

Committee on Resources

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**Statement of John W. Keys, III
Commissioner, Bureau of Reclamation
U.S. Department of the Interior
on H.R. 4775**

Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Water and Power
September 9, 2004

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I am John Keys, Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation. I am pleased to be here today to present the Department of Interior's views on H.R. 4775, a bill to amend Title XVI of Public Law 102-575 to authorize the planning, design, and construction of the El Paso, Texas, Water Reclamation, Reuse, and Desalinization Project.

For reasons set out below, it is not possible for the Administration to support H.R. 4775. Nevertheless, we commend the bill's sponsor, Mr. Reyes, and the City of El Paso, Texas for their focus on the water needs of West Texas.

Background

During full water allocation years, El Paso and surrounding communities in West Texas obtain nearly 50 percent of their potable water from the Bureau of Reclamation's Rio Grande Project surface water supply. However, the current drought has expanded El Paso's reliance on groundwater and increased its interest in alternatives such as stricter water conservation, groundwater importation, effluent reuse, and desalinating water from older wells that have succumbed to salt intrusion.

Demonstrating economic treatment of brackish, saline ground water is a significant challenge. It requires further technological progress in reducing construction and operating costs of desalination plants and closely monitoring costs of alternative supplies. To meet this challenge, Reclamation has already committed funds for research and new technologies for water treatment facilities including the Yuma Desalting Plant and the Tularosa Basin Desalination Research Facility, which we broke ground on just this past June.

While we understand Mr. Reyes's interest in pursuing desalinization, H.R. 4775 is not consistent with Administration guidelines for Title XVI projects. First, it exposes Reclamation to as much as a 50% federal share of construction costs. Administration guidelines, like the basic threshold in Title XVI, limit the federal share to 25%.

Second, even if the cost-sharing problems are corrected, Reclamation has not reviewed a feasibility report and therefore, is not in a position to support funding of design, planning, or construction of a project.

In addition, Reclamation faces a lengthy backlog of Title XVI projects already authorized but not funded. It should be noted that El Paso already has a Title XVI project that has received Reclamation funding of more than \$7.8 million.

Mr. Chairman, despite the fact that we are not in a position to support H.R. 4775, we will be pleased to continue working closely with the City of El Paso to develop a strategy for meeting the city's water supply needs involving an appropriate balance of local and federal resources.

I am pleased to answer any questions.