



MEMORANDUM

TO: SAN LUIS & DELTA-MENDOTA WATER AUTHORITY DIRECTORS
FROM: SAMANTHA BARNCastle, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SUBJECT: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT
DATE: MAY 11, 2026

This executive director's report is intended to keep you apprised as to what is happening behind the scenes on policy and other issues the Alliance is engaged in or is otherwise tracking. This report is intended for your use, but I understand that you may wish to share this information with your local board members and close associates. I would ask that you be circumspect when you distribute this, however. Here is your update on activities during the last month:

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

First, access The Ferguson Group's Special Report and Review of Appropriations for FY 2026 here: [TFG Special Report - FY 2026 Appropriations Review Updated - Adobe cloud storage](#)

House appropriators are moving quickly on FY 2027 spending, with Chairman Tom Cole (R-OK) releasing an ambitious schedule to advance all 12 spending bills out of committee by the end of June. The process kicked off with the Military Construction-VA and Financial Services subcommittees, setting a brisk two-month pace for the panel. For natural resources and infrastructure funding, the most relevant action comes in the back half of the schedule. The Energy and Water Development bill (funding the Bureau of Reclamation and Corps of Engineers) heads to subcommittee on May 15, with full committee markup following May 20. The Interior and Environment bill (funding Interior agencies and the EPA) gets its subcommittee markup just one day later on May 21, moving to full committee on June 3.

Before those markups would begin in earnest, Interior Secretary Doug Burgum testified before the full Appropriations Committee. He defended the Trump Administration's proposed nearly 13% cut to Interior's budget, a reduction that appropriators are widely expected to reject. He faced questions on staffing reductions, a proposal to consolidate wildland firefighting operations, a potential

merger of the bureaus overseeing offshore drilling and deep-sea mining, and the department's broader push to expand fossil energy production. See below for more on his testimony.

TRUMP 47 ADMINISTRATION

1. Reclamation Budget proposal shows stark cuts, defended by Sec. Burgum

Interior Secretary Doug Burgum spent much of April defending the Trump Administration's proposed FY2027 Interior Department budget before Congress, including significant cuts to public lands, water, and conservation programs. The proposal would reduce Interior's overall discretionary budget by roughly 13%, including a Bureau of Reclamation budget of approximately \$1.27 billion while eliminating key western water programs such as WaterSMART and Title XVI water recycling grants. Additional proposed reductions affecting western water and natural resource interests include cuts to USGS water and ecosystem science programs, endangered species conservation funding, wetlands programs, and core Bureau of Land Management accounts. Burgum's primary defense was that wasteful spending has been cut, and efficiencies improved, so Congress should not assume the proposed cuts are harmful. Burgum also faced bipartisan scrutiny over proposed National Park Service staffing reductions and maintenance cuts, although he clarified that a proposed \$10 billion "Presidential Capital Stewardship Program" for Washington, D.C. infrastructure repairs would not fund President Trump's proposed monumental arch project.

During multiple hearings, Burgum strongly endorsed congressional efforts to advance permitting reform, arguing that laws such as NEPA and the Endangered Species Act have been "weaponized" and are slowing needed infrastructure and energy development. He described permitting reform as essential to unlocking more than \$1 trillion in delayed investment and pledged Interior's support for bipartisan negotiations underway in the Senate. Democrats criticized the Administration's simultaneous efforts to halt or delay renewable energy projects, particularly offshore wind, while Republicans raised concerns about staffing reductions, wildfire reorganization proposals, and delayed release of previously appropriated water infrastructure funding.

2. EPA to roll back PFAS rules

Following White House clearance on May 1, EPA is set to propose two rules rolling back Biden-era drinking water limits for PFAS "forever chemicals." One rule would extend the compliance deadline for PFOA and PFOS limits from 2029 to 2031. The other would rescind limits entirely for four other PFAS, including GenX chemicals. EPA argues the Biden Administration failed to follow proper procedures when setting those four standards. Health advocates are pushing back, warning the rollbacks would put millions of Americans at greater risk. A federal appeals court is also weighing a separate legal challenge to the original 2024 rule. The Alliance continues to track passive receiver PFAS issues closely and will report out on the subject as appropriate.

3. EPA Water Reuse Action Plan 2.0

The EPA announced the launch of Water Reuse Action Plan (WRAP) 2.0, a renewed federal initiative focused on expanding water reuse to support agriculture, industry, energy production, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and data centers. The plan emphasizes

collaboration with states, local governments, and industry partners rather than new federal mandates, while promoting investments and best practices for recycled water use and water supply resilience. The initiative received support from the Congressional Western Caucus, which praised the effort as an important step toward strengthening long-term water reliability and economic growth in the West. This is all against the backdrop of the Administration's budget that, like other water programs, proposes to cut funding in these areas.

4. EPA FY 2027 Budget Proposes Deep Cuts to SRF Water Infrastructure Funds

The Trump Administration's FY2027 budget request proposes cutting EPA's state revolving fund (SRF) programs by roughly 90 percent, a reduction of more than \$2.5 billion, just as both the SRF programs and supplemental Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding are set to expire at the end of this fiscal year. Water utilities are pushing back but cautiously optimistic that Congress will again reject the cuts, as it did in FY 2026, when lawmakers funded the clean water and drinking water SRFs at \$1.6 billion and \$1.1 billion respectively. One senior Senate Republican appropriator called last year's similar proposal "unserious." The cuts are especially jarring given that EPA is simultaneously defending costly Biden-era drinking water mandates, including lead service line replacement and new PFAS standards, that place significant financial pressure on utilities. Industry groups point to an EPA assessment estimating the nation's 20-year drinking water infrastructure needs at \$625 billion as evidence that federal support is needed now more than ever.

5. USDA Reorganization drama continues!

The USDA's sweeping reorganization is moving forward through a series of major relocations and structural changes aimed at shifting staff and decision-making away from Washington, D.C. and into regional "hub" offices across the country, while also consolidating or closing some long-standing facilities like the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center. Department leaders argue the effort will improve efficiency and better align USDA programs with farmers by placing employees closer to rural communities, but the plan has raised legal and procedural concerns as Congress has sought to retain oversight over large-scale reorganizations and office moves.

At the same time, the effort is facing significant operational headwinds, including widespread staffing reductions and workforce attrition across key agencies like the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which has left some field offices severely understaffed or effectively non-operational. Farmers and lawmakers from both parties have raised concerns that these shortages are already disrupting technical assistance, conservation programs, and grant delivery, calling into question whether USDA can execute a major restructuring while maintaining core services. Additional uncertainty stems from ongoing disputes over congressional notification versus approval requirements, as well as the risk that relocation and consolidation efforts could further strain already limited expertise and slow program delivery during a period of high demand and environmental stress.

6. USDA Funding, generally

USDA funding for FY2027 is headed for a modest but broad pullback under the House Agriculture appropriations proposal, which would cut overall discretionary spending by about 1.4% to \$26.3 billion—less severe than the Trump administration's requested nearly 20% reduction but still

signaling tighter budgets across conservation, research, and climate-related programs. The bill reduces funding for conservation efforts and eliminates USDA “climate hubs,” while also trimming grants through the National Institute of Food and Agriculture even as the Agricultural Research Service sees a small increase. The Natural Resources Conservation Service would see a slight reduction in discretionary funding, though most of its support remains in mandatory spending accounts. At the same time, the department is reshaping existing “climate-smart” farm grant programs into a rebranded conservation initiative that continues funding projects but removes climate-focused language and shifts more dollars directly to producers. If past years are any guide, Senate appropriators are expected to soften many of these cuts, setting up another round of negotiations to reconcile funding levels and program priorities.

