

Representative John Linder
Statement to the United States House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Water and Power
Committee on Resources
May 22, 2002
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 3561 and H.R. 4638

I wish to thank Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member Smith, and the other members of the Subcommittee on Water and Power for holding today's hearing on H.R. 3561, the "21st Century Water Policy Commission Establishment Act." I appreciate your giving me the opportunity to present my ideas and objectives for this bill, as well as giving me the opportunity to receive constructive feedback on this important legislation.

During the past few months, I have read story after story in our nation's newspapers about fresh water crises. Nearly half of the United States is currently experiencing drought conditions. Rivers and wells are drying up, aquifers are challenged by saltwater intrusion, and fish, wildlife, and crops are threatened. While these droughts are temporary problems, their impacts signal the state of things to come as population growth and development challenge our nation's fresh water resources in the 21st century. Our water resources will be utilized to their fullest capacity in the coming decades, and current water supplies will prove inadequate. It is important that we develop a strategy to meet future water demand now, before the full-blown water shortage hits.

Over the past two decades, I have given much thought to the impending shortage of fresh water in our nation. As we enter the 21st century, I am convinced that we must act now to prepare for the coming water crisis. I have introduced H.R. 3561 to take the first small step toward meeting 21st century water challenges. I realize that getting fully prepared for future water challenges will take years, possibly decades. We need to begin this process today by taking the small step of gathering together water experts and policy makers to initiate a dialogue on how to address this problem.

My 21st Century Water Policy Commission bill would create a commission to evaluate future water demand and supply, to consider innovative water research and technologies, and to recommend possible solutions to future water shortages. The last commission to consider water resources with such a comprehensive approach completed its work in 1973. That commission contributed much to our nation's water policies. The United States and its resources, however, have changed dramatically over the past three decades. It is certainly time to reassess America's water.

H.R. 3561 is designed to bring our nation's premier water experts and managers together to the discussion table to share their ideas for the future. According to Harvard Professor Peter Rogers, in the early 1990s there were 90,000 federal employees working to solve water problems, with three times as many individuals working on water at the state and local level. Add to that the 50,000 private-sector employees also working on water issues, and you can begin to develop a sense for how unwieldy this issue has become. Unfortunately, these hundreds of thousands of water experts rarely communicate among themselves or coordinate their efforts. As we work to plan and prepare for future demands placed on our fresh water resources, it will be critical that we share information, coordinate efforts, and reduce duplication and conflict among those agencies. I believe the first step toward meeting these goals is getting everyone together at the discussion table.

I understand that we could spend years arguing over the appropriate size and shape of the table, even before we begin the debate of who deserves a seat at that table. But remember that the clock is ticking. The longer it takes us to begin to make preparations for the future, the less prepared we will be when crisis comes...and it is coming.

In John Steinbeck's novel, *East of Eden*, the narrator observes, "And it never failed that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way." I have been told over and over again that the United States only reevaluates its water policies when a crisis hits. I know that my efforts to begin preparations for the future will be met with resistance by many who fear change. But resistance to planning for future water shortages is a recipe for disaster. One day, you may turn your tap and discover that no water emerges.

We must begin now to advance the science and knowledge that will be necessary to deal with 21st century water challenges. H.R. 3561 was drafted to serve as a basic model, which I hope to improve upon with your suggestions.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, I come before you today to ask for your input on how we can best shape this commission – this first step toward solving our nation's impending water problems. I hope that you will support my objective of ensuring an adequate and dependable supply of fresh water for all Americans throughout the 21st century, and I hope you will share your insights on the best approach to this challenge so we may avoid the pitfalls of past commissions.

We simply cannot afford to maintain the status quo with regard to our nation's fresh water resources. If we fail to prepare for impending water shortages, we may be faced with a crisis of astronomical proportions in the coming decades. Providing all Americans with fresh water is a matter of life and death for the future of the United States. The time for action is now.