



A Nonprofit Housing and Community Development Organization

HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, OCEANS AND WILDLIFE

MAY 25, 2021

DROUGHT IN THE WESTERN U.S.

PREPARED TESTIMONY

TOM COLLISHAW, PRESIDENT/CEO OF SELF-HELP ENTERPRISES, VISALIA CA

Good afternoon, Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Tom Collishaw. I'm the President and CEO of Self-Help Enterprises, a non-profit organization which since 1965 has worked to build nearly 9,000 affordable homes for low-income families, and to bolster communities by building sustainable infrastructure.

We have observed first-hand the impacts of climate change and the infamous California "water wars" on the most vulnerable people in our state.

The San Joaquin Valley is blessed with great natural resources. Sediments from annual flooding cycles have created some of the most fertile soils in the world. Snowfall in the Sierras has historically provided a reliable natural reservoir, slowly melting each spring to feed the Valley's rivers and farms.

The Valley's precipitation falls almost entirely in the winter months between November and March. Much of the San Joaquin Valley is technically a desert, receiving less than ten inches of rainfall per year. Because of this, storing water for use during the hot summer growing season is essential. Water is stored primarily in snowpack, constructed reservoirs, and in underground aquifers.

Irrigation is the lifeblood of Central Valley farmers, so much so that 17% of the nation's irrigated land is in the Central Valley. That land produces a quarter of the nation's food, so when rain, snow, and reservoirs fail to deliver surface water for irrigation, it's a serious thing, and the groundwater becomes Plan B. When the rivers run dry and surface water allocations are paltry, farmers fire up their wells and begin pumping groundwater.

Of course, people live here too, lots of them. The San Joaquin Valley is home to about four million people, but those people are dispersed over about twenty-seven thousand square miles. Remote, rural towns dot the landscape, and tens of thousands live on homesteads where their water supply comes from a single private well. Throughout California, 85% of residents rely on groundwater for at least part of their water supply.

In the last drought, we saw desperation, and misery. Farmers and ranchers, desperate to keep their crops and livestock alive turned to groundwater wells. Intensive, high-powered pumping by big agricultural wells inevitably causes the water table to drop. One by one, nearby wells dry up. The wells

that serve the small towns and rural households are always smaller and shallower than these large commercial-scale wells.

Try to imagine the misery of a family whose water supply is just... gone. No water to sustain the family's health, no water to bathe, no water to flush a toilet. A home without a water supply becomes valueless, so a homeowner with a failed well cannot even borrow money against their property to drill a new well. When a well serving an entire community fails, we multiply the misery by the number of families relying on that well.

There are programs to help families who find themselves in this crisis. Self-Help Enterprises has worked to deploy state and federal resources to achieve interim and permanent solutions. During the last drought, we developed an emergency response program—an expensive system of temporary water tanks, small pumps, and water hauled by trucks. It keeps families in their homes with a semblance of normalcy until a permanent solution can be achieved. We have 324 of these tanks currently deployed across the Valley, with more being requested every single day.

To resolve water outages permanently, a number of strategies are used, and the solutions varied. Sometimes a new well can be drilled, and sometimes a connection to a nearby water system is an available option.

We are gratified to know that federal agencies under your purview want to lend a hand. There are a number of ways the Bureau of Reclamation can have a positive impact on the groundwater crisis in California.

Increased funding to WaterSmart and Small-Scale Water Efficiency grants, funding irrigation efficiencies and water recycling could leave more water in the ground and support the implementation of California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. The federal government could incentivize and fund groundwater storage opportunities as a complement to surface water storage. Keeping the aquifers full ensures the reliability of wells, prevents land subsidence, and keeps the storage banks full for a non-rainy day.

Groundwater storage potential is larger than any reservoir we could ever build. The combined storage capacity of the state's major reservoirs is about fifty million acre feet; groundwater storage is estimated to be at least 850 million acre feet.

USDA and EPA have other programs that support emergency response and infrastructure enhancement; it is also important to fund those programs.

It's already too late to avoid this drought. Emergency funding, interim measures, and rapid response will be required get us through. But we need better preparedness for future droughts, and reducing groundwater demands is one key strategy. Increasing the groundwater storage is another. As California works to achieve a sustainable balance in its groundwater resources, federal support for water efficiency, enhanced water storage, and water recycling will help us stretch every drop. Thank you for the opportunity to address you here today.