

Monthly Briefing

A Summary of the Alliance's Recent and Upcoming Activities and Important Water News

Snake River Dam Tour Brings Stakeholders Together

The Family Farm Alliance – partnering with the Idaho Water Users Association (IWUA) – last month wrapped up a tour that brought over 50 participants to the Lewis-Clark Valley to learn first-hand about the national importance of the Lower Snake River Dams and the broader Columbia River system.

The tour brought together a diverse group, including farmers, tribal leaders, conservationists, port officials, and water advocates, for a firsthand look at critical infrastructure, including Dworshak Dam (pictured at right, from the crest of the structure), the third highest dam in the U.S.

“These on-the-ground experiences are central to the Alliance’s mission: building understanding, strengthening relationships, and advocating for practical solutions that preserve irrigated agriculture in the

West,” said Alliance Executive Director Dan Keppen.

The Columbia-Snake system is the top wheat export gateway in the U.S., with barging on the Snake River handling nearly 10% of all U.S. wheat exports. In addition to the economic benefits of providing ready access to world markets, river barging provides significant environmental benefits. In 2020 alone, it would have taken over 42,000 rail cars or over 162,000 semi-trucks to move the cargo that was moved by barge on the lower Snake River. Operating the system is not, however, without controversy. For decades, the region has been embroiled in litigation over asserted impacts of the river system on salmon and steelhead populations.



Dworshak Dam face, viewed from the 717 feet high dam crest.

The call to breach the four dams on the Lower Snake River for the benefit of salmon is persistent.

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Lower Snake River Dam Tour a Success (*Cont'd from Pg 1*)

“Removing the Lower Snake River Dams would send ripple effects throughout the broader agricultural community and would take out an important source of clean, renewable energy and a vital navigation link that agriculture relies on,” said Mr. Keppen.

On Day One, participants toured Dworshak Dam and the Clearwater Hatchery, followed by a frank, in-person dialogue around one of the most complex and debated water issues in the West.

Speakers included Shannon Wheeler (Chairman of the Tribal Executive Committee) and Joseph Oatman (Department of Fisheries Resource Management) of the Nez Perce Tribe, Scott Corbitt (Port of Lewiston), Mitch Cutter (Idaho Conservation League), Clark Mather (Northwest River Partners) and Neil Manau (Pacific Northwest Waterways Association).

The panel discussion was moderated by Paul Arrington (IWUA Executive Director) and Norm Semanko (Family Farm Alliance General Counsel).

“Our issues are complex and complicated and tour participants got a taste of that,” said Mr. Arrington. “But, one thing we know about farmers is, that faced with what seems to be an impossible challenge, they always roll up their sleeves, get their hands dirty and work towards solutions.”

The day ended with dinner at Lindsay Creek Vineyards, where conversations continued informally.

On the second day of the tour, the group traveled by jet boat from Lewiston down the Snake River to Lower Granite Dam, one of the four Lower Snake River dams at the heart of current regional and federal water policy discussions.

There, one of the tallest single lift navigational locks in the country lowered the boat 105 feet to the tailwater below.

The group then toured the dam and adjacent state-of-the-art fish ladder, designed to facilitate the upstream migration of fish – including salmon and steelhead – past the dam.

Columbia Basin Water Outlook Grows Dire As Summer Heats Up

As a backdrop to the tour, drought conditions continued to tighten their grip on much of the Northwest, with Idaho water managers warning that shortages are now increasingly likely. The Idaho Department of Water Resources last month noted that exceptionally warm, dry weather since April has “dramatically changed the outlook on water supply conditions statewide.”

Reservoir storage across the Snake River system is below average and dropping faster than normal, raising concerns about water availability in August and September if the North American Monsoon fails to deliver significant rainfall. Northern Idaho’s drought is also expected to continue for another year, while smaller reservoirs in southern and central Idaho are already struggling.

Meanwhile, in Washington’s Yakima River basin, irrigation outlooks remain

steady but grim. Farmers with junior water rights can expect just 45% of their normal water allotments, according to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, with potential fluctuations depending on weather conditions. The Roza Irrigation District is planning to shut off deliveries nearly a month early on Sept. 28, and further cutbacks could come if the water supply worsens.

“If the water shortage worsens, we’ll have to decide whether to shorten the season even more, reduce flows, or do a combination of both,” Roza district manager Scott Revell told *Capital Press*.

These mounting shortages underscore the increasing strain on water resources during one of



ALLIANCE LEADERS IN LEWISTON: Pictured at right in the back row are Alliance directors Charlie Lyall and Mark Hansen (WA), Marc Thalacker (OR), Jim Yahn (CO), Paul Orme (AZ) and Clinton Pline (ID). In the front row are incoming Alliance executive director Samantha Barncastle (NM) and current executive director Dan Keppen (OR). Photo taken at Lindsay Creek Vineyards.

the driest stretches in recent memory.

Mr. Arrington reflected on the week’s activities.

“We were excited to bring people to show them our country and our issues,” he said. “Sometimes it seems that all we ever read about in the news is the conflict that’s brewing in the Colorado River Basin.

“This tour gave a diverse group of participants some time to step away from those challenges and see what other Western basins are facing,” he added.

Sweeping OBBB Act Signed, Sets Stage for Major Water Investments

On July 4, President Trump signed into law the sweeping One Big Beautiful Bill (OB3) Act, a GOP-led multitrillion-dollar initiative that combines bold spending with fiscal restraint.

A key component allocates \$1 billion to the Bureau of Reclamation for projects that “restore or increase the capacity” of existing conveyance or surface storage facilities—an explicit win for the Central California Republican delegation and western water interests.

