

**Western States Federal Agency Support Team** (WestFAST) is a collaboration between 13 Federal agencies with water management responsibilities in the West. WestFAST was established to support the Western States Water Council (WSWC) and the Western Governors' Association (WGA) in coordinating Federal efforts regarding water issues.

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## **WestFAST News**

March 2015

### **WestFAST Principals and WSWC Leadership Meet in Washington DC**

WestFAST and the WSWC held their annual "Principals Meeting" March 17th in Washington DC, hosted by the Department of the Interior (DOI). During the meeting, principal water-resource leaders from 12 WestFAST agencies reviewed recent WestFAST activities and discussed priority tasks for continuing to enhance interagency coordination and developing positive working relationships with western state partners and the WSWC. WestFAST Principals and team members then met with WSWC leaders and staff to discuss federal-state collaboration on western water issues.

Jenifer Gimbel, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Water and Science, led the combined meeting and initiated, with Jerry Rigby, WSWC Vice-Chair, a discussion on the benefits of proactive federal-state collaboration. The discussion included recent federal-state communication on a U.S. Forest Service (USFS) proposed Directive on Groundwater Resource Management and the WSWC's concerns and comments about the directive. Mr. Rigby expressed the WSWC's appreciation for the recent positive work that the USFS had done to identify areas of possible common ground regarding the directive. Rob Harper, USFS Director for Watershed, Fish, Wildlife, Air and Rare Plants, referring to a February 13<sup>th</sup> meeting with WSWC representatives on the directive, agreed that recent communication with the WSWC had been "very productive" and asked the WSWC to "continue to help educate the Forest Service on the best approach" to working with western states.

Ann Mills, USDA Acting Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, led a discussion on federal activity in the National Drought Resiliency Partnership (NDRP). The NDRP is part of the President's Climate Action Plan, and aims at making it easier for communities to access the drought assistance they need by promoting strong partnership and information sharing at all levels of government. Bill Werkheiser, USGS Associate Director for Water, briefed the group on inter-agency work on the Open Water Data Initiative— an Advisory Committee on Water Information initiative to help integrate currently fragmented

water information into a connected, national water data framework.

The WSWC held individual meetings during the week with WestFAST agencies including the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Department of the Interior, the Department of Defense, and the USFS. These visits also focused on improving state-federal collaboration, and included discussions on Landsat, basic data programs, the WSWC's Clean Water Act (CWA) priorities, the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, and the USFS's proposed groundwater directive. WSWC leaders participating in the visits included Vice-Chair Jerry Rigby of Idaho and Water Quality Committee Chair J.D. Strong of Oklahoma. Sue Lowry of Wyoming, who attended on behalf of WSWC Chair Pat Tyrrell, and Norm Johnson of Utah also participated in the meetings.

Of note, during the WSWC's meeting with EPA, the WSWC expressed its appreciation for the agency's continued support of its water transfers rule, which is subject to ongoing litigation and clarifies whether certain transfers do not require CWA permits. The WSWC also discussed the status of the proposed CWA jurisdiction rule that EPA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have proposed. EPA indicated that it is reviewing the comments that it received, including the WSWC's, and is working to revise the rule. EPA also indicated that it will work closely with the states to implement the rule once it has been finalized this spring or early summer.

### **WGA supports funding for USGS and NRCS Water and Snow Programs** (WSWC, March 20)

On March 12, Western Governors' Association (WGA) Executive Director Jim Ogsbury wrote leaders of the House and Senate appropriations committees to call for "adequate funding" for the U.S. Geological Survey's (USGS) streamgaging programs, namely the Cooperative Water Program (CWP) and the National Streamflow Information Program (NSIP). "The importance of the [CWP] and NSIP to Western states cannot be overstated and I encourage [appropriators] to maintain this critical effort," Ogsbury said.

