

**Testimony of Royce Fast
President, Board of Directors
Kern County Water Agency
Bakersfield, California**

**Before Members of Congress
May 19, 2021**

Good afternoon, Leader McCarthy, and Members of Congress. My name is Royce Fast. I am the President of the Board of Directors of the Kern County Water Agency.

Introduction

The Kern County Water Agency (KCWA) is located in Bakersfield, California and serves the urban and agricultural areas in the surrounding region. KCWA contracts with the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) for water from the State Water Project (SWP).

KCWA participates in a wide range of water management activities including protecting water quality, providing domestic, municipal and industrial water supplies, constructing and managing groundwater banking facilities and managing flood control facilities. KCWA is the second largest participant in the State Water Project (SWP), a water storage and delivery system of reservoirs, aqueducts, power plants, and pumping plants owned by the State of California.

KCWA holds a contract for nearly one million acre-feet (af) of SWP water that is delivered to 14 public water agencies that serve domestic and irrigation water supplies to the farms, families and businesses in Kern County. (One af equals about 326,000 gallons, or enough water to cover a football field a foot deep or the annual planned water usage of a suburban family household.)

Since 1987, KCWA and the local water districts it serves have been faced with extreme variations in water supply from its local and SWP sources due to drought, but also in major part due to regulations imposed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). These reductions in deliveries have resulted in significant losses of agricultural production, and significant adverse impacts on Kern County's economy.

In 1961, when KCWA contracted with the State of California for water from the SWP, we expected that KCWA would receive nearly 100 percent of the water contracted for each and every year (about one million af). However, between 1960 and 2005 that expectation changed because the SWP was not completed, additional criteria were imposed on SWP operations, and because of federally imposed restrictions to protect Chinook salmon and Delta smelt. By 2005, we could expect only 68 percent of our total contract amount. In 2020, the DWR announced that the long-term average had further declined to just 58 percent of the water supplies contracted into the future.

2021 Drought Preparation

Water agencies and growers in Kern County have planned for dry years and droughts. Our growers employ the most advanced water conservation techniques including micro-drip irrigation, recycling of produced water from oil wells for agricultural use, K-12 water conservation education programs and public outreach campaigns highlighting water conservation messages through various social media platforms.

In addition to an emphasis on water conservation, Kern County growers are world leaders in groundwater banking. Between 1977 and 2005, Kern County invested more than \$300 million to build its groundwater banking infrastructure. The banks can store upwards of 5.7 million acre feet (af) of water during wet years, and through pumping from groundwater wells, water is recovered for use during dry years. Since 1978, more than 4 million af of water has been recovered for use.

This infrastructure provides for efficient and flexible movement of water, which combined with previously stored water from banking projects, has been crucial to the area's survival during drought cycles and low SWP allocations like we are experiencing this year. Kern County groundwater banking infrastructure also benefit other areas of California that store their water supplies in Kern County during wet years and recover the stored water during dry years.

2021 Drought Impacts

This year Kern County growers are trying to adapt to the very low water allocation from the State by buying additional water from northern California through water transfers approaching \$1,000 per af, planting fewer crops, early removal of mature orchards, stress irrigating crops with less water which will reduce crop yields, and employing fewer people. All of these strategies have a negative impact on the local economy, and some of them cause long-term damage to crops that can reduce crop yields into the future.

The impacts of the 2021 drought are yet to be seen. But the impacts of the 2014 drought provide a guide to what we can expect this time around. Beginning in 2014 and extending through 2016 the Tulare Basin lost approximately 192,000 acres of productive farmland with a related loss of 17,100 jobs.¹ It takes years to recover from these kinds of losses.

2021 Path Forward

There were many reports and analyses of the last drought that identified strategies for coping during future droughts. Unfortunately, 2021 is that future drought, and yet we are still in a situation that provides us with just 5 percent of our SWP allocation. That needs to change. The federal biological opinions issued in 2019 were helpful because they focused more closely on what fish need and allowed additional water to be available for agricultural use in some years. However, the State of California issued rules in 2020² that it hopes will protect Delta fish but that eliminated much of the benefit the federal rules allowed.

We appreciate Governor Newsom's recent drought emergency proclamation and his decision to include significant funding to repair badly subsided water supply canals in his draft budget. But to make it through this drought we will need the State and federal agencies to work together and we will

¹ Economic Analysis of the 2014 Drought for California Agriculture. Richard Howitt, et.al., Center for Watershed Sciences University of California, Davis UC Agricultural Issues Center ERA Economics, Davis, Calif.

need State regulatory agencies to review environmental restrictions and determine if they can be modified to make additional water available to farmers while adequately protecting fish.

Hopefully, the next drought is a long way off. But whether it is next year or next decade, we need to be better prepared. The State, working with the federal government as a partner, needs to invest in additional water storage and the ability to move water to where it is needed. We need to construct a new conveyance system to get that water across the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta by advancing the Delta Conveyance Project, sometimes referred to as the Delta tunnel. The federal government is reviewing expansion of Shasta Reservoir and the State and federal governments are jointly reviewing a new reservoir in the Sacramento Valley know as Sites Reservoir.

All of these new pieces of concrete and steel infrastructure are needed to prepare California for the next drought and all of them are in the planning stages now, but they are far from built. They will all require significant funding from federal, State and local sources and the coordinated efforts of all three levels of government. Preparing for the next drought must start now, in the middle of this one.

On a personal note, I am a 4th generation family farmer with what is by California standards a medium-sized farm. 640 acres of the farm relies on water from California's State Water Project. This year the SWP allocation is just 5 percent and as a result my family will be able to farm 25 percent of that ground thanks to groundwater banking that we have done in wetter years. But even though we will only get 5 percent of our SWP allocation we will still get a bill from the State for the capital costs of the SWP as if our allocation was 100 percent. One idea to provide immediate help for individual farmers like me is developing a program through the Farm Service Agency that covers drought and prevented planting costs. Such a program would have broad applicability throughout the West.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am available to answer any questions the members may have,

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