March IX, 2019

The Honorable Peter DeFazio  
Chairman  
House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee  
2164 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Frank LoBiondo  
Ranking Member  
House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee  
2164 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman DeFazio and Ranking Member LoBiondo:

As the new Congress begins, we look forward to working with you and the committee on an infrastructure package that will benefit all Americans. On behalf of the thousands of Western farmers, ranchers and businesses we represent who provide the food our nation relies upon on millions of acres of productive land, as well as agencies who supply water to Western urban, suburban and rural residents, we urge you to use any infrastructure package to help address severe hydrological conditions in the West.

Water challenges in the West are significant and daunting. Despite wet conditions this winter, the Colorado River Basin has experienced the longest dry spell in recorded history and one of the driest in the past 1,200 years. According to research evaluating tree rings, hydrological conditions in California in the mid-2010s were the worst to hit the region since the 13th century. Drought conditions in the Pacific Northwest over the last half-decade have been severe. As such, we are encouraged by statements that Chairman DeFazio has made that any infrastructure package include water projects.

As a nation we must continually invest in the Western water infrastructure necessary to meet current and future demands. Our existing water infrastructure in the West is aging and in need of rehabilitation and improvement. Water conservation, water recycling, watershed management, conveyance, desalination, water transfers, groundwater storage, and surface storage are all needed in a diversified management portfolio.

- Water conservation, one of the most cost-effective actions, needs to continue to be aggressively pursued in conjunction with new storage and other actions.

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• We need new water storage – both above or below ground – in order to adapt to a changing hydrology and develop usable and sustainable supplies to meet growing demands for water. Surface storage, in particular, provides a degree of operational flexibility and significant water supply volumes that cannot be provided by other management actions. However, we also need new tools to assist in achieving groundwater use sustainability across the West.

• Failing to improve water infrastructure and expand useable supplies will inevitably result in more conflict as pressure grows to ‘solve’ urban and environmental water shortages by moving water away from Western irrigated agriculture. The federal government must become a more active partner in solving these water problems in the West either through direct funding to help meet these needs or develop and expand federal financing mechanisms that have a very low cost to the Treasury and to taxpayers. In short, water resource infrastructure investments should be made more attractive and affordable for non-federal interests.

• Beyond monetary assistance, the federal government should also bring forward policy changes that help ensure that water projects are built in a timely fashion. Making funding available for projects is useless if projects take decades to be approved. In the past, Congress has, on a bipartisan basis, put forward significant efforts to streamline environmental regulations and permitting processes. Any infrastructure package should address this concern by streamlining the regulations and permitting processes for water projects.

• Last fall, the most destructive wildfire in California history – the Camp Fire - destroyed the town of Paradise. Today, on average, seven to eight million acres of forests and grasslands burn annually, about double the figure from three decades ago. Today’s wildfires are often larger, more catastrophic, and deadlier. Wildfires are being impacted by decades of fire suppression, longer fire seasons, pest/insect infestations, reduced snowpack in high elevation forests and increasingly severe droughts. Modernized watershed and forest management tools are just as important as traditional water infrastructure projects to Western water supply reliability. We urge Congress to seek bipartisan measures that streamline projects to thin forests and reduce the fire threat across our National Forest watersheds, which are so important to all Western water users.

• Finally, in order to respond to current and future water shortages, Congress must also provide federal agencies with more flexibility under existing environmental laws and regulations to encourage a more cooperative approach toward achieving multiple goals. And, where such flexibility currently exists in law, Congress should demand that agencies use those flexibilities to act with the urgency and promptness that this drought crisis demands.

We need you to ensure that Western water users have every tool available to survive and recover from years of drought and to prepare for the hard, dry years the future may hold. Congress must
use any infrastructure package to not only address our nation’s chronic needs surrounding roads and bridges, but to also include water infrastructure needs for storage and conveyance.

Sincerely,

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cc: every Western state committee member as well as water subcommittee chair and ranking (15 Members of Congress) also cc Pelosi and McCarthy