

Monthly Briefing

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

MAY 2026 • Issue #286

Board Member Quote of the Month



“Colorado River irrigated agriculture should not be left behind in the discussions and solutions for dealing with a highly stressed river and watershed. High priority Colorado River water rights must be respected while recognizing that all users must make sacrifices to ultimately protect this incredibly important resource at whatever level Mother Nature ultimately provides. Lower priority users, such as Central Arizona Project agriculture, over the last three years, have seen their Colorado River supplies mostly disappear due to twenty plus years of drought and the application of shortage guidelines. The predictable result has been following between 50–80% of the irrigation acres previously dependent on CAP water in central Arizona, with devastating economic and environmental consequences. State and Federal funding has sought to mitigate some of the damage to the irrigation districts and local communities resulting from loss of the Colorado River supplies. Much more needs to

be done. This is particularly true at the Federal level to avoid stranding hundreds of millions of federal and local dollars of investment in state-of-the-art irrigation water distribution systems designed to deliver water. For these reasons, and many others, Central Arizona Project irrigation districts signed onto the Alliance letter of May 13, calling for significant new and continuing Federal investment in the Colorado River Basin. Such transformative investments would not only help to protect agriculture, but will also support significant municipal and tribal interests as well. Possible solutions include infrastructure for storage, development and delivery of non-Colorado River supplies as well as increased conservation, which is not a solution by itself.”

–Paul Orme, Immediate Past President

A Defining Moment for Western Water.....	1
Building the Case for Long-Term Western Water Investment.....	4
From Washington to California: Advancing the Case for Western Water Infrastructure.....	6
USDA Reorganization, Funding Shifts, and the Growing Debate Over Long-Term Resilience.....	9
Farm Bill Finally Advances, But Major Senate Hurdles Remain.....	10
Public Lands Rule Rescinded, Restoring Focus on Multiple Use Across the West.....	11
ESA Reform Debate Intensifies as Congress and the Administration Push for Change.....	12

A Defining Moment for Western Water

Alliance Testifies in DC



Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director of the Alliance, testifies May 19 before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries at a hearing titled “The Federal Reclamation Program’s Next Century.” For the Family Farm Alliance and the farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts, and rural communities it represents across the West, the hearing represents far more than another policy discussion in Washington, D.C. It is an opportunity to make the case that the future of the American West — and the nation’s food security — depends upon bold investment in water infrastructure and a federal government willing to move at the pace of the crisis.

Barncastle’s testimony focuses on a simple but urgent message: the West cannot conserve its way out of every water challenge. While conservation and efficiency remain essential, they are no longer enough on their own to bridge the growing gap between water supply and water demand across much of the region. Farmers and water managers are already implementing innovative projects that improve efficiency, modernize aging systems, recharge aquifers, expand



HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
**NATURAL
RESOURCES**
CHAIRMAN BRUCE WESTERMAN

storage, and stretch limited supplies further than ever before. What is missing is the ability to deploy those solutions quickly and at the scale required.

“The people closest to the ground already know what needs to be done. What they need is a federal government willing to partner with them, remove unnecessary barriers, and invest in the infrastructure necessary to secure the future of the West.”

Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director

The testimony calls for major reforms to federal permitting and environmental review processes that routinely delay critical water projects for years — sometimes decades — even when projects have broad local support and clear drought resilience benefits. It also urges Congress to fully implement the Department of the Interior’s recent efforts to streamline project delivery and empower local water agencies and irrigation districts to take on greater responsibility for project implementation.

Most importantly, the testimony frames Western water infrastructure as national security infrastructure.

For more than a century, federal investment in reservoirs, canals, diversion systems, and hydropower facilities transformed the arid West into one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. Today, those same systems are under immense pressure from drought, changing hydrology, aging infrastructure, regulatory complexity, and growing operational demands. According to the Alliance, the solution is not retreat — it is reinvestment.

