Bill.

The Coalition provides these suggestions to the House and Senate Ag Committees for their consideration as they develop input to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction (Super Committee) and to the Ag Committees considering policy changes to write the 2012 Farm Bill.

We are users of Farm Bill Title II programs. We need these programs to continue, and we have a vision for changing them forward.
WACC Common Water Principles: Rights

- A water right is a legal entitlement authorizing water to be diverted from a specified source and put to beneficial use. Water rights are property rights, but their holders do not own the water itself. They possess the right to use it.

- Water rights are primarily administered by individual States, and may be sold, leased, or otherwise transferred subject to applicable provisions of law.
WACC Common Water Principles: Responsibilities

- All water users should strive to be active and responsible stewards of their water resources to ensure long-term agricultural and environmental resource viability.

- All water users should seek to conserve their water supplies, employing economically and environmentally sustainable practices, in accordance with state law.

- Municipalities and other holders of water rights for urban, municipal, or residential uses should seek to conserve, reuse and maximize the benefit from their existing water supplies before seeking transfers of water from rural areas.
The recognized rights of other affected water users should be protected from "injury" by a transfer. For any water transfer from rural to urban areas, there should be explicit requirements in the transfer instruments for avoidance and/or mitigation of harm to rural/agricultural economies and environmental values.

Agriculture and environmental interests must be engaged in state and federal processes that consider transfer policies and particular transfers.
WACC Common Water Principles: Infrastructure

- Storage projects that are sized, designed and located so as to provide a variety of public benefits in an environmentally beneficial and fiscally responsible manner should be considered as part of the solution to better manage our limited water supplies.

- Modernization of water conveyance facilities and other infrastructure should be part of the solution to better manage our limited water supplies. Improved conveyance infrastructure can contribute to a more resilient and profitable agricultural sector alongside healthy rivers and a thriving recreational economy.
WACC Common Water Principles: Policy Incentives

- When projects have the support of multiple entities, including agriculture, environmental, and urban interests, the regulatory process for approval of such projects should be better integrated and more conducive to moving forward, and less embroiled in redundant action by multiple agencies.

- Policies should facilitate and encourage projects that contribute to conservation, efficiency and reuse of water, subject to comprehensive evaluation of and consideration of the relative benefits and potential impacts of such actions.
Related Activities

- Colorado River Basin Designation as “Critical Conservation Area”
- FFA / National Young Farmers Coalition
  Conservation Case Study
CO River Basin Contingency Planning
Conclusions

- Reclamation has determined that hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural land will be lost in the Colorado River Basin due to competing interests and dwindling future supplies.

- This assumption does not comport with the need to feed a growing world population, support the national and protect open-space and conservation opportunities on private lands.
Conclusions

Policy makers and elected officials must clearly understand the importance of Western irrigated agriculture and the implications associated with drying up land currently producing food in the Colorado River Basin and elsewhere.
Conclusions

- Diverse, coordinated interests have the best potential to drive this message.
Questions?
www.familyfarmalliance.org