

Written Statement of Carlyle Currier  
President, Colorado Farm Bureau

The United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry,  
Subcommittee on Conservation, Climate, Forestry, and Natural Resources  
“Hearing on the High Plains: Combating Drought with Innovation”  
June 26, 2024

Chairman Bennet, Ranking Member Marshall and members of the ag committee,

My name is Carlyle Currier and I serve as President of the Colorado Farm Bureau—our state’s largest general farming organization representing all four corners of the state and all commodities. In terms of people, that’s about 13,000 rural Coloradans. I’m also on the Board of the American Farm Bureau Federation. I want to thank you all for the invitation to participate in today’s proceedings as we discuss the compounding challenges and opportunities ushered by a drier, more arid future.

I’m the fourth generation on my family ranch, located on the western slope of Colorado in a rural farming community in and around Molina, CO. My son, Joel, will be the fifth generation to raise beef cattle, grow hay and small grains from our home in Mesa County.

In my volunteer capacities, I've been fortunate to work with many groups intent on finding adaptations to hotter, drier times. The need for innovation becomes increasingly urgent with each drought cycle. Here in Colorado, our farmers and ranchers have adapted because dwindling water supplies *demanded it*. Where I'm from, our high-elevation pastures are often flood-irrigated. Our producers have improved efficiencies in flood irrigation over the years, and in doing so we provide a couple of important, *low cost trade-offs* for the irrigation water we use. For example:

1. We slow water down and provide water for downstream ecological benefits, like water for wildlife, and shallow mountain aquifer recharge. We also benefit downstream users throughout each of the seasons. This trade-off provides consistency whether we're talking about our role in delivery through Colorado River compact compliance or sustainability of our ecosystems.
2. We produce the most nutrient-dense, consumable, and affordable protein in the world. Our ability to use water to grow forage that we feed to livestock results in dividends that shore up food security issues domestically. This assurance trade-off should not be dismissed.

Additionally, farmers and ranchers in the West play a critical role on federal lands by improving range conditions, preventing wildfires, and maintaining healthy watersheds through grazing. Ranchers with federal grazing permits utilize land that is often ill suited for other kinds of production because of a lack of water in these remote landscapes. Because we're here to talk about water, I'd like to offer that, specifically, grazing on federal lands increases water yields, improves soil structure and assists with water storage and filtration. A strong partnership between federal agencies and local grazing permittees is key to maintaining these ecosystem services. I've been fortunate enough to have good working relationships with personnel at the Grand Mesa National Forest, where I take my cattle in the summertime. Again, they recognize the important trade-offs and contributions of multiple use on federal lands as opposed to an exclusionary preservation designation.

There are many other ways agriculture is part of the solution for the future we are facing, but our continued contributions depend on the continued respect of our state's administration of water rights and the private property protection that the prior appropriation system provides. Often, this system creates tension between growing urban centers that need water resources and an agriculture industry that may be hurting during difficult times. "Buy and dry" programs, as a stop-gap for

conserving water during periods of peak urban and municipal expansion, have consequences. “Buy and dry” imperatives do not bode well for a state’s economy that depends on agriculture’s \$9.2 billion dollars of sales contributions.<sup>1</sup> We at Colorado Farm Bureau think “buy and dry” programs are to be cautioned against because of the consequences to our rural communities and economies, should the support of agriculture be withdrawn or abandoned. USDA is certainly recognizing the importance of rural investment when it comes to helping farmers in rural areas experiencing distress from drought, etc. But surely, we can do more.

We need solutions that fuel long-term rural economic development and provide *multiple benefits*, like Senator Bennet’s “Healthy Watersheds and Healthy Communities Act”. I recently heard our Colorado Congresswoman Caraveo say, when speaking about our nation’s transition to renewable energy sources, that it must make sense for farmers’ and ranchers’ economic bottom line to be successful. I believe that’s equally as true when we talk about management of our water resources. There must be a balance between resource stewardship and economic viability. If farmers and ranchers are expected to take on the risk of modifying with new precision or conservation technologies, there must be incentives. The “Healthy Watershed and Healthy Communities Act” provides the right kind of

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<sup>1</sup> USDA “Investing in Colorado” Report, June 2024

common sense incentives by leveraging federal investment against private and public partnerships. It also streamlines our planning processes and empowers our proven, local efforts already underway at our state and county levels.

As a founding member of the Colorado Ag Water Alliance (CAWA) and past Chairman, I know intimately that our needs for water are diverse, and we must avoid a “one size fits all” approach to our water woes across the arid west. By simply reducing cumbersome paperwork requirements and streamlining ideas, CAWA secured funding from the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) and supported a diverse group of water projects all with the targeted objective of drought resiliency. They gathered the data from respective projects and are now leading the way with solutions that we know will help get us through this hotter and drier future. They are varied in method, but projects of all shapes, sizes, and duration are part of the equation.

We must also strive for more permanent funding for current ad-hoc and disaster assistance programs. In 2023 major disasters and severe weather accounted for over \$16.5 billion in total crop losses—Colorado, for our part, contributed to \$227 million of that just from drought, wildfire, and heat alone.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> American Farm Bureau Calculations, USDA Risk Management Agency as of 2/27/2024

Programs like ELAP (Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honey Bees, and Farm Raised Fish) and improvements to the emergency grazing protocols for CRP have helped and could continue to help farmers and ranchers bridge gaps in cash flows at times when they so desperately need them. We also hope you'll consider expansions and improvements to LRP (Livestock Risk Protection) and PRF Insurance (Pasture Rangeland and Forage) as tools to assist farmers and ranchers with drought.

In closing, I suggest our federal partners be mindful of the following points as they work to address drought through meaningful policy:

1. Remember the trade-offs provided by ag uses of water, and how cost-effective they are.
2. Elevate multiple-use doctrine in discussions about resource conservation.
3. Continue to respect the states' administration of water rights. Do no harm, and think critically about "buy and dry" programs.
4. Encourage continued investment by USDA and RMA in the areas of rural economic development, disaster relief (and find ways to make it more permanent), and expand LRP and PRF programs.

5. Leverage public-private investment. Support Senator Bennet's "Healthy Watersheds and Healthy Communities Act".
6. And finally, trust and support local efforts by proven groups with experience and track records.

Thank you for your time today and the opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

I hope you will consider myself and the Colorado Farm Bureau to be a resource when it comes to ideas that help protect and support our nation's resources and rural communities.