“California House Republicans are once again taking steps to secure a reliable and affordable water supply for our constituents and farmers,” said Rep. Ken Calvert (R-CALIFORNIA).

While driven by Californian priorities, the water funding applies broadly to all Reclamation states.

A Surge in Conservation Program Funding

Beyond water infrastructure, OB3 substantially boosts several USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service programs expected to benefit western water infrastructure planning:

- **Grassroots Source Water Protection:** \$1 million mandatory in FY 2026 and \$20 million annually through FY 2031
- **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program:** Rising from \$625 million in FY 2026 to \$700 million annually in FY 2029–31
- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program:** \$2.655 billion in FY 2026, climbing to \$3.255 billion annually starting FY 2028
- **Conservation Stewardship Program:** Scaling from \$1.3 billion to \$1.375 billion through FY 2031
- **Regional Conservation Partnership Program:** \$425 million in FY 2026, then \$450 million annually
- **Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention:** \$150 million mandatory funding in FY 2026 (available until expended)

“The significant funding in OB3 for NRCS conservation programs could potentially be used to advance water infrastructure priorities in the West over the next five years,” said Family Farm Alliance Executive Director Dan Keppen.

Political Reactions and Fiscal Concerns



President Trump signs the One Big Beautiful Bill Act into law on July Fourth. (Photo courtesy of the White House)

House Natural Resources Committee Chair Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.) hailed the act as a victory for resource development and rural job creation.

“This historic legislation unleashes American energy and unlocks the full potential of our abundant natural resources,” he said.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-SOUTH DAKOTA) described July 4 as “an extraordinary day for our country,” pointing to border security initiatives and spending reforms included in OB3.

Meanwhile, some analysts and economic leaders offered cautionary notes.

“The level of the debt is sustainable but the path is not, and we need to address that sooner or later,” said Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell. “Sooner is better than later.”

The Congressional Budget Office forecasts a \$3.4 trillion increase in the federal deficit and an estimated 10 million Americans losing health insurance over the next decade due to the bill.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) criticized Republicans for what he said was undue allegiance to billionaire donors, while others questioned the bill’s infrastructure returns.

Looking Ahead

Although the fiscal implications remain under scrutiny, the OB3 Act establishes a robust federal commitment to western water infrastructure and conservation. With immediate funding for conveyance and storage reinforcement and expanded long-term support for conservation programs, stakeholders across the West are now assessing how to align priorities with this new legislative framework.

“As implementation begins, our interest will turn to translating funding opportunities into tangible infrastructure improvements in the coming years,” said Mr. Keppen.

Trump's NEPA Overhaul Reshapes Environmental Review

Agencies Move Quickly as Congress Eyes Further Reform

The Trump administration's sweeping changes to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) have triggered one of the most significant overhauls of federal environmental review in decades. Federal agencies have rapidly moved to implement interim rules streamlining permitting processes, while Congress is considering additional reforms.

Agencies Move Quickly

President Donald Trump on January 20, 2025, signed Executive Order 14154, "Unleashing American Energy," directing the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to rescind its 1978 NEPA regulations and replace them with agency-by-agency procedures designed to expedite federal permitting.

"President Trump's action ... will ensure timely reviews and consistency across agencies and enable CEQ to coordinate this monumental deregulatory effort," the White House said at the time.

CEQ followed with an interim final rule on February 25, 2025, removing all NEPA implementing regulations (40 CFR parts 1500–1508). The rule, effective April 11, instructed agencies to issue their own NEPA procedures within 12 months. CEQ guidance emphasized "expedited reviews, prioritizing efficiency and certainty," including tighter deadlines and reduced documentation.

Legal and Policy Context

The administration's overhaul follows longstanding questions over CEQ's authority to issue binding NEPA rules. The U.S. Supreme Court's May 29, 2025, decision in *Seven County Infrastructure v. Eagle County* reinforced the administration's approach, ruling that NEPA is strictly procedural and granting agencies broader discretion in how they conduct reviews.

"The court's ruling recognizes NEPA as a process statute, responsibly limits its scope and helps return the law to its original intent," said House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Bruce Westerman (R-AR).

Environmental groups sharply disagree. They argue the changes undermine the core purpose of NEPA by narrowing the types of impacts that must be considered, limiting public input, and exempting large categories of projects from review.

"By rescinding these regulations, this administration is ensuring that much needed critical infrastructure will be delayed, that communities historically overburdened by pollution will continue to be ignored, and that there will be no clear rules for project developers and investors," said Earthjustice Senior Legislative Counsel Stephen Schima.

Water and Forestry Projects to Benefit From USDA, DOI Regulatory Overhauls

The Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and the Interior (DOI) have already adopted sweeping changes.

USDA rescinded seven separate agency NEPA regulations, including those for the Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service, consolidating them into a single department-wide procedure. The interim rule reduces requirements for public notices and environmental assessments, particularly for routine activities like logging or water infrastructure maintenance.

The Family Farm Alliance welcomed USDA's streamlined approach.

"For years, slow and cumbersome federal regulations have been a major obstacle to critical water supply projects," said Alliance Executive Director Dan Keppen. "We appreciate USDA's effort to consolidate regulations and encourage more use of categorical exclusions for routine projects."

DOI issued an interim rule eliminating most department-specific NEPA regulations and shifting standards to internal guidance. Only limited provisions for categorical exclusions and emergencies remain, enabling agencies to bypass review for urgent projects.

Mr. Keppen added that the Alliance supports the Interior Department's effort to align with the same principles.

"We plan to file comments with Interior encouraging even broader use of categorical exclusions, especially for projects that protect water supplies or improve forest health," he said.

