WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

OF

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GREELEY, COLORADO

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEES ON WATER AND POWER OF THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONCERNING

MANAGING WATER FOR THE FUTURE: HOW FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL ENTITIES ARE SUPPORTING AGRICULTURE

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

GREELEY, COLORADO

MAY 17, 2010

Chairman Napolitano, Ranking Member McClintock, and members of the House Subcommittee on Water and Power, thank you for inviting me to present testimony to you today regarding water and agriculture in the South Platte River Basin of Colorado.

My name is Tom Cech, and I have been Executive Director of the Central Colorado Water Conservancy District, based here in Greeley, since 1982. Our district was formed in 1965, and includes agricultural regions of Adams, Morgan, and Weld Counties in northeast Colorado. Central provides services of water delivery, water quality, water education (teachers/students), water conservation, and augmentation. Our district owns, or has developed, approximately $100 million of senior water rights and lined gravel pit reservoirs (underground bentonite slurry walls constructed around excavated gravel pits to store surface water). We work with a wide range of water user groups – from irrigation companies and developers to Front Range cities and state water agencies.

The interaction and use of surface water and groundwater is a challenging, and often contentious issue in many regions of the world – but particularly so here in Colorado. Why? Colorado's Constitution, in 1876, adopted the Doctrine of Prior Appropriation – "first in time, first in right" for the allocation of water resources of the state. Historically, that only affected water diversions from rivers and streams for irrigation. However, around the early 1900s, irrigation wells were dug to pump groundwater from shallow aquifers adjacent to streams. These "alluvial" wells pumped groundwater from a depth of sometimes less than 30 feet.

Groundwater pumping in this region can affect the flow of the South Platte River - and that runs headlong into Colorado's Doctrine of Prior Appropriation – "first in time, first in right." Generally, "senior" irrigation ditches were constructed in the 1800s, while the "junior" groundwater wells were constructed in the 1900s. The result is that well users are not allowed to

pump unless they obtain “augmentation water” – sources of water that offset depletions caused by out-of-priority well depletions.

Acquisition and delivery of augmentation water (sometimes called “replacement water”) gets complicated and expensive, and has created reams of court documents due to widespread and extensive litigation. The economic impact to many sectors of the agricultural economy of the region has been great. To date, an estimated 2,000 wells in the South Platte Basin have been shutdown, and will not likely pump again. Thousands of acres of prime farmground lay idle, only growing weeds. Tax revenues have been lost and agricultural activity has declined – resulting in personnel layoffs, and reduced small business revenues. Feed production has also declined, which has a negative effect on feedlots, dairies, and poultry operations in the area. Farm families have switched to less profitable dryland crops, have left the area, or have simply given up the fight to preserve their irrigated farms.

We have 1,200 member wells in our two augmentation plans. Our oldest group – formed in 1973, is currently allowed to pump 38% of their historic needs. Our new group of wells, formed in 2004, has been not been allowed to pump groundwater since 2006. (You may have read back then of irrigators being forced to abandon their crops after planting season was over due to insufficient augmentation water.) Simply stated, these well owners have been through serious economic challenges, and must become as efficient as possible with their limited water supplies.

Our member wellowners have currently borrowed $36 million from the Colorado Water Conservation Board – the maximum allowed under our bonding capacity based on projected tax revenues. – to purchase or develop augmentation water. Our members had a 400 percent annual assessment increase in 2008. The group of non-pumping wells paid $5,000 per well to join the augmentation plan in 2004, and have paid annual assessments since 2006, with no groundwater pumping allowed to date. We have asked our constituents to pay all they can to develop augmentation water.

We have also asked our members to become more efficient with their water use, and are providing tools to help make these improvements. Here are some examples of that work:

1. With the assistance of federal funding, we have installed water meters on all 1,200 of our member groundwater wells. These meters are read monthly by the well users, and four times a year by Central staff.

2. Our newest conservation program was funded through a special appropriation hosted by the NRCS, and involves a partnership with McCrometer, Inc. of Hemet, California. We are installing telemetry devices on member wells to provide realtime data of their remaining annual groundwater pumping allocation. We are also developing an online water accounting program for well users – similar to an online checking account – so that irrigators know, on a daily basis, how much water they have left to pump for the coming water year.

3. We have created a partnership with Colorado State University in Fort Collins to provide seminars and other educational events to discuss deficit irrigation, new irrigation practices, and nutrient management.

4. Our relationship with the Colorado State University and the U.S. Geological Survey allowed us to develop improved irrigation management practices, and with their assistance, deliver them to our innovative farming community.

5. We continue to develop groundwater recharge sites – small excavated ponds that are filled through existing irrigation canals during periods of high river flows. Since 1980, Central has recharged well in excess of 100,000 acre-feet of water to replenish the shallow alluvial aquifer for replacement of out-of-priority well pumping depletions. We recently toured the extensive groundwater recharge sites of the Orange County Water District along the Santa Ana River of Southern California, and obtained insight into silt removal to maintain infiltration rates.

6. We are working closely with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Colorado Water Conservation Board, and 14 other water user groups (municipalities, an irrigation company, The Greenway Foundation, and metropolitan water & wastewater districts) to

obtain reallocated storage space in Chatfield Reservoir south of Denver. This new storage space will allow Central to store flood flows for well augmentation purposes.

7. We have investigated the USDA's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to provide payments to groundwater users that are not allowed to pump. Cost-sharing requirements have been the major impediment for use of this program.

8. We continue to explore small and large surface water storage projects in the region. Over 100,000 acre-feet of water left the state this past year in the South Platte River – water that would have allowed increased groundwater pumping in the District.

9. We continue to explore local/state/federal partnerships for water conservation projects. Improved water management is a critical aspect of the groundwater/surface water challenges of the South Platte River Basin.

10. Central has received support from both state and federal organizations to improve water use efficiency within our groundwater community. In 2008, our office obtained a Conservation Innovation Grant thanks to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which allowed us to analyze the efficiency of center pivot and flood irrigation systems.

11. Also that year, Central received a special appropriation grant to implement CACO, the Colorado Agricultural Conservation Outreach. CACO provided Central the funds necessary to install water saving technology on more than 20 large irrigation operations, and spread the paradigm that water savings equals profitability.

We would like to strengthen our partnership with the federal government so that our local resources can be supplemented with federal program resources. Central strongly encourages the committee, in its budget oversight role, to seek increases in programs like WaterSMART, recently enhanced somewhat by the Administration. Such fiscal partnerships can only serve to fulfill the goals of efficiency, storage and conservation more quickly.

Once again, thank you very much for allowing me to speak to you and the Committee. We greatly appreciate your interest in the future of irrigated agriculture in the South Platte River Basin.

Sincerely,

Tom Cech

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