



Protecting water in an era of Climate Change

WASHINGTON, D. C. - U.S. Senators Tom Udall, D-N.M., and Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., were joined by U.S. Representatives Xochitl Torres Small, D-N.M., Deb Haaland, D-N.M., and Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., on Oct. 28 as they introduced the Western Water Security Act of 2019: legislation to improve water management in the West through investments in water infrastructure, a focus on conservation, efficiency, and environmental restoration, and tailored funding for local communities. The forward-looking legislation will arm communities with the federal funding and research necessary to grapple with the potential of a long-term drying trend in the West and changes in water availability exacerbated by climate change.

“Make no mistake about it: we are in the midst of a water crisis in the West. Communities in New Mexico and across the country depend on fragile water ecosystems that are struggling to adapt to the wild swings in weather caused by climate change,” Udall pointed out. “In New Mexico and in the West, we are trying to cash checks from an account that is overdrawn, by relying on diminishing snowpacks and over-allocated surface water supplies and drawing on precious and dwindling groundwater resources. It is past time that Congress address this problem, which is hitting our most vulnerable communities the hardest, to ensure that future generations can sustain life in the American West. In New Mexico, we know how vital water is to preserving our economy, our environment, and our way of life. I will continue to fight for legislation like the Western Water Security Act to ensure we are making smart investments in water infrastructure and meeting the needs of our changing climate.”

New Mexico delegation works to save water for future generations

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“In New Mexico, we know that water is life. Particularly in an era of prolonged droughts and climate disruption, we must use the best available science to protect and conserve our limited freshwater supplies. I’m proud to support this legislation to make smart investments in watershed restoration, scientific research, and infrastructure that will help our communities use water more efficiently,” Heinrich stated.

“Water is life, and few places have felt the impact of its scarcity like New Mexico. The future of our state and the rest of the West depends on communities and industries’ ability to adapt in the face of a dwindling water supply. Smart investments in water management will ensure that our way of life, economy, and environment are preserved for generations to come,” Torres Small added.

“In New Mexico, water is life. This precious resource fuels our traditional way of life and economy. We know the climate crisis is threatening the West - perpetuating a drought that puts these vital resources at risk. I’m proud to work with my colleagues to put forward a bold solution to improve water management by ensuring investments in water infrastructure, a focus on conservation, and targeted funding for rural communities,” Luján said.

“Water is essential to life, but in the desert we’re constantly struggling to ensure we have the water resources to sustain our communities. Our delegation is working to address the water shortages that result from a changing climate. Our bill will empower local communities including pueblos along the Rio Grande, conserve water resources, and prepare for a future of climate change,” Haaland declared.

The Western Water Security Act is supported by a number of organizations including the Audubon Society, the Nature Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, the National Wildlife Federation, the State of New Mexico, the Elephant Butte Irrigation District, and the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District.

“Trout Unlimited supports Senator Udall’s legislation because it brings a portfolio approach to addressing water security in the West, and advances the Bureau of Reclamation’s WaterSMART program as a leader in this effort,” Senior Counsel and Water Policy Advisor for Trout Unlimited Laura Ziemer explained.

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“The Western Water Security Act helps address a number of major issues facing water users in the Southwest where the warming climate is predicted to have major impacts to an already water stressed region,” Chair of the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District Board of Directors Karen Dunning confirmed. “The Rio Grande Valley is in the epicenter of water supply variability with vulnerable agricultural economies and ecosystems and this bill provides vital support to this region in a proactive approach. The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District supports the passage of this critical legislation.”

“The New Mexico Office of the State Engineer and Interstate Stream Commission strongly support[s] the Western Water Security Act,” New Mexico State Engineer John D’Antonio said. “The bill will provide technical support and funding to many New Mexico communities to address current and future water security issues. In particular, the portions of the bill on rural water desalinization, technical support for water conservation, and projects to improve river conditions and habitat for endangered species are aligned with the Governor’s vision for New Mexico’s water future.”

“The Western Water Security Act of 2019 will help to plant the opportunity and stimulate investments in water infrastructure as well as advance the focus on conservation and the needs of environmental enhancement. Long term solutions take time to develop and Sen. Udall has stepped up to initiate action now through tailored funds designed to improve groundwater and surface water assessments during a time of needed response to an emerging long-lasting drought in the West. The Elephant Butte Irrigation is in full support of this bill and the overwhelming impact it will have up and down the river in the Rio Grande Basin of New Mexico,” Manager and Treasurer of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District Gary Esslinger affirmed.

The Western Water Security Act of 2019 would:

Expand and Enhance Water Infrastructure

- Invest in WaterSMART - This bill will give an additional \$120 million to the Bureau of Reclamation’s WaterSMART program, which helps water users throughout the West tackle water security through common-sense solutions, such as investments in conservation and efficiency. The bill would also build on the success of this popular program and make eligible for grants non-governmental organizations - who have played an invaluable role throughout the West helping to promote water efficiency.

- The bill also expands the authority of States and Indian Tribes to declare a drought emergency and access vital drought emergency funds when confronted with any water crisis or conflict. This federal assistance could then go toward projects designed to secure reliable water supplies for vulnerable communities and restore the environment to benefit imperiled fish and wildlife.

Groundwater Management

- Through the re-authorization and expansion of the Transboundary Aquifer Assessment Program, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, in partnership with water institutes throughout the West and the U.S. Geological Survey, can collaborate with Mexican water management officials to study this shared resource.

Water Conservation and Environmental Restoration

- The legislation reauthorizes the Cooperative Watershed Management Program, an important program that brings together stakeholders from throughout the basin to find local solutions for their local water management needs. The bill also creates a pilot water leasing program that provides the Bureau of Reclamation and local water districts with increased flexibility to move water where it can be of the most use, including for environmental purposes—a potential model for other water districts throughout the west.