The DOI rule also consolidates existing procedures into a single department-wide NEPA handbook. This includes new provisions that broaden the use of categorical exclusions, set tighter deadlines for Environmental Assessments (EAs) and Environmental Impact Statements (EISs), and reduce the requirement to analyze indirect and cumulative impacts.

"We support DOI's intent to implement NEPA as a procedural statute focused on reasonably foreseeable environmental impacts, rather than as a barrier to critical water supply projects," said Todd Ungerecht, the Alliance's federal policy advisor who is leading the effort to craft the comment letter.

Other Agencies Revise NEPA Procedures

Other departments are also moving forward. The Defense Department now limits Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) to 150 pages and has dropped mitigation plan requirements. The Air Force rescinded its NEPA regulations entirely while drafting new procedures. The Department of Energy eliminated NEPA requirements for projects involving presidential permits on the border.

Critics argue these moves collectively weaken environmental safeguards.

"This is a wholesale retreat from the environmental accountability that NEPA was designed to ensure," said Lisa Evans, senior attorney at the nonprofit Earthjustice, a known quantity in the environmental litigation industry.

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Farm Bill Faces Uncertain Fall Amid Budget, Nominee Fights

As Congress heads into its August recess, the outlook for passing even a scaled-down farm bill this fall remains uncertain, with partisan tensions running high over recent budget maneuvers.

House Agriculture Committee Chair G.T. Thompson (R-Pa.) has floated the idea of a “skinny” farm bill, but Democrats remain incensed by GOP-backed cuts to nutrition programs included in the reconciliation package.

House Agriculture ranking member Angie Craig (D-Minn.) warned that those cuts—nearly \$200 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—could undermine the bipartisan coalition historically needed to pass farm bills.

“The Republican budget cut nearly \$200 billion from SNAP, which certainly upends the traditional farm bill process,” Rep. Craig said. “I’ll work with anyone to improve the lives of our farmers, but you can’t decimate a title of the farm bill and think it won’t negatively affect the



*House Agriculture Committee
Chairman G.T. Thompson
(Photo courtesy of House.gov)*

bipartisan farm bill coalition and make future farm bills harder to pass.”

Thompson, meanwhile, must balance Democratic wariness with pushback from GOP fiscal hardliners skeptical of additional farm spending.

Lawmakers will need to bridge those divides when they return to Washington on September 2.

The House adjourned July 24 and the Senate was set to leave on August 1 (*at the time of publication*), but Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-SOUTH DAKOTA) has signaled that part of the Senate’s recess could be suspended to process some of the 136 pending Trump administration nominees.

“We are absolutely trying to avoid a nuclear option issue, but at some point, you’ve got to have an operational government,” Sen. Mike Rounds (R-SOUTH DAKOTA) said, hinting at possible rule changes if Democrats continue delaying votes.

Agencies Revise NEPA Procedures (*Cont’d from Page 4*)

Congress Weighs Further Reforms

Meanwhile, Congress is considering legislation that would codify some of the administration’s changes. Westerman and Rep. Jared Golden (D-ME) have introduced the Standardizing Permitting and Expediting Economic Development (SPEED) Act, which narrows the definition of “major federal action,” shortens litigation deadlines, and limits consideration of long-term climate effects.

“A country as advanced as the United States must be nimble enough to build what we need, when we need it,” said Rep. Golden. “I’m proud to partner with Chairman Westerman on reforms that protect our environment while delivering the investments Americans need today, not years from now.”

But Rep. Jared Huffman, the Ranking Member on the House Natural Resources Committee, warned that the bill could go too far.

“This proposal tilts the playing field toward polluters at the expense of public health,” he said.

The Family Farm Alliance supports the bill, which essentially codifies the recent Supreme Court rulings relating to NEPA and also the intent of the Trump E.O. to streamline NEPA reviews.

“The SPEED Act provides much-needed reforms to streamline the NEPA process and reduce unnecessary litigation

that has delayed critical Western water supply and infrastructure projects for years,” Mr. Keppen said. “This legislation will help farmers, ranchers, and rural communities move forward with projects that sustain their livelihoods and the nation’s food supply.”

Next Steps

With agencies already rewriting NEPA procedures and Congress poised for debate, the future of federal environmental review remains uncertain.

Environmental advocates are bracing for a fight.

“We will continue to challenge any effort that erodes public participation and weakens environmental protections,” Ms. Evans said.

However, proponents of reform say the changes are necessary to reduce costly delays for infrastructure projects, from water delivery systems to wildfire prevention.

Mr. Keppen said his organization hopes USDA and Interior will fully train staff to implement the new procedures consistently.

“By eliminating duplicative processes and focusing reviews where they’re truly needed, we can better manage limited resources,” he said.

USDA Escalates Fire Readiness as Western Wildfire Season Intensifies

As wildfire risks climb across the West, the National Multi-Agency Coordination Group (NMAC) has raised the national fire preparedness level to Level 4, signaling heightened coordination and resource mobilization across federal, state, and tribal firefighting agencies.

“To protect our public lands and communities during peak fire season, we are elevating preparedness and mobilizing all hands on deck,” said U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke L. Rollins. “We’re not waiting for fires to strike—we’re actively managing national forestlands. For too long, well-intentioned rules have tied the hands of our land stewards. We’re rescinding the failed roadless rule and declaring a national forest emergency so we can clear dangerous fuels before disaster strikes.”

With legislative action moving forward, a nearly fully staffed firefighting workforce, and stepped-up fuel-reduction efforts, officials hope this multi-pronged strategy will help prevent the kind of catastrophic wildfires that have devastated Western lands and communities in recent years.

Wildfire Trends: Numbers on the Rise

As of July 30, 3.14 million acres have burned in 40,247 fires nationwide —up from 28,165 fires at this time last year, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. California’s Madre Fire, at 80,779 acres, is the largest blaze so far this year.

