



House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries

Field Hearing on H.R. 215 "WATER for California Act" and H.R. 872 "FISH Act"

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Testimony of William Bourdeau, Director, Westlands Water District

Good afternoon, Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and members of the Subcommittee. It is a great privilege to appear before you.

My name is William Bourdeau, and I bring over 26 years of expertise in business and agriculture to the Subcommittee. I serve on the board of directors for the Westlands Water District, American Pistachio Growers, Family Farm Alliance, and the Agriculture Foundation of California State University, Fresno. Additionally, I hold several key leadership positions, including Vice Chair of the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, Chair of the California Water Alliance, and Chair of the Valley Future Foundation. I am dedicated to public service and the communities where I live and work.

Today, I am testifying as a director of the Westlands Water District (“Westlands”).

The District and its farmers appreciate the value of water and the importance of water conservation. Those instrumental in the formation of the Westlands are responsible for its existing water conveyance system, which is comprised entirely of buried pipeline (approximately 1,100 miles of pipe). Over time, Westlands and its farmers have continued to invest in this sophisticated system. All surface water diversions are metered, and Westlands is just completing its efforts to install meters on all groundwater wells. In many of the fields within Westlands, farmers employ surface and subsurface drip irrigation or micro-sprinklers. The result of these investments is that farmers achieve some of the highest water use efficiencies in the world.

Farmers in Westlands are also incredibly productive. They are able to grow approximately 60 different high-quality, nutritious crops under some of the highest environmental standards in the world – producing crops with a value of \$2 billion and generating more than \$4.7 billion in farm-related economic activity each year, supporting nearly 35,000 jobs, and benefitting local communities in the San Joaquin Valley and across the state. The primary source of the water necessary to grow food and provide the economic benefits is the federal Central Valley Project.

Today, I share with you my experiences as a resident, farmer, and public servant in an area served by the Central Valley Project and my views of the two bills that you are considering, H.R. 215, the

WATER for California Act, and H.R. 872, the FISH Act. Both of these pieces of legislation reflect commonsense approaches to the real issues facing California. Both are intended to provide regulatory efficacy and certainty, as well as enhance the operational flexibility of the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project to allow them to better achieve their congressionally established purposes.

The Central Valley Project and State Water Project are truly feats of human ingenuity and engineering. They were designed to deliver reliable water supplies to support the people and industries that now call California home. And they have provided the foundation for communities in California's Central Valley. But years of shortages, particularly over the last few years when Westlands and other agencies received zero allocations, followed by the torrential rain and snow this year, demonstrate that our water management system needs to adapt and be improved. We need more infrastructure, particularly storage so that we can capture more water when it is plentiful so that we have water available to get us through the dry periods. We also need smarter – science based – regulatory approaches that will allow for biological-based management that achieves environmental goals, adaptively manages resources to optimize overall benefits, and encourages cooperation rather than conflict.

The WATER for California Act would benefit the cities, farms, and ecosystems throughout California that depend on the Central Valley Project and State Water Project.

The bill includes important provisions to advance water storage in California by extending section 4007 of the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation (WIIN) Act. Under this provision, the Bureau of Reclamation can provide up to 50% federal funding for federal-led storage projects and 25% federal funding for state led projects. By extending the storage project authorizations until 2028, the bill will facilitate both the surface and groundwater storage necessary to improve the reliability of water in the Central Valley.

The bill would also preserve operational flexibility for the Central Valley Project and State Water Project. To improve the efficacy of actions taken to protect or improve the environment and to support the ability to beneficially use the water resources of the State to the fullest extent of which they are capable, it is vitally important that regulation of the Central Valley Project and State Water Project be science based. Regulation should reflect the need to comprehensively address all factors that affect the abundance of at-risk fish species and control only when serving biological needs.

These objectives of the WATER for California Act are of critical importance to Westlands, not only because of the direct benefit this bill would provide to Westlands' farmers but because of the benefit it would provide to community water systems – to the water supplies for me and the people with whom I work and live. The impacts of unreliable water supplies were evident in the prior two years. Just one example concerns the community of Coalinga in Fresno County. In 2022, it nearly ran out of water. Those who live in Coalinga rely solely on Central Valley Project water, delivered by the Bureau of Reclamation through the Central Valley Project. Reclamation, in the face of a severe drought, allocated Coalinga enough water for minimum health and safety needs. Coalinga

did everything it could do use its available water supply efficiently, restricting outdoor water use and providing incentives for conservation. Even so, it was on the brink of not being able to provide adequate water for facilities located there, including a state prison and state mental hospital. Coalinga was able to purchase water from a nearby district, which was enough to get through the year. But the experience has had a chilling effect on the community, causing water insecurities and concern about its future. Other communities in the Central Valley have at times run out of water or been unable to provide water that is safe to use for drinking. Quite simply, lack of reliable water threatens the economy and public health. The federal government plays an important role in operating key water infrastructure in California, and it should be a partner in ensuring that the CVP and SWP are able to satisfy their multiple purposes, including delivery of an adequate and reliable water supply to people and farms.

The FISH Act, like the Water for California Act, is aimed at rationalizing regulations, only with a focus on threatened and endangered fish. The bill would consolidate Endangered Species Act responsibilities over fish into a single federal agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Under current law, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has responsibility for anadromous and catadromous fish (fish that move between fresh and ocean waters during their lifetimes). For fish species that remain in freshwater their entire lives, FWS has ESA responsibility. There have been times when requirements imposed by FWS have conflicted with requirements imposed by NMFS. Having two different federal agencies consulting over operations of federal water projects also adds to the complexity of ESA compliance. Consolidating responsibility in a single agency will improve the ability to protect threatened and endangered species by ensuring coordinated approaches, particularly when dealing with a finite natural resource such as water. For these reasons, the consolidation makes sense.

In conclusion, I fully acknowledge the immense challenges involved in managing California's water resources. The state continues to grapple with rapid hydrological changes, as atmospheric rivers deliver much-needed rainfall and snowpack following three of the driest years in California's recorded history reaches record levels. Managing flood risk and efficiently capturing and transporting this water to where it is needed remain daunting tasks. Enhancements to water infrastructure are essential for providing the operational flexibility required to navigate these extreme climate variations effectively.

However, infrastructure improvements alone are insufficient to achieve water supply reliability. In the Central Valley, we aspire to foster thriving ecosystems and fish populations alongside flourishing businesses and farms. To realize this vision in California, we must maintain operational flexibility and implement improvements in the regulatory landscape. Regulations ought to be grounded in scientific evidence, with regulatory actions taken only when they address specific biological needs.



We do not seek perpetual conflict over regulations or discrepancies between state and federal laws. Instead, we yearn for certainty and the capacity to invest in a brighter future. I am confident that the two bills under consideration today will contribute significantly to accomplishing these vital objectives.

I again thank the Subcommittee for allowing me to testify at today's field hearing.