7. USDA Announces second round of funding for ACEP

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), announced a second national application deadline of May 29, 2026, for fiscal year 2026 funding under the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). NRCS is making up to \$200 million available for Agricultural Land Easements during this sign-up period, part of a broader \$4 billion investment in conservation easements authorized under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025. The program aims to preserve working agricultural lands through voluntary easements and partnerships, helping prevent the loss of productive farmland. While applications are accepted year-round, this additional deadline allows NRCS to evaluate and rank proposals based on conservation impact, with a streamlined application process requiring basic documentation such as proof of ownership and parcel mapping.

8. USDA Announces more Disaster Relief funding

The USDA also announced a second round of payments under the Supplemental Disaster Relief Program (SDRP) for farmers impacted by natural disasters in 2023 and 2024, increasing total assistance by raising the payment rate from 35% to 70% of calculated losses. The additional payments will go to producers with approved applications, building on more than \$6.7 billion already distributed through the program. USDA also extended the application deadline from April 30 to August 12, 2026, to give producers more time to complete applications and address documentation, particularly for more complex claims. Farmers impacted by drought in 2023 or 2024 are eligible and should apply.

9. USDA Reinstates Grant to benefit farmers looking for ‘climate-smart’ practices

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has reinstated a \$59 million grant to the University of Idaho to support farmers in adopting climate-smart agricultural practices, after previously terminating the program in 2025 due to revised funding criteria. The university updated the program to direct more funding toward producers and marketing efforts, allowing work to resume in April 2026 with a focus on enrolling the original group of participating farmers. The initiative—developed in partnership with organizations and tribal groups—aims to incentivize practices that reduce environmental impacts across key commodities, with contracts expected to move forward later this year. We are seeing an overwhelming preference in direct payments to farmers, rather than system level improvements in this administration, and while it’s great news that this grant was reinstated

– it is also a signal of criteria to qualify for funding that does not necessarily fit with the Alliance mission of ensuring adequate funding to system level improvements.

10. USDA upgrades rainfall data source

The USDA Risk Management Agency (RMA) announced it is upgrading the rainfall data source used in several federal crop insurance programs, transitioning from NOAA’s Climate Prediction Center to the National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI). The change, phased in beginning April 2026, will affect programs such as Pasture, Rangeland, Forage, Annual Forage, Apiculture, and Shellfish insurance. Officials say the move will improve data accessibility, transparency, and support for producers, while maintaining existing program structures, coverage areas, and actuarial integrity. RMA also expects the upgrade to allow faster delivery of index values and indemnity payments, with additional flexibility for future data enhancements such as expanded weather station inputs.

11. US Forest Service relocation effort drawing questions from appropriators

Senate appropriators are raising concerns about the Forest Service’s proposed reorganization and steep budget reduction from \$6.2 billion to \$2.1 billion, which is tied largely to shifting wildfire operations to the Interior Department. Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz told lawmakers the agency is actively recruiting staff and has hired about 9,700 firefighters, slightly ahead of last year’s pace, but Senators—including Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)—pressed for assurances that staffing will be sufficient heading into a potentially severe fire season. Lawmakers also questioned structural changes such as replacing regional offices and relocating headquarters, while Democrats focused on proposed research cuts that the agency says would be preserved through consolidation or shared facilities. Overall, while some Republicans are open to shifting wildfire responsibilities, broader reorganization plans remain politically unsettled and under close scrutiny.

12. Government staffing shortages in the news

An article in Government Executive reported that severe staffing reductions at the General Services Administration (GSA) are creating operational challenges across the federal government. Citing a Government Accountability Office (GAO) review, the article found that GSA’s Public Buildings Service cut nearly half its workforce before conducting adequate workforce planning, resulting in project delays, confusion among agencies over points of contact, and concerns about reduced service capacity. The report highlighted broader concerns that rapid workforce reductions, implemented without strategic planning, may disrupt federal operations and delay infrastructure and property management activities relied upon by multiple agencies.

13. The Debate over the CO River continues – All eyes on Reclamation

Hydrologic conditions in the Colorado River Basin continue to deteriorate rapidly following one of the driest winters on record and an unusually warm spring across the Rocky Mountain headwaters. Forecasted inflows into Lake Powell are now projected at only 13–29% of average, with some forecasts describing conditions as among the worst ever recorded for the system. Federal officials warn that without immediate intervention, water levels at Glen Canyon Dam

could fall below minimum power pool elevations later this summer, threatening hydropower generation and the ability to reliably move water downstream. Reservoir storage basin-wide has dropped to roughly 36% of capacity, and agricultural producers throughout the Upper Basin are bracing for drought-related shortages and potential curtailments. Concerns are also growing over reduced hydropower generation at both Glen Canyon and Hoover Dam, with projections showing Hoover power production could decline by as much as 40% under current operating plans.

In response, the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Reclamation have initiated emergency drought operations designed to stabilize the system and buy time for broader negotiations over post-2026 river operations. Federal actions include reducing releases from Lake Powell to the legal minimum of 6 million acre-feet and moving up to 1 million acre-feet of water from Flaming Gorge Reservoir into Powell under existing drought response agreements. At the same time, Arizona, California, and Nevada have proposed additional voluntary conservation measures totaling up to 1 million acre-feet through 2028, supported by more than \$450 million in anticipated federal conservation funding. However, negotiations among the seven basin states remain deeply divided, particularly over the role of Upper Basin reservoirs, future operational authority, and long-term water allocation rules as current management guidelines expire later this year. Upper Basin states are now calling for formal mediation to break the ongoing stalemate.

14. Public Lands Rule repeal efforts

The Trump administration has advanced efforts to repeal a Biden-era Bureau of Land Management “public lands rule” that elevated conservation to a formal land-use category alongside grazing, energy development, and recreation, including allowing dedicated conservation leasing for restoration projects. The Biden rule was strongly supported by environmental groups as a major shift toward prioritizing ecosystem health but opposed by industry groups and Republicans who argued it could restrict land access and resource development. With the White House regulatory review of the repeal now complete, the Interior Department is expected to finalize the rollback soon, reflecting a broader policy shift away from formalizing conservation as an equal use of federal public lands.

15. More of the President’s nominees move forward

The Senate cleared a procedural hurdle last week on a package of Trump Administration nominees, with final confirmation votes expected soon. Leading the list is Steve Pearce, a former New Mexico congressman tapped to head the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Democrats have opposed his nomination, citing his ties to the oil and gas industry and past support for public land sales. Also in the package are nominees for the Department of Energy, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). Separately, Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-SD) moved to advance Kevin Warsh's nomination to chair the Federal Reserve, who is also expected to be confirmed after the recess.

16. Administration’s Expedited Permitting Agenda Moves Forward

Recent developments in Congress suggest that momentum for bipartisan permitting reform is continuing to build, although significant policy differences remain. Senate Environment and Public

Works Committee leaders Sen. Shelley Moore Capito and Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse are reportedly working closely together on a broad package aimed at streamlining approvals for energy, infrastructure, and transmission projects. Negotiators are discussing faster environmental reviews, expanded electric transmission siting, litigation reforms, and greater certainty for already-issued permits. Senate leaders have indicated that draft legislation could emerge later this summer.

