

September 16, 2025

Aubrey Bettencourt  
Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
*Sent via email*

Bill Beam  
Administrator of the Farm Services Agency  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
*Sent via email*

David Palumbo  
Acting Commissioner, Bureau of Reclamation  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
*Sent via email*

**Re: Western Agriculture and Conservation Coalition Support for Federal Investments in Western Agriculture to Achieve Water Conservation in the Colorado River Basin**

Dear Chief Bettencourt, Administrator Beam, and Acting Commissioner Palumbo:

The ongoing negotiations over the future of the Colorado River will have massive ramifications for farmers, ranchers, and rural communities across the American West. On behalf of the Western Agriculture and Conservation Coalition (WACC), we write to highlight the importance of supporting producers in Colorado River Basin (CRB) states as they make significant contributions to U.S. food security, generate \$60 billion annually for local economies, and protect critical ecosystems – all while navigating a challenging and ever-evolving water landscape.

Founded in 2012, the WACC and its diverse member organizations support the common interests of agriculture, conservation, and others who rely on natural resources and seek to promote an economically viable and sustainable rural West.

The WACC encourages the Administration to 1) make full use of and support investments in existing, cost-effective tools at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) for advancing water conservation and supporting farm families in the CRB, 2) seize opportunities to create dedicated funding streams with those programs to help launch innovative projects and improve conservation outcomes for high-priority resource concerns for Western agriculture, and 3) support personnel with expertise in Western water and agriculture at USDA and DOI as the Departments continue to assess long-term staffing needs.

U.S. Department of Agriculture

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act, signed into law by President Trump on July 4, includes a \$17 billion investment in key conservation programs at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Representing a 25 percent increase over baseline farm bill funding, this investment is a breakthrough opportunity to support CRB producers, including through the NRCS-issued Western Water and Working Lands Framework, which identifies several critical areas for investment.

Additionally, the WACC finds great value in the following USDA programs, which support a broad range of much-needed water conservation efforts undertaken by producers in Western states:

1. *The EQIP WaterSMART Initiative*, which leverages resources within the Bureau of Reclamation's (BOR) WaterSMART funds alongside EQIP contracts. It helps farmers and ranchers in priority irrigation districts and other agricultural water service areas adopt on-farm water conservation and efficiency measures, including lining or replacing ditches, enhancing soil health, modernizing irrigation, and improving irrigation water management.
2. *The Water-Saving Commodities Program*, an initiative at the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to support commodity production while reducing water losses in drought-affected areas. FSA awarded competitive grants were awarded to irrigation districts or other water delivery organizations to implement activities that seek to conserve water while maintaining agricultural productivity.
3. *The Sustainable Water for Agriculture Pilots (SWAP) Program*, which identifies innovative projects that generate additional water conservation benefits on irrigated land. SWAP targets recipients and partners of the Water-Saving Commodities Program at USDA and supports cultivation of water efficient crops, enhancement of on-farm irrigation practices, and improving water delivery systems.
4. *The Watershed Program*, also known as PL-566, which is designed to boost local watershed health and enhance the resiliency of agricultural operations and rural communities. For watersheds of 250,000 or fewer acres, eligible uses of PL-566 resources include flood prevention, erosion and sediment control, water supply and quality management, and wildlife habitat enhancement.
5. *Water Management Entity Support*, an authority included in the 2018 farm bill, which allows the NRCS to enter EQIP contracts with water management entities, including irrigation districts, groundwater management districts, acequias, and others responsible for irrigation water delivery. Funds under this authority support water conservation projects, fish and wildlife habitat, and drought-related environmental mitigation.
6. *Release award funds for producers undertaking on-farm efforts to conserve water*. Boosting the resiliency of agricultural production and farm communities across the West requires sustained coordination and partnership with the Department. As you review the water-conserving projects selected for awards, we urge you consider the ongoing drought conditions in the Colorado River Basin and prioritize concluding the reviews of these projects as soon as possible so that the conservation benefits may be realized.

#### U.S. Department of the Interior

1. *The WaterSMART Program*, housed at BOR, provides resources to States, tribes, irrigation districts, water districts, and other authorities in Western states to support drought planning, water management, habitat restoration, and other critical activities.
2. *The System Conservation Pilot Program*, a BOR initiative to examine voluntary water conservation measures to manage severe drought in the Colorado River Basin. The program generates valuable data on innovative water management strategies to inform ongoing discussions among Colorado River Basin states, BOR, and important stakeholders.

3. *The Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program*, which aims to reduce salinity levels in Colorado River water. High salinity levels can diminish agricultural production and severely damage municipal and household water systems.

4. *Release award funds allocated for water conservation and drought resilience projects in the Colorado River Basin*. Department and agency leadership continue to review previously announced funding awards to boost water storage, mitigate drought conditions, enhance system resilience, and achieve other critical objectives in Basin states. We urge you to swiftly complete these reviews to provide certainty to the producers and communities involved and allow them to realize the water conservation and drought resilience benefits of these projects, many of which originate under bipartisan authority from Congress.

#### Water Subcabinet

In addition to highlighting the essential USDA and DOI programming described above, the WACC strongly supports resurrecting the Water Subcabinet, first launched by President Trump in 2020 to encourage cross-agency coordination on water-related initiatives. With participation from key leaders across government, the Water Subcabinet serves an important role in promoting integration among federal initiatives to support the CRB and creating opportunities to achieve strong Basin-wide conservation results.

We appreciate your consideration of our perspective and are grateful for all you and your teams are doing to support Western agriculture. The WACC stands ready to help and please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

California Agricultural Irrigation Association  
California Farm Bureau  
Environmental Defense Fund  
Family Farm Alliance  
Farmers Conservation Alliance  
Irrigation Association  
National Audubon Society  
Trout Unlimited  
The Freshwater Trust  
Western Agriculture and Conservation Coalition