Ogsbury also highlighted the WGA's Drought Forum, noting: "One of the emerging



themes...is the importance of historical data - like that provided by these USGS programs - in studying and mitigating the impacts of drought in Western states. This data is integral to water supply management decisions for states, utilities, reservoir operators, and farmers. The information is particularly useful as drought persists in Nevada, the Pacific Coast states and the Southern Great Plains. Additionally, these data sources are used for flood forecasts, making them essential to risk assessment as well as water management."

Oggsbury also sent Congressional appropriators a similar letter supporting adequate funding for the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting Program. Oggsbury noted that this information "...provides a basis for predicting snowpack runoff.... Additionally, this data source provides states with valuable information pertaining to navigation and water flows on the Missouri River, highlighting the versatility of historical data as a tool for state and local officials." Click this [link](#) to read both letters.

## WestFAST to participate in WSWC April Meetings in Tulsa Oklahoma

Oklahoma will host the 177th WSWC meetings in Tulsa on April 15th. WestFAST members, and invited federal experts from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) will provide information on recent federal activities and products to the WSWC and their committees during the meetings in several topic areas:

### WSWC Water Resources Committee Meeting

- Federal water data activities
- NOAA's California Drought Assessment Report
- Endangered Species Act activities in the Southwest

### Water Quality Committee Meeting

- EPA Clean Water Acting rule making
- EPA hydraulic-fracturing studies
- USGS report: Water Quality in Principal Aquifers of the United States
- USGS report: Coping with Earthquakes Induced by Fluid Injection

### Legal Committee Meeting

- Discussion and update on USFS proposed Groundwater Management Directive

Patrick Lambert, the WestFAST Federal Liaison to the WSWC, will also review the WestFAST draft 2015-16 Work Plan with WSWC committees toward aligning WestFAST priority activities with current WSWC Committee work plans.

More information on the April WSWC meeting in Oklahoma can be found at this [link](#).

## Brent Rhees Named Regional Director for Reclamation's Upper Colorado Region *(Reclamation, March 26)*

On March 26th, Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Estevan López announced the selection of Brent Rhees, P.E., as Upper Colorado Regional Director. Rhees has served as the Salt Lake City-based region's deputy regional director since October 2007.

"Brent Rhees has extensive knowledge and more than three decades of experience with the complex challenges in this important region," Commissioner López said today. "Through his strong leadership and his ability to build solid partnerships, Brent is more than prepared to lead the Upper Colorado Region into the future."

In his new role, Rhees will oversee all Reclamation operations in most of Utah, New Mexico and western Colorado, as well as northern Arizona, a portion of west Texas, the southeast corner of Idaho and southwestern Wyoming. The responsibility includes oversight of Reclamation programs, projects, and facilities and encompasses 62 dams with a reservoir capacity of more than 32 million acre feet, 28 hydroelectric powerplants that meet electricity needs of more than 1.3 million people, and multiple recreation opportunities for about 12 million annual visitors.

As deputy regional director, Rhees managed several complex and high profile issues, including the Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Collaborative Program, dam safety modifications, implementation of the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project, the Colorado River Salinity Control Program and completion of the Animas La-Plata Project. Rhees has 35 years of federal service. He started in Reclamation's Denver Office in 1980 as a rotation engineer, moved to the Upper Colorado Regional Office in 1981 to serve as Engineering Services Office supervisor and construction liaison. He transferred to the Provo Area Office in March 1993 to serve in several key management positions including three division manager positions and as the deputy area manager from June 2004 to October 2007.



**Brent Rhees , new Regional Director for Reclamation's Upper Colorado Region**

Rhees is a recipient of the DOI's Superior Service Award in recognition of his significant contributions and leadership in Western water issues. He holds a bachelor's degree in civil and environmental engineering from Utah State University and is a registered Professional Engineer in the State of Utah.





## NOAA: Arrival of “Weak” El Niño Will Have Little Influence on Weather and Climate *(March 5)*

The long-anticipated El Niño has finally arrived, according to forecasters with NOAA’s Climate Prediction Center. In their updated monthly outlook released today, forecasters issued an El Niño Advisory to declare the arrival of the ocean-atmospheric phenomenon marked by warmer-than-average sea surface temperatures in the central Pacific Ocean near the equator.

