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Opening Statement
The Honorable Tom McClintock
Chairman, Water and Power Subcommittee
At the Oversight Hearing on
"Water for Our Future and Job Creation: Examining Regulatory and Bureaucratic Barriers
to New Surface Storage Infrastructure"
February 7, 2012

The sub-committee on Water and Power meets today to consider what steps need to be taken to remove government-imposed impediments to the construction of new dams and reservoirs.

The need for action can be summarized quite succinctly: The Bureau of Reclamation has built over 600 dams and reservoirs in the last century, but two-thirds of them were built in the first 60 years of its existence – more than 50 years ago. With one exception, Reclamation has not built any major dams or reservoirs in the last generation.

And now, under this administration, the Bureau of Reclamation is actually moving to tear down perfectly good dams to placate the most extreme elements of the environmental left.

This shift of purpose is fast becoming a direct and imminent threat not only to the prosperity of the west, but to our very ability to support our population. For example, California's 37 million people now rely on a water system built to support a population of just 22 million.

Last year, this sub-committee focused on the release or diversion of billions of gallons of desperately needed water to meet absurd environmental regulations.

But that's just part of the man-made drought that is gripping the west. The other part is the panoply of federal regulations that makes the construction of new storage cost prohibitive.

Last year, California had one of the wettest winters on record. So far this year, it has had one of the driest. Last year, billions of gallons of water had to be released simply because we had no place to store that surplus water. If the drought continues for another year, we will rue the decisions that denied us the additional storage capacity that would have saved that water.

As we will hear, major projects have been hamstrung because of litigation and regulatory excesses stemming from 1970's era legislation. Three years ago, this sub-committee travelled to Colorado which was in the grips of a chronic water shortage. There, we learned that if the Two-Forks project had not been blocked in this manner, they would have had no water shortage.

Apologists for the status quo tell us that dams are too expensive. They blissfully ignore the fact that it is precisely these excessive regulations – having nothing to do with dam safety – that have needlessly and artificially driven up the cost.

It is true that dams impede the migration of certain species of fish – a problem that is easily and economically addressed through down-stream fish hatcheries. Yet hatchery fish are often not included in ESA population counts despite the fact there is no more genetic difference between hatchery fish and fish born in the wild than there is between a baby born at the hospital and a baby born at home.

Indeed, it was the construction of dams that made possible the year-round cold-water flows so conducive to thriving fish populations. The dams tamed the environmentally devastating cycle of floods and droughts that once plagued these habitats.

Nor will conservation measures such as recycling and rationing address our needs. As we will hear, there are limits to what conservation alone can do to address this shortage, and handing out taxpayer grants for toilet exchanges and rock gardens isn't going meet the next generation's needs. Title 16 recycling legislation in the last Congress cost twice as much as imported water to the same regions.

Conservation is what you do to manage a shortage. It is the government's responsibility to alleviate that shortage. And that means that this generation must summon the common sense and resolve that the greatest generation used to build the infrastructure that we still rely upon today.

That means returning to the sound principles of finance that produced this infrastructure: hard-nosed cost-benefit analysis and restoring the beneficiary pays principle that the actual users of these projects pay for them in proportion to their use.

We have squandered enormous amounts of money and precious time proving that the policies of the 1970's do not work, and we now face devastating water shortages as the cost of that lesson. It was a generation whose folly resembles Edward Gibbon's description of "Decent easy men, who supinely enjoyed the gifts of the founder." Those days need to end now.

It is time to open a new chapter in the history of the West: that a new generation recovered and restored the vision of abundance of its forbearers and finished the job described by the founder of the Bureau of Reclamation as "making the desert bloom."