That message carries special significance for Barncastle personally. One of her great-grandfathers helped build one of the nation’s earliest Bureau of Reclamation projects during the formative years of Western water development. At the time, the idea of constructing massive dams and irrigation systems in the arid West was considered unrealistic by many critics. Yet previous generations chose to think big, invest boldly, and build infrastructure capable of sustaining communities and agriculture for generations. Today’s challenges demand that same level of vision.

Across the West, local water managers are advancing innovative projects ranging from precision irrigation technology and canal improvements and automation to groundwater recharge, recycled water systems, expanded storage, and watershed restoration. These are not theoretical concepts — they are practical solutions already delivering measurable results. But without long-term federal

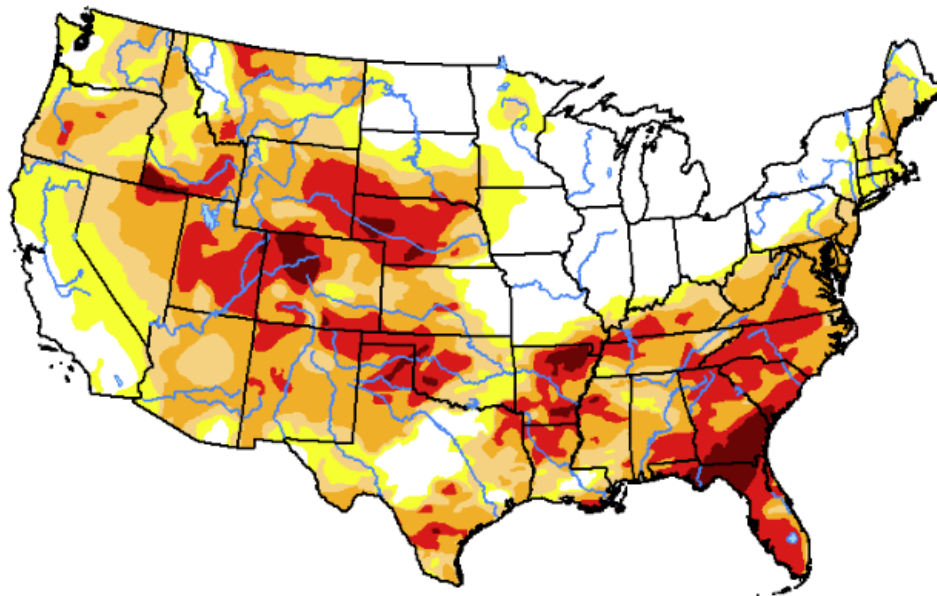
investment and regulatory certainty, many communities simply cannot deploy projects quickly enough to meet worsening drought conditions.

“This is not about asking for handouts. This is about ensuring that the people who feed this country have the tools and infrastructure necessary to continue doing so for the next hundred years.”

Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director

For the Family Farm Alliance, this hearing is about ensuring Congress understands both the urgency of the moment and the scale of the opportunity ahead. The West was built by people willing to invest in the future. The question now is whether the nation is prepared to do it again.

Building the Case for Long-Term Western Water Investment



U.S. Drought Monitor, May 12, 2026

In recent weeks, the Family Farm Alliance has intensified its advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C., sending multiple coalition letters to Congress calling for increased and stabilized federal funding streams to address the growing water crisis across the American West. The message from water users, farmers, conservation organizations, hydropower interests, Tribal representatives, and local

communities has been remarkably consistent: the West can no longer afford a “crisis-to-crisis” approach to water management.

The first letter, sent to congressional appropriators in late April, urged lawmakers to provide robust Fiscal Year 2027 funding for Bureau of Reclamation programs, including the highly successful WaterSMART Grant Program, while also advancing emergency drought funding to help Western communities respond to one of the driest years on record. The letter emphasized that the West’s water challenges are no longer temporary emergencies but structural realities requiring long-term investment and modernization.

The Alliance and its partners warned Congress that continued drought, aging infrastructure, declining reservoir storage, and shifting hydrology now threaten far more than agricultural production alone. Water scarcity increasingly affects food security, energy reliability, municipal supplies, economic stability, affordability, and national resilience.