The Palisades Fire in Los Angeles destroyed nearly 7,000 homes, caused 12 fatalities, and burned more than 23,000 acres at the beginning of the year —making it the most destructive wildfire in the city’s history.

Wildfires Put Western Irrigation Lifelines at Risk

Wildfires in overgrown Western forests are increasingly threatening the irrigation infrastructure that sustains some of the nation’s most productive farmland.

Last month, *Circle of Blue* published a story that featured coverage of several Family Farm Alliance irrigation districts who are dealing with the aftermath of watersheds seared by wildfires.

The 115-year-old Yakima-Tieton Irrigation Canal in Washington’s Yakima Valley is a vivid example. Following the 2024 Retreat Fire, which burned 45,601 acres of nearby state and federal forestland, destabilized slopes sent boulders, trees, and sediment crashing into the canal’s 12-mile route carved into basalt cliffs.

The damage has caused more than 2,000 leaks and forced the irrigation district to spend millions on emergency repairs to keep water flowing to 35,000 acres of orchards.

Similar scenarios are playing out across the West. In Colorado, Oregon, and Washington, sediment from burned watersheds has clogged fish screens, reduced canal capacity, and threatened to shut down irrigation systems during peak growing season.

Irrigators say the cost and difficulty of replacing century-old canals and pipelines in rugged terrain make proactive forest management essential. Without healthier watersheds, the risk of post-fire debris flows, landslides, and flooding will continue to grow.

“Those federal lands overlay the upper watersheds that supply the water for irrigation districts,” said Dan Keppen, executive director of the Family Farm Alliance. “The manner in which they’re managed has an impact on our water supply.”

USFS Firefighting Workforce Nearly Fully Staffed

Some Western states are expressing concerns about staff reductions and cuts in funding at federal agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service, which often partners with states to fight wildfires and manage forests.

“The key is we need to scale up across the board if we are going to meet our targets and keep our communities safe,” Patrick Wright, executive director of the California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force, told *AgAlert*. “This causes real concern in the federal ability to step up and meet our joint targets.”

However, the Forest Service reports it has now hired 99% of its

11,300 firefighter target, with full staffing expected shortly. Officials say this puts the agency well ahead of previous years in building a fully operational wildfire response force.

U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources related to Trump’s budget request for the Forest Service for fiscal year 2026.

When questioned about sufficient Forest Service firefighting personnel this year, he said the agency currently has 11,250 firefighters, and the maximum that is typically hired is 11,300.

“We have not made any changes to our resource availability this year, whether it’s aviation resources or firefighters,” Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz told the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources earlier this summer.

Congress Pushes Wildfire Prevention Legislation

Republicans on Capitol Hill continue efforts to legislate a way toward healthy Western forests.



Aerial view of the Mountain Fire, Ventura County (CALIFORNIA), November 2024.

Colorado River Negotiations Intensify as Deadline Approaches

Stakes High for All Colorado River Basin Users

As the November deadline nears for a consensus agreement on post-2026 Colorado River operations, negotiators from the seven basin states remain locked in difficult talks over how to divide water from the drought-stricken river. The outcome could reshape water management for decades and carries major implications for cities, Tribes, and the 4 million acres of farmland that rely on the river.

Negotiations remain tense, with the Upper Basin states—Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico—pressing for water use to align more closely with available supply.

Colorado River Commissioner Becky Mitchell of Colorado warned in late June that the Lower Basin states—California, Arizona, and Nevada—must be prepared to accept less water under a new framework.

“The Lower Basin receives about 62 percent of the ‘natural flow,’ which is too high,” Ms. Mitchell said at a Colorado Basin Roundtable meeting. “It isn’t about winning or losing an argument, but about operating the system so we don’t all lose the benefits of the system.”

Lower Basin officials warn that cuts must be balanced and fair.

“The Lower Basin has already made significant contributions to stabilize the system, and we’re willing to continue working on a supply-driven framework,” said Tom Buschatzke, director of the Arizona Department of Water

Resources. “But the reductions cannot fall disproportionately on one side of the river.”

Federal officials have made clear that if the states cannot finalize a plan by February, the Interior Department will step in.

“There is less water in the Colorado River—that’s the new reality,” said Scott Cameron, Interior’s acting assistant secretary for water and science. “We all have to live in the physical world as it is, not as we hope it might be.”

Agricultural voices have underscored the stakes of a balanced outcome.

In a July *Arizona Republic* op-ed, Dan Keppen of the Family Farm Alliance and Tom Davis of the Yuma County Water Users’ Association warned that policy choices could threaten national food security.

“The fresh food grown in Yuma feeds the entire nation in winter months,” they wrote. “We must

protect the farms that sustain our nation while adapting to the river’s changing reality.”

In another guest opinion in the Palm Springs *Desert Review* by Mike Wade of the California Farm Water Coalition and Mr. Keppen discusses the Colorado River, the connection between farm water and food supply, water use efficiency, and why Americans should reject the decline of domestic food production in favor of overseas sources.

“The water farmers use doesn’t stay on the farm—it returns in the food we buy at the grocery store,” they wrote. “That food feeds not just millions of people in the Southwest but tens of millions more across the country.”



Yuma area growers produce more than 200,000 acres of vegetables annually with some of the highest water-use efficiency rates in the country.

Wildfire Legislation Advanced (Continued from Page 6)

The U.S. House Natural Resources Committee advanced three key bills on July 23:

- *The Put Out Fire Act* (H.R. 178) directs Interior and USFS to take immediate suppression action on high-risk land.
- *The Proven Forest Management Act of 2025* (H.R. 179) expands categorical exclusions for forest management projects up to 10,000 acres across federal lands, including the Tahoe Basin.
- *The Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act* (H.R. 1045) creates a research center dedicated to wildfire prevention technologies.

