

Thank you, Ranking Member Westerman and members of the Natural Resource Committee for the opportunity to speak with you today concerning the impacts of the catastrophic drought we are facing in New Mexico and specifically in Sierra County. As Representative Herrell has stated, I have dedicated my career to agricultural and natural resource management and the current drought conditions have made management of our lands extremely difficult. According to the most recent US Drought Monitor, every county in the state of New Mexico is in, at a minimum, D2 severe drought with approximately half the state being in D3 extreme drought conditions. Specifically in Sierra County, we consider 12 inches in annual rain to be a strong moisture year. These drought conditions have a detrimental impact on our economy, watershed health, and agricultural producer's abilities to manage their operations and lands.

Sierra County is home to New Mexico's economically top state park in Elephant Butte Lake. In a typical year, Elephant Butte lake attracts over 100,000 people to our communities on Memorial Day weekend, the fourth of July, and Labor Day weekend. In a county of just over 12,000 residents, the boom of economic activity is much appreciated. In fact, Elephant Butte lake is responsible for the economy of an entire municipality in the City of Elephant Butte. Our lake is currently sitting at 12% capacity and projected to decrease to 3% after the release of water for irrigation and Rio Grande Compact requirements to Texas and Mexico. Local businesses who have been impacted by Covid-19 related closures worry that continued low water levels and potential loss of the lake entirely will force them to close their doors permanently.

As land managers and policy makers, we need to take an in depth look at the management of our watersheds. The drought coupled with a history of mismanagement of our forests have resulted in catastrophic wildfires, loss of premier wildlife habitat, and no water recharge of our aquifers. High water usage species such as juniper and salt cedar plague our forest meadows and riparian habitats. Salt Cedar, a non-native species, has the potential to use 200 gals of water a day and provides no environmental benefit dominates the land along the Rio Grande River. It is imperative that we move to a more active approach when considering the management of our watersheds.

Finally, I would like to applaud our farmers and ranchers who I have the privilege of working alongside every day to plan, design and implement water conservation infrastructure projects. I am a true believer that the American Farmer and Rancher are the greatest stewards of our natural resources however they are not immune to drought impacts. In Sierra County, our ranchers are forced to haul water across the ranch because groundwater wells are going dry. I have had personal conversations with ranchers who fear having to sell their entire herd this year if no moisture is received. They simply cannot afford to buy hay or grain. Our farmers in the southern portion of the county are only being allocated a total of 3 inches of irrigation water for the year. An amount that does not equate to a full single irrigation. The continuance of funding for federal programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Livestock Forage Program to provide assistance to our producers is crucial to ensure they have the means to feed the American population.

Ranking Member Westerman and committee members, thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today and I will happy to answer any questions.