Due to the weak strength of the El Niño, widespread or significant global weather pattern impacts are not anticipated. However, certain impacts often associated with El Niño may appear this spring in parts of the Northern Hemisphere, such as wetter-than-normal conditions along the U.S. Gulf Coast.

“Based on the persistent observations of above-average sea surface temperatures across the western and central equatorial Pacific Ocean and consistent pattern of sea level pressure, we can now say that El Niño is here,” said Mike Halpert, deputy director, NOAA’s Climate Prediction Center, and ENSO forecaster.

“Many climate prediction models show this weak El Niño continuing into summer.”

Forecasters say it is likely (50 to 60 percent chance) that El Niño conditions will continue through the summer.

The last El Niño, in 2009-2010, was a moderate to strong event. Other recent El Niños took place from 2002-2003 (moderate), 2004-2005 (weak), and 2006-2007 (weak to moderate). The last very strong El Niño was 1997-1998 and was known for providing heavy rainfall in the West, especially California. As for this year, “this El Niño is likely too late and too weak to provide much relief for drought-stricken California,” added Halpert.

NOAA scientists will continue to monitor the situation and will issue their next monthly update on April 9th.

## Interior Department Releases Final Rule to Support Safe, Responsible Hydraulic Fracturing Activities on Public and Tribal Lands *(BLM, March 20)*

Following a robust and transparent public process that included more than 1.5 million public comments, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell released final standards that will support safe and responsible hydraulic fracturing on public and Tribal lands. The com-

monsense standards will improve safety and help protect groundwater by updating requirements for well-bore integrity, wastewater disposal and public disclosure of chemicals.

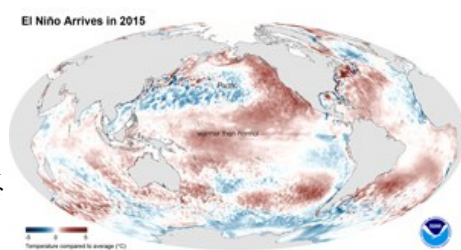
There are more than 100,000 oil and gas wells on federally managed lands. Of wells currently being drilled, over 90 percent use hydraulic fracturing. The rule applies only to development on public and tribal lands and includes a process so that states and tribes may request variances from provisions for which they have an equal or more protective regulation in place. This will avoid duplication while enabling the development of more protective standards by state and tribal governments. Today’s final rule is a major step in the Department of the Interior’s agenda to support a balanced, prosperous energy future. Other reforms will also include important measures to target where oil and gas leasing occurs and protect sensitive areas that are too special to drill.

“Current federal well-drilling regulations are more than 30 years old and they simply have not kept pace with the technical complexities of today’s hydraulic fracturing operations,” Secretary Jewell said. “This updated and strengthened rule provides a framework of safeguards and disclosure protocols that will allow for the continued responsible development of our federal oil and gas resources. As we continue to offer millions of acres of public lands for conventional and renewable energy production, it is absolutely critical the public have confidence that transparent and effective safety and environmental protections are in place.”

Key components of the rule, which will take effect in 90 days include:

- Provisions for ensuring the protection of groundwater supplies by requiring a validation of well integrity and strong cement barriers between the wellbore and water zones through which the wellbore passes;
- Increased transparency by requiring companies to publicly disclose chemicals used in hydraulic fracturing to the Bureau of Land Management through the website FracFocus, within 30 days of completing fracturing operations;
- Higher standards for interim storage of recovered waste fluids from hydraulic fracturing to mitigate risks to air, water and wildlife;
- Measures to lower the risk of cross-well contamination with chemicals and fluids used in the fracturing operation, by requiring companies to submit more detailed information on the geology, depth, and location of preexisting wells to afford the BLM an opportunity to better evaluate and manage unique site characteristics.

