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Introduction

Ranking Member Westerman, Congressman LaMalfa, and members of the forum, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony for the House Natural Resources Republicans' Western Water Forum. My name is Jeff Sutton, and I am the General Manager of the Tehama-Colusa Canal Authority (TCCA).

The TCCA is a Joint Powers Authority, a public agency created under state law, that delivers water to seventeen water agencies throughout its four county (Tehama, Glenn, Colusa, Yolo) service area along the westside of the Sacramento Valley. Pursuant to a contract with the United States Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), TCCA operates and maintains a large dual canal water delivery system commonly referred to as the Sacramento Canals Unit of the Central Valley Project (CVP). These facilities provide irrigation water to approximately 150,000 acres of prime farmland, generating over $1 billion of regional economic benefit annually. Throughout our rural agricultural region, farming is the foundation of our economy, and any interruption in the ability to deliver water to these crops could have significant and long-lasting impacts.

Peak irrigation season in the TCCA service area typically occurs from early May though early September. Post-harvest irrigation typically continues throughout the months of September, October, and November, and sometimes longer until the rains set in. Also, post-harvest water plays an important role in our region, both to decompose rice straw and to provide critical habitat for a variety of wildlife, waterfowl, and shorebirds.

2021 Drought Conditions

In California, we have experience with droughts, which are an inevitable and recurring reality. In 2021, after back-to-back critically dry winters, California's farms and our rural communities are facing a real and imminent threat as we approach the hottest, driest months of the summer irrigation season. While we brace for the impacts of this challenging water situation, our farms and local communities are simultaneously dealing with the huge economic impacts and uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic that has hit California's rural communities hard.

That said, the current drought in California is the worst in recorded history. When Reclamation made initial water supply announcements at the beginning of the water year, TCCA contractors were given on 5% of their contract supply. Because drought conditions have gotten increasingly worse, with expected reservoir inflow failing to materialize, that 5% has since been reduced to a 0% allocation.

Northern California reservoirs, the foundation of both the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project, are at historically low levels and continue to fall. The Sierra Nevada snowpack, that serves as our mountain reservoirs, is likewise experiencing historic lows.

Increasing Drought Resilience

The severity of the current drought should serve as a wake-up call to all of us that we must continue to invest in innovative projects that increase California's drought resilience and provide an insurance policy against future drought conditions.

Sites Reservoir is a proposed multi-benefit, off-stream water storage facility, located north of Sacramento in rural Colusa and Glenn counties. Sites will serve to capture and store stormwater and flood flows in the Sacramento River, after all other water rights and regulatory requirements are met, for release primarily in drier years, such as 2021. This is not a big on-stream dam project of past generations.

I have the honor of serving as the Vice-Chairman of the Sites Project Authority, which is the Joint Powers Authority charged with building the reservoir. On behalf of the authority, I'd like thank Congressman LaMalfa for his tireless leadership, along with Congressman Garamendi, who have both been unwavering in their bipartisan support for making Sites Reservoir a reality.

The circumstance we find ourselves in today is a prime example of why we need to build Sites Reservoir now. Just a couple of years ago, in 2017 and 2019, we experienced a series of atmospheric river events that produced so much runoff that it overtopped our flood control system causing localized and regional flooding impacts throughout Northern California. If Sites Reservoir had been in place during that time, not only could we have avoided many of those flooding impacts, but we also could have captured and stored much of this excess runoff for use in a dry year like we are currently experiencing. In fact, if Sites Reservoir were constructed and operational over these past few years, we would have a million acre-feet of water stored for use today to help mitigate the impacts we are currently experiencing during this very difficult drought situation.

Sites is a 21st century water storage facility which will utilize existing state-of-the-art screened, fish friendly water diversions on the Sacramento River and existing water conveyance facilities (Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District, Tehama-Colusa Canal Authority, and the Colusa Basin Drain). It provides a new off-stream water storage facility that integrates perfectly into our current water management system. In fact, not only does this project have an extremely benign environmental impact, but it also dedicates a significant portion of its water supply and operational benefits to the enhancement of terrestrial and aquatic environments.

In California, we have relied on the Sierra Nevada snowpack and the spring/summer runoff to fill our reservoirs and recharge our groundwater aquifers – which in turn provides water for agricultural, environmental, and urban uses.

However, this snowpack has become less reliable because of climate change. At present, most of California's precipitation now comes from intense storm events that produce extreme amounts of stormwater that runs off before it can be captured for maximum benefit. Sites Reservoir is specifically designed to store the water generated by these storm events for use during times of drought when the water is so desperately needed.

Flexibility During Drought

During these times of extreme drought, water transfers with other CVP contractors who hold more senior water rights will be the lifeblood of the TCCA given our current 0% water allocation. Water transfers can serve as a pressure valve for California water during times of drought, where areas that do not have water in a given year (depending on hydrology) can partner with areas that have available water supplies. Having a flexible, market-style, mechanism to help balance supply and demand is important for California, particularly during dry years.

Reclamation and the state of California should be commended for their efforts promote and facilitate water transfers from willing sellers.