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May 18, 2021

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources, Republican Office
U.S. House of Representatives
1329 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Virtual forum on the catastrophic drought situation across the American West

Dear Ranking Member Westerman and Natural Resources Committee Republicans:

My name is Jason Phillips, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Friant Water Authority in California's San Joaquin Valley. The Friant Water Authority (Authority or Friant) is a public agency formed under California law in part to operate and maintain the Friant-Kern Canal, a component of the Central Valley Project (CVP) owned by the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation). In addition to that responsibility, the Authority also advocates on behalf of the entire Friant Division and eastside communities for sound public policy on water management and operations. For more than 30 years, most decisions made, and actions taken in Washington, DC and Sacramento, CA have made the impacts of drought even worse, and have turned a water storage and delivery system, which was once the envy of the world, into a confusing mess of regulations, laws, and contradictions. Our forefathers had the wisdom and vision to design and construct a water delivery system that could withstand FIVE consecutive years of drought. Now, after ONE or TWO years, the system is in a tailspin and unable to live up to its needs. At some point, if common sense doesn't take over, the past will become the permanent future and implementing sensible solutions will be too late for too many people, cities, and farms in the Valley.

Thank you to Congressman Devin Nunes for inviting me to speak. Friant is particularly well positioned to comment on the topic of this hearing, given: (1) our role as the local operator and responsible agency for the Friant-Kern Canal, and (2) the significant water-related challenges Friant and others face in the San Joaquin Valley (Valley) and elsewhere in California, especially during a severe drought year like 2021 is shaping up to be.

During my verbal testimony, I will touch on the following items:

- The 2021 drought, and how government decision makers can help, instead of hurt,
- The importance of restoring carrying capacity in major canals in CA,
- The role of storage projects, and how delay, hand wringing, and opposition to constructing even “non-controversial” storage projects has made today’s predicament worse, and,
- Our thoughts on a path forward.

Background on the Friant Division

The 152-mile-long Friant-Kern Canal and the 36-mile-long Madera Canal, together with Friant Dam and Millerton Lake on the San Joaquin River, form the Friant Division of the Central Valley Project. On average, the canals deliver 1.2 million acre-feet of irrigation water annually to more than 15,000 farms on over one million acres of the most productive farmland in the world. Friant Division deliveries also are vital to meeting the domestic water needs of many small communities in the San Joaquin Valley, as well as larger metropolitan areas, including the City of Fresno – California’s fifth-largest city.

The Friant Division was designed and is operated as a conjunctive use project to convey surface water for direct beneficial uses, such as irrigation and municipal supplies, and to recharge groundwater basins in the southern San Joaquin Valley. The ability to move significant water through the Friant Division’s canals in wetter years to store in groundwater recharge basins is critically important for the project to work as intended, and these operations sustain the primary source of drinking water for nearly all cities, towns, and rural communities on the Valley’s East side.

Canal Capacity Crisis

Over the past 30 years, increasingly stringent environmental regulations have redirected water away from the Valley in an attempt to aid struggling fish populations dependent on the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta (Delta). As water exports through the Delta declined, many San Joaquin Valley water users have relied heavily on groundwater supplies to maintain economic viability for their communities. The resulting groundwater overdraft damaged the Friant-Kern Canal, Delta-Mendota Canal, and California Aqueduct and compromised their ability to deliver water in the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California. The southern third of the Friant-Kern Canal has lost 60% of its capacity, which translates to 100,000 – 300,000 acre-feet of water per year that doesn’t flow to farms and communities. Additionally, by reducing the canal’s ability to deliver water to aquifers in the south Valley, the conveyance constriction will also worsen existing water supply and water quality problems in dozens of rural and disadvantaged communities who rely entirely on groundwater. While these losses are recoverable if the canal is repaired, time is of the essence, and current drought conditions don’t bode well for such challenges.

Impacts are Exacerbated During Drought Years

During extreme drought years, such as we're experiencing in 2021, subsidence and the effects of groundwater overdraft are likely to intensify water supply, water quality, and subsidence problems in the San Joaquin Valley. One reason for that stems from the historic water rights that the Federal government obtained in order to supply the Friant Division with water, combined with how we operate the dams in Northern California and the pumps that export water south through the Delta. Part of those agreements allow for the historical water rights holders on the San Joaquin River to call on their reserved rights to some of the river's flow when Delta exports don't meet their demand. Such has happened twice – in 2014 and 2015 – and may occur again this year if the State Water Resources Control Board orders the Bureau of Reclamation to operate Shasta Dam for the benefit of salmon in the Sacramento River. The consequences of this could be disastrous for the Valley.

Not only would this situation – a “call” on Friant water supplies – reduce the irrigation and municipal supplies for our members, all of whom are contractors in the Friant Division, but it would also increase the rate of land elevation subsidence, reduce water supplies, and worsen water quality conditions for the Valley's most vulnerable communities, and squander the investments Friant water users have made in restoring fisheries and habitat along the river.

Of particular concern is the impact of reduced surface water supplies to more than 55 disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged communities within the Friant Division service area, all of which are almost entirely reliant on groundwater wells for their supplies. More than 1 million Californians live in these communities, and many of them already have unsafe drinking water or experienced their wells going dry during 2014 and 2015; both problems will inevitably be exacerbated with fewer surface flows infiltrating the valley's groundwater aquifers.

CVP and State Water Project (SWP) operations for the remainder of 2021 should be governed by decisions that take into account the “whole field” of impacts possible if the projects are operated to rob Peter in order to pay Paul. In a painful year, we must share the pain equally.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide our perspective and thoughts on this critical topic.



Jason Phillips
Chief Executive Officer
Friant Water Authority