At the same time, the White House is pushing Congress to include reforms to Clean Water Act Section 401, which gives states authority to condition or block federally permitted projects based on water quality concerns. Administration officials argue some states have used Section 401 as a broader veto authority unrelated to water quality, while opponents view the provision as an important state safeguard. Separately, bipartisan House lawmakers introduced the “CERTAIN Act,” which would provide greater protection for lawfully issued permits, establish clearer agency timelines, reduce duplicative reviews, and improve interagency coordination. The growing national focus on energy reliability, electric transmission expansion, and power demand associated with AI and data centers continues to add urgency to the permitting reform debate.

17. DOI, Bureau of Reclamation: Agency Realignment and Efficiency

Last month, we finalized the NEPA memorandum in coordination with Reclamation, which will be transmitted from the Washington, D.C. office to field staff to outline the updated NEPA handbook and expectations for implementation. This has been a nearly year-long effort, and we are encouraged by its completion. As this guidance is rolled out, we anticipate corresponding cultural and procedural shifts within the agency; if those changes do not materialize as expected, please flag concerns so we can follow up and help ensure proper implementation.

We are also continuing to work toward common ground on procurement and OM&R issues through our standing committee, which recently received a list of projects identified by the Bureau of Reclamation as potential candidates for transfer to local districts. While this effort is partly driven by reduced federal staffing levels, it also reflects broader administrative priorities aimed at shifting certain responsibilities from federal agencies to local entities. As these transitions move forward, it will be important to monitor for any unintended or adverse consequences at the district level. We encourage close coordination with local offices and timely reporting of any challenges so they can be addressed promptly. While we support transferring responsibilities where it is practical and appropriate, it is equally important to ensure that districts are not assigned additional burdens beyond their capacity.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 119TH CONGRESS

18. Reconciliation 2.0...and 3.0???

Congressional Republicans are moving ahead with a second budget reconciliation package focused primarily on immigration enforcement funding, but there is growing uncertainty about whether the party will pursue a broader third reconciliation bill later this year that could address energy, environmental, and regulatory priorities. While some GOP lawmakers continue pushing for a future package that could include permitting reform, energy policy changes, regulatory rollbacks, and other conservative initiatives, key Republican leaders have expressed skepticism about both the timing and political appetite for another major partisan effort before the midterm elections.

Senate Environment and Public Works Chair Sen. Shelley Moore Capito indicated that a third reconciliation bill appears unlikely at this stage, citing spending constraints and competing legislative priorities.

Republican leaders are currently focused on advancing what some are calling “reconciliation 2.0,” a narrowly tailored package intended to provide long-term funding for border security and immigration enforcement agencies without Democratic support. Some lawmakers have attempted to attach additional provisions related to energy, disaster aid, and environmental policy, but party leadership has warned that expanding the bill’s scope could jeopardize its passage. At the same time, House leadership has continued signaling to conservatives that another reconciliation effort later this year remains possible. However, compressed legislative timelines, election-year political risks, and uncertainty over Senate reconciliation rules continue to cloud the prospects for a broader energy or permitting-focused package.

19. Farm Bill (still, maybe)!!!

Congress finally made significant movement on a long-stalled farm bill in April and May, with the House narrowly passing a five-year package, H.R. 7567, by a 224-200 vote after months of delays and intense debate over pesticide liability protections, California’s Proposition 12, ethanol policy, conservation funding, and SNAP reforms. While the House bill advances key farm safety net, conservation, forestry, and rural development programs through 2031, several controversial provisions were either stripped out or delayed, including pesticide liability language opposed by “Make America Healthy Again” advocates and a year-round E15 ethanol provision that House leaders agreed to consider separately. The bill also reflects major policy changes already enacted through last year’s reconciliation package, which expanded commodity support programs while reducing future SNAP funding obligations. Agricultural groups broadly supported House passage, arguing producers need updated policies after operating under repeated extensions of the 2018 Farm Bill amid rising input costs, inflation, and market uncertainty.

Attention has now shifted to the Senate, where Agriculture Committee Chairman John Boozman has emphasized that any final package will require bipartisan support to overcome the Senate’s 60-vote threshold. Senate Democrats are already demanding revisions to SNAP cost-sharing provisions enacted in the reconciliation law, while some Republicans argue many of the most important farm bill priorities have already been addressed. Additional disputes over ethanol, pesticide policy, conservation funding, and nutrition programs could further complicate negotiations as Congress faces a compressed legislative calendar ahead of the midterm elections. Despite those challenges, Senate leaders continue expressing optimism that a bipartisan farm bill can still be completed later this year, although timing remains uncertain and another short-term extension remains possible if negotiations stall.

20. ESA Amendments Act stalls in the House

Congressional efforts to advance major reforms to the Endangered Species Act encountered significant turbulence this past month. House Natural Resources Chair Rep. Bruce Westerman had planned to move the “ESA Amendments Act” (H.R. 1897) through the House, but leadership ultimately pulled the bill from floor consideration after internal Republican opposition emerged, particularly from members of the Florida delegation concerned the bill’s expanded “God Squad” exemption provisions could increase the risk of offshore oil and gas drilling near Florida’s coastlines. The legislation would make broad changes to ESA implementation, including requiring

economic impact analyses for species listings, limiting litigation by environmental groups, streamlining permitting and consultation processes, and narrowing certain species protections. Despite the setback, Westerman and House leadership have indicated they intend to continue negotiations and potentially revive the bill later this spring.

At the same time, the Trump Administration continued advancing parallel administrative ESA reforms through agency rulemaking and high-profile exemption actions. Most notably, the Administration recently utilized the rarely invoked “God Squad” process for the first time in more than 30 years to exempt certain Gulf offshore drilling activities from ESA requirements, prompting litigation from environmental groups and heightened concern among some Republicans and coastal states. Separately, federal agencies are reportedly advancing regulatory proposals that would narrow the definition of “harm” under the ESA and reduce habitat-related protections for listed species. The Family Farm Alliance submitted a letter supporting H.R. 1897 on April 20, citing the need for improved regulatory certainty and modernization of ESA implementation.

21. House ENR Subcommittee considers legislation to adjust ESA related policies to formally give water districts seat at the table

Rep. Cliff Bentz’s H.R. 8259, the “Federal Water Projects Consultation Improvement Act of 2026,” was the subject of a House Natural Resources Subcommittee hearing on April 30, where lawmakers debated whether local water contractors should have a more formal role in Endangered Species Act consultations affecting Bureau of Reclamation projects across the West. Bentz emphasized that the bill would not alter the ESA itself but instead would improve transparency and collaboration by requiring federal agencies to provide irrigation districts, water contractors, and affected communities with greater access to draft biological opinions, scientific analyses, and opportunities for engagement when federal actions could affect water deliveries. Democrats on the panel raised concerns that the proposal could weaken ESA implementation or disproportionately favor contractors over tribes and other stakeholders. Testifying in support of the legislation was Alliance Advisory Committee member Elizabeth Nielsen, executive director of the Klamath Water Users Association, who told lawmakers that water contractors possess critical on-the-ground knowledge about water supply, delivery systems, and impacts to both agriculture and wildlife. Nielsen said the current consultation process is often inconsistent and lacking transparency and argued that earlier contractor involvement would improve outcomes for water reliability, agricultural producers, and rural communities without changing existing ESA requirements. The Alliance and several members supported the bill ahead of the Committee hearing.

