

Drought – National Drought Mitigation Center

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From the Director: October 1998

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From the Director

On July 16, 1998, President Clinton signed the National Drought Policy Act into law. This law creates the National Drought Policy Commission (NDPC), which will examine current laws and programs and make recommendations to the president and Congress on the needs for a national drought policy. The Farm Service Agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture will serve as the chair for the Commission, which will comprise 16 members. In addition to the Secretary of Agriculture, other members of the Commission will include the Secretary of the Interior, Secretary of the Army, Secretary of Commerce, Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Administrator of the Small Business Administration, two governors nominated by the National Governors' Association, and two persons nominated by the National Association of Counties and the United States Conference of Mayors. The Commission will also include six persons (nominated by the Secretary of Agriculture, in coordination with the Secretary of the Interior and Secretary of the Army) representing groups acutely affected by drought emergencies, such as the agricultural production community, the credit community, rural and urban water associations, Native Americans, and fishing and environmental interests. Numerous groups are currently requesting representation on the Commission.

The NDPC will undertake several specific tasks during its 18-month duration. First, it will determine what needs exist on all levels of government to prepare for and respond to drought emergencies. Second, the Commission will review existing federal laws and programs relating to drought. Third, the Commission will review state, local, and tribal laws and programs relating to drought. Fourth, the Commission will determine what differences exist between the needs of those affected by drought and the federal laws and programs designed to mitigate the impacts of and respond to drought. Fifth, the Commission will collaborate with appropriate entities to consider appropriate regional initiatives and the application of such initiatives at the national level. Sixth, the Commission will make recommendations on how federal drought laws and programs can be better integrated with ongoing state, local, and tribal programs into a comprehensive national drought policy that emphasizes improved mitigation and response to drought emergencies. Seventh, the Commission will make recommendations on improving public awareness of the need for drought mitigation, prevention,

and response and on developing a coordinated approach to drought mitigation, prevention, and response by governmental and nongovernmental entities. Finally, the Commission will include a recommendation on whether all federal drought preparation and response programs should be consolidated under one existing federal agency and, if so, identify that agency.

The movement to form a comprehensive national drought policy has been a long time in coming. In fact, the United States has had a drought policy for some time, albeit an ad hoc approach that emphasized crisis management and often rewarded individuals and entities for not preparing for the recurrence of drought. Recommendations to form a national drought plan date back at least to 1979, when the General Accounting Office recommended that such a plan be formed to provide assistance in a more “timely, consistent, and equitable manner.” This recommendation was largely ignored by federal agencies. In addition to my own personal recommendations to create a national drought policy and plan, other scientists subsequently made similar proposals. In addition, entities such as the National Academy of Sciences, Great Lakes Commission, American Meteorological Society, Interstate Council on Water Policy, and Environmental Protection Agency made similar recommendations.

We have before us an incredible opportunity to create a national drought policy for the United States that acknowledges current and escalating risks asso-

ciated with drought and emphasizes mitigation and preparedness as a means to reduce these risks for future generations. To accomplish this goal, the Commission must recognize regional differences in our nation’s vulnerability to drought and provide incentives to foster improved preparedness and innovative mitigative measures. Thus, our *national* drought policy should acknowledge these regional differences and propose regional solutions that address these differences.

In October, the National Drought Mitigation Center, with sponsorship from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, conducted a drought planning workshop in collaboration with the U.S./Mexico International Boundary and Water Commission, Comision Nacional del Agua, and the Instituto Mexicano de Tecnología del Agua in Cuernavaca, Mexico. This very successful workshop is seeking to develop a joint drought mitigation program between the United States and Mexico, particularly in the border states region. This workshop followed several years of drought in northern Mexico and drought conditions in Texas and New Mexico in 1996 and 1998.

Drought Network News readers are encouraged to submit articles, announcements, and other information of interest to our network members. **The deadline for submitting material for the February 1999 issue of the newsletter is January 4, 1999.**

Donald A. Wilhite

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