What Preparedness Level 4 Means

Preparedness Level 4 reflects strained firefighting resources, severe drought, heavy fuel loads, and escalating fire activity. This designation unlocks greater federal support for incident management teams, airtankers, helicopters, engines, and heavy equipment—working in close coordination with state, local, and tribal agencies.

Secretary Rollins urged Western residents and visitors to remain vigilant.

“Enjoy the outdoors responsibly—your caution helps keep firefighters safe and communities protected,” she said.

SCOTUS Ruling Clears the Way for Federal Workforce Cuts

The Trump Administration's sweeping plans to restructure federal agencies and significantly reduce the federal workforce gained critical momentum this month after the Supreme Court lifted a lower court injunction blocking the initiatives. The 8-1 ruling permits agencies to move forward with mass layoffs and restructuring, even as the legality of the executive order directing the cuts continues to be challenged in the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals.

The Administration's efforts include large-scale reorganizations at agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Interior Department (DOI), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). According to a court filing, 17 agencies were targeted for potential reductions in force (RIFs), impacting tens of thousands of federal employees. Critics warn the moves could undermine public health, safety, and research functions, while administration officials argue they are necessary to address bloated payrolls, underutilized facilities, and systemic inefficiencies.

USDA Relocation Plan Sparks Backlash

At USDA, Secretary Brooke Rollins announced a comprehensive reorganization plan aimed at "bringing the Department closer to its customers" and ensuring its workforce aligns with budget realities.

"American agriculture feeds, clothes, and fuels this nation and the world, and it is long past time the Department better serve the great and patriotic farmers, ranchers, and producers we are mandated to support," Secretary Rollins said in a July 24 statement.

The plan includes relocating much of the Department's Washington, D.C.-area staff to five regional hubs — Raleigh, Kansas City, Indianapolis, Fort Collins, and Salt Lake City — and vacating or consolidating several capital-region facilities, including the USDA South Building and the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center.

Secretary Rollins estimated that "perhaps 50 to 70 percent" of the 4,600 employees currently based in the National Capital Region would choose to relocate.

The reorganization comes amid mounting scrutiny from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. Senate Agriculture Committee Chair John Boozman (R-Ark.) and ranking member Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) called for a hearing to examine the USDA plan.

"The U.S. Department of Agriculture plays a critical role in supporting America's farmers, ranchers and rural communities," Chairman Boozman said, expressing disappointment that Congress was not consulted prior to the announcement.

Ranking Member Klobuchar was more blunt.

"Obviously it's completely unacceptable, and it's going to

decimate research work at the USDA," she told reporters, adding that she was given only 15 minutes' notice before the plan was made public. She warned that the proposed closure of major research facilities could "destroy the whole USDA."

The Senate Agriculture Committee later conducted a hearing late last month with USDA Deputy Secretary Stephen Vaden to further examine the reorganization plan.

Mr. Vaden told lawmakers the plan is not yet final and emphasized the department's focus on retaining staff and developing future leadership. USDA will close one headquarters building and three Washington-area offices but expects most employees will choose to relocate.

"We won't know whether there might be onesies or twosies until the plan is finalized", he said. "But we have an intent that if an employee wants to relocate, we've got an office for them."

Interior and EPA Face Deep Restructuring and Layoffs

DOI has also moved aggressively to expand its list of offices subject to RIFs. Internal documents show that the number of "competitive areas" — categories used to determine layoff eligibility — has surged to more than 1,400, encompassing the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, and the Office of the Secretary. Employees in

these units now face the possibility of layoffs based on tenure and performance evaluations. The department has already reduced its workforce by over 11% in recent years and is pursuing further restructuring under its efficiency initiative.

"Reclamation faces mounting pressure to deliver reliable water and power with fewer federal resources and increasing operational complexity," said Family Farm Alliance (Alliance) Executive Director Dan Keppen. "To remain effective and efficient, Reclamation is going to have to get creative on how it delivers its core mission—supporting the Western U.S. through infrastructure ownership, dam safety, water management, and power generation"

The Alliance has been working for most of the summer with its members and the National Water Resources Association, assembling a set of actionable recommendations for DOI and Reclamation to consider as Reclamation faces the near-future with a much-reduced workforce.

At the EPA, the administration is poised to eliminate the Office of Research and Development and reorganize key air and water offices, reallocating staff to speed up chemical reviews. Environmental groups and some lawmakers argue these changes could weaken public health protections by eroding the agency's independent scientific capacity.

"This is a direct assault on science and the public's right



USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins and Deputy Secretary Stephen Vaden. (Photo courtesy of USDA)

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California Groups Urge Changes to FWS Yellow-Legged Frog Habitat Plan

A coalition of California water, agriculture, and rural community organizations, including the Family Farm Alliance, is challenging a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) proposal to designate 760,071 acres as critical habitat for four populations of the foothill yellow-legged frog listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The proposed designation spans 17 counties, with more than 363,000 acres of the affected land privately owned.

In comments submitted to FWS on July 28, the coalition, led by the California Farm Bureau, raised alarm about the potential effects on private landowners and resource management.

“We are particularly concerned with the vast scope of this proposal, the impact on private landowners, and the indirect impacts the proposal creates for land and resource management,” the letter stated.

“Our organizations oppose the critical habitat designation as proposed due to the irreparable damage that we anticipate would occur to communities throughout California.”

The coalition argued that the proposal could restrict agricultural practices, water management, and wildfire mitigation efforts.

The group also urged FWS to better coordinate with existing state laws and regulations and to recognize the role of grazing and forestry in reducing wildfire risk.

