

Committee on Resources

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**Testimony of Greg Walcher
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Colorado Department of Natural Resources
Before the Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on Water and Power
United States House of Representatives
on
Meeting Colorado's Water Needs
Denver, Colorado
December 12, 2003**

I am Greg Walcher, Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources.

Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to join you today to share with you the State of Colorado's view on our water supplies and the efficient use of this most precious resource. I thank you and your colleagues for taking the time to visit our great State and to learn how we are addressing issues related to water management.

With Colorado firmly in the grasp of an on-going drought, your visit could not have been more timely. While late spring storms eased the dramatic situation, the summer and fall brought continued harsh conditions for water managers and policymakers. We still sit at the heels of the worst drought on record.

Because Colorado is uniquely situated at the apex of eight major water drainages, it has built its water conservation and supply programs around these features. Our state is highly reliant on spring runoff to fill our reservoirs, irrigate our fields and bring water to our thirsty metropolitan areas.

In order to meet the State's water needs, we must look to locally driven solutions to this statewide issue. Clearly, we cannot assume that West Slope water users will shoulder the entire burden created by growth in other parts of the state. However, we must be willing to look at novel answers to use and reuse of water currently in the system.

The State of Colorado, through the Colorado Water Conservation Board, has started the process of working with local communities to identify and develop their water needs. This program, called the Statewide Water Supply Initiative, is the first comprehensive analysis of locally based solutions to our statewide water issues. Unlike other plans that have been offered, SWSI is built on the premise that a coordinated effort, built upon local expertise, offers the best opportunity to find new and different answers to the age old question of water use.

The project started in June of this year and is scheduled for completion in November of 2004. During this time, my staff will have held public meetings in each river basin, contacted hundreds of local water authorities and reviewed thousands of documents in order to provide a forum aimed at developing a common understanding of existing water supplies, future water supply needs and demands throughout Colorado and possible means of meeting those needs.

Because Colorado is so diverse in its water needs, it is clear that the only way to address this statewide issue is to begin from the bottom up. As a sidebar, I would like to thank Rick Brown of the Colorado Water Conservation Board for his efforts guiding the SWSI process.

Being a "West-Sloper" myself, I am sensitive to the needs of Western Slope towns, farms and ranches. There is no question that the time has come for a more comprehensive approach like the one being offered by the Colorado Water Conservation Board.

While there is no question that Colorado must advance water storage and delivery across the state, it is important to note that the federal government holds a very important key to efficiently managing our State's water resources.

The Endangered Species Act passed with the best of intentions three decades ago. However, in the

intervening years, the Act has been used more and more as a tool to control and inhibit human activities as opposed to securing the future the species it was intended to protect.

Colorado has taken a bold step in advancing species conservation on the state level. We built and operate the first facility dedicated to the conservation of threatened and endangered aquatic animals. This facility, located in Alamosa, Colorado, is a testament to Colorado's desire to move beyond the political squabble's that have historically put a stranglehold on species conservation and to focus on recovering threatened and endangered species.

In order to take the next step in our forward looking program, the federal government, through the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, must be willing to publish static and responsible recovery goals. The Colorado River Program is an example of the State's ability to step in on behalf of wildlife, here there are four endangered fish, and make significant headway through the use of leadership and cooperation. However, we cannot efficiently utilize our water resources without a level of certainty on how threatened and endangered species will be treated. Reasonable recovery goals responsive to the resource will allow us to do that.

Mr. Chairman, all of this work will be for nothing if Colorado is not able to protect its share of Colorado River water. Over the past five years, I and my staff have worked with the Department of the Interior and other Colorado River states to develop a framework under which Colorado's share of the Colorado River would be better protected. With the signing of the QSA in October, the Colorado River basin states appear to be on track to live within the Colorado River Compact requirements. I am pleased that this peace has been secured and would like to thank Secretary Norton and her staff for their hard work.

Earlier this month, the Colorado Water Conservation Board finished a feasibility study aimed at determining whether Colorado can use its share of the Colorado River in a way that is economically practical. The feasibility study concluded that such a project is possible with the right mix of users and the financial will to see it through. This novel analysis is just the type of solution that allows us to put the necessary tools on the table.

Colorado's water issues are not unique, but are shared across the western United States. For the better part of four years, most of the region has seen below normal precipitation. While we cannot dwell on the impacts of the current drought, it is important to recognize that we can plan better for the next time mother nature throws us a curveball. For Colorado that means increased storage, in the form of expanding existing reservoirs and building new ones, increased efficient use of ground water sources and a sincere movement toward water conservation. Certainly no single program can address the management issues present in our state, but by protecting the water to which we are entitled, and by using that resource wisely, Colorado can protect our valued way of life and continue the State's economic prosperity.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I thank you and your colleagues for the opportunity to address you today and will answer questions the committee might have.