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Western States Water

Addressing Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future

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ADMINISTRATION/WATER QUALITY
EPA/Water Infrastructure

On September 20, Radhika Fox, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Assistant Administrator for Water, announced EPA'S commitment to addressing pressing water challenges in disadvantaged communities across the country. EPA's Advancing Water Equity and Access for All Commitment will invest $500M, including funds from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), for technical assistance to help communities invest in water infrastructure to close America's water equity gap.

"Too many people in the United States lack access to clean and safe water. As result, these communities face significant health issues and barriers to economic opportunity," said Fox. "President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law presents a historic opportunity to change the odds for people living in these areas. With this commitment to 1,500 communities, EPA is delivering on the Biden-Harris Administration's promise to invest in America and leave no family behind."

This commitment builds on EPA's ongoing efforts to strengthen community water infrastructure. The BIL presented an unprecedented opportunity to address water infrastructure needs with $50B in new funding – the largest ever federal investment in water. The announcement leverages EPA's new water technical assistance (WaterTA) pilot programs and over $150M in awards through its Environmental Finance Centers to scale technical assistance and reach hundreds of communities. Participating communities have already begun to apply for and receive federal funding for their water infrastructure needs. https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/biden-harris-administration-announces-commitment-advancing-water-equity-and-access-all

EPA/WIFIA

On September 21, EPA announced $7.5B is now available for low-interest loans for drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure through the Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA). This round of funding is focused on increasing investment in economically stressed communities, making rapid progress on lead service line replacement, addressing per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and emerging contaminants, mitigating the impacts of drought, and supporting water innovation and resilience. EPA is accepting letters of interest. Prospective borrowers can also receive technical assistance for developing funding requests. https://www.epa.gov/wifia/wifia-application-materials

EPA/WIFIA/Oregon

On September 26, the EPA announced a $16M WIFIA loan awarded to Oregon City, Oregon. "This funding will modernize century-old infrastructure to meet the drinking water needs of the city's 37,000 residents while better preparing the community for wildfires."

"Oregon City – like other cities that have received WIFIA funding – is prioritizing upgrading outdated water infrastructure and securing its water system against threats such as cyber-attacks and wildfires, ensuring clean, safe, and reliable access to water for generations to come," said EPA Administrator Michael S. Regan.

"I created the WIFIA program to invest in water infrastructure projects and job creation after hearing from local Oregon leaders that water infrastructure is one of the top issues facing their communities," said Senator Jeff Merkley. "This WIFIA funding through the EPA will help Oregon City improve their water infrastructure and strengthen the city's resilience to wildfire. WIFIA continues to be a great model for delivering results through local and federal collaboration." https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/search/press_office/water-ow-226159

ADMINISTRATION/WATER RESOURCES
NIDIS/Drought Resilience

On September 25, the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) announced approximately $2M in funding for projects to support tribal drought resilience. Projects may include, but are not limited to: (1) conducting drought vulnerability assessments; (2) developing drought and communication plans; and (3) identifying drought impacts, indicators, or triggers.

Wayne Higgins, Director, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Climate Program Office, said: "NOAA's Climate Program Office and the National Integrated Drought Information System take the responsibility to engage with tribal partners very seriously, and this funding opportunity is an example of that commitment. With climate change impacts further stressing the water supply in the West, it is imperative that we work together to take on the drought challenges in our tribal communities." https://www.drought.gov/news/nidis-invests-approximately-2-million-build-tribal-drought-resilience-2023-09-25

CONGRESS/ENERGY

Hydropower Clean Energy Future Act

On September 20, the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Energy, Climate, and Grid Security held a hearing on the Hydropower Clean Energy Future Act (H.R. 4045). The Act aims to streamline the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's (FERC) licensing process, by requiring all licensing involved federal, state and local government agencies to coordinate reviews, and subject agencies to deadline penalties, and involve the Office of Management and Budget and Council on Environmental Quality in agency dispute resolution. Projects smaller than 40 megawatts that do not pose significant environmental impacts may be exempt from some licensing requirements.

Committee Chair Cathy McMorris (R-WA) emphasized the essential reliability of hydropower, and the role of Congress in determining the future of the Lower Snake River dams. "I would like to remind our witnesses from the administration here today that Congress - and Congress alone - has the authority to change the operations of the federally-operated Snake River dams…. As we work towards a final outcome, we must consider all the facts, prioritize transparency, and utilize sound science and input from all tribes, industry groups, and the people in our Pacific Northwest, not just a small group of those organizations or officials that seem to want to rip out the dams…. Hydropower is vital...to lowering energy costs, enhancing grid reliability, and ensuring that America will be and continue to be the leader in reducing carbon emissions." https://energycommerce.house.gov/posts/chair-rodgers-delivers-opening-remarks-at-hearing-on-unleashing-hydropower

WATER RESOURCES

Upper Colorado River Commission/SCPP

On September 21, the Upper Colorado River Commission unanimously voted to renew the System Conservation Pilot Program (SCPP), with significant revisions. The revised SCPP will explore Demand Management Studies and implement improvements identified during the program last year. The Commission plans to narrow project criteria and prioritize projects that support innovation of water conservation and the development of drought resiliency.

Becky Mitchell, Colorado's Commissioner, said, "I received personally a lot of input across Colorado, both good and bad. I took it to heart and we heard from producers who want the opportunity to try new things. They want the security that their water is protected while they try new things and increase their ability to get through periods of extended drought. I also heard from many that the system conservation pilot program gave them the chance to try things that they wouldn't have otherwise been able to do…. [I] heard plenty about how the process could be improved, including the level of transparency and all this input has really helped inform the decision that I'm making today and informs us on how any process will be developed if the program moves forward." https://www.telluridenews.com/news/article_3377aa6e-5a2e-11ee-9b59-e7d7e4704db3.html

Western Land Owners Alliance/Colorado River

On September 25, the Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources at University of Wyoming (UW), and Western Landowners Alliance (WLO) published a survey which engaged 1,020 Colorado River Basin farmers and ranchers on agricultural water conservation. They found that Colorado River agricultural water users have a high level of concern about changes in water management policy and the potential constraints to be placed on themselves and their neighbors. Roughly 70% reported they were already adopting conservation practices. The majority reported that these adaptations were because of water shortages on personal property or in anticipation of shortages and/or curtailment.

The survey also revealed a "trust gap" between water users and non-local agencies. Only 13-14% agreed that there is a high level of trust between water users and water management agencies. There is also high resistance to water transfers, except temporary transfers to other agricultural users. One of the most common reasons was concern about water rights forfeiture. Respondents also indicated an overwhelming preference for any demand management program to be administered by local agencies (74%).

The survey also found low awareness of conservation programs. With the exception of the Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) Environmental Quality Inceptives Program (EQIP), more than 70% of respondents said they were not aware of the programs included in the survey. westernlandowners.org and www.uwyo.edu/crb-survey