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Improving Governmental Response to Drought: Lessons from the Mid-1970s

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Abstract

Government response to the mid-1970s drought in the United States is reviewed and evaluated with regard to the general “state of preparedness” and timeliness of federal and state actions. From this review it is apparent that to improve the response of government to future drought, it will be necessary to better define the role of state and federal government. Although federal government must assume responsibility for gathering and distributing general information about drought conditions, it is recommended that states must assume a greater role in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating, in a timely manner, properly packaged information about drought conditions and water supplies. For more reliable assessments of agricultural impacts, crop-specific drought indices are needed to determine probable impacts. Federal and state government should share in these developmental efforts. Drought response plans need to be formulated by state and federal government to improve our “state of preparedness.” Plans at both the federal and state levels should focus on organizational aspects of drought response. Federal assistance programs, tailored for drought-related impacts, must be available “on the shelf” to avoid delays in program formulation and congressional approval.

Keywords: drought, drought impact, water planning, water supply, water policy

Introduction

The first large-scale response by the federal government of the United States to widespread and severe drought came during the years of drought and depression in the 1930s. Subsequent episodes of severe drought, as occurred in the 1950s and 1970s, led to large-scale drought response efforts at the federal level (Wilhite, 1983). Involvement of state government in drought mitigation efforts has generally been of minor importance, although the mid-1970s drought did lead to increased activity at the state level. State alliances were formed during the 1970s to stimulate federal activity.

In this paper we describe state and federal response to drought during the mid-1970s, with particular reference to the agricultural sector. We suggest appropriate roles for state and federal government and describe the need we perceive for a “state of preparedness” with respect to the inevitable droughts of the future.

Drought Planning and Response: The Mid-1970s

The Nixon-Ford Approach: 1974–1976

An interesting aspect of the mid-1970s drought is that it spanned three administrations—those of Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter. There is little doubt that the differing political philosophies of the three presidents had a substantial effect on the type of federal actions taken.

During the 1974–76 drought, the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration (FDAA) was responsible for administering grants from the President’s Disaster Relief Fund to presidentially declared disaster areas. In addition, the FDAA directed and coordinated the assistance efforts of all federal agencies (FDAA, 1975). Numerous federal assistance programs were available in 1975. The most immediate and significant impact of drought is usually in the agricultural sector. Those FDAA programs most relevant for this sector were the Crop Loss Disaster Program, Emergency Conservation Measures Program, Emergency Livestock Feed Program, and the Emergency Loan Program. The Federal Crop Insurance Program was of limited scope during the mid-1970s drought. This drought assistance program differs from other agricultural programs in that benefits are available only to holders of policies taken out in advance of drought. The Federal Crop Insurance Program was expanded under the Carter Administration largely through the efforts of Bob Bergland, then Secretary of Agriculture.

Moisture conditions improved during 1975, but drought returned in the spring of 1976 and continued during the summer. On July 22, 1976, Governor Kneip of South Dakota requested President Ford to direct the heads of the domestic cabinet departments to provide maximum assistance to the severely stricken drought areas in his state (Kneip, 1976). This request was the catalyst that sparked a series of federal actions during the latter part of the Ford Administration. For example, following receipt of this request the President directed the Domestic Council to review the impact of drought in the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Wisconsin to determine if additional assistance might be provided under existing laws and federal programs (May, 1976).

Two weeks later Representative James Abdnor of South Dakota asked the Secretary of Agriculture to create a task force to review drought assistance programs and to provide for local and state input in the review process. Abdnor recommended that the mission of the task force be to develop a new, "expanded" and "streamlined" federal program (Abdnor, 1976). Abdnor also recommended that the USDA emergency programs about to expire be extended. He requested that President Ford evaluate the federal drought program and methods to improve the coordination of current programs. He also asked that the President put renewed emphasis on water utilization and development (Abdnor, 1976). Abdnor sent a copy of his letter to President Ford to all agencies with responsibility for disaster assistance.

On September 17, 1976, in response to Abdnor's letter to the President, the Domestic Council and the Acting Administrator of FDAA discussed the establishment of a special cabinet-level drought committee. As a precedent, they cited the National Interagency Drought Committee, formed in 1971 to combat drought in the Southwest. The intent to form a drought committee was reported to Abdnor by the Deputy Assistant to the President on September 24 (Leppