

Congress of the United States
Washington, D.C. 20510

April 29, 2024

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Jefferson Drive SW
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for your continued leadership at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (the Department) and efforts to ensure the success of family farmers, foresters, and ranchers across the country.

We write to you today regarding the climate-driven long-term drought affecting our States and Districts. Drought remains a severe risk for American farmers and ranchers and threatens farmland and local economies that rely on dwindling water resources, especially in states West of the 100th meridian. In addition to the Western Water and Working Lands Framework, we greatly appreciate the Biden-Harris Administration's recent steps to make additional climate-smart agriculture and forestry mitigation practices eligible for *Inflation Reduction Act* dollars, particularly around energy savings related to irrigation efficiency and upgrades. Expanding these practices is important to empower farmers, ranchers, and foresters in the West to be part of the climate solution.

However, there is more work to do as the places and people we represent are on the frontlines of climate change. We ask the Department to bring all resources to bear in helping address long-term drought and aridification in the Western United States. In particular, leaning on opportunities to partner with states, Tribes, and local organizations like irrigation districts and acequias can leverage local knowledge and limited resources.

As you implement any assistance, we wish to underscore how upstream watershed-scale investments greatly benefit all downstream uses, in particular for our farming and ranching communities. Across the major basins of the American West – including the Arkansas-White-Red Basin, the Colorado River Basin, the Columbia River Basin, the Great Basin, the Rio Grande Basin, and the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Basin – investments on National Forest System (NFS) lands have an overwhelming effect on the downstream surface water flows. According to a 2022 U.S. Forest Service (USFS) report, NFS lands comprised 9.2 percent of all land area in the conterminous U.S. and contributed 12.8 percent of the surface water supply.¹ However, in the West, NFS lands comprise 19.2 percent of the total land area and contribute 46.3 percent of the surface water supply.² As such, investments to comprehensively address both short-term drought recovery and future resilience in the American West must include both smaller-scale on-farm measures and larger-scale upstream watershed restoration and improvements.

¹ www.fs.usda.gov/research/treesearch/64978

² www.fs.usda.gov/research/treesearch/64978

With this in mind, we ask the Department to provide additional resources to programs related to water forecasting, water conservation, and watershed restoration within the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the USFS — including the USFS Water Source Protection Program, drought-related multi-benefit projects under NRCS Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Operations program³, and on-farm or forest measures that upgrade water infrastructure, build soil health, and contribute significant ecosystem benefits.

In 2021, the Biden-Harris Administration expressed significant interest in supporting drought recovery and encouraging the adoption of water-smart management practices, including by creating the Western Water Framework. We call for the Department to bolster this commitment and use its discretionary authorities to fill gaps or develop new partnerships to improve the efficiency and resilience of the water supply. Reliable and sustainable water availability is absolutely critical to any agricultural commodity production in the American West, and swiftly deploying funds to producers and watersheds in our States and Districts is crucial to help them respond to more frequent and severe droughts.

Thank you for your Department's tireless work on behalf of American agriculture and dedication to supporting producers across Western landscapes facing unprecedented challenges due to long-term drought.


Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



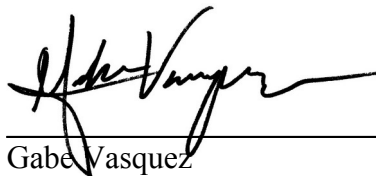
Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



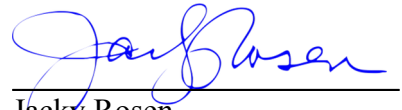
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



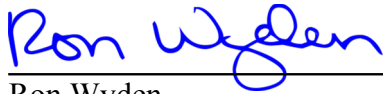
Yadira Caraveo, M.D.
Member of Congress



Gabe Vasquez
Member of Congress



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



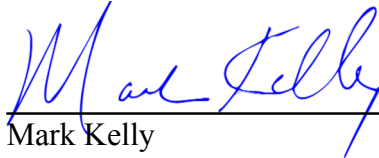
Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



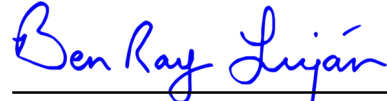
Jon Tester
United States Senator



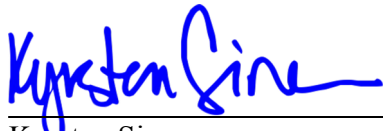
John Hickenlooper
United States Senator



Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



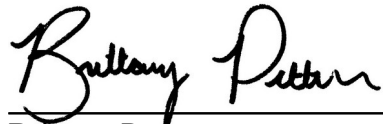
Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator



Susie Lee
Member of Congress



Andrea Salinas
Member of Congress



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Dina Titus
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