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From the Director: February 1997

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Drought Network News

February 1997

A Newsletter of the International Drought Information Center and the National Drought Mitigation Center

Volume 9 No. 1

From the Director

In the October issue of *Drought Network News*, I briefly discussed two policy initiatives that developed in response to the severe and widespread drought that affected the Southwest and southern Great Plains states in the United States during 1996. The first of these activities, a multistate workshop (and its subsequent report), was coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. This report was submitted to President Clinton in late August; it contained a series of recommendations that focused on short- and long-term issues. The second initiative, under the leadership of the Western Governors' Association (WGA), was not available in final form as we went to press with the last issue of the newsletter. This report is now available and is summarized below.

In June 1996, the WGA adopted a resolution, sponsored by Governor Johnson of New Mexico: "The western governors believe that a comprehensive, integrated response to drought emergencies is critical . . .[and that] it is important to work together and cooperatively with other affected entities to plan for and implement measures that will provide relief from the current drought and prepare for future drought emergencies." From this resolution, a WGA drought task force was created and charged with (1) coordinating the drought response needs of the states by immediately identifying barriers to effective response at the federal level; (2) working with existing state, federal, and private entities to develop criteria for assessing various stages of drought and corresponding emergency response measures and mutual assistance; and (3) sharing solutions and relief measures that can be implemented within the states and localities in the West. Beginning with a meeting of the Drought Task Force in September, four working groups (drought management, agriculture, water resources, and wildfire and forest health) began working on a report that was to be presented at the November 1996 meeting of the 19 western governors.

The recommendations contained in the drought management section of the WGA Drought Task Force report primarily address longer-term mitigation and preparedness issues:

- develop a national drought policy or framework that integrates actions and responsibilities among levels of government;

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- ensure that each state develops a drought contingency plan that includes early detection, monitoring, decision-making criteria, short- and long-range planning, and mitigation;
- establish a regional drought policy and coordinating council to develop sustainable policy, monitor drought conditions and state responses, identify impacts and issues for resolution, facilitate interstate activities, and work in partnership with the federal government to address needs brought on by the drought;
- establish a federal interagency coordinating group with a designated lead agency for drought coordination with states and regional agencies;
- provide federal funding for the National Drought Mitigation Center to assist states with drought preparedness, planning, and mitigation;
- ensure that drought is an essential element in any national discussion of water policy (i.e., the Western Water Policy Review Advisory Commission assessment currently in progress).

The other three working groups also offered numerous, far-reaching recommendations. For example, the water resources group urged enhanced water conservation programs; additional state and federal assistance for drought preparedness, response, and mitigation for small communities and rural water systems; revisions of existing laws and policies on water rights on a short-term basis; and improved funding for the U.S. Geological Service's cooperative stream gauging program and an integrated climate data collection and dissemination system.

The recommendations emanating from both the FEMA and WGA reports reflect an important philosophical change in the way states and others believe droughts should be managed in the United States—from one that predominantly stresses a "relief-oriented" crisis management approach to one that encourages and promotes risk management. Whether these recommendations move beyond the discussion phase will depend largely on how vigorously states collectively pursue their implementation and how receptive federal agencies are to a more integrated (within and between levels of government) and proactive approach to drought management.

I encourage *Drought Network News* readers to obtain a copy of the WGA report and read it carefully. The report can be found on WGA's website (http://www.westgov.org) by clicking on WGA Publications from the home page and scrolling down to the Lands and Waters section, clicking on the link for the drought plan.

This issue of *Drought Network News* includes a wide range of articles on drought-related issues, including linkages between famine and drought in Zimbabwe, drought management strategies in the arid region of India, experiences with medium-range weather forecasting over Kashmir, and a 1996 summary of drought in the United States.

As always, I encourage members of the network to submit articles and reports for publication in *Drought Network News*. The information reported in this newsletter is extremely valuable to scientists, natural resource managers, and policy makers worldwide. **The deadline for receipt of articles for publication in the June issue of *Drought Network News* is May 5, 1997.**

Donald A. Wilhite

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