



WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL

682 East Vine Street, Suite 7 / Murray, Utah 84107 / (801) 685-2555 / FAX (801) 685-2559

Web Page: www.westernstateswater.org

August 26, 2026

The Honorable John Boozman, Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar, Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

The Western States Water Council (WSWC) is a government entity created by the Western Governors in 1965 to advise and engage on water policy issues affecting the West. As negotiations continue on the *Agricultural Act of 2026*, we appreciate your continued efforts to reach agreement on a Farm Bill that provides certainty for agricultural producers and rural communities. Following the Committee's August 6 business meeting, we understand discussions remain ongoing and respectfully offer the following priorities for consideration as that work continues.

Agriculture sustains rural economies and communities throughout the West, where water scarcity and periodic drought pose particular challenges to an agricultural sector that also accounts for the predominant share of consumptive water use. WSWC Position #505 (attached) supports USDA conservation programs and sufficient funding to address water conservation, flood protection and water quality needs. It particularly supports voluntary, incentive-based programs implemented in coordination with state and local governmental partners, with flexibility and opportunities for innovation to achieve meaningful water savings. WSWC policy also recognizes that maintaining a sustainable western agricultural economy may require both improving water-use efficiency and, in some circumstances, assisting transitions from irrigated to dryland agriculture.

We strongly support a number of water-related provisions in the revised Senate bill and urge their retention in any bipartisan agreement.

First, the proposed **State Conservation Assistance Program** (§2805) is consistent with WSWC policy. The program would provide direct assistance for State and Tribal conservation programs addressing locally identified resource concerns, with grants of up to \$5 million per State and \$50 million annually in total funding. Giving states greater ability to tailor conservation investments to their own water, agricultural and natural-resource needs reflects the collaborative federal-state approach WSWC has long supported.

We also support the bill's targeted improvements to the **Environmental Quality Incentives Program** (EQIP) (§2202). These include increasing the payment limitation for Water Conservation and Irrigation Efficiency contracts to \$2 million; allowing State technical committees to request waivers of irrigation-history requirements where doing so would not adversely affect aquifer depletion or surface streams experiencing decreased flows; and limiting unnecessary requirements such as whole-farm assessments as a condition of EQIP assistance. These provisions provide useful flexibility while retaining an appropriate focus on measurable conservation outcomes. Farmers use EQIP grants to offset costs for practices that improve water

conservation and water quality, such as upgrading irrigation systems, improving soil health, and managing farm nutrients.

The WSWC similarly supports the Senate bill's improvements to the **Conservation Reserve Program** (CRP) (§2101) and **Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program** (CREP), particularly the new **Drought and Water Conservation Agreements** (§2102). Providing appropriate payments where producers permanently retire water rights or transition acreage from irrigated to dryland agricultural uses closely aligns with WSWC policy supporting voluntary approaches that can achieve real water savings while assisting affected producers. We also support increasing the general CRP payment limitation to \$125,000.

We commend the bill for strengthening the **Regional Conservation Partnership Program** (RCPP) (§2601) by expressly recognizing the conservation and protection of drinking-water sources and groundwater, as well as drought and flood resilience, among eligible regional and watershed-scale resource concerns. EQIP and RCPP are especially valuable in the West because they can support collaborative regional efforts involving agricultural producers, states, local governments, irrigation organizations and other partners.

We also support many of the proposed improvements to the **Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program** (PL-566) (§2801) and **Emergency Watershed Protection Program** (§2802). The Senate text appropriately recognizes water conservation and water management among program purposes; expands the entities that may serve as local sponsors; allows consolidated planning for subwatersheds within a larger watershed; gives State Conservationists greater authority over watershed-plan approvals; directs updates to engineering standards; and raises to \$50 million the federal construction contribution threshold triggering congressional committee approval. We also support expanded authority to restore and protect floodplain hydrologic functions, water quality, floodwater retention and groundwater recharge through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program.

Finally, the WSWC supports the Senate bill's substantial attention to rural drinking water and wastewater needs. We appreciate the proposed increases in authorization for **Water, Waste Disposal and Wastewater Facility Grants** (§6201) and for the **Rural Water and Wastewater Circuit Rider Program** (§6205), as well as creation of a new **Cybersecurity Circuit Rider Program** (§6206) and other technical assistance for small and rural water systems. These provisions are consistent with WSWC's longstanding support for USDA Rural Development efforts to provide clean and safe drinking water and sanitation to rural communities.

As negotiations continue, several western water priorities warrant additional attention.

Conservation Funding. WSWC policy supports conservation-program funding based on demonstrated need rather than baseline budget targets. This bill reduces overall funding for EQIP by nearly \$2 billion, and cuts CSP by \$500 million. The policy improvements described above will achieve little if producers, states and local partners lack adequate resources to implement them. We therefore urge Congress to maintain robust funding for core voluntary conservation programs, including EQIP, CRP/CREP, CSP, RCPP, Conservation Innovation Grants and other watershed programs, and to avoid financing worthy new initiatives by reducing the resources available for existing high-demand programs.

EQIP Limitations. We are concerned by the removal of USDA authority to waive payment or eligibility requirements for Water Conservation and Irrigation Efficiency contracts (§2202(c)), potentially reducing flexibility.

CRP Acreage Limitation. The current Senate text would continue the overall CRP enrollment limitation at 27 million acres through 2031 (§2101). As we noted in our April comments on the House Farm Bill, existing acreage limitations can constrain further progress toward western water-supply reliability,

drought resilience and other conservation objectives. We respectfully urge Congress to increase the overall statutory CRP acreage limitation so that willing producers are not prevented from participating solely because the national program has reached its enrollment ceiling.

