

The Winter Meetings of the Western Governors' Association (WGA) were held at the Loews Coronado Bay Resort, California on December 9-10. WGA Chair Idaho Governor Bard Little (R) welcomed those attending and fellow governors including Arizona Governor Doug Ducey (R), Colorado Governor Jared Polis (D), Hawaii Governor David Ige (D), North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum (R), Oregon Governor Kate Brown (D), Utah Governor Spencer Cox (R) and Wyoming Governor Mark Gordon (R). WGA Executive Director Jim Ogsbury highlighted the fact that this was the first in-person meeting of the governors since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. He declared, "At the point of the spear of COVID response, Governors have worked tirelessly to protect their people and economies. They have made life and death decisions."

Governor Little expressed delight in meeting in person! Even virtually, western governors continued to work collaboratively. "Covid has had us building the plane on the fly!" As Chair, Little's Working Lands, Working Communities Initiative recognizes of our interdependent relationship with federal land managers, and provides a forum for improving western communities, and forming the next Farm Bill.

The meetings included diverse conversations on: (1) the global computer chip supply shortage; (2) environmental justice and conservation; (3) the future of aviation and transportation; (4) energy generation, transmission and security; (5) emergency preparedness, including for drought and wildfire; (5) as well as the changing public perception of politicians and the importance of communication.

The Governors adopted seven resolutions: (1) Energy in the West; (2) Air Quality Protection and Management; (3) Workforce Development; (4) Foreign Visitor Preclearance; (5) Cybersecurity; (6) Compensatory Mitigation; and (7) Physical and Behavioral Health Care.

Secretary of the Interior (DOI) Deb Haaland was a special guest. She observed: "The Department of the Interior and WGA have consistently worked together to address natural resource issues across the West.... Nature has a critical role to play in improving our resilience to climate change and creating a thriving economy.... Together we can make a lasting difference that our children and their children can be proud of." She declared, "The West is my home. My ancestral home. Growing up in the high desert of New Mexico I am very familiar with water scarcity." She remembered hiking in the mountains and wading in the streams. "There is nothing like being in a place.... I learned how interconnected nature is."

She addressed drought, forest restoration, outdoor recreation and wildfire. "Wildfires hit home with many of us this year. The fire season these days last year-round." She emphasized the need to remain committed to wildfire preparedness and noted the impact of climate change and invasive species on forests and rangelands. DOI is making a \$1.5B investment to provide the resources needed to expand restoration work, hire 500 seasonal employees permanently and raise federal fire fighters pay. There are also grants to states and tribes to restore lands and waters.

The Secretary highlighted the extensive drought and strained water supplies. Irrigators, tribes, large cities and rural communities have all been affected. She referred to work in the Klamath and Colorado River Basins. "Thanks for coming to the table with open hearts and open minds. I am proud of the collaborative work we are doing." She added that Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) included \$8.3B for water and drought resilience, including the development of nature-based infrastructure. BIL provided \$16B for legacy pollution clean-up with money to tackle abandoned mines and orphaned wells, close dangerous mine shafts and treat acid mine drainage.

Joining the governors, the Canadian Ambassador to the United States, Kirsten Hillman, emphasized the importance of bipartisan collaboration. "Canada is the largest and most diverse energy supplier for the U.S.," she said. "Our systems, companies, and workers are integrated. The strength of those connections will help us face the energy challenges of today and tomorrow." Further, she noted, "Canada has 13 of the 30 minerals that are deemed critical for defense and other applications. We are looking to partner with our closest neighbor and ally on these products that are deeply important. These products are critical for electric vehicle batteries. We want to be strong partners with the U.S. and your companies in getting these products to market."

Deanne Criswell, Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), discussed the challenges facing our Nation and States in terms of planning for and responding to disasters such as wildfires and hurricanes, as well as public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. "It is our responsibility to empower local communities to implement these mitigation actions, practice preparedness year-round, and work together to implement climate mitigation plans that are equitable for all communities."

Criswell addressed flooding related to atmospheric rivers, the Northwest head dome, wildfires and burn scars with mud slides, and earthquakes. Governors face uncertain evolving climate situations. She noted in Washington State, near Mt. Vernon, the Skagit River flooding crested at 37 feet, the highest since 1990. A flood wall constructed in 2018 spared the community. Hawaii recently received 25” inches of rain, and a blizzard warning with a foot of snow for the Island’s peaks. She added, “You have seen crops of life-long farmer wither and die without water to save them.” She stated that “increasing wildfires are a direct result of climate change, with some 51,000 fires across 7 million acres, resulting in damages estimated in the billions. Every community is vulnerable to severe weather.”

Director Criswell observed the average 6-year old will see three times the devastating climate disasters as their grandparents. “What can we do now?” Without bold action future generations will face irreversible damages. She focused on advancing climate and community resilience, calling for an equitable distribution of resources and information. The BIL includes \$6.8 billion for FEMA to help communities strengthen climate resiliency and reduce disaster damages. FEMA provides competitive Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grants as well as a Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) grants that may be used to reduce or eliminate repetitive flooding, address dam safety, and the latter are authorized for Covid disaster-related relief. In Utah FEMA risk reduction grants have been used to rehabilitate masonry structures threatened by earthquakes. There is \$1B available for BRIC grants, with \$25M set aside for tribes.

FEMA will be pro-active and deliver benefits to help underserved, disadvantage and vulnerable communities with grants and directed technical assistance. “It is our responsibility, with state and local leaders, to empower communities...” through investments and providing information needed for decisionmaking. Resilience is needed across the whole of government. Further, a FEMA 2020 survey found only 40% of families have a disaster plan. Too many fail to make plans until it is too late. Individual preparedness needs to be a common theme. She concluded, “This is a collaborative partnership. We can’t be successful without you. We need to act with purpose and solidarity.”

Governor Cox specifically raised the slow rolling nature of drought and recovery and questioned FEMA’s role. Criswell replied that while the Stafford Act lists drought as a national disaster, FEMA’s role is primarily through mitigation programs. Cox added some of the biggest problems with recovery from fires relates to drinking water and fish and wildlife impacts. “What can FEMA do?” Criswell said to take advantage of the HMGP and Fire Management Assistance Grant Program (FMAGP). The latter is intended to aid with the mitigation, management, and control of fires burning on publicly or privately owned forests or grasslands.

Richard Glick, Chairman of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) discussed the challenges States and the federal government face and opportunities to collaborate on protecting and enhancing the energy grid. “One of the challenges of this new energy transformation is that we now have a grid that’s much more reliant on the weather. We need more flexible generation resources that can compensate for this dynamic.” He mentioned last winter’s Texas power outage, noting FERC has authority over interstate systems, but not Texas’ intrastate generation and transmission system (under the Electric Reliability Council of Texas or ERCOT).

Glick noted that distributed generation – wind and solar – is also intermittent and raises questions of reliability, also depending on weather. Options to improve reliability include battery storage, pumped storage hydropower, and demand flexibility and compensation for interruptible energy supplies. He added, “Things are getting worse and the margins are getting tighter.” Regional Transmission Organizations (RTOs) are one option to move energy from areas of surplus to areas of need. Some argue for mandating a western RTO, but that is not accepted by all states and state regulators, and further Federal Power Marketing Administrations are not under FERC’s authority. There is also a need for more transmission capacity – new assets and market structures – regionally. “Incremental changes are happening but bold action is needed.”