



The Time is Now to Invest in Western Water Infrastructure – Let's Do It.

By Christine Arbogast and Patrick O'Toole

The coronavirus crisis reminds those of us in the water world of the importance of the systems which sustain us.

Our water systems are among the very most important. The need for effective planning, preparation and implementation of water policy and infrastructure is critical, as we manage the engines which drive our economy, our health and our safety. It is most certainly a primary focus of the Western water community, which develops and manages the water infrastructure so critical to every individual and every economic sector.

Our organizations and other industry leaders have long anticipated the potential crisis if we fail to invest soon in the aging systems which store and deliver water for safe drinking, for agriculture production and for industry. We will face another crisis if we fail to invest in new water storage infrastructure to save water for use in dry years. Years of recurring drought conditions in Western states, and the economic and human impacts of drought, require us to look ahead.

But as we have seen in the health crisis of the spring of 2020, anticipation on paper isn't enough. We must prepare, and we must invest.

An investment in water infrastructure is a powerful investment in our economy, our communities and our health. Since 1902, the investment in Bureau of Reclamation infrastructure has been about \$20 billion. Annually, this infrastructure spurs \$62 billion in direct and associated economic activity. Between 2010 and 2013, every dollar invested in Army Corps of Engineers civil works generated sixteen dollars in economic benefits. Every year, our economy recoups its investment in water infrastructure multiple times over.

For the 17 Western states studied in a 2015 Family Farm Alliance economic report, the total household income impacts from irrigated agriculture, associated service industries, and food processing sectors was \$172 billion annually. Irrigated farming and ranching is a huge economic driver in the West, particularly in rural communities. However, this economic force would virtually disappear, along with the rural American communities dependent on farming and ranching, if the water infrastructure that supports it crumbles.

Infrastructure needs offer an immediate and long-lasting way to stimulate our deeply troubled economy. We saw the positive impact of such investment after the recession of 2008.

Across the West, there are hundreds of small non-federal dams which store water for domestic and irrigation purposes in rural areas. Many are under state restrictions and cannot store water to capacity because they are not safe. In Colorado, for instance, the cost of many of these dam repairs is \$1-3 million each. That infrastructure investment is one-time and would not require ongoing federal cost.

Let's do it.

Many existing storage facilities, federally owned and provider owned, could easily be expanded to store more water when the semi-arid West is blessed with good precipitation. Enlarging existing facilities has a more immediate impact on supplies, is an affordable way to expand supplies, and enjoys significant public support.

Let's do it.

We've seen technologies develop which increase the efficiency of water delivery for both domestic and irrigation purposes. Increasing the manufacture of these technologies and providing incentive for applying them to municipal water systems and agricultural production can conserve finite water resources. In this way, they can be made available in drought periods and can be used for economic development across the board.

Let's do it.

And we know that, while we are unlikely to building another Hoover or Grand Coulee Dam, the long term value of developing more storage is certain. It must be done in an environmentally sensitive and strategic way. And it must be done cooperatively between the federal, state and local water agencies which ensure the water supply which absolutely is our lifeblood.

Crisis—be it a health crisis, a drought crisis, a flood crisis—compels us to work together.

Partnerships are a critical piece of infrastructure investment, and can reach beyond the three levels of government to private sector involvement as well. Policies on infrastructure investment would be most effective if a cooperative development and management structure were a requirement.

The infrastructure investment conversation has been loud and clear in recent years. But the actual infrastructure investment has not been made.

The time is now. Let's do it.

We understand the fiscal difficulty of a large infrastructure stimulus package. But we also understand the historical proof of its effectiveness

If indeed our leaders are unable to reach consensus on a large-scale infrastructure investment plan, we have other specific opportunities for the Administration and Congress to invest in Western water infrastructure. Bills like S. 1932 the *Drought Resiliency and Water Supply Infrastructure Act*, and S. 2044 the *Water Supply Infrastructure Rehabilitation and Utilization Act* address needs long anticipated by Western water resource managers. The biannual Water Resources Development Act, currently teed up in the House and the Senate, affords the opportunity to anticipate and act on Western water needs if it includes a title for Bureau of Reclamation programs and projects, as it has in recent years.

The importance of anticipating a potential crisis, and effectively preparing for it with solid planning and investment, can mitigate or even avert the crisis. We in Western water have done that. The federal government needs to be our partner.

Let's do it.

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The NWRA and the Alliance are organizations that represent the water users that are the cornerstone of western communities and their economies.