Regional Watershed and Drought Projects. We appreciate the Senate's improvements to PL-566, including consolidated planning and increased State Conservationist authority. However, the revised text continues to define a work of improvement as an undertaking within a watershed or subwatershed not exceeding 250,000 acres. That limitation can impede regional drought and water-management projects in the large watersheds characteristic of the West. Consistent with our April comments to the House Farm Bill, WSWC urges Congress to provide a waiver of the 250,000-acre limitation for appropriate regional drought and water-conservation projects and to further eliminate duplicative watershed-planning requirements where existing planning and environmental reviews adequately address program needs.

Irrigation Water Shortages and Prevented Planting. The Senate bill expands Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honey Bees, and Farm-raised Fish Program authority to address transportation costs associated with water and feed shortages, and adds adverse weather and drought as loss causes. We encourage Congress to build on that drought-resilience work by addressing circumstances in which producers reasonably determine before planting that insufficient irrigation water will be available to produce a crop. S. 4862 would establish targeted eligibility for prevented-planting assistance in such circumstances, subject to specified irrigation history and other safeguards, including reduced payments for consecutive crop years. Inclusion of that language, or a comparable approach, would provide an important risk-management tool for western producers affected by drought, reduced surface-water allocations, and other water-supply shortages beyond their control.

The WSWC also continues to emphasize the importance of the **National Water and Climate Center's** water-supply forecasts, snow surveys and soil-climate information. Although those activities depend substantially on annual appropriations rather than Farm Bill mandatory funding, they provide essential information for producers, water managers and states making decisions about drought, irrigation and water supplies and are fundamental to the effective implementation of many USDA conservation programs.

The WSWC appreciates the considerable work reflected in the *Agricultural Act of 2026* and the many provisions that recognize the unique water challenges facing western agriculture and rural communities. We encourage you to preserve those improvements as negotiations continue while addressing the remaining needs identified above. In particular, we urge a final Farm Bill that provides adequate conservation funding, expands opportunities for voluntary water conservation, strengthens state and local partnerships, and provides the flexibility necessary to address locally identified water-resource challenges across the West.

Thank you for your leadership and consideration of these priorities.

Sincerely,



J.D. Strong
Executive Director



**POSITION
of the
WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL
regarding
USDA CONSERVATION PROGRAMS
and
WATER RESOURCES**

**Anchorage, Alaska
September 14, 2023**

WHEREAS, water is the lifeblood of the West and this is most apparent in the agricultural sector, which accounts for the predominant share of consumptive water use westwide; and

WHEREAS, agriculture sustains many rural economies and provides important employment opportunities both directly and indirectly; and

WHEREAS, increasing demands on often scarce water resources and periodic drought threaten the West and its agricultural base and the communities built on that base; and

WHEREAS, many agricultural producers in the West rely on irrigation surface water delivery systems that are shared among multiple producers and operated by an irrigation district, canal company, mutual ditch company, or acequia while others rely on overdrafted and or overallocated groundwater basins; and

WHEREAS, maintaining a sustainable agricultural economy in the West requires promoting efficient water use and achieving net water savings, while maximizing production and in some cases assisting in the transition from irrigated to dryland farming; and

WHEREAS, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs focus on conservation of ground and surface water resources, as well as reductions in nonpoint source pollution, including nutrients, sediment, pesticides and salinity; and

WHEREAS, many agricultural producers in the West voluntarily participate in USDA programs to implement conservation practices that improve water use efficiency, water quality and wildlife habitat; and

WHEREAS, the Farm Service Agency (FSA), Rural Development (RD), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and National Water and Climate Center (NWCC) administer many water-related programs; and

WHEREAS, multiple USDA farm financial assistance programs are particularly important to producers and rural communities, water users and water quality managers, including the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Emergency Watershed Protection Program

(EWPP), Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP) and its Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) and Colorado River Salinity Control Program (CRSCP), and Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and others such as watershed protection and planning programs; and

WHEREAS, special EQIP funding also covers a number of initiatives, including the Drought, Ogallala Aquifer, National Water Quality, Resiliency to Climate Change, and WaterSMART Initiatives; and

WHEREAS, the Western States Water Council (WSWC) supports USDA Conservation Program funding levels based on need rather than baseline budget targets; and

WHEREAS, the WSWC supports collaborative, targeted and voluntary conservation actions to address locally identified farm, range, forest and water resource concerns on private and public lands; and

WHEREAS, the WSWC supports actions to address secure water supplies, improved water quality, and drought and wildfire resilience, as well as wildlife habitat conservation and invasive species threats; and

WHEREAS, the WSWC supports the role of Conservation Title Programs in providing solutions to resolve water supply reliability, water quality impairments, groundwater recharge, and other water resource concerns facing agricultural water users and agricultural producers; and

WHEREAS, the WSWC supports the continued efforts of Rural Development to provide financial assistance for drinking water, wastewater facilities and other services to rural communities.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Western States Water Council strongly supports USDA Conservation Programs, and urges the Administration and the Congress to provide sufficient funding to address water conservation, flood protection and water quality remediation needs.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the WSWC supports regional cooperative agricultural programs such as EQIP Initiatives, the Colorado River Salinity Control Project, and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the WSWC supports the work done by Rural Development to bring clean, safe drinking water and sanitation to rural communities.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the WSWC supports investment in voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs, including when appropriate assisting in the transition from irrigated to dryland farming, that are implemented in coordination with state and local governmental partners, while providing the maximum flexibility possible and opportunity for innovation to create efficiencies, coordinate funding and achieve real water savings.

Revised and Readopted
(See also Position #413 adopted Oct. 20, 2017 and #455, Oct. 15, 2020)