“Water infrastructure is no longer just a regional issue. This is about protecting the nation’s domestic food supply, stabilizing rural economies, and ensuring future generations can continue producing food in the American West.”

Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director

The letter specifically called for sustained investment in programs that have already demonstrated measurable success on the ground. WaterSMART-funded projects alone now conserve an estimated 1.7 million acre-feet of water annually while leveraging non-federal investment at more than a two-to-one ratio. Across the West, these projects are modernizing canals, improving drought resilience, automating systems, increasing groundwater recharge capacity, and helping local communities stretch limited supplies further than ever before.

However, Alliance leaders emphasized that demand for these programs now far exceeds available funding. Highly qualified projects with broad local support continue to go unfunded each year, even as communities face mounting infrastructure costs and worsening drought conditions.

The second coalition letter, sent May 13 to congressional leadership overseeing natural resources and energy policy, focused specifically on the rapidly intensifying crisis in the Colorado River Basin. That letter included more than 70 signatories representing an unusually broad coalition of agricultural organizations, municipal water providers, Tribal interests, hydropower stakeholders, conservation groups, infrastructure advocates, and local communities from across the Basin.

The coalition called on Congress to provide at least \$2 billion in near-term federal funding to stabilize the Colorado River system while also establishing a durable long-term funding mechanism dedicated to drought resilience, conservation, infrastructure modernization, and water supply innovation.

“Emergency funding may help communities survive the current season, but survival is not the same thing as resilience. We need long-term infrastructure investment that allows the West to adapt and thrive under changing conditions.”

Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director

The Alliance continues to advocate for an “all-of-the-above” approach that combines conservation with infrastructure modernization, new storage, groundwater recharge, watershed restoration, recycling, desalination, precipitation enhancement, forecasting technology, and streamlined project delivery. Underlying all of these efforts is a broader argument that echoes throughout the West today: previous generations built the modern West by investing boldly in water infrastructure, often in the face of skepticism and uncertainty. The current generation now faces a similar moment of decision.

For the Family Farm Alliance and its partners, the question before Congress is no longer whether investment is needed — but whether the nation is willing to act before temporary drought emergency becomes permanent decline.

From Washington to California: Advancing the Case for Western Water Infrastructure



Last month, Samantha Barncastle traveled to California to participate in the Spring Conference of the Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA), where she spoke before multiple policy development committees and participated in a panel discussion focused on the Bureau of Reclamation’s ongoing realignment initiative and federal project delivery reform efforts.

The trip came at a pivotal moment for Western water policy. Between escalating drought conditions, proposed federal budget cuts, and ongoing efforts to modernize how the federal government works with local water managers, discussions throughout the conference centered on one overarching reality: the West can no longer afford slow-moving systems and short-term thinking.

Federal Budget Proposals Raise Serious Questions

Much of the discussion at ACWA focused on the Trump Administration’s proposed Fiscal Year 2027 Interior Department budget and its implications for Western water users. Interior Secretary Doug Burgum spent much of April defending a proposed budget that would reduce the Department of the Interior’s discretionary funding by roughly 13 percent, including major reductions to water and conservation programs relied upon throughout the West. The proposal would cut the Bureau of Reclamation’s budget to approximately \$1.27 billion while eliminating programs such as WaterSMART grants and Title XVI water recycling funding — programs that many Western communities view as essential tools for drought resilience and infrastructure modernization.

Additional proposed reductions affecting Western water interests include cuts to U.S. Geological Survey water science programs, endangered species conservation funding, wetlands programs, and core Bureau of Land Management accounts. While Secretary Burgum argued that efficiencies and reduced waste would offset the impacts of the cuts, water managers throughout the West continue to express concern that the scale of the region’s water challenges requires more investment, not less.

“The scale of the challenge now outpaces the scale of current investment. The West cannot continue trying to solve structural water shortages with temporary funding and fragmented implementation.”

Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director

Reclamation Realignment: Turning Policy into Action



ACWA Panelists

A major focus of the Alliance’s participation at the ACWA conference — and a central priority for the Alliance over the past year — has been the Bureau of Reclamation’s realignment initiative and implementation of Department of the Interior Secretarial Order 3446. Barncastle joined a panel alongside Ian Lyle (ACWA), Greg Morrison (NWRA), and Edward Young (BOR) to discuss ongoing efforts to streamline project delivery, reduce bureaucratic duplication, and empower local entities to take on greater responsibility for project implementation, operations, and procurement.

Over the past year, the Family Farm Alliance and the National Water Resources Association have worked directly with leadership at the Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of the Interior to help shape this initiative. That work recently culminated in the completion of a revised NEPA implementation memorandum now being distributed from Reclamation’s Washington, D.C. office to field staff across the West.

The memorandum outlines a significantly more flexible framework for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act, including expanded use of categorical exclusions, increased reliance on applicant-prepared NEPA documents, narrower and more focused effects analyses, and greater use of existing environmental reviews to avoid duplicative work.



“This initiative is really about trust. The people operating these systems every day already have the expertise and practical knowledge to move projects efficiently. The federal government needs to function as a partner ensuring risk is properly managed in a way that also enables implementation of projects — not a bottleneck that delays it.”

Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director

The Alliance also recently distributed a “Reclamation Opportunity Flyer” encouraging members to proactively engage with their local Reclamation offices about opportunities to expand local roles in project delivery, procurement, operations, and maintenance. The Alliance continues working closely with Reclamation leadership to monitor implementation and address concerns as they emerge.

USDA Reorganization, Funding Shifts, and the Growing Debate Over Long-Term Resilience

As the federal government continues broader efforts to streamline operations and shift more responsibility closer to local communities, the Family Farm Alliance is closely monitoring major developments within the U.S. Department of Agriculture that could significantly impact farmers, conservation programs, and drought resilience efforts across the West.



Over the past several months, USDA has been moving forward with a sweeping departmental reorganization designed to decentralize decision-making and relocate staff away from Washington, D.C. into regional “hub” offices throughout the country. However, the transition is occurring at the same time USDA agencies are already facing significant staffing shortages and operational strain. Agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) have experienced substantial workforce attrition, leaving some field offices severely understaffed and, in some cases, struggling to maintain core services.

For Western water users, these concerns are especially significant because many drought resilience and infrastructure modernization efforts depend heavily upon functioning USDA partnerships and timely technical support. At the same time, Congress and the Administration continue negotiating Fiscal Year 2027 funding levels that signal a broader tightening of federal agricultural and conservation spending priorities.

“We are seeing an overwhelming preference for direct payments to farmers rather than long-term system improvements. Emergency assistance absolutely matters, but if we can modernize delivery systems, improve conveyance, expand storage, and build infrastructure capable of adapting to changing hydrology, we reduce the need for emergency relief in the first place. And at the end of the day, farmers largely prefer to keep farming, not be paid to lay out.”

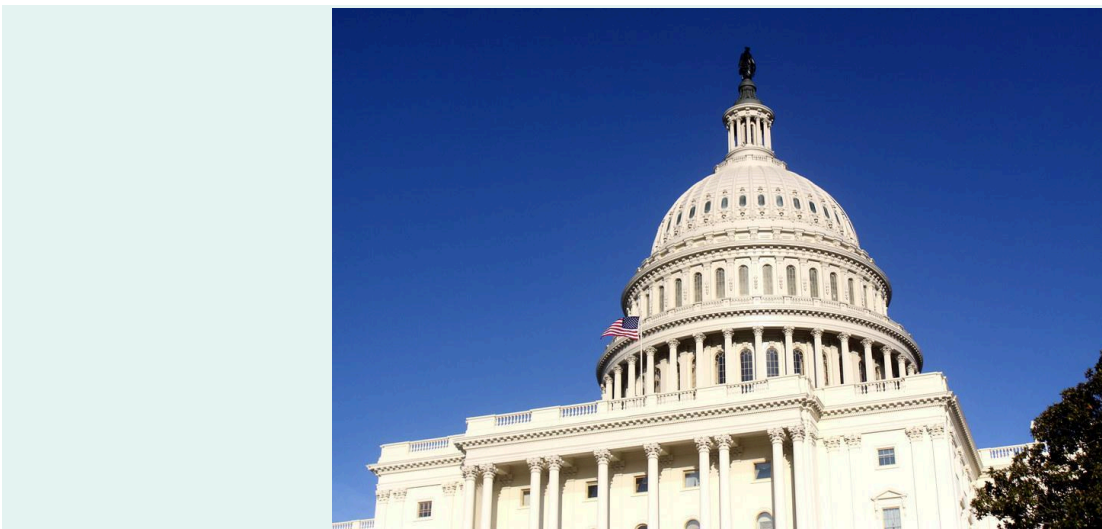
Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director

