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Testimony
Before the Subcommittee on Water and Power
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on

“The Role of New Surface and Groundwater Storage in
Providing Reliable Water and Power Supplies and Reducing Drought’s Impacts”

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, my name is James Trull, General Manager of the Sunnyside Division Board of Control and District Manager of the Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District. I also serve as President of the Yakima Basin Joint Board and on the Board of Directors of the National Water Resources Association.

I am accompanied today by Mr. John Sullivan, Associate General Manager of Water for the Salt River Project in Arizona.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the critical role of storage in meeting the needs of the arid west.

In my 35 years of experience in water resource issues at the local, state and federal level two things are very clear. 1) Developing water supply to the arid lands provides economic benefits for the west and far beyond, and 2) Storage is a necessary management tool to smooth out the peaks and valleys of climatic conditions.

The Yakima Valley has a history of irrigated agriculture extending well over 100 years. By the beginning of the last century, the natural flow in the Yakima River was already over appropriated. It was obvious that storage was necessary if irrigation development was to continue. In 1905 the Bureau of Reclamation purchased the Sunnyside Canal system and created the first Division of the Yakima Reclamation Project. In 1923 the 100,000 acre Sunnyside Division was complete and by the 1950's the Yakima Reclamation Project was complete with nearly 500,000 acres of irrigable lands. Along the way the Bureau of Reclamation constructed five storage reservoirs totaling 1 million acre feet of storage. The last of these reservoirs was completed in 1933 and the project entered a period of relative tranquility until 1977.

Yakima County is one of the leading agricultural counties in the nation with the production of apples, cherries, pears, grapes, hops, and mint. A stable water supply is extremely important to the economic viability of the area. In 1977, the most severe drought occurred in over 35 years and the first after the full development of the Federal Reclamation Project. Junior water right holders were faced with less than a 50% supply. Since 1977 water shortages have occurred eight times and now 2005 looks to be the most severe ever. That is a staggering frequency rate of nearly one out of every three years.

The irrigation demands on the system have not increased since the project became fully developed. In fact due to local, state and federal investments in conservation, irrigation demand has declined steadily over the past 50 years. In 1994 Congress passed the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project Act. The Sunnyside Division is a participant in that program which through implementation of an array of conservation elements will operate more efficiently, provide more reliable service and return approximately 20,000 acre-feet to the Yakima River for in-stream flows.

While irrigation demands have not increased, increasing demands for municipal water supply together with greater environmental sensitivity and the realization of the potential for enhancement of anadromous fish runs in the Yakima River have added additional demands on an overtaxed system. Adding these new albeit legitimate concerns coupled with a drought cycle of unknown extent and duration creates the need for additional storage.

Serving on the Board of the National Water Resources Association and learning more about issues in other river basins I

have come to realize that the Yakima Basin does not have a water supply problem, but instead lack sufficient infrastructure. The annual demand on the system is just over 2 million acre feet (MAF) while the average annual basin yield is nearly 3.5 MAF. However storage capacity is only 1 MAF. Snow pack is commonly referred to as the 6th reservoir. In a year like this we start the year with the largest reservoir virtually empty. To add perspective, most river basins across the west store water in wet years to use in dry years. In the Yakima Basin, the reservoir system is only capable of storing water from wet months to use in dry months.

In February 2003, with leadership provided by Congressman Doc Hastings, Congress authorized the Secretary of Interior acting through Reclamation to conduct a Storage Study. This study is an ongoing evaluation of options for additional water storage facilities to improve water supplies for the Yakima River Basin. It will investigate the potential for in-basin storage opportunities such as the enlargement of an existing gravity filled dam (Bumping Lake Enlargement), a new pump – storage reservoir (Wymer Dam and Reservoir), a pipeline connecting to existing reservoirs to better utilize the yield of one of the watersheds (Keechelus to Kachess Pipeline). The Bureau is also authorized to study the potential for a trans-basin diversion from the Columbia River (Black Rock Reservoir). The Bureau has initially focused its efforts on the Black Rock Reservoir to provide information up to a level comparable with previously studied alternatives.

Through the efforts of a local “grass roots” group, public support has been generated for storage generally, and Block Rock Reservoir specifically, at levels perhaps unparalleled since the original project was developed at the turn of the 20th century. It is imperative for the study to proceed as rapidly as possible and to preserve the public interest and support as well as resolve the longstanding supply problems that are plaguing the Yakima Basin with increasing frequency and financial devastation.

In the earliest time frame possible, the BOR needs to identify fatal flaws, project benefits, and cost allocations of projects under consideration. The focus needs to be placed on those storage options that have the most likely and viable chance of success for solving the Yakima basin’s water supply problems. Although we realize the BOR can not advocate a specific project, it should exert leadership in identifying an array of alternatives, at least one of which could solve the increasingly frequent water shortages.

In 1905, the BOR came into the Yakima River Basin and exerted the necessary leadership to plan, design , and build the necessary water storage facilities to provide a reliable water supply benefiting not just the local area but the entire region and beyond. Today, 100 years later, the work is not finished. The BOR is needed to identify some viable alternatives to provide the economic stability this area so desperately needs.

We commend the Bureau for its work on this study and Congress for its support and urge the study’s rapid conclusion so that a viable alternative can be selected and we can move forward to solve the serious water supply problems in the Yakima River Basin.

On behalf of the NWRA, the Yakima Basin Joint Board, and the Sunnyside Division I thank you for the opportunity to testify.