22. Think-Tank Analysts Float Bipartisan Paths Forward on Permitting Reform

Analysts are offering two potential frameworks for a bipartisan permitting deal, even as a crowded legislative calendar makes the window increasingly narrow in an election year. The Breakthrough Institute argues that recent court rulings have fundamentally undermined NEPA's legal foundations that congressional action is now the only way to restore durable environmental protections, framing reform as a "rescue mission" rather than a rollback. The Bipartisan Policy Center, meanwhile, points to "permitting certainty" as the most promising common ground, noting that both parties want consistent, technology-neutral standards protecting projects, whether wind, solar, oil, or gas, from arbitrary delays across administrations. Several legislative vehicles are in play, including the House-passed SPEED Act, [H.R. 4776](#), and an upcoming surface transportation reauthorization bill expected to include a permitting title. Bipartisan Senate talks have also quietly resumed. Both analyses stress that weakening public engagement ultimately produces more

litigation, not less, and that a durable deal should codify meaningful public participation requirements rather than leaving them to agency discretion or shifting court interpretations.

23. Senate Democrats Push Back on CWA 401 Water Permitting Rulemaking

Eleven Senate Democrats have sent a letter to the Trump EPA expressing "strong objection" to the agency's proposed rule limiting state and tribal water quality reviews under Section 401 of the Clean Water Act, arguing it undermines cooperative federalism and could paradoxically worsen the permitting delays it aims to fix. The draft rule would restrict state reviews for hydropower dams, pipelines, and other energy projects, barring states from considering environmental impacts beyond direct "discharges" into federally regulated waters and requiring certification decisions within one year. The Administration has framed it as a tool to prevent states from "weaponizing" the Clean Water Act to block energy projects. Led by Sen. Alex Padilla (D-CA), the letter argues the rule would strip states of core water protection authority, especially significant for dams, which broadly affect fish, erosion, and water temperature. Democrats also warn it could backfire in states like California, where the narrowed federal certification scope could force developers to file separately under state law, adding cost and delay rather than reducing red tape.

24. Bipartisan House Bill Aims to Shield Federal Permits from Political Interference

A bipartisan group of House lawmakers have introduced the CERTAIN Act, legislation designed to protect lawfully issued federal permits from being revoked by future administrations. Led by Reps. Scott Peters (D-CA) and Gabe Evans (R-CO), the bill would require agencies to conduct reviews within set timelines, reduce regulatory duplication, and encourage coordination among regulators. The bill strengthens a permit certainty provision from the SPEED Act, H.R. 4776 passed by the House last year, and comes as senators negotiate a broader permitting reform package. It faces some opposition; however, offshore wind opponents are hoping the Trump Administration will revoke Atlantic project permits, a move this legislation would complicate.

25. Wildfire still a *HOT* topic!

The 2026 wildfire situation across the West is being driven by unusually dry conditions, low snowpack, and early-season fire activity, prompting a mix of federal and state responses focused on both prevention and rapid suppression. At the federal level, the U.S. Forest Service has issued a 2026 wildfire readiness directive emphasizing full suppression strategies, expanded staffing, and coordination across agencies, while also testing new response tools like "Operation Sky Hammer," which deploys mobile aerial firefighting units to attack fires in their earliest stages. The Forest Service is also maintaining a large contracted aviation fleet and more than 28,000 responders nationwide, even as broader reorganization plans and proposed shifts of wildfire management to the Interior Department remain politically unresolved.

On the ground, federal land managers such as the Bureau of Land Management in Idaho and Nevada have issued seasonal fire prevention orders restricting fireworks, explosives, unsafe ammunition types, and equipment that could spark fires on public lands. State leaders, including Colorado's governor, are warning of extreme fire risk tied to record-low snowpack and widespread drought, while mobilizing additional aircraft, crews, and incident management teams ahead of peak fire season. Recent fires in Colorado and the Southwest have already required emergency declarations and state resource deployments, underscoring how quickly conditions can escalate. Alongside suppression efforts, agencies and research institutions are also expanding mitigation

strategies—such as watershed fuel reduction projects, post-fire recovery tools for rangelands, and new mapping systems to guide landowners—reflecting a broader shift toward both immediate response and longer-term landscape resilience.

The U.S. House passed the FIRE Act (H.R. 6387), legislation aimed at encouraging prescribed burns as a wildfire prevention tool by modifying Clean Air Act rules related to smoke emissions. Supporters argue the bill will give states greater flexibility to conduct controlled burns without risking violations of federal air quality standards, helping reduce catastrophic wildfire risk while easing regulatory burdens on local communities and land managers.

26. Rural Broadband

The House overwhelmingly passed the “Expediting Federal Broadband Deployment Reviews Act” (H.R. 1681) in a 384–9 vote, aiming to streamline permitting for broadband infrastructure on public lands. The bipartisan bill would create a multi-agency federal “strike force” to coordinate and accelerate project reviews, addressing longstanding delays that have limited internet access in rural and underserved areas. Lawmakers from both parties framed the effort as a practical step toward closing the digital divide, though broader and more controversial permitting reforms remain under debate. For those of us living in rural areas, access to adequate internet services is becoming essential to operating precision agriculture businesses and features such as tractor GPS, telemetry on wells and headgates, and time clocks for employees, among many other functions.

27. Hydropower gets continued support

Hydropower continues to receive significant attention at the federal level as lawmakers and the administration emphasize grid reliability, domestic energy production, and modernization of existing infrastructure. The Department of Energy recently announced a \$430 million initiative focused on improving the resilience and efficiency of hydropower facilities, while debates continue in the Pacific Northwest over balancing fish passage requirements with the region’s dependence on hydropower generation. Congress also approved the bipartisan “Build More Hydro” bill (S. 1020), which is now headed to President Trump’s desk and would extend Federal Energy Regulatory Commission construction timelines for certain hydropower projects, potentially advancing nearly 40 stalled projects representing more than 2.5 gigawatts of baseload power nationwide. Energy Secretary Chris Wright also recently defended the importance of the Lower Snake River dams during congressional testimony, arguing the facilities remain critical for affordable electricity, grid stability, irrigation, navigation, and regional economic activity in the Pacific Northwest.

28. AI and Data Centers at the center of the Cost of Living debate

Data centers can consume millions of gallons of water on a single hot summer day, and as more facilities tap into local systems, utilities are planning major and expensive expansions. Researchers at UC Riverside estimate that building the water infrastructure needed to support AI data center growth through 2030 could cost anywhere between \$10 billion and \$58 billion. As artificial intelligence continues its rapid expansion, communities across the country are grappling with a question that goes beyond electricity costs: who pays for the water?

In Columbus, Ohio, home to at least 130 data centers, residents are increasingly linking rising utility bills to the tech boom. The city is raising water rates 18% and sewer rates 8% this year while

officials' study whether large users like data centers are truly paying their fair share. In rural Virginia, a planned Google data center that could consume up to 2 million gallons daily has prompted county officials to commit up to \$300 million toward finding new regional water supplies, costs they hope Google's tax revenue will offset, though locals remain skeptical. Underlying all of it is a timing problem experts find particularly troubling. Water infrastructure is built for a service life of 50 to 60 years, while data centers are typically designed to last for only 15 to 20. Until clearer frameworks are established for how these costs get allocated, the risk of households quietly footing the bill remains very real.

IN THE COURTS

29. DOJ argues permitting system for ranchers whose livestock graze on public land counts as beneficial use of its water rights

The case centers on a dispute between Idaho and the federal government over whether the state can require documentation and potentially forfeit “stockwater” rights tied to livestock grazing on federal public lands when those rights are not shown to be actively used. The U.S. government argues Idaho’s laws unlawfully target federal water rights and interfere with the federal grazing permit system, while Idaho contends it is simply enforcing its water law rules—including a five-year nonuse forfeiture standard—equally against all users. At the Ninth Circuit, the federal government is defending its ability to treat grazing-permit-related livestock watering as a “beneficial use” sufficient to maintain its water rights, while Idaho maintains that mere issuance of grazing permits does not establish water use or exempt federal rights from state forfeiture rules. The outcome will affect how water rights tied to millions of acres of federal grazing lands in Idaho are defined and enforced under the Snake River Basin adjudication framework.

30. Supreme Court May Take Up Key WOTUS Wetlands Question

The Supreme Court has asked EPA to respond by April 24 to a petition that could bring the justices back to the question of federal wetlands jurisdiction under the Clean Water Act with significant implications for the agency's pending “waters of the U.S.” (WOTUS) rulemaking. The case, *Andrews v. United States*, involves a Connecticut farmer who argues the Second Circuit incorrectly upheld federal authority over his wetlands despite their lacking a continuous surface water connection to covered waters, a standard established in the Supreme Court's landmark 2023 *Sackett* decision. Legal observers say if the Court takes the case, it would likely clarify what constitutes a “continuous surface connection,” a term *Sackett* left undefined and one EPA and the Army Corps are currently grappling with in their proposed WOTUS rule, which is expected to be finalized this summer. A coalition of Republican-led states filed an amicus brief supporting the petition, arguing that lower courts have failed to faithfully apply *Sackett* and that federal regulatory overreach continues to impose significant costs on states, municipalities, and landowners.

31. Arizona court invalidates groundwater policy

An Arizona court has invalidated a state water policy that had been used to restrict residential development in the Phoenix area, ruling that the Arizona Department of Water Resources exceeded its legal authority. The court found that ADWR’s “Unmet Demand” approach

improperly evaluated regional groundwater demand rather than focusing on whether individual developments could meet Arizona’s statutory requirement for a 100-year assured water supply. The decision could have significant implications for future growth and water management policies in Maricopa County.

32. NM stream access case decided against ranchers

A recent federal appeals court ruling upheld public access to streambeds on private land in New Mexico, affirming that recreationists may legally use the beds and banks of public waterways even where they cross private property. While state officials framed the decision as a win for public access, it raises ongoing concerns for agricultural producers, who argue that expanded access can interfere with ranching and farming operations, create liability risks, and limit landowners’ ability to manage and protect their property. The case highlights a broader tension between public recreation rights and private property interests, particularly in working landscapes where unrestricted access to waterways can disrupt operations and resource stewardship. State officials are now asking the court to hold the rancher at the center of the controversy criminally liable for actions he took, which he claims were in defense of his property.

Meanwhile, there is an ongoing stalemate over public stream access in Colorado, where lawmakers continue to struggle with balancing recreational use and private property rights after decades of debate. The discussion has intensified amid growing pressure from boating and fishing advocates seeking expanded river access, while landowners and agricultural interests warn that changes to longstanding “float but don’t touch” rules could increase liability concerns, threaten private property rights, and create new conflicts for ranching and farming operations located along waterways. I expect the New Mexico litigation to impact the Colorado debate.

ALLIANCE INITIATIVES

33. Invasive mussels update

Western states continue responding aggressively to invasive aquatic species threats, particularly quagga and golden mussels, due to the major risks they pose to water infrastructure, hydropower systems, fisheries, and irrigation operations. In Idaho, the Department of Agriculture reported ongoing efforts to eradicate quagga mussels in the Snake River following recent detections, including continued monitoring, treatment, and coordination with regional partners to prevent further spread. In California, state agencies announced a forthcoming invasive species grant program funded through Proposition 4, which will dedicate \$20 million toward invasive species prevention and management projects, while also updating stakeholders on evolving golden mussel response efforts. Separately, the California Department of Water Resources announced it is scaling back mandatory mussel inspection and decontamination requirements at Lake Oroville after additional analysis showed a lower-than-expected risk of golden mussel establishment in the reservoir system, though monitoring and statewide prevention efforts will continue

34. Nukes cost water, too!

A recent report highlighted growing concerns over the massive water demands associated with expanding nuclear and artificial intelligence operations at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, where federal projections estimate future operations could require roughly 1.4 million gallons of water per day for at least the next decade. The expansion, which includes new AI supercomputing facilities and expanded nuclear weapons production, comes as New Mexico faces worsening drought, declining aquifer levels, and increasing pressure on limited water supplies across the region. The situation underscores a broader trend throughout the West, where energy, technology, and national security infrastructure are increasingly competing for scarce water resources during an era of prolonged drought and water scarcity. Making matters increasingly more complex, AI and Datacenter water use is difficult to measure, and therefore difficult to plan for. I continue to expect more on this subject both in the legislative arena, and soon also the litigation arena where local battles over water rights permitting issues are beginning to proliferate.

35. New Science on Salmon population pressures with rising water temps

New research from the University of Alaska Fairbanks finds that warming river temperatures are increasing the feeding rates of invasive northern pike, intensifying pressure on already struggling salmon populations. As water temperatures rise, pike metabolism accelerates, driving higher energy demand and more aggressive predation—particularly among younger fish, which have increased consumption by more than 60% in recent years. The study highlights how climate change and invasive species can compound impacts on freshwater ecosystems, raising concerns that continued warming will further threaten native salmon and other fish species in Alaska.

36. Iowa ranchers advocate for changes to CRP

An opinion piece from the Iowa Cattlemen’s Association calls for targeted reforms to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to better support cattle producers amid historically low herd numbers and ongoing industry pressures. While acknowledging CRP’s conservation benefits, the article argues that current program structures can limit access to productive land, increase rental rates, and unintentionally discourage pasture retention and grazing infrastructure. It highlights concerns that some producers are excluded from programs like Grasslands CRP, even as land is taken out of livestock production. At the same time, the piece recognizes the program’s value to many landowners and instead advocates for a balanced approach—particularly expanding managed grazing options within CRP—to maintain conservation outcomes while improving flexibility for producers working to rebuild the nation’s cattle herd.

WESTERN WATER “HOT SPOTS”

Here’s the link to the US Drought Monitor: [Maps | U.S. Drought Monitor](#)

And here’s the link to another drought monitor: [Watershed Drought Information | Drought.gov](#)

If you're like me, you're enjoying some recent moisture! Keep praying for more but be on the lookout for the Super El Niño that is supposedly headed our way this summer!!

Water supply conditions across the American West remain under severe and widespread stress, with more than 60% of the country in drought and conditions particularly acute in major agricultural and population centers. In several states, including Arizona, Montana, and parts of California and Nevada, small towns are already facing the possibility of running out of municipal water or implementing strict rationing, while others are relying on emergency declarations and federal assistance to maintain basic supplies. Agricultural producers are experiencing some of the most immediate impacts, with widespread irrigation cutbacks in senior and junior water rights systems—especially in river basins like the Colorado and Yakima—forcing fallowed fields, reduced plantings, and herd reductions as ranchers grapple with insufficient forage and irrigation water. Federal and state responses include USDA disaster designations allowing emergency loans, Bureau of Reclamation allocation reductions tied to record-low snowpack, and expanded drought monitoring and planning tools, but these measures are largely reactive as hydrologic conditions continue to deteriorate.

At the same time, policymakers and water managers are scaling up longer-term adaptation efforts, including conservation mandates, efficiency programs, and infrastructure planning for more variable supply conditions driven by warming temperatures and reduced snowpack storage. Despite these interventions, officials across the West warn that the system is still operating in deficit, with reservoirs, soil moisture, and snow water equivalents well below historical norms and recovery dependent on sustained precipitation over multiple seasons. Looking ahead, climate forecasts suggest a growing likelihood of a strong to potentially “super” El Niño developing later in 2026 or into 2027, which could bring wetter conditions to parts of the South and West. However, experts caution that even a favorable El Niño pattern is uncertain in timing and intensity, meaning it may not be enough to immediately reverse ongoing shortages. For now, the West remains in a fragile transition period—marked by emergency management, declining reserves, and growing pressure on both rural communities and food production systems—while longer-term outlooks remain cautiously hopeful but far from guaranteed.

The Alliance continues to push for large amounts of funding, both near term and long term to address both prongs of this crisis – emergency measures needed this year and longer-term sustainability efforts to ensure continued water supply – even though large funding levels are not favored in this administration. The Alliance continue to believe that fallowing alone is not a solution and will instead create longer term water and food security crises, along with other adverse impacts such as substantial loss of green space and other natural features supported by ag water use across the West. While the battle is an uphill one, and it's a steep hill, we continue to be vocal about system level needs, especially while priority seems to have shifted to emergency funding for farmers without an eye on future needs for the system. Our work is cut out for us!

37. WONKY article of the month!

Last month a Los Angeles Times article highlighted emerging research showing that reservoirs are a previously underrecognized source of methane, a greenhouse gas. As organic material such as plants decomposes underwater, it produces methane that can bubble up and be released into the

atmosphere, potentially contributing to climate change. While major methane sources like oil and gas production, landfills, and dairies are well tracked, emissions from reservoirs are largely unmonitored. Environmental groups and researchers are now urging the California Air Resources Board to require formal reporting of greenhouse gases from dams and reservoirs, arguing this gap could be significant for climate accounting and water infrastructure planning. Just another reason to hate water storage in case anyone was looking for one (ok, sorry, but the sarcasm is necessary - you just can't make this stuff up!!).

38. Drought – and new tools

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) has unveiled a new online tool that lets water planners and businesses assess water availability across roughly 80,000 watersheds nationwide now and into the future. The [National Water Availability Assessment Data Companion](#) pulls together stream monitoring data, satellite observations, and climate modeling to map where water supply and demand are out of balance. About 8 percent of the U.S. population lives in areas where demand consistently meets or exceeds natural supply and the results are sometimes surprising. Despite abundant river water, 42 percent of the Mississippi Embayment faces stress due to heavy irrigation for rice and cotton. Meanwhile, the Central and Southern High Plains spanning Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas are strained by slim precipitation and high irrigation demand.

39. Rainmaker and other similar technologies

Conversations around enhanced precipitation technologies are also proliferating. Rainmaker is a drone-based cloud seeding company that says it has achieved a major step forward in proving its technology can actually increase precipitation. In operations across western states like Utah and Idaho, the company reports it has identified “seeding signatures” linking its drone flights to measurable increases in snowfall and rainfall, positioning itself as one of the first private firms attempting to scientifically validate cloud seeding results at scale. While cloud seeding itself has existed for decades, Rainmaker’s approach uses drones, radar tracking, and data analysis to try to make the process more precise and verifiable. Rainmaker’s technology has not yet been peer reviewed. Another company, which I’ll be doing a feature article on in this month’s newsletter is called Rain Enhancement Technologies, and I recently had the opportunity to travel to multiple conferences and events with their chemist who shared some major cool stuff on ionization technology being used to increase precipitation – look for that soon!

40. California weather and water supply

a. Water Supply update – general

Recent reporting on California water conditions highlights a growing “water paradox”: despite major storms, high reservoir levels, and periods of near-record precipitation, concerns persist that the state still lacks enough long-term storage, conveyance, and groundwater resilience to fully capture and manage extreme swings between wet and dry years. Commentary in outlets including the Wall Street Journal and regional business publications argues that massive storm flows continue to move through the system and out to sea during high-flow events because of

infrastructure, regulatory, and operational constraints, even as agricultural communities face groundwater restrictions and future supply uncertainty under SGMA implementation.

Current 2026 water conditions in California are generally favorable compared to recent drought years, with most major reservoirs at or above historical averages following strong winter storms and early-season precipitation. However, experts warn that a “whiplash spring” of warm temperatures sharply reduced Sierra snowpack earlier than expected, reinforcing concerns about California’s increasing climate volatility and diminished natural snow storage reliability. Governor Gavin Newsom has continued promoting major long-term infrastructure efforts, particularly the Delta Conveyance Project, as part of a broader strategy to improve reliability and climate resilience for the State Water Project, while debate continues over groundwater sustainability, Delta operations, and how to balance environmental protections with water supply reliability for farms and communities.

b. Sites Reservoir ROD completed!

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Sacramento District has issued its Record of Decision for the proposed Sites Reservoir Project following completion of its National Environmental Policy Act review. The project, an off-stream storage facility planned in Colusa County north of the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta, is intended to provide additional water supply and operational flexibility for California’s water system. The Record of Decision documents the Corps’ environmental review and will guide future permitting decisions under the Clean Water Act and Rivers and Harbors Act, with the Environmental Impact Statement led by the Bureau of Reclamation and the Corps serving as a cooperating agency.

c. SGMA update

California water regulators voted to return the Delta-Mendota Subbasin to Department of Water Resources oversight under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), finding that the basin’s 23 groundwater agencies had significantly improved coordination and adopted a unified sustainability plan that addressed prior deficiencies. The decision allows the subbasin to avoid probationary status and state intervention after local agencies strengthened groundwater management measures, including protections for drinking water wells, marking another high-profile example of SGMA agencies revising plans to maintain local control.

d. San Diego enters another water supply deal

The San Diego County Water Authority approved a long-term agreement to deliver water to Riverside County’s Eastern Municipal Water District, continuing a broader regional strategy to market surplus water supplies developed through decades of infrastructure investment, conservation, storage expansion, and desalination. Under the 21-year deal, Eastern Municipal Water District will receive up to 10,000 acre-feet annually, generating new revenue for San Diego ratepayers while strengthening regional water reliability through existing Metropolitan Water District infrastructure. The agreement follows a similar recent deal with Western Municipal Water District and reflects increasing regional collaboration as Southern California agencies adapt to changing water demands and affordability pressures.

e. PFAS in fertilizers under a microscope in CA Assembly

California lawmakers are considering Assembly Bill 1603, which would phase out PFAS-based pesticides—often called “forever chemicals”—by 2035, halt new approvals, and require greater public disclosure of their use. Supporters argue the measure is needed to address growing concerns over PFAS contamination in food, soil, and groundwater, citing studies showing residues on a significant share of California-grown produce, while the proposal adds to a broader national debate over regulation of persistent chemicals linked to potential health risks.

f. Harvesting the sun

Recent news out of CA highlights a massive proposal in the Central Valley – the proposal would convert 136,000 acres of farmland in the Westlands Water District into 21 gigawatts of solar generation paired with battery storage — nearly matching the amount of utility-scale solar currently installed statewide. Known as the Valley Clean Infrastructure Plan (VCIP), the project is being discussed as both a renewable energy initiative and a potential economic lifeline for farmers facing chronic water shortages and reduced irrigation supplies. The discussion underscores how ongoing water constraints in the San Joaquin Valley are accelerating land-use changes, with some agricultural leaders viewing large-scale solar development as one way to stabilize revenues on land that may no longer receive reliable water deliveries. Supporters describe the concept as “harvesting the sun” in areas where long-term agricultural production is increasingly uncertain due to regulatory and hydrologic pressures.

g. California Commercial Salmon Fishing to Resume After Three-Year Closure

Federal fishery managers voted last month to reopen California's coast to commercial salmon fishing for the first time since 2022, marking a significant rebound for an industry that has weathered years of devastating closures. The Pacific Fishery Management Council approved limited commercial and recreational fishing following a recovery in chinook and coho salmon populations, driven by recent wet winters that restored cold water conditions salmon need to spawn. Commercial fishing will begin in May, with quotas and limited fishing days in place. State officials also credited active river restoration efforts, most notably in the Klamath and Sacramento river basins. But fishery managers are proceeding cautiously with restrictions to protect the still-recovering population.

41. Columbia, Snake and Yakima River Basins (ID/OR/MT/WA)

a. Idaho farmers relying on groundwater reach agreement to keep pumping

Idaho groundwater users in the Little Lost and Big Lost River basins reached a mitigation agreement that could prevent irrigation shutoffs this season by aligning them with statewide conservation and aquifer recharge requirements, reflecting continued reliance on negotiated management to avoid curtailment in over-allocated systems. That said, it’s still going to be a rough year in Idaho, with an unprecedented snow drought, lower than average runoff already ending, and higher than average temperatures – pray for rain!

b. Oregon’s water year looks like most others in the West...dry

In Oregon, ongoing drought conditions and record-low snowpack are signaling a worsening water supply outlook, with new research from Oregon State University projecting that western water systems will see faster runoff and less reliable summer flows as climate patterns shift. At the same time, state regulators have again rejected a proposed 12,000-acre-foot irrigation reservoir in the Willamette Valley, underscoring continued tension between new storage development and protection of existing water rights and in-stream flows. Fire officials are also warning that hotter, drier conditions are contributing to longer wildfire seasons, adding pressure on already strained water and land management systems.

c. Yakima hydrology improves, somewhat

Yakima Basin water users are facing a challenging irrigation season, with the Bureau of Reclamation announcing a 52% proratable water supply for 2026. While March precipitation reached 239% of average and improved mountain conditions somewhat, water managers noted that snowpack distribution remains uneven, with stronger conditions in the Naches Basin than in the Upper Yakima Basin, creating operational challenges for districts such as KRD and Roza. Although conditions are not as severe as the 2015 drought, Washington state has declared a statewide drought emergency, unlocking funding and additional response measures as water supply concerns continue across the region.

d. Seniors make priority call in Yakima Basin

Four senior Yakima Basin irrigation districts—Naches-Selah Irrigation District, Selah-Moxee Irrigation District, Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District, and Yakima Tieton Irrigation District—have jointly asked the Washington Department of Ecology to administer surface water rights strictly by priority date for the full irrigation season (including October), consistent with historical practice and state law. The districts, which collectively serve about 142K irrigated acres in the Yakima Basin, are concerned about last season’s early curtailment of senior rights during ongoing drought conditions. They emphasize that water should be allocated under the prior appropriation doctrine (“first in time, first in right”) and consistent with the Yakima Basin adjudication and the 2019 Final Decree. They acknowledge severe, multi-year drought impacts affecting agriculture, instream flows, municipal supply, and the regional economy. However, they argue that clear and lawful administration of rights is essential for predictability and planning, especially since their senior rights predate the May 10, 1905 Yakima Project water rights held by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and are partially subject to prorationing through federal contracts during drought.

42. Colorado River Basin (AZ/CA/CO/NV/NM/UT/WY)

a. Arizona groundwater bill vetoed

Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs vetoed legislation that would have funded recovery of brackish groundwater as a potential water-supply strategy, arguing the proposal redirected funds to already-eligible or “speculative” groundwater projects rather than proven needs. Supporters of the approach say treating and using brackish groundwater remains a viable drought-response tool in

Arizona, but state water policy experts caution that groundwater should be managed as a largely non-renewable resource requiring careful long-term planning. Despite being called ‘speculative’ in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas are funding brackish water desalination and other water supply options like produced water reuse projects at higher levels than ever.

b. Time for bigger thinking – larger scale projects needed

A new study examining Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Denver found that while urban conservation measures such as watering restrictions, tiered pricing, and efficiency incentives have successfully reduced water demand, those gains may not be enough to offset the long-term impacts of climate change and declining Colorado River supplies. Researchers conclude that as temperatures rise and river flows continue to weaken, western cities will likely need to pursue larger-scale water supply and infrastructure solutions in addition to traditional conservation efforts.

c. Denver Water taking steps to buffer drought

Denver Water announced it will drain and temporarily close Antero Reservoir in Colorado’s South Park region to reduce evaporation losses during what officials describe as the driest year on record in key watershed areas. Water stored in Antero will be transferred downstream to Cheesman Reservoir, where cooler conditions and deeper storage will preserve approximately 5,000 acre-feet of water for Front Range municipal users. The unprecedented move reflects worsening drought conditions across Colorado and highlights growing pressure on water managers to maximize efficiency and protect limited supplies.

d. Colorado’s Chimney Hollow begins to fill

As drought conditions intensify across Colorado and the broader West, water managers are increasingly being forced to adapt operations, timelines, and infrastructure decisions in real time. One example is Northern Water’s Chimney Hollow Reservoir project in Colorado, where officials began a limited initial fill of the new reservoir while continuing to study naturally occurring uranium detected in construction materials at the site. The cautious approach reflects how extreme hydrologic conditions and growing water supply pressures are reshaping reservoir operations, water quality management, and long-term planning decisions throughout the region.

e. Colorado River has “personhood”, and other interesting new arguments to protect flow

A recent article from Water Education Colorado examined the growing range of legal and policy strategies being used to protect the overstressed Colorado River, including tribal efforts to grant the river “personhood” status under tribal law. The article highlighted how advocates are increasingly pursuing tools such as environmental protections, recreation-based flow agreements, water rights acquisitions, and “rights of nature” initiatives as drought, climate pressures, and ongoing water demands intensify across the basin. It also underscored that there is no single solution to protecting the river, with stakeholders instead relying on a broad mix of legal, conservation, and management approaches.