On one hand, the Alliance welcomed several recent announcements that provide meaningful support for producers facing severe drought conditions. NRCS recently announced up to \$200 million in additional Agricultural Conservation Easement Program funding to help preserve working agricultural lands through voluntary easements and conservation partnerships. USDA also expanded Supplemental Disaster Relief Program payments for farmers impacted by natural disasters in 2023 and 2024, increasing payment rates and extending application deadlines to help producers navigate complex claims.

That concern remains particularly relevant regarding USDA's stalled Water Saving Commodities Program. Despite completion of the Administration's review process, the 18 awarded projects across the West remain in limbo awaiting implementation. The Alliance continues actively advocating for release of those funds, arguing that system-level investments in irrigation modernization and water delivery efficiency are essential components of long-term drought resilience.

To help elevate these concerns, the Alliance recently joined the Western Agriculture and Conservation Coalition in sending a letter to USDA leadership urging a more comprehensive, "all-of-the-above" drought response strategy. The coalition's recommendations included releasing Water Saving Commodities Program awards, strengthening drought-focused conservation programs, improving implementation of irrigation modernization authorities under the Farm Bill, supporting watershed and PL-566 projects, and creating an interagency water coordination effort focused specifically on Western drought resilience.

Farm Bill Finally Advances, But Major Senate Hurdles Remain



After years of delays and repeated short-term extensions, Congress finally made significant movement on a new Farm Bill this spring as the House of Representatives narrowly passed a five-year package, H.R. 7567, by a 224-200 vote. The legislation would reauthorize major farm safety net, conservation, forestry, and rural development programs through 2031 and marks the first major step toward replacing the long-expired 2018 Farm Bill.

Passage of the bill followed months of intense negotiations over a wide range of controversial issues, including pesticide liability protections, California Proposition 12, ethanol policy, conservation funding, and reforms to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Several of the most

contentious provisions were ultimately removed or delayed in order to secure enough support for House passage.

“Producers need certainty anywhere they can get it. Farmers and ranchers are already navigating enormous economic and environmental pressures well beyond their control. Modernizing and stabilizing these programs matters, especially for conservation, drought resilience, and rural infrastructure.”

Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director

However, significant challenges remain before a final bill can become law. Attention has now shifted to the Senate, where John Boozman, chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, has emphasized that any final package will require bipartisan support to clear the Senate’s 60-vote threshold. Senate Democrats are already calling for revisions to SNAP cost-sharing provisions enacted through last year’s reconciliation package, while additional disputes over conservation funding, pesticide policy, ethanol, and nutrition programs are expected to complicate negotiations further.

Despite those obstacles, Senate leadership continues expressing cautious optimism that a bipartisan agreement can still be reached later this year. Still, another short-term extension of the 2018 Farm Bill remains a very real possibility if negotiations stall once again. For Western agriculture, the outcome will help shape not only commodity and conservation policy, but also the federal government’s long-term approach to drought resilience, watershed health, and rural economic stability.

