Biden-Harris Administration Invests Up to $400 Million to Address Drought, Conserve Water through Production of Water-Saving Commodities

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USDA also announces record $2.3 billion investments under the Western Water Framework; Funding builds on Administration's historic water conservation efforts, which have stabilized short-term western water supply and are investing in long-term solutions

WASHINGTON, Aug. 1, 2024 - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will invest $400 million with at least 18 irrigation districts to help farmers continue commodity production while also conserving water across the West. This funding - which will support irrigation districts and producers in using innovative water savings technologies and farming practices while producing water-saving commodities in the face of continued drought - is expected to conserve up to 50,000 acre-feet in water use across 250,000 acres of irrigated land in production, while expanding and creating new, sustainable market opportunities.

This historic funding builds on the Biden-Harris Administration's work to conserve water, increase the efficiency of water use, upgrade existing infrastructure, and overall strengthen water security in the West. With historic water conservation enabled by President Biden's Investing in America agenda, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation announced in May 2024 it had staved off the immediate possibility of the Colorado River System's reservoirs from falling to critically low elevations that would threaten water deliveries and power production. Due to record conservation investments as well as improved hydrology, Lake Mead levels today, at elevation 1075 feet, are the highest since May 2021, when they were at 1073 feet. The Administration is now working to ensure the long-term sustainability and resilience by focusing on long-term water conservation in several basins across the west.

Agricultural producers are the backbone of rural communities across the West and many of them are struggling under prolonged drought conditions," Vilsack said. "USDA is taking an 'all hands' approach to help address this challenge, including these new partnerships with irrigation districts to support producers. We want to scale up the tools available to keep farmers farming, while also voluntarily

conserving water and expanding markets for water-saving commodities."

Partnering with Irrigation Districts to Support Water Conservation, Produce Water-Saving Commodities

USDA worked to select irrigation districts based on several commodity production and water management-related criteria in order to maximize the ability to achieve program objectives, leveraging available data from the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation to ensure close alignment and partnership. USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) provided data and analysis to support the preliminary selections. Districts that have been preliminarily selected for potential inclusion in this program include:

- Black Canyon Irrigation District, Idaho
- Brooklyn Canal Company, Utah
- Central Oregon Irrigation District, Ore.
- Central Arizona Irrigation and Drainage District, Ariz.
- Corcoran Irrigation District, Calif.
- East Columbia Basin Irrigation District, Wash.
- Elephant Butte Irrigation District, N.M.
- Glenn - Colusa Irrigation District, Calif.
- Greybull Valley Irrigation District, Wyo.
- Hidalgo & Cameron Counties Irrigation District 9, Texas
- Huntley Project Irrigation District, Mont.
- Imperial Irrigation District, Calif.
- Maricopa - Stanfield Irrigation and Drainage District, Ariz.
- Palisade Irrigation District, Colo.
- Quincy Columbia Basin Irrigation District, Wash.
- Solano Irrigation District, Calif.
- Sutter Mutual Water Company, Calif.
- Truckee-Carson Irrigation District, Nev.

The preliminary selected districts may receive up to $15 million each in the awards and will enter into sub-agreements with the producers participating within the district. Depending on available funding, awards to additional districts may be possible.

Producers who participate will receive payments for voluntarily reducing water consumption while maintaining commodity production. The needs of producers will determine the specific strategies for water conservation, including irrigation improvements, shifts in management practices, shifts in cropping systems, and other innovative strategies. USDA will learn from the diversity of strategies used and identify additional opportunities to maintain and expand water-saving commodity production in the future.

Participating producers and irrigation districts will commit to ensuring continued commodity production in the areas where water consumption is reduced. USDA is working to finalize agreements with the preliminarily selected districts, which will include the details of each individual district's water-saving strategies, commodities to be produced, and specific budgets. Following the finalization of those awards, producers within the participating districts will work directly through their irrigation districts to participate. USDA and the preliminarily selected districts will provide more details on the agreements and opportunities for producers to directly enroll.

"Maricopa-Stanfield Irrigation and Drainage District is pleased to be working with USDA to implement practices and projects that save water and improve efficiencies at a time when the historic drought in the southwest has put so much pressure on our agricultural producers. Investing in agriculture is an investment in America," the District said.

"Quincy-Columbia Basin Irrigation District is excited to enter into partnership with USDA to help bring Federal dollars to local growers. Our top priority is providing efficient and dependable irrigation water to our constituents, and we look forward to working with USDA to explore new water-efficient practices in the Columbia Basin," the District said.

"Greybull Valley Irrigation District (GVID) is extremely excited to explore water conservation efforts with the USDA Water-Saving Commodities team, this is a great opportunity for the District and their producers. GVID is always looking for ways to conserve water while supplying their producers with a steady flow for their crops, livestock, underground pipelines and pivots. The District is looking forward to discovering other conservation measures that would be very beneficial for all GVID members," GVID said.

Investing in Water Conservation in Tribal Communities and Acequias

In addition to the preliminarily selected districts announced today, USDA is also announcing a Tribal set-aside within the program, targeting up to $40 million in funding for additional awards within Indian

Country. USDA will work with the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Tribes, and Tribal producers to reduce water consumption and maintain land in agricultural production - supporting the production of water-saving commodities. USDA is partnering with BIA to use available data and ensure meaningful engagement with Tribes to establish selection criteria that reflect the specific needs and water management systems within Indian Country. Additional information for further engagement and selections will be provided in the weeks ahead.

USDA will also include targeted assistance to support water-saving commodity production for acequias, recognizing that many irrigators in the Southwest are formed under the community-based acequia model instead of the irrigation district model. Additional information regarding targeted assistance to acequias that reflects the historical nature of their water distribution structure will follow.

Additional information for further engagement with Tribes and acequias will be provided in the weeks ahead.

Historic Investments in Western Water Complement Water-Saving Commodities Program

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is working to help producers and communities conserve water, manage and prepare for the effects of climate change and build drought resilience in the West through its Western Water and Working Lands Framework for Conservation Action (Western Water Framework), which was launched in 2023. The Western Water Framework describes how NRCS assistance is used to address water resource related issues in 17 states in the West. In fiscal year 2023, NRCS provided $2.3 billion in conservation investments that help producers and communities in Western states better steward water resources, including investments that also support climate change mitigation. This total includes a boost of 9.7 percent or $213.3 million from the Inflation Reduction Act.

The Western Water Framework includes key NRCS conservation programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). Within EQIP NRCS has created a WaterSMART Initiative (WSI), to coordinate investments with the Bureau of Reclamation's WaterSMART investments in priority areas.

For Fiscal Year 2024, NRCS selected 9 new priority areas and is continuing to offer funding in 36 prior approved areas, making $29.7 million in EQIP funding available through the WSI across 16 states.

EQIP and CSP provide conservation planning and funding to help with implementation of conservation practices. Practices like irrigation water management improve irrigation efficiency and mitigate climate change. Meanwhile, practices like conservation crop rotation, cover crop, residue and tillage management, no-till, and nutrient management help producers build resilience to future drought.

ACEP gives producers and landowners tools to protect wetlands, grasslands and agricultural lands which can be used to conserve water.

Together, these efforts by FSA and NRCS advance USDA's efforts to create more, new, and better market opportunities, sustainably grow agricultural productivity to feed a growing population, and help farmers and natural resource managers manage and prepare for the effects of climate change.

Learn more about the Western Water Framework.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. In the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit usda.gov.

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