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U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Barbara Boxer EPW Hearing on “New Approaches and Innovative Technologies to Improve Water Supply”

April 20, 2016

(Remarks as prepared for delivery)

Today we are here to discuss innovative technologies to improve water supply. This is an issue that is very dear to me and very significant for my home state of California.

I am pleased that Denis Bilodeau from Orange County Water District is testifying today. Orange County Water District has been engaged in the development and implementation of innovative water supply technologies for many years.

In California, we continue to face some of the nation’s most critical water resources challenges. We have been experiencing one of the most severe droughts on record, which has forced the Governor to declare a drought State of Emergency and implement water restrictions. While this past winter’s El Nino brought rain and snow to northern areas of California, many areas in southern California remain parched. And we know that a changing climate means more droughts could be in our future.

We continue to face many challenges associated with this ongoing drought, including: over-tapped aquifers, mandatory water restrictions, threats to our Bay-Delta ecosystem and our fisheries, and not enough water to support our state’s agriculture industry.

No matter how many canals we have, if there is drought – there is no water to ship. Too often in recent years, we have been locked in a culture of conflict that pits one stakeholder against another, with policies that only lead to the courtroom door.

I have always challenged that approach and believe all stakeholders must figure this out together.

In 2014, I accompanied President Obama on his visit to the Central Valley. He said: “There’s a tendency, historically, to think of water as a zero-sum game, that either the agricultural interests are getting it, or the urban areas are getting it...We’re going to have to figure out how to play a different game. And if the politics are structured in just such a way where everybody is fighting each other and trying to get as much as they can, my suspicion is we’re not going to make much progress.”

He is absolutely right.

I have always been committed to the idea that rather than fighting over existing water supplies, we need to think about ways to expand the pool by using our existing water more intelligently and developing new sources of water.

This begins with conserving the water we have to ensure that none is being wasted. Other technologies, such as desalination and water recycling, can also play an important role in a balanced water supply strategy.

We are fortunate to have two excellent witnesses here today who can improve our understanding of these issues and offer thoughts on how the Federal government can help. The Orange County Water District will explain how it has converted wastewater into 100 million gallons per day of clean, safe drinking water—enough for 850,000 people. And Mr. Price will talk about his experiences with desalination in the Middle East and particularly in Israel where so much truly innovative water supply activity is occurring.

I am also pleased that the Corps of Engineers is here today because they have such an important responsibility for managing water around the country. The Corps operates 30 dams and reservoirs in California alone, and these reservoirs often serve critical water supply needs. The Corps must employ the latest technologies to ensure these reservoirs are operated efficiently and can meet the growing water supply challenges we face.

I believe we should be looking for opportunities to invest in new technologies that provide additional sources of water and support innovative efforts in cities and states across the country. We must also learn from international partners, such as Israel, that have been confronting water supply challenges for many years.

I thank Sen. Inhofe for holding this important hearing, and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.

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