

United States Senate

Washington, D.C. 20510

December 7, 2022

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

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to you regarding Western drought and the important role our country's family farmers and ranchers play in addressing climate change and supporting local economies. Thank you for your continued leadership and efforts to ensure farmers and ranchers can succeed during a difficult time.

The American West is in crisis. Across the major basins of the American West – including the Colorado River Basin, the Rio Grande Basin, the Great Basin, the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Basin, the Columbia River Basin, and the Arkansas-White-Red Basin¹ – farm and ranch families hang in the balance as they grapple with a 22-year mega-drought. The acute shortage of water for Western growers threatens productive farmland across our states, which are both a pillar of our rural economies and drivers of America's food production.

We therefore urge the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to give parity to the needs of our States as Western growers and communities face these dire conditions. This includes using existing authorities to support projects and practices for Western farmers and ranchers to conserve water, improve their water infrastructure and efficiency, protect highly-erodible lands plagued by drought, restore western range lands' ability to retain water by reconnecting floodplains to incised streams, and offer technical assistance for growers in drought-stricken regions. Many of these practices, like water conservation, cover crops and restoration of western range lands' drought resilience, provide multiple benefits such as enhanced soil carbon storage and would be eligible for various new funding sources. Other infrastructure projects such as irrigation water efficiency may be better suited to funding streams provided to USDA through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, or through other USDA programs. In addition to new funding provided by Congress, the dire drought conditions in the West require more resources and even more creative and tailored solutions through USDA programs, particularly given many existing programs do not translate well to the needs of Western agriculture. We also urge USDA to prioritize the work of Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) State Technical

¹ <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/reference-maps/us-river-basins>

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Committees to identify and promote those practices and projects that best align with basin-specific drought plans and needs.

As you know, American farmers and ranchers manage over 895 million acres² of ground in the United States, giving them a vital role in combating climate change risks while continuing to feed America. Recently, Congress funded \$20 billion for USDA agriculture conservation programs. We believe USDA should allocate these funds for agriculture conservation equally across the country to reflect the contribution of every region, including the West. It is also critical for USDA to coordinate with states, local and tribal governments, and other partners to further the reach of the agency to scale effective and resilient practices.

We also urge you to address the understaffing of USDA field offices and prioritize hiring staff with expertise in Western production agriculture at the NRCS and Farm Service Agency (FSA). Specifically, the current lack of engineers and experts on USDA staff regarding Western water conservation has delayed many projects for Western growers. USDA's success in helping our nation address the multi-faceted crises facing farmers and ranchers rests on its ability to swiftly roll out programs, facilitate a streamlined application process, and offer technical assistance in a timely manner.

Finally, we request regular briefings from USDA, NRCS, and FSA staff to discuss their steps to assist farmers and ranchers in our states facing severe drought. We look forward to hearing from you on these topics and continuing our partnership to address the water resource concerns in the West.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet
U.S. Senator



Mitt Romney
U.S. Senator



Kyrsten Sinema
U.S. Senator



Michael S. Lee
U.S. Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
U.S. Senator

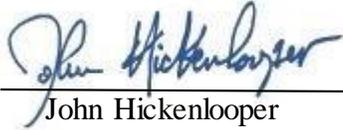


Dianne Feinstein
U.S. Senator

² https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Todays_Reports/reports/fnlo0222.pdf

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John Hickenlooper
U.S. Senator



Mark Kelly
U.S. Senator



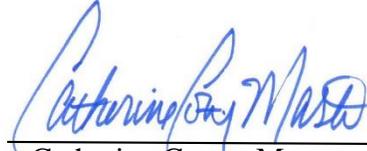
Martin Heinrich
U.S. Senator



Ron Wyden
U.S. Senator



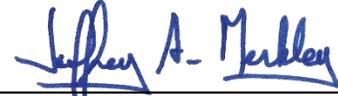
Jacky Rosen
U.S. Senator



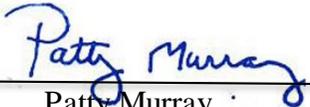
Catherine Cortez Masto
U.S. Senator



Alex Padilla
U.S. Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
U.S. Senator



Patty Murray
U.S. Senator



Maria Cantwell
U.S. Senator