



**Opening Statement**  
**Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)**  
**Committee on Energy and Natural Resources**  
**Hearing on Drought Conditions in Western States**  
**June 2, 2015**

“Thank you, Chairman Murkowski, for scheduling this important hearing. As you mentioned, in my state, the governor has declared a drought emergency as has been done in 11 other states. And I hope that we can use this hearing to better understand the magnitude of this drought and its impacts across many of our western states.

“I want to emphasize, too, that I hope we can have a robust discussion today about solutions—about what is working and what is not—and what actions the federal government needs to take to address drought over the long-term. If drought conditions are likely to become the ‘new normal,’ what do we need to do to usher in a new era of solutions?

“This year, many states experienced their warmest winter on record. In my state, mountain snowpack, which keeps our rivers flowing in spring and summer, is now at 9 percent of its normal level. And 11 snow sites monitored by the Department of Agriculture were snow-free this year for the first time ever. For example, Hurricane Ridge, which is one of the most visited sites in our state, in Olympic National Park is normally covered in feet of snow this time of year and it is completely snow-free. It’s a startling sight to many Washingtonians.

“As a result of such low snowpack, 78 percent of the state’s streams are running below normal and run-off is projected to be the lowest it’s been in 64 years.

“On May 15, the governor declared a statewide drought emergency and has been working with communities to mitigate the impacts—particularly in rural communities, which have been hard hit.

“For example, in the Yakima River Basin, which is the state’s most productive agricultural region, irrigation districts are rationing water and farmers are facing significant cuts.

“The Washington Department of Agriculture predicts that crop losses could total \$1.2 billion this year. So I want to make sure that our federal agencies are working hand-in-hand with the states, to provide relief and assistance and try to address this issue moving forward.

“Meanwhile, our communities are bracing for a potentially severe fire season, which also will provide many challenges.

“It’s very important to me that we respond to the long-term changes that are before us, that we change the ways that we do business in managing water in the midst of a major crisis and that we think about the paradigm shift that is in front of us as we face these warmer seasons.

“We need to develop innovative, 21st century strategies for water management that not only respond to the drought conditions of today, but prepare us for an uncertain future. This requires new ways of thinking and collaboration, which means exploring all options—not just incremental changes at this point in time.

“I think the Yakima Basin Enhancement Plan in my state is an excellent example of long-term water management planning in the basin, which hasn’t been done in the past and which interest groups from farmers to fishermen to tribes to environmentalists are working together to try to implement the best plan over the long-term.

“I think there are four areas that we should consider moving forward:

“First, we need more collaborative water-sharing agreements—just like with the Yakima Basin. These empower communities to take action at a local level and be a part of crafting solutions.

“Secondly, we need to be more flexible in drought operations. This includes the way we build, manage and finance storage and other infrastructure and how we support those efforts at the local level. I know a lot of people don’t even want to talk about storage because they start thinking about how long it takes to get it permitted and authorized. I’m not talking about rolling back any environmental laws, but I think we have to think creatively about how we build storage now, even if that’s small-scale storage like what’s being done with the Yakima Basin project.

“Third, we need to do a better job of leveraging science and technology. I’m amazed at what Israel has done as a country to have such low water resources and yet continue to be such an agricultural producer. We need to make sure that we are deploying new technologies that help improve efficiencies at all scales, from hydroelectric dams to agriculture to our homes.

“And finally, we need to do a better job planning for the future, instead of simply reacting to the next emergency. I hope, Madam Chair, that in the future we can get some of our climate scientists from Oak Ridge National Laboratory here; they have incredible science on what will be impacting us as a nation. They have the modeling and I think we should be looking at what these ‘new normal’ conditions will mean to us because we will

see what the economic impacts will be from an agricultural perspective and I think they are going to be great. So I think we need to do a better job planning for the future.

“We need to do all we can now at the federal level to be flexible in our response and to get the right kinds of investments that help ensure both that our states can deal with this and that our communities will be better protected in the future.

“So once again, I would like to thank the chairman for her leadership and for having this hearing. I look forward to hearing from all of the witnesses, including Tom Loranger, who is the Water Resources Manager for Washington State’s Department of Ecology, on this important topic.”

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