



Protecting Water for Western Irrigated Agriculture

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October 23, 2017

The Honorable John Barrasso
Chairman, Environment and Public Works Committee
United States Senate
410 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Barrasso:

On behalf of the Family Farm Alliance (Alliance), I am writing in support of the draft “Wildfire Prevention and Mitigation Act of 2017” (draft bill). The draft bill is intended to discourage litigation against the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management relating to land management projects, require the Secretary of the Interior to develop a categorical exclusion under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for covered vegetative management activities carried out to establish or improve habitat for greater sage-grouse and mule deer, address the forest health crisis on National Forest System land, and expedite and prioritize forest management activities to achieve ecosystem restoration objectives, among other purposes.

The Alliance is a grassroots organization of family farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts, and allied industries in 16 Western states. The Alliance is focused on one mission: To ensure the availability of reliable, affordable irrigation water supplies to Western farmers and ranchers. We are also committed to the fundamental proposition that Western irrigated agriculture must be preserved and protected for a host of economic, sociological, environmental, and national security reasons – many of which are often overlooked in the context of other national policy decisions.

In the world of Western water, a massive wildfire in the headwaters of a watershed can devastate the water supply – both quantity and quality – so important to the many beneficial uses in that river basin, including the irrigation of farms and ranches that produce some of our Nation’s high-quality food and fiber. The Alliance believes that the draft bill would help actually implement some important forest management projects on federal lands to ward off these disastrous wildfires and protect some of our most vulnerable Western water supplies in the process.

The draft bill does not waive or ignore existing federal environmental laws; it would simply make them work better. The draft bill would streamline the application of environmental laws by allowing landscape-level land management plans to guide individual actions on the ground without duplicative administrative process under federal environmental laws, and would direct the creation and use of categorical exclusions already allowed under NEPA in preventing wildfires and restoring forest habitat and ecosystems more effectively and on a timely basis. By eliminating duplicative or unnecessary processes, using streamlining tools already allowable under the law, and promoting actions instead of litigation, we believe these provisions could help these agencies use their limited resources to actually implement land management actions designed to prevent wildfires and improve habitat for priority, endangered and/or threatened species, instead of spending those resources on more bureaucratic process and litigation.

The Family Farm Alliance believes enactment of the draft “Wildfire Prevention and Mitigation Act of 2017” would improve our Western landscapes, protect our valuable water supplies from the devastating effects of wildfires, and allow agencies to improve habitat and restore ecosystems for the benefit of federally important species to allow continued agricultural use of our public lands.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at dankeppen@charter.net if you have further questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dan Keppen', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dan Keppen
Executive Director