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Western States Water

Addressing Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future

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ADMINISTRATION/CONGRESS

Colorado

On August 4, Colorado's entire Congressional delegation sent a bipartisan letter to the Department of Interior (DOI) and the Bureau of Reclamation, calling on them to release funding for fifteen Colorado River drought-response projects. The projects were selected for Reclamation's Upper Colorado River Basin Environmental Drought Mitigation funding opportunity, commonly known as "Bucket 2." The lawmakers expressed appreciation for the recent release of funding for two Colorado projects, but asked Acting Assistant Secretary for Water and Science Scott Cameron and Acting Commissioner David Palumbo to obligate the remaining $140M worth of Bucket 2 projects in Colorado.

"In 2022, Congress provided $4 billion to address the impacts of drought with a priority for the Colorado River Basin, including activities to support environmental benefits and promote ecosystem and habitat restoration. This directive recognizes the interconnected nature of a water system like Colorado's, which relies on healthy waterways as our most important conveyance Facilities…. By making the Colorado River Basin's headwaters more resilient, these Bucket 2 projects will also help manage the impacts of the unrelenting 25-year drought affecting the Colorado River Basin. As Colorado and the other Basin States work towards an agreement for future operations on the river, it is critical to invest in the health of our headwaters so we can all better withstand the impacts of drought."

NASA/Landsat Next

On August 4, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) met with interested organizations to discuss restructuring the Landsat Next mission for a more affordable architecture, reducing the life-cycle costs to under $1B while maintaining program continuity and meeting public needs. In May, NASA's Science Mission Directorate stood up the 12-member Mission Alternatives Assessment Team (MAAT) to independently advise NASA and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) on options in response to President Trump's FY26 Budget cuts. NASA anticipates the following funding for Landsat continuity over the next five years: $70M in FY26; $89M in FY27; $110.1M in FY28; $129.7M in FY29; and $130.2M in FY30. For FY31 and beyond, the project funding would be capped.

With nearly five decades of records on land cover, land use, and vegetation condition, "Landsat is the world's longest continuously operated land remote sensing satellite series, and most widely used and cited land remote sensing data set, helping us understand and manage natural and human-induced landscape change via a multitude of land, water, and natural resource management applications."

NASA noted that any solutions must still meet the required technical specifications (available on SAM.gov). With a few exceptions, the solutions must meet or exceed the Landsat 9 on-orbit performance, which is often better than the design performance. Among the requirements include the Landsat 9 levels of stability, sensitivity, signal-to-noise ratio, image sharpness, and geodetic and geometric accuracy for the Thermal Infrared Sensor (TIRS-2) and Operational Land Imager (OLI-2), with data products that include vegetation indices, aquatic reflectance, and surface temperature.

The MAAT is considering a wide range of options, including: (1) using existing NASA investments and instruments; (2) an "all commercial" solution; (3) a hybrid mix of government and commercial roles; (4) data-buy models with providers that use a "Service Level Agreement"; (5) solutions that allow the offeror to profit from the data while still allowing NASA/USGS to make the scientific data available to the public on a not-for-profit basis; and (6) using disaggregated architectures where Landsat observation instruments are not all on the same satellite or platform. The MAAT is seeking input to help inform their findings. For those unable to meet with MAAT in person on August 5-6, NASA invited brief 5-page white papers to help shape their Request for Information (RFI). NASA will post their RFI on SAM.gov on August 15, with a quick response deadline of August 29. The RFI will seek input on concept architectures, risks, and programmatic information.

NASA Earth Science Division Director Dr. Karen St. Germain closed the meeting by thanking the MAAT and urging participants to work quickly. She framed the effort as part of a broader effort to work more effectively with the private sector, noting that while the focus is Landsat Next, the process will yield valuable lessons for NASA's entire Earth Science portfolio of more than 20 missions. She referenced the 2017 Decadal Survey, which serves as the scientific foundation for NASA's work and emphasizes partnerships, innovation, and using science to drive action.

St. Germain talked about how new technologies like cloud computing and AI are crucial for enabling rapid scientific productivity, helping people make better, faster decisions. She concluded by aligning the work of the MAAT with key administration priorities, such as promoting economic growth, strengthening domestic manufacturing, and maintaining a gold standard for science. The goal is to move from a scientific productivity timeline measured in years to one measured in hours.

CONGRESS

FY2026 Appropriations

On July 24, the Senate and House Appropriations Committees each approved an Interior-Environment appropriations bill (S. 2431, H.R. 4754). The Senate bill includes $4.4B for State and Tribal Assistance Grants (STAG), compared to $3.7B billion in the House bill. For the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRFs), the Senate proposed $1.6B, with about 22% ($349.7M) designated for Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS). The House proposed $1.2B and allocated about 46.5% ($558.2M) to CDS. For the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRFs), the Senate proposed $1.1B, with roughly 22.5% ($247.6M) going to CDS. The House proposed $894.7M for DWSRFs, and set aside about 43.6% ($390.7M) for CDS. The Senate Committee recommended $64.5M for the Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation (WIFIA) Program, while the House Committee recommended $72.3M.

The Senate and House were near agreement with a proposed $1.4-$1.5B for the USGS. For the Water Resources Mission Area, the Senate would provide $291.8M compared to the House's $285.2M. Under that heading, the Water Availability and Use Mission would get $68.3M under the Senate plan and $70.3M under the House plan. For Core Science Systems, the Senate recommended $279.7M and the House $283.2M.

Within the Core Science Systems mission area, the House and Senate both recommended funding the Landsat Next Mission at $95.3M, level with FY25 funding. The Senate Committee bill acknowledged the importance of Landsat imaging and would direct NASA to maintain the current superspectral three-satellite constellation architecture, with a launch target by the end of 2031.

The House Appropriations Committee has also approved its Energy-Water appropriations bill (H.R. 4553), recommending an $9.9B for the Army Corps of Engineers and $1.87B for the Bureau of Reclamation. The bill noted the significance of Reclamation operations and the "severe and exceptional drought" experienced in the West. They recommended $1.6B for Water and Related Resources, noting this recommendation includes "targeted, increased investments in programs to assist western states as they respond to the drought crisis and continues to build on long-term efforts to address future challenges."

House Reclamation investments include $23M for the Central Utah Project (equal to FY2025), $126.8M for rural water projects, and $201M for water storage projects authorized by the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation (WIIN) Act. In total, H.R. 4553 would provide $901M in Community Project Funding for 94 Reclamation and Corp Projects including $18.3M for Corps project studies, $583.8M for Corps project construction, $143.6M for operation and maintenance of existing Corps projects, and $23.9M for Reclamation projects.

The Senate Appropriations Committee has also approved a Commerce-Justice-Science bill (S. 2354) which includes $6.1B for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). NOAA funding includes $1.6B for procurement, acquisition and construction of weather satellites. Operations, Research, and Facilities would be funded at $4.5B, including funding for the National Weather Service at $104.2M. The Committee expressed openness to the Administration's proposal to eliminate NOAA's Office of Atmospheric Research (OAR), but noting "the absence of detailed plans" they would maintain funding for OAR programs at $657M.

The U.S. Weather Research Program would be funded at $39.1M, of which not less than $1M would go to continue the subseasonal to seasonal (S2S) research program. The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS), usually funded under OAR, was not specifically mentioned. The Committee encouraged NOAA to work through its Cooperative Institute for Research to Operations in Hydrology (CIROH) to establish a research-to-operations program to operationalize Forecast Informed Reservoir Operations (FIRO). The bill would fund NASA at $24.9B, including $2.2B for the Earth Sciences mission area. The Committee provided NASA $183M for Landsat Next.

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