Public Lands Rule Rescinded, Restoring Focus on Multiple Use Across the West

Western agricultural and water interests saw a significant policy shift this month as the Bureau of Land Management officially rescinded the Biden Administration’s Conservation and Landscape Health Rule, commonly referred to as the “Public Lands Rule.” The rule, finalized in 2024, expanded BLM authority to prioritize conservation leasing and “landscape health” across federal lands. Supporters argued the policy would improve ecosystem resilience, while critics warned it risked fundamentally shifting BLM away from its longstanding “multiple-use” mandate.

The Family Farm Alliance formally supported rescission of the rule and submitted comments to the Federal Register pointing out that the policy created legal and regulatory uncertainty for water users, ranchers, irrigation districts, and adjacent agricultural operations. The Alliance emphasized that

many Western water delivery systems directly interface with federal lands through canals, conveyance facilities, watershed access, storage infrastructure, grazing allotments, and operational easements.

“The issue was never whether conservation matters – it absolutely does. The concern was whether the federal government was creating new layers of uncertainty that could undermine collaborative management, water infrastructure operations, and the ability of local communities to continue stewarding these landscapes productively.”

Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director

The Alliance’s comments urged BLM to reaffirm the agency’s statutory obligation to manage lands for multiple use and sustained yield, including grazing, recreation, water infrastructure, energy development, and other productive uses alongside producer-led conservation objectives. The Alliance has long pointed out that complete lack of use is not proper management of public lands and can lead to devastating effects like wildfire and structural damage in post-fire conditions, especially in the headwaters of each watershed.



For irrigation districts and agricultural water users throughout the West, the decision is viewed as an important step toward restoring predictability and reinforcing collaborative, locally driven management approaches.

Related: Steve Pearce, former Congressman from New Mexico’s second Congressional District, was recently confirmed by the

Senate as the new Director of BLM

ESA Reform Debate Intensifies as Congress and the Administration Push for Change

Efforts to modernize implementation of the Endangered Species Act intensified this spring as both Congress and the Trump Administration advanced significant proposals aimed at reforming how the law affects water infrastructure, agriculture, energy development, and project delivery across the

West. For the Family Farm Alliance and many Western water users, the conversation is not about eliminating species protections — it is about creating a system that is more transparent, more collaborative, and more effective at balancing environmental goals with the realities facing rural communities and water infrastructure operators.

Congressional ESA Reform Efforts Face Political Turbulence



Chairman Bruce Westerman

The largest legislative proposal under consideration this year has been H.R. 1897, the “ESA Amendments Act,” led by Bruce Westerman and House Natural Resources Committee leadership. The bill would make changes to ESA implementation, including requiring economic impact analysis during species listing decisions, narrowing certain habitat protections, limiting some litigation pathways, and streamlining permitting and consultation requirements that often delay infrastructure and water management projects for years. However, House leadership ultimately pulled the legislation from floor consideration after internal Republican disagreements emerged.

Although delayed, congressional leaders have indicated negotiations will continue and that portions of the legislation could reemerge later this year. The Alliance formally supported H.R. 1897, arguing that the current implementation of the ESA too often creates uncertainty, delays infrastructure modernization, and encourages endless litigation without delivering measurable recovery outcomes for species.

The Administration Moves Forward Administratively

At the same time Congress debates legislative reform, the Trump Administration has continued pursuing parallel administrative changes through federal rulemaking and executive actions. Most

notably, the Administration recently invoked the rarely used “God Squad” exemption process for the first time in more than three decades — a move that immediately triggered litigation and national debate over the future scope of ESA authority.

Bringing Water Contractors Into the Consultation Process

Another of the most closely watched ESA proposals for Western irrigation districts this year is H.R. 8259, the “Federal Water Projects Consultation Improvement Act of 2026,” introduced by Cliff Bentz. The legislation focuses specifically on improving transparency and collaboration during ESA Section 7 consultations involving Bureau of Reclamation water projects. Importantly, the bill does not alter the ESA’s underlying legal standards or species protections. Instead, it seeks to ensure that irrigation districts, water contractors, and affected communities have a formal opportunity to participate in consultations that directly impact water deliveries and project operations.

