

Members of Congress, thank you for allowing me to speak today.

My name is Todd Neves. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today so that I can relay my story regarding California's drought and how it has impacted my family's farming operation.

I am a 4th generation California farmer in the San Joaquin Valley, where my family has been farming for the last 107 years. The crops we have grown in recent years consist of almonds, corn, cotton, onions, tomatoes, and walnuts. Many people have said the San Joaquin Valley is the most productive and fertile land in the world, and they are correct. But for these lands to be productive, farmers need water to irrigate crops that feed the nation. In fact, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture, one-third of the fresh vegetables and two-third of nuts and fresh fruit consumed in the United States are grown in California, and much of that comes from the San Joaquin Valley. The surface water supplies for my farms consist of two different watersheds. One is the Kings River, and the other is Westlands Water District via the Central Valley Project.

Every morning I wake up, I start my day off with a prayer. The focus of my prayers recently is that all the groundwater wells on my ranch are still pumping water from when I left them the previous evening. This water situation is gut-wrenching, extremely stressful, and has created an emotional rollercoaster for my family, employees, and me! On our farm in Westlands, we are dependent on groundwater wells today, because the Bureau of Reclamation has said it cannot currently make any surface water available to us. This has caused me to make tough decisions, like fallowing 35% of our farm. When fallowing 35% of your land, what follows next is laying off employees. I have the daunting task of deciding whom to let go. Will it be a longtime employee who has been with me through thick and thin, whose children I saw grow up? Or is it the new employee who is recently married, with their first child on the way? These decisions are gut-wrenching, and I know that every other farmer in Westlands is having to make these same decisions.

All of this is extremely frustrating because I feel that a lot of our problems regarding today's drought could have been avoided or reduced significantly if water resources in California were more effectively managed. No doubt, 2021 is an incredibly dry year, as was 2020. But in the last five years, we have also experienced two wet years, 2017 and 2019, and an average year, 2018. Had we been better prepared to capture and store runoff from 2017 and 2019, we would not today find ourselves in a situation where storage is at historic low levels. More water would be available for cities, farmers, and the environment, and groundwater storage in the San Joaquin Valley would be in better shape to help us get through this dry year.

A classic example is Shasta Dam. Forty-one years ago, in 1980, Congress passed a law to authorize Reclamation to investigate enlarging Shasta Dam. After decades of study, Reclamation identified a project, enlarging Shasta Dam 18.5 feet, that would create an

additional 634,000 acre-feet of storage, and which would improve water supply for farmers, cities, and the environment. In fact, Reclamation has concluded that a primary benefit of this project would be improved Sacramento River temperatures and water quality below Shasta Dam for salmon survival. Had this project been in place in 2019, that 634,000 acre-feet of storage could have been filled in February and March. Some of that additional water could be available today for irrigation, and Reclamation's ongoing efforts to protect the cold-water pool in Shasta Lake for the protection of salmon below the Dam would not be so daunting.

In 2000, the CalFED Record of Decision identified five surface storage projects, including enlarging Shasta Dam, to better meet water supply demands around the state. Today, more than 20 years later, only one of those projects, enlarging Los Vaqueros Reservoir, has been undertaken, and that is thanks mainly to the efforts of a local water agency, Contra Costa Water District.

Proactive water policy requires more than simply studying projects. Proactive water policy requires more than ensuring the environment is protected, without regard to the water supply needs of cities, small communities, and farmers. Proactive water policy requires calculating existing and future water demands, and then taking action to ensure those demands, including environmental uses of water, can be met.

Given the state's geographic size, the state's population, the federal government's interest in protecting the viability of the state's economy, and the scale of the problem, solving California's water crisis will also require a cooperative partnership between the state and federal governments.

When natural disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, strike, the same questions are always asked: why didn't we anticipate this disaster and better prepare to deal with its consequences? In the first half of the 20th Century, the state and federal governments did anticipate drought and prepared to deal with its consequences. They built the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project, which were designed to supply water even through extended drought. But in the five decades since completion of the State Water Project no significant actions have been undertaken. The problem has just been studied. In that same time, the population of the state has more than doubled and a new demand, environmental uses of water, has been placed on our water projects. In fact, today, the environment is by far the largest user of developed water supplies. I am not saying this new demand is a bad thing; I am merely saying that this new demand adds to the need for planning and action.

Without the formation of a proactive water policy and actions to meet existing and future water supply needs, the San Joaquin Valley is destined to see more and more agricultural lands being taken out of production. We will see an endless cycle of drought induced economic and social impacts in communities like Mendota, Huron, Tranquility, and Firebaugh, which in the last drought saw unemployment rates as high as 40%, people standing in food lines, homeless encampments, and declining school enrollments.

As a farmer and good steward of the land, I feel I have done my part to conserve water. In the last 15 years I have spent twice what I paid for my ranch on water conservation systems. I have installed 100% drip irrigation, installed new underground pipe to convey water throughout my ranch, without evaporation or seepage loss of water, and installed new, more efficient groundwater wells.

I have been truly blessed to be part of my family's farming operation for all these years. With your willingness to attend today's forum and listen to my testimony, it gives me hope that my son, Jake, and daughter, Jordyn, can continue the family's legacy by becoming our 5th generation farmers.

Thank you,

Todd Neves, Farmer and Westlands Water District Director