“This rule will protect public health and the environment during and after hydraulic fracturing operations at a modest cost while both respecting the work previously done by the industry, the states and the tribes, and promoting the adoption of more protective standards across the country,” said Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management Janice Schneider. “It will be implemented in the most efficient way possible to avoid duplication or unnecessary activities by industry, other regulators, or BLM staff. We know how important it is to get this right.”



Click on the image to view average sea surface temperature for February 2015 as measured by NOAA satellites. The large area of red (warmer than average) can be seen extending through the equatorial Pacific. (Credit: NOAA)



The new rule is the culmination of four years of extensive public involvement to bring onshore oil and gas drilling regulations into the 21st century. The BLM published both a draft rule and a supplemental draft rule, held regional forums and numerous stakeholder meetings on the proposal and reviewed more than 1.5 million public comments.

BLM staff studied state and tribal regulations and consulted with state and tribal regulators, industry, environmental experts, and the public, including communities affected by oil and gas operations. In many instances, provisions in the new rule are similar to or based on existing state or tribal rules and industry best practices. The result of this careful consultation is a rule that will enhance environmental protection in a thoughtful and cost-effective way. BLM estimates the new rule will cost less than one-fourth of 1 percent of the cost of drilling a well, based on the Energy Information Administration's average per well cost of \$5.4 million.

“This rule was informed and shaped by the technical expertise, interests and concerns of all of our partners, and builds on the work of states and tribes to ensure best practices on a nationwide basis,” said BLM Director Neil Kornze. “The new regulations are essential to our mutual efforts to protect the environment and the communities that depend on vital water, land and wildlife resources. This rule is good government.”

The BLM oversees about 700 million subsurface acres of federal mineral estate and carries out regulatory duties of the Secretary of the Interior for an additional 56 million acres of Indian mineral estate across the United States. The Indian Mineral Leasing Act and other laws require that Indian lands and communities have the same protections as U.S. public lands.

To view the final rule, click [here](#).

## Federal News

**[3/3: What Happens to the Water? Assessing Water Quality in Areas with Hydraulically Fractured Oil and Gas Wells](#)**

**[3/6: Reclamation Issues Snowmelt Forecast for North Platte](#)**

**[3/11: Obama names new head of White House environmental council](#)**

**[3/12: Boise River Flows Set to Increase](#)**

**[3/16: One Year Later – The Oso Landslide in Washington](#)**

**[3/16: February 2015 was second warmest February for globe; December–February was warmest such period on record](#)**

**[3/17: Impacts of California's Ongoing Drought: Hydroelectricity Generation](#)**

**[3/24: Department of Energy, Department of the Interior and Army Corps of Engineers Renew Five-Year Partnership to Advance Hydropower](#)**

**[3/25: Home on the California Range, Year 2100: Land Use and Climate Change Could Impact Wildlife, Water Supplies](#)**

**[3/25: National Wetlands Research Center to Merge](#)**

**[3/27: Reclamation Provides Updated Central Valley Project Water Supply Information](#)**

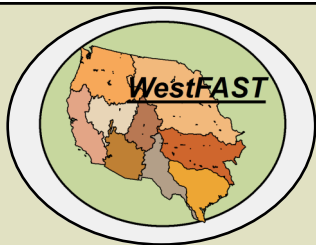
## State News

**[3/10: Drought Update: Oklahoma drought grants and Oregon wildfire concerns](#)**

**[3/4: California survey finds snowpack far below normal, drought likely to continue](#)**

## Upcoming WSWC Meetings & Events

- **April 15-17 2015, Spring (177th) Council Meeting**, Tulsa, Oklahoma, The Hard Rock Hotel and Casino, Tulsa
- **May 27-29, 2015, WSWC/CDWR Precipitation Forecasting Workshop**, San Diego, California, Doubletree San Diego Downtown
- **June 24-26, 2015, WGA Annual Meeting**, Lake Tahoe, Nevada
- **July 8-10, 2015, Summer (178th) Council Meeting and**



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