f. Meanwhile, new storage projects see turbulence

A northern Colorado water district has agreed to abandon a decades-old proposal to build a major dam and reservoir on South St. Vrain Creek above Lyons, ending a project that had drawn environmental opposition for years. Instead, the district plans to pursue ‘less invasive’ storage alternatives, such as using gravel pits and other off-channel facilities, while still preserving access to the underlying water rights. The decision reflects a broader struggle in western water management balancing water supply reliability with environmental and community concerns. The Alliance continues to advocate for more storage, easing of environmental conditions, and streamlined permitting and construction rules to counter the effects of situations like this.

g. Upper basin farmers and ranchers tightening their belts this year

Farmers in the Colorado River’s Upper Basin are heading into the growing season facing sharply reduced water supplies following an unusually dry winter and low snowpack, forcing widespread “belt tightening” across agricultural regions. Many irrigation districts and operations are cutting back allocations, fallowing fields, reducing herd sizes, and shifting crop plans to higher-value or lower-water-use production just to stay viable. In some areas, producers are receiving only a fraction of their normal water supply, leaving them with difficult choices about what land can be irrigated at all. Some areas of NM have already been cut off of surface supply for the year. These shortages are not just a one-year problem but part of a broader trend of increasing water scarcity tied to drought and declining runoff, changes in timing and quantity of water, creating ongoing uncertainty for agriculture and rural economies.

h. Arizona’s water future hinges on tribal water rights

At the Annual Arizona Water Conference recently, water experts emphasized that the state’s long-term water future is closely tied to unresolved tribal water rights, alongside Colorado River shortages and groundwater constraints. Navajo Nation hydrologist Crystal Tulley-Cordova highlighted the urgency of these issues, noting that about one in three Navajo households still lack access to running water and are far more likely than the average American to lack clean water or sanitation. She pointed to the Northeastern Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement—which includes 39 parties—as a key but still-in-progress effort to address long-standing allocation and access inequities. The discussion underscored that resolving tribal water rights is not only a legal obligation but a central component of Arizona’s broader water security challenges. The Navajo Nation has traditionally been a good partner on projects I have worked on, including signing onto our recent call for funding for the CO River Basin.

43. Rio Grande Basin (CO/NM/TX)

a. New Mexico’s new water dashboard

Amid ongoing extreme drought conditions, New Mexico has launched a new public dashboard to track progress on its 50-year Water Action Plan, providing real-time data on efforts to conserve water, develop new supplies, and protect existing resources. The tool highlights specific targets such as reducing municipal and agricultural water use, expanding treatment of brackish water, and

restoring watersheds, while also underscoring growing risks to water quality from factors like wildfires. State officials say the dashboard is intended to improve transparency and accountability as New Mexico faces increasing water scarcity and long-term supply challenges.

b. Texas initiates historic water infrastructure investment

Texas has launched an historic wave of water investment, with Governor Greg Abbott encouraging applications for more than \$1 billion in Water Supply and Infrastructure Grants as part of a broader state strategy to expand supply and modernize aging systems. This initiative builds on a larger, bipartisan-backed Texas commitment—including roughly \$20 billion in total water infrastructure funding and a new long-term framework to support desalination, reuse, pipelines, and system repairs as the state confronts rapid growth and recurring drought. Taken together, Texas is pairing this near-term grant program with long-term constitutional and legislative investments that dedicate ongoing annual funding to water supply development, signaling one of the largest sustained state-level water infrastructure efforts in the country.

c. Rio Grande Compact Commission sounds the alarm on drought

Water managers in Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas warned this year’s Rio Grande flows could rank among the lowest on record, as severe drought and historically low snowpack continue to strain the basin. Officials at the Rio Grande Compact Commission meeting described conditions as “critical” and “dire,” noting that reservoir storage across the system remains extremely low and that water management decisions, irrigation deliveries, endangered species protections, and compact compliance efforts will all look markedly different this year because of the extraordinary hydrologic conditions facing the region.

d. US Supreme Court begins final steps to approve settlement in TX v. NM

In early May, the US Supreme Court distributed the Report of the Special Master recommending the settlement of the parties be accepted. The Court previously docketed the report, effectively setting a timeline for accepting exceptions to the report. No exceptions were filed by any party marking the first trip to the Supremes in this litigation where a party has not objected. With the parties in agreement, the Court is likely to accept the settlement and is expected to act by sometime this summer.

MISCELLANEOUS

- A recent study found that seeds from the moringa “miracle tree” can remove over 98% of microplastics from drinking water, performing as well as or better than commonly used chemical treatments. Researchers say the natural, plant-based method could offer a more sustainable and potentially lower-cost alternative for water purification, though further testing is needed before large-scale adoption.
- New Mexico conservation leaders and elected officials are mourning the death of media entrepreneur and longtime conservation advocate Ted Turner, praising his decades of work protecting open spaces, restoring wildlife habitat, and promoting large-scale land stewardship across the West. Turner, who owned extensive ranch lands in New Mexico, was widely recognized for his investments in conservation, bison restoration, and

collaborative environmental initiatives that shaped land and wildlife management discussions throughout the region. I had the privilege and pleasure of working with Mr. Turner on legal issues related to the ranch and neighboring properties on a number of occasions before transitioning to this role and always appreciated his practicability.

- A bipartisan bill introduced by lawmakers from Nebraska and Colorado would expand USDA support for precision agriculture workforce training programs, helping colleges and local partners prepare more students for careers in data-driven farming technologies such as GPS-guided equipment, drones, and advanced irrigation systems. Supporters say the legislation is aimed at addressing growing labor shortages in high-tech agriculture while helping producers improve efficiency, conserve water, and reduce input costs.

ADMINISTRATIVE

- Last month I stayed home, caught upon paperwork, and continued preparing to take on interns for the summer to continue working on more development of the 'Boots on the Ground' advocacy Campaign. I am also planning the Board's Summer Retreat. But, I'm off and running again in May and June, with most of my calendar filled with travel for those months. More to come on that front.
- May will see a lot of action on the Hill when it comes to water legislation, agency funding, and, a long awaited Congressional Western Caucus briefing I have been working on for a few months. On May 27, the Alliance, along with two of its more active members of the Advisory Committee and the National Water Resources Association will update Caucus staff and staff of individual members of the committee (only those who elect to participate) in a focused hearing on water, drought, and funding needs.
- We sent multiple letters to Congress in April, including one in support of both programmatic funding at historically high levels, and near term funding to support emergency measures related to the drought. We also have a coalition letter going out this week for the CO River basin where over 70 signatories have already signed on. Please use those letters and the corresponding talking points we put out to push for funding with your individual delegations and reach out if we can help! Be sure to identify key projects to point to as solutions, rather than simply asking for a blank check.
- Please continue to send pictures and information about any successful water infrastructure projects you have in motion or recently completed. We recently released our FY27 funding and drought advocacy letter to support infrastructure funding, and we expect much more on this topic in the coming weeks/months, so I would like to have plenty of pictures and projects to showcase along the way!

This is a quick summary of just a few of the issues the Alliance has been engaged in, some of which has come directly from other authors, such as Alliance Contractors. Please do not hesitate to contact me at 575-202-2705 or samantha@familyfarmalliance.org if you have specific questions or would like further information about what the Alliance is doing to protect water for Western irrigated agriculture.