Among those testifying before Congress was Elizabeth Nielsen, who serves on the Alliance Advisory Committee. Testifying on behalf of the Klamath Water Users Association, Nielsen emphasized that local irrigation managers and water contractors possess critical operational expertise that is too often excluded from the consultation process.

A Push for Transparency and Practical Outcomes

Building on congressional efforts, the Alliance recently transmitted a formal letter to Timothy R. Petty urging the Administration to administratively implement the core framework of H.R. 8259 through Secretarial Order authority even before Congress acts legislatively. The letter urges that water

“Those closest to the ground often understand these systems best. Irrigation managers, water contractors, local operators, and producers are not obstacles to conservation — they are essential partners in finding workable solutions that protect species while also sustaining rural communities and food production.”

Samantha Barncastle, Executive Director

contractors should no longer be treated as passive observers during ESA consultations affecting federal water projects.

The Alliance continues to emphasize that long-term species recovery and water reliability are not mutually exclusive goals. For many Western water users, the broader ESA reform conversation ultimately comes down to one central question: whether federal agencies will continue relying on opaque, adversarial processes that create uncertainty and conflict, or whether they will move toward a

more open and collaborative framework that delivers practical, measurable results for both species and communities.

Drought Is No Longer a Future Threat: It Is Reshaping the West Right Now



Recent aerial view of the CAP Canal in Arizona

As the Family Farm Alliance prepares to brief members of the Congressional Western Caucus later this month on the heels of testimony delivered to the House Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries, one message is becoming increasingly unavoidable across every Western basin: drought in the American West is no longer episodic. It is structural, intensifying, and forcing difficult decisions about the future of food production, economic stability, energy reliability, affordability, and water security across the country.

From the Colorado River Basin to California's Central Valley, from the Rio Grande to Idaho, and all across the West, the challenges facing Western water users are growing faster than the systems designed to manage them. But so too are the opportunities — if policymakers are willing to think at the scale the moment demands.

The Colorado River Basin Faces a Critical Moment



Large data center surrounded by fallowed land

Hydrologic conditions in the Colorado River Basin continue deteriorating following one of the driest winters on record and an exceptionally warm spring across the Rocky Mountain headwaters. Forecasts for Lake Powell inflows have dropped to as low as 13–29% of average, with some projections describing conditions as among the worst ever recorded for the system.

Federal officials now warn Glen Canyon Dam could approach minimum power pool elevations later this summer, threatening both hydropower generation and downstream operational stability. Basin-wide storage remains only about 36% full, while agricultural producers throughout the Upper Basin are already facing reduced allocations, field fallowing, herd reductions, and irrigation curtailments.

The federal government has responded with emergency drought operations, including reduced releases from Lake Powell and emergency transfers from Flaming Gorge Reservoir. Lower Basin states have proposed additional conservation measures supported by federal funding. Yet negotiations over long-term post-2026 operating rules remain deeply divided.

The underlying reality is clear: conservation alone will not solve the West's growing water imbalance. Recent studies examining cities like Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Denver concluded that while conservation programs have successfully reduced demand, those gains are unlikely to fully offset long-term climate pressures and declining river supplies. Larger-scale infrastructure and supply solutions will almost certainly be required alongside conservation efforts.

DONOR SUPPORT

What's The Secret to our Success? Grassroots Members Like You

Join our membership of agricultural producers, agribusiness, water purveyors, supporting industries, local governments, and community members. Your membership will strengthen our advocacy and connect you to cutting-edge research, analysis, and insight on the policies impacting **agricultural water**.

We encourage you to visit the **RESOURCES** page on our website: www.familyfarmalliance.org to view Reports, Insightful Monthly Briefings and Information Water Reviews. We believe our accomplishments and activities speak for themselves. While you're there, join our email list to be kept up-to-date on our efforts on your behalf.



LEARN MORE 

Defending Western Irrigated Agriculture

The Family Farm Alliance is a powerful advocate for family farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts, and allied industries in seventeen Western states. The Alliance is a focused organization. **Everything we do supports one mission — to ensure the availability of reliable and affordable irrigation water supplies to Western farmers and ranchers.**