WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL
www.westernstateswater.org
Policy Position #2026-07

Support for USDA Conservation and Rural Water Infrastructure Programs in the West

Policy Summary

Agriculture is central to western economies and communities and accounts for much of the West's consumptive water use. Drought, scarce water supplies with competing uses, stressed surface and groundwater resources, and water-quality concerns underscore the need for agricultural water conservation and sound water management.

USDA programs play complimentary roles in supporting western water resources. Conservation Title programs help producers and water users improve water-use efficiency, water quality, watershed health, and drought and wildfire resilience. These programs should be sufficiently funded based on need; remain voluntary, incentive-based, flexible, and locally targeted; and be implemented in coordination with state and local partners. USDA Rural Development programs provide essential financial and technical assistance for drinking water, wastewater, and related infrastructure in rural communities.

Senate Committee of Jurisdiction
- Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry

House Committee of Jurisdiction
- Agriculture

Relevant Appropriations Subcommittee
- Agriculture, Rural Development, & FDA

Relevant Federal Agencies
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
  - Farm Service Agency
  - Natural Resources Conservation Service
  - Rural Development
  - U.S. Forest Service

WSWC Urges Congress and the Administration to:

1. **Provide sufficient, need-based funding for USDA conservation and water-related programs.**
   Support conservation, watershed, water-supply, flood-protection, and water-quality needs based on demonstrated demand rather than baseline budget targets alone.
2. **Preserve voluntary, flexible, and locally targeted conservation.**

*The **Western States Water Council (WSWC)** is a government entity representing western state water agencies with members appointed by their respective governors. The WSWC's mission is to ensure that the West has an adequate, secure, and sustainable supply of water of suitable quality to meet its diverse economic and environmental needs now and in the future.*

Maintain incentive-based programs that address locally identified farm, range, forest, and water-resource concerns in coordination with state and local governmental partners.

3. **Support measurable water benefits and regional partnerships.**
   Encourage practices and cooperative programs that improve water-use efficiency and water quality, strengthen drought and wildfire resilience, address groundwater and watershed needs, and achieve real water savings where water conservation is the objective.

4. **Sustain Rural Development support for rural water infrastructure.**
   Provide financial and technical assistance for drinking water, wastewater, sanitation, and related infrastructure needed by rural communities.

Core Message

USDA conservation programs are important tools for sustaining western agriculture, water resources, and rural communities. They work best when adequately funded, voluntary, locally driven, flexible enough to address regional differences, coordinated with states and local partners, and focused on meaningful water-resource outcomes.

What WSWC Is Asking For

1. **Fund USDA Conservation Title and water-related programs based on demonstrated need.**

2. **Preserve voluntary, incentive-based approaches and maximum practical flexibility** for producers, states, local governments, and conservation partners.

3. **Support programs that address water-use efficiency with real water savings, flood protection, water quality remediation, and groundwater recharge** and, where appropriate, transitions from irrigated to dryland farming.

4. **Maintain strong regional and cooperative programs**, including EQIP, RCPP, the Colorado River Basin Salinity Project, and watershed protection and recovery efforts.

5. **Continue Rural Development assistance** for drinking water, wastewater, sanitation, and related rural infrastructure.

Closing Statement

WSWC supports strong federal investment in voluntary, incentive-based USDA conservation programs that help western producers and communities conserve and manage water, improve water quality, strengthen resilience, and sustain productive agricultural economies. These programs should remain flexible, locally responsive, and coordinated with state and local partners.

Nothing in this position is intended to alter or affect the authority of western states over the allocation, administration, development, or protection of waters within their borders, or the interpretation or application of any interstate compact, court decree, international treaty, tribal settlement agreement, or state water law.

Supporting Documentation

Why This Matters

Water is the lifeblood of the West, particularly for agriculture. Agricultural production sustains rural economies and employment and depends on reliable surface-water and groundwater supplies.

Many western producers rely on shared irrigation systems operated by irrigation districts, canal companies, mutual ditch companies, acequias, and similar organizations. Others depend on groundwater basins facing declining supplies, overdraft, or competing demands.

USDA conservation programs provide agricultural producers, water users, and rural communities with voluntary financial and technical assistance to address water supply reliability, water quality impairments, watershed health, groundwater recharge, drought and wildfire resilience, and other natural-resource concerns.

Voluntary Conservation and Water Savings

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. WSWC supports collaborative, targeted, voluntary, and incentive-based conservation actions addressing locally identified farm, range, forest, and water-resource concerns.

These programs can help:

- improve irrigation and water-delivery efficiency;
- conserve surface and groundwater resources;
- reduce nonpoint-source pollution, including nutrients, sediment, pesticides, and salinity;
- improve groundwater recharge and management;
- strengthen drought and wildfire resilience;
- improve wildlife habitat and address invasive species; and
- sustain productive agricultural operations.

Improved irrigation efficiency can provide substantial benefits, but it does not always result in equivalent net or basin-wide water savings. Where water conservation is the objective, programs should consider local hydrology, consumptive use, return flows, state water law, and measurable outcomes.

Different conditions may call for different approaches, including improving efficiency while maintaining production, reducing consumptive use, changing production practices, or, where appropriate, assisting producers in transitioning from irrigated to dryland farming.

Key USDA Conservation Programs

USDA administers a range of complementary conservation and water-related programs, including:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP);
- Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG);
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP);
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP);
- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP);
- Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWPP);
- watershed protection and planning programs; and
- the Colorado River Salinity Control Program and other water-focused regional initiatives.

These programs can help address water-supply reliability, water-quality impairments, groundwater recharge and management, watershed protection, and other concerns facing agricultural producers and water users.

Regional cooperative programs are especially valuable where water-resource challenges cross individual farm, irrigation-district, watershed, or political boundaries.

Working together with or through state agencies, voluntary programs such as CREP may provide critical funding that supports state and local efforts to permanently retire water rights in water-stressed basins.

Funding, Flexibility, and State Partnership

WSWC supports USDA conservation program funding levels based on demonstrated needs rather than baseline budget targets alone.

Programs should provide maximum practical flexibility and opportunities for innovation while coordinating federal, state, local, producer, and other partner investments. Federal requirements should not unnecessarily discourage participation or prevent locally appropriate solutions.

State involvement is particularly important where conservation activities may affect water use, groundwater management, return flows, water rights, or other matters governed by state law.

Federal conservation programs should complement state and local water-management responsibilities and allow states and local partners to tailor approaches to regional conditions.

Rural Water and Wastewater Assistance

USDA Rural Development provides important financial and technical assistance for drinking water, wastewater, sanitation, and related infrastructure in rural communities.

Many small rural communities face aging facilities, limited financial capacity, and difficulty accessing affordable financing. Continued federal assistance helps these communities protect public health, maintain essential services, and sustain the rural economies that support western agriculture.

Additional Supporting Context

A. Voluntary programs encourage participation

Incentive-based approaches allow producers and local partners to pursue conservation practices suited to their operational, economic, and water-resource conditions.

B. Efficiency and water savings are not always the same

Water-use efficiency can provide important benefits, but actual water savings depend on consumptive use, return flows, local hydrology, and how conserved water is subsequently managed.

C. Regional partnerships can increase results

Coordinating USDA investments with state, local, producer, irrigation-organization, and other partner resources can reduce duplication and address water challenges at a broader scale.

D. Rural communities are part of the agricultural water system

Reliable drinking water, wastewater, and sanitation infrastructure supports the communities and workforce on which western agricultural economies depend.

Adopted unanimously by the Western States Water Council on October 22, 2026, in Las Cruces, New Mexico.