April 15, 2016

Senator Maria Cantwell

Ranking Member, U.S Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources

304 Dirksen Senate Building

Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Cantwell:

The Oregon Water Resources Congress (OWRC) is very interested in the “National Policy Framework to Address Drought and Water Security in the United States” white paper issued on March 22, 2016 as part of World Water Day. Drought and water security are both important issues for our members and we would like to share some ideas about how this concept could help Oregon and other states impacted by drought conditions.

Established in 1912, OWRC is a nonprofit association representing irrigation districts, water control districts, improvement districts, drainage districts and other government entities delivering agricultural water supplies. The water stewards we represent operate complex water management systems, including water supply reservoirs, canals, pipelines, and hydropower production, and deliver water to roughly 1/3 of all irrigated land in Oregon. The land served by our members produce a bounty of agricultural products that are vital to the economy and food supply of Oregon, the United States, and the world.

Oregon, like many other Western states, was deeply impacted by the drought of 2015, with varying levels of extreme to severe drought across the state, and formal drought declarations in twenty-five of Oregon’s thirty-six counties. While 2016 is shaping up to be a much better year in terms of snowpack and related available water supplies, recovery from drought takes more than one year and there is a great need for assistance to better plan for and mitigate drought impacts. Furthermore, the most severe impacts of the 2015 drought were linked to high temperatures, which exacerbated the lack of water and led to decreased yields and in some instances failed crops. Unfortunately, Oregon is still facing higher than normal temperatures, which will cause existing snowpack to melt quicker, soil moisture to decrease, and other related impacts which can be detrimental to crops along with to the environment we all share.

The State of Oregon is currently working on several interrelated efforts to tackle drought which includes funding programs for water projects as well as developing other tools to respond to drought in the short and long-term. One of the key areas is providing financial assistance for planning, feasibility, and implementation of water resources projects that help meet our current and future instream and out-of-stream water needs. Oregon has limited funding for these grant and loan programs and having additional federal funding to match with these efforts would greatly help leverage scarce resources while achieving broad benefits. The projects funded by these programs include water conservation, efficiency, reuse, and storage projects that help meet current and future water needs. The grant programs all have a cost-share component and while Oregon has a strong record of leveraging local investment, additional federal funding is essential to moving these vital projects forward.

The other important effort is evaluating and refining existing tools as well as developing new mechanisms to help communities plan, respond, and mitigate to drought. The Oregon Water Resources Department is in the process of updating its Integrated Water Resources Strategy to include recommendations for addressing drought and climate change impacts. This effort will be completed by early 2017 and will likely include a variety recommended actions for long-term drought planning and mitigation. The other effort that will commence later this spring is a soon to be formed Drought Taskforce, led by the Governor’s office, that will be developing a suite of short-term and emergency measures to tackle drought.

The Taskforce activities will include (but are not limited to) the following:

* Evaluate the sufficiency of existing drought response tools to address short-term drought response needs and recommending additional tools to address short-term drought response needs;
* Identify options to minimize the impact of drought on agricultural, municipal, fish and wildlife, and other interests;
* Identify tools to assist small water providers in developing water management, conservation or efficiency plans and in anticipating drought risks and responses.
* Identify the data and resources necessary for anticipating drought and drought impacts on the economy, communities and the environment;
* Recommend improvements in information sharing necessary for enabling the public, water users and recreational in-stream users to understand drought conditions and to assist in efforts to mitigate or adapt to drought.

Once the Taskforce has completed its work later this year, there will be a set of recommended actions that will likely necessitate both legislation and budget authorizations to implement. Many of these types of activities are applicable to other states and would match well with the draft policy framework to address drought at the national level.

The five policy principles that are outlined in the white paper complement several ongoing efforts in Oregon. Here are some examples of how those principles are being put into action:

**Supporting collaborative watershed-scale solutions that are locally driven** – In many ways, Oregon is a model for collaborative, locally driven solutions at the watershed level. Watershed planning in Oregon formally began in 1995 with the development of the Oregon Plan for Salmon Recovery and Watershed Enhancement, a statewide strategy developed in response to the federal listing of several fish species. This strategy led to the creation of the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB), a state agency and policy oversight board that funds and promotes voluntary and collaborative efforts that “help create and maintain healthy watersheds and natural habitats that support thriving communities and strong economies” in 1999. Planning activities are conducted through local watershed councils, volunteer-driven organizations that work with local, state and federal agencies, economic and environmental interests, agricultural, industrial and municipal water users, local landowners, tribes, and other members of the community. There are over 60 individual watershed councils in Oregon that are already deeply engaged in watershed planning and restoration activities. Assistance is needed to better coordinate these efforts with various federal programs to increase efficacy and better leverage scarce financial resources.

**Financing solutions through partnerships and streamlined federal funding; Advancing sustainable water supply solutions for people and the environment** – Tackling the challenge of reoccurring droughts and achieving water security necessitates implementing a broad array of solutions that provide diverse benefits and leverage funding from multiple sources. In 2013, Oregon’s Legislature authorized one of the aforementioned funding programs to provide grant and loans for implementation of water projects through SB 839. Due to the complicated nature of the bill the initial round of funding will be awarded in May 2016 but the basic premise is that all projects must provide economic, environmental, and social benefits in order to be eligible for funding. The intent is to encourage various water interests to work together on implementing water supply solutions that benefits everyone rather than a single interest. It also helps leverage limited resources and ensure greater community buy-in into the project. It will be crucial that this funding matches well with other funding programs, such as the Bureau of Reclamation’s WaterSMART program or EPA’s Clean Water Revolving Loan Fund. Given the complex nature and high cost of water infrastructure projects, particularly storage, it is important to ensure that the funding programs do not add overly cumbersome requirements which can cause beneficial projects to be shelved.

Oregon is also on the forefront of innovative and integrated approaches to balance the needs of people and the environment we share. There are several projects underway in different areas of the state that include that irrigation districts, cities, environmental interests, and tribal representatives working together to improve water quantity and water quality for the people while resorting river flows and habitat for the numerous endangered, threatened, and sensitive species in Oregon. There are also various projects using highly treated municipal effluent water for irrigation as well as a separate project that is exploring making beer from a similar source. Another innovative type of project involves different methods to recharge declining groundwater levels through aquifer recharge and storing water underground through aquifer storage and recharge (ASR). Some of these efforts are still preliminary but show great promise as a solution that benefits communities, the economy, and the environment.

In conclusion, we greatly appreciate your efforts to continue the conversation about drought at the national level and see great value in how this effort could match with the needs and solution driven activities in Oregon. Please contact us for any additional information.

Sincerely,

April Snell

Executive Director