“Expanding critical habitat designations without solid scientific justification... undermines both conservation efforts and the viability of working landscapes,” they concluded.

The FWS extended the public comment period from May 17 to July 28 following requests from stakeholders.

White House Issues Executive Actions Regarding Data Centers

The White House last month released the Winning the Race: America’s AI Action Plan, which outlines over 90 planned federal policy actions the Trump administration plans to implement to speed up artificial intelligence development nationwide.

The order defines data center projects as those requiring more than 100 megawatts of new electrical load and directs multiple federal agencies to ease permitting requirements.

Key provisions include directing the Council on Environmental Quality to develop new categorical exclusions under the National Environmental Policy Act, instructing the Environmental Protection Agency to expedite permitting under the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, and requiring the Departments of the Interior and Energy to preemptively consult on common construction activities under the Endangered Species Act.

While Western water resources per se weren’t singled out in reviews of the AI Action Plan, the water-intensive nature of data center infrastructure and the proposed NEPA rollbacks and regulatory exemptions triggered significant concern.

Critics—particularly Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA)—highlighted that hyperscale AI data centers consume massive volumes of water for cooling, which may strain local water supplies and lead to interstate competition and conflict. Greene described these facilities as “black holes” of water consumption and expressed concern about communities losing water to corporate facilities.

“While I understand the many promised benefits of AI, I remain committed to protecting state rights, human jobs, human lives, human rights, our environment and critical water supply,” she wrote on X.

Federal Agency Restructuring (*Continued from Page 8*)

to a clean and healthy environment,” said Representative Chellie Pingree (D-Maine).

But administration officials insist that the restructuring will eliminate redundancy and improve efficiency without compromising essential functions.

Battles Intensify as Changes Take Effect

While the Supreme Court’s decision does not resolve the underlying legal challenges, it allows the Administration to enforce its Feb. 11 executive order and accompanying directives from the Office of Management and Budget and Office of Personnel Management. Legal experts caution that the pace of reorganization could make it difficult to reverse even if the 9th Circuit ultimately rules against the Administration.

Michael Fallings, managing partner at Tully Rinckey, warned that “the reduction-in-force plans need to be clear and specific because employees can challenge those,” adding that

the administration’s failure to follow clearly defined criteria could open the door to successful legal disputes

Rob Larew, president of the National Farmers Union, voiced concerns about the impact of the USDA changes on rural communities and agricultural research.

“The reorganization will result in significant staff turnover and loss of institutional knowledge at a time when farmers and ranchers most need USDA’s support,” he said. “Around 15,000 department employees have already left or taken buy-outs this year — and that’s before these latest moves.”

Secretary Rollins, however, framed the changes as part of a broader effort to modernize government and shift talent into the private sector.

“The economy is beginning to thrive again,” she said in a recent Fox News interview. “President Trump’s vision was always to move people out of these government jobs, where maybe it isn’t the most productive use, into the private sector.”

Trump Administration Elevates Ag as National Security Priority

The Trump Administration last month unveiled the National Farm Security Action Plan, a sweeping effort to treat U.S. agriculture as a cornerstone of national security.

The initiative, spearheaded by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins, seeks to curb foreign ownership of American farmland, enhance agricultural supply chain resilience, and safeguard critical infrastructure from foreign adversaries.

“We feed the world. We lead the world. And we’ll never let foreign adversaries control our land, our labs, or our livelihoods,” Secretary Rollins said last month’s announcement. “This Action Plan puts America’s farmers, families, and future first—exactly where they belong.”

The announcement followed the recent arrest of foreign nationals accused of smuggling a noxious fungus into the U.S., a potential agroterrorism weapon. Officials cited the case as evidence of vulnerabilities in the food and agriculture supply chain.

Key Provisions and Expanded Authority

The seven-point plan proposes stricter oversight of foreign purchases of farmland, new penalties for violations, and greater investment in domestic agricultural manufacturing.

It also seeks to fortify plant and animal health programs, enhance cybersecurity for food systems, and tighten restrictions on foreign involvement in agricultural research.

Later in the month, Secretary Rollins expanded the initiative by launching a Foreign Farm Land Purchases database and a web portal for anonymous reporting of illegal transactions.

She also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Treasury Department, giving the USDA a seat at the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) for agriculture-related transactions.

“Gone are the days of foreign adversaries taking advantage of our farmland, farmers, and programs paid for by American taxpayers,” Secretary Rollins said. “The National Farm Security Action Plan was a first step... Our work is far from done.”

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth echoed the urgency.

“Foreign ownership of land near strategic bases and U.S. military installations poses a serious threat to our national security,” he said. The Farm Security Plan will put America First and keep our bases secure.”

Praise and Support from Capitol Hill GOP

The plan has drawn strong support from congressional Republicans. Senator Roger Marshall (R-KANSAS) called the initiative “imperative.”

“Farm security is national security, and it is imperative that we start recognizing this before it is too late,” said Senator Marschall.

Senator Cynthia Lummis (R-WYOMING) praised the crack-down on foreign ownership, declaring, “The CCP has no place owning American farmland.”

Critics Raise Concerns About Implementation

While many lawmakers and industry groups back the effort, some agriculture advocates worry about the unintended consequences of sweeping restrictions on land transactions. Several Democrats expressed concern about the lack of consultation with Congress. Environmental groups also argue that focusing narrowly on foreign ownership could distract from broader issues affecting food security, such as climate change and labor shortages.



Secretary Rollins introduces USDA’s National Farm Security Action Plan on the steps of the national Capitol. (Photo courtesy of USDA)

A New Security Frontier

Supporters argue that the Farm Security Plan aligns with bipartisan concerns about foreign ownership of farmland, which has grown steadily in recent years. In 2023, the Senate voted 91-7 to block businesses based in China from purchasing U.S. farmland, after a high-profile attempt to buy cropland near a military base in North Dakota.

“Food policy is national security policy,” said Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem. “A country who cannot feed itself... is not secure. We will never let any other country control our food supply.”

Dan Keppen, Executive Director of the Family Farm Alliance, said the plan reflects the reality that food production and national security are inseparable.

“Less domestic food production means more global competition and higher prices for American consumers,” Keppen noted. “In the Western U.S., that means we need water allocation policies that support Western farms producing at capacity, because the ability of the U.S. to feed itself is a cornerstone of security.”

The USDA plans further action in coming months as it builds partnerships with governors, state legislators, and federal agencies to integrate agriculture into broader national security efforts.

Senate Advances Spending Bills as House Leaves for Recess, Showdown Looms

As the House departed for its six-week August recess, the Senate pushed ahead on several of its fiscal year (FY) 2026 appropriations bills, though partisan disputes over spending levels and policy riders threatened to derail progress. Lawmakers on both sides of the Capitol acknowledged that a stop-gap continuing resolution (CR) would likely be necessary to avoid a government shutdown when the new fiscal year begins October 1.

Senate Moves Minibus and Key Bills Forward

In the final days before the recess, the Senate Appropriations Committee marked up its Defense and Labor-HHS-Education funding bills and advanced its first “minibus” package, which included Military Construction–VA, Agriculture–FDA, and Commerce-Justice-Science. Committee leaders repeatedly emphasized the need for a bipartisan path forward.

“We are committed to keeping the government funded in a responsible way,” said Senate Appropriations Chair Patty Murray (D-WASHINGTON). “That means rejecting unnecessary rescissions, upholding prior bipartisan agreements, and ensuring vital programs aren’t gutted.”

Sen. Kennedy Blocks Energy-Water Bill Over Funding

But that message met resistance from some Republican members. Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA), who chairs the Energy-Water Appropriations Subcommittee, held up his panel’s bill over its top-line funding level. Committee leaders had struck a bipartisan deal to increase the bill’s budget by 3% to \$59.9 billion, but Senator Kennedy demanded a 3% cut instead, largely targeting clean energy initiatives.

“We can’t just keep spending money like it’s water,” Senator Kennedy said. “A 3% cut is reasonable, especially when so many of these dollars are going to programs that don’t have measurable outcomes.”

Senator Murray and Ranking Member Susan Collins (R-ME) argued that Mr. Kennedy’s move could jeopardize funding for core programs at the Department of Energy and the Army Corps of Engineers.

“We need to ensure that energy infrastructure and water resource projects are properly supported,” Senator Collins said. “This is about maintaining reliability and security.”

Deep Divisions Between House and Senate

The dispute reflected broader partisan divides that slowed the appropriations process. In the House, Republicans had already passed their Defense and Military Construction–VA bills largely along party lines, in alignment with Trump Administration priorities, and moved a sweeping \$38 billion Interior-Environment spending bill that slashed the Environmental Protection Agency’s budget by 23%.

House Appropriations Chair Tom Cole (R-OKLAHOMA) defended the cuts, saying, “We are restoring fiscal discipline and reining in overreach by agencies like EPA. These reduc-

tions bring spending closer to where it needs to be.”

The House bill also includes conservative policy riders aimed at rolling back Biden-era regulations, limiting Endangered Species Act listings, and promoting conventional energy and critical minerals development.

Democrats on the committee blasted the measure, noting it eliminated funding for key environmental programs and imposed conservative policy riders rolling back Biden-era regulations.

“These cuts would devastate clean water infrastructure and roll back decades of environmental protections,” said Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), the panel’s top Democrat.

By contrast, the Senate Appropriations Committee advanced a \$41.5 billion bipartisan Interior-Environment bill that rejected the House’s deep cuts.

“We simply cannot afford to hollow out the agencies that protect our air, water, and public lands,” Senator Murray said.

Agriculture Bill Shows Rare Bipartisan Agreement

The Agriculture Appropriations bill, one of the few bright spots for bipartisan cooperation, passed the Senate committee unanimously on July 10. The Senate Committee bill’s Conservation Operations title includes \$895M for Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) technical and financial assistance to farmers and ranchers to support America’s working lands, the same as last year. There is \$52M for Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations.

“This important bill supports our farmers, rural communities, and critical nutrition programs,” Senator Collins said.

Subcommittee Chair John Hoeven (R-NORTH DAKOTA) added that the measure “makes important investments to ensure America’s producers have the tools they need while maintaining strong support for agricultural research and food safety.”

But differences remained with the House Agriculture plan, which reduced discretionary spending by 4.2% and targeted climate and conservation programs for cuts.

With just two months left before the end of the fiscal year, leaders on both sides privately acknowledged that negotiations would likely stretch into the fall.

“There’s no question we’re going to need a continuing resolution,” Senator Collins said. “The question is whether we can get these bills close enough together in the interim to avoid another yearlong omnibus.”

Senator Murray warned that brinkmanship could lead to another shutdown showdown.

“We’ve seen this movie before,” she said. “If Republicans insist on extreme cuts and partisan riders, we risk hurting families, small businesses, and our economy. That’s not an option.”

For now, the Senate’s actions during July set the stage for tough negotiations with the House when members return in September.

“Just around the time we’ll have our members back in D.C. for our farmer lobbyist trip,” said Family Farm Alliance Executive Director Dan Keppen.

House Advances Bills to Tackle Resources Challenges Before August Recess

In the final days leading up to the August congressional recess, the U.S. House of Representatives and its committees moved forward with a series of bipartisan bills aimed at addressing critical Western water, forestry, and wildlife management issues. From advancing species management reforms to improving storm forecasting, lawmakers across the aisle pushed through legislation designed to provide practical solutions for communities and ecosystems across the country.

House Floor Activity

Several high-profile bills cleared the House floor with strong bipartisan support. Among them was the *Finish the Arkansas Valley Conduit Act*, introduced by Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-COLORADO), which will reduce cost-prohibitive interest payments for Pueblo, Colorado communities working to complete a vital water infrastructure project.

"This project is critical for ensuring safe drinking water for thousands of Coloradans," Rep. Boebert said.

Species Management and Environmental Law Reforms

The House Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries also held a legislative hearing on six bills and a discussion draft aimed at improving species management and reforming the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Subcommittee Chair Harriet Hageman (R-WYOMING) emphasized the need for more practical approaches.

"Today's hearing underscores our commitment to ensuring that federal environmental laws work for the American people," Rep. Hageman said. "These bills reflect a much-needed shift toward transparency, flexibility and common sense in how we manage our natural resources."

Key proposals included Rep. Nick Begich's (R-Alaska) discussion draft to reduce regulatory uncertainty under the MMPA and Rep. McClintock's *Endangered Species Transparency and Reasonableness Act of 2025* (H.R. 180), which would require federal agencies to publish all scientific data underlying endangered species listing and habitat designations. The bill also places caps on attorneys' fees for lawsuits filed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Committee Action on Wildfire and Water

The full House Natural Resources Committee advanced H.R. 435, the *Direct Hire to Fight Fires*, authored by Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CALIFORNIA), which gives the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior permanent authority to quickly hire qualified wildland firefighters. Another key bill, H.R. 831, the *Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program Amendment Act*, introduced by Rep. Ken Calvert (R-CALIFORNIA), allows non-federal program funds to accrue interest, helping offset inflation without additional taxpayer costs.

"Providing additional resources for the Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program at no cost to taxpayers will support one of our most important natural resources in the Southwest," Rep. Calvert stated.

Improved Forecasting and Western Water Bills

On July 14, the *Improving Atmospheric River Forecasts Act* (H.R. 4302) was reintroduced by Western Caucus Vice Chair Jay Obernolte (R-CALIFORNIA) and a bipartisan group of lawmakers. The measure would create an atmospheric river forecast improvement program at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to better predict severe storm events.

The House also passed bills codifying executive orders and expanding energy development, including H.R. 1044 by Rep. David Valadao (R-CALIFORNIA), which extends the Kaweah Project hydroelectric permit for 40 years, and H.R. 4297, the *Bolts Ditch Act*, introduced by Rep. Joe Neguse (D-COLORADO), which enables more local entities to maintain and repair the Bolts Ditch headgate.

"These bipartisan measures show that Congress can work together to secure water supplies, improve environmental stewardship, and protect communities from wildfire and flooding," Westerman said.

As Congress returns from recess, these bills are expected to continue advancing through the legislative process.

Alliance Backs United Water in Critical Water Rights Appeal

The Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA), the Family Farm Alliance, and six other public water agencies and associations have filed an amicus brief in support of United Water Conservation District's petition for rehearing in a case with sweeping implications for California water rights.

On April 2, 2025, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit issued a ruling in *United Water Conservation District v. United States* that allows the federal government to curtail up to 99.5% of a state-licensed water agency's water use without providing just compensation. This decision, ACWA and its partners argue, threatens both the constitutional property rights of state-licensed water rights holders and the long-term operational stability of public water agencies.

"This is a critical issue impacting California's water rights system and public water agencies across the Western United States," said Alliance General Counsel Norm Semanko.

Joining ACWA and the Alliance on the brief were the California Special Districts Association, Modesto Irrigation District, Rowland Water District, South San Joaquin Irrigation District, Santa Clarita Valley Water Agency, and Turlock Irrigation District.

The coalition brief emphasized the importance of defending the integrity of California's water rights system and the Fifth Amendment rights of agencies and landowners statewide.



Conference Highlights

Then and Now: The Evolution and Vision of the Family Farm Alliance - a multiple panel, dynamic featuring veteran and emerging leaders from the Alliance.

“Monarch Butterfly Rulemaking: Realizing More Winners”

Western Groundwater Management—expert panel discussion moderated by incoming Alliance executive director Samantha Barncastle.

Bridging the Currents: Farms, Fish, and the Future of the Columbia River System - panel discussion bringing together irrigation leaders and Native American tribal representatives to discuss the issues shaping the Columbia River.

Snake River Water Quality Partnership – panel discussion that will discuss this partnership, which blends hydropower mitigation, data-driven restoration, irrigation modernization, and stakeholder coordination to revitalize the mid-Snake River.

Reclamation Roundtable

A Look at DC from Capitol Hill

.....and much more!

The 2025 Annual Meeting and Conference is an opportunity for producers, policy makers and water professionals from throughout the West to focus on topics of critical concern.

A wide variety of speakers will take on the issues that make a difference to irrigators. Members of Congress and their staff, Administration officials, and representatives from constructive NGOs are regulars on the program.

Join us this fall in Reno for the 2025 Family Farm Alliance Annual Meeting and Conference!

This year’s theme, *Flowing Forward: Shaping the Future of Western Water*, captures the urgency and opportunity facing Western irrigated agriculture.

Against the backdrop of historic political change in Washington, severe drought, and persistent wildfire threats, this conference offers a timely forum to advance collaborative, community-driven solutions.

Silver Legacy Resort Reno, NV

Conference agenda coming soon!

Go to www.familyfarmalliance.org to register today with online and mail-in options.

Sponsorship and exhibitor booth opportunities are also available!