



Alliance Applauds Senate Introduction of Healthy Watersheds Act

Bipartisan Bill Will Increase Flexibility and Reduce Red Tape in NRCS Watershed Improvement Program



Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and Alliance board member Marc Thalacker (L) at a 2022 irrigation modernization ribbon-cutting ceremony at Three Sisters Irrigation District in Central Oregon (Photo courtesy of KTVZ TV)

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The Family Farm Alliance and other agricultural and conservation organizations are publicly thanking U.S. Senators Michael Bennet (D-COLORADO), Deb Fischer (R-NEBRASKA) and Jeff Merkley (D-OREGON) for introducing [S.2636, the Healthy Watersheds and Healthy Communities Act](#), legislation that will help American agriculture and communities become more resilient to drought and flooding by improving the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations program (also known as "PL-566").

"PL-566 has a strong track record of helping farmers, ranchers and local water management agencies with efforts to modernize water systems across the West," said Dan Keppen, Executive Director of the Family Farm Alliance. "S. 2636 further improves the PL-566 planning and construction process and strengthens local control, which will ensure that the program is utilized in the most efficient manner possible in each state. We thank Senator Bennet and his staff for their leadership and initiative on this bill, and we're grateful to Senators Fischer and Merkley for stepping up as co-sponsors on this important bipartisan legislation."

The Alliance earlier this summer joined agriculture and conservation organizations that are a part of the Western Agriculture Conservation Coalition in [sending a letter](#) to the leadership of the [Senate Agriculture Committee](#) supporting the legislation.

"The PL-566 program is an important tool to help state, local, and Tribal governments and local water managers restore the health of our watersheds – but we need to do more to ensure this program works for the American West," said Senator Bennet. "Our bill will cut red tape and help get federal assistance to watershed projects in Colorado. By investing in the health of our watersheds, we can make our communities more resilient to drought, flooding, and climate change."

As the American West faces severe drought and more frequent flooding, farmers, ranchers, and communities are turning to the PL-566 program to mitigate the effects of these natural disasters through watershed improvement projects. However, as demand for this program grows, inadequate funding and burdensome red tape keeps applicants from accessing its full benefits. Western users especially face a harder time accessing the program as a result of its structure and eligibility requirements.

“Nebraska is home to 33 Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations projects, which are critical to providing locally-led conservation solutions to protect Nebraska’s natural resources,” said Senator Fischer. “We’re introducing this legislation to build on the success of the program and boost efficiency. Our bill would also bring planning and oversight closer to the local level and into the hands of those who know the land best.”

The bipartisan legislation would streamline the planning and administration processes to enable more watershed-wide projects, shift decision-making to local NRCS staff, expand program eligibility, and allow federal funding to count toward state and local match requirements. The bill also prioritizes projects with multiple conservation and public benefits and makes drought resilience an explicit purpose of the program.

“The P.L. 566 program is an effective modernization tool for irrigation systems to conserve water—keeping farms in operation during droughts while also protecting habitat for wildlife,” said Senator Merkley, who revitalized this program when he served as Ranking Member of the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee. “Oregonians’ ingenuity with this program has supported projects that benefit both farmers and wildlife, and this legislation would expand this model and enable rural communities in the West to better mitigate the devastating impacts of drought.”

The Alliance’s support for S. 2636 was noted in [Senator Bennet’s press release](#) and an August 21 article in *Greenwire*, “Bennet bill would add drought mitigation to flood program”.

The list of bill supporters also includes the Almond Alliance, California Agricultural Irrigation Association, California Farm Bureau, Colorado Farm Bureau, Environmental Defense Fund, Farmers Conservation Alliance, Irrigation Association, Oregon Water Resources Congress, the Freshwater Trust, The Nature Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, Western Growers, and the Wyoming Stockgrowers Association.

The text of the bill is available [HERE](#). A summary is available [HERE](#)

We will continue to keep you informed on this and other developments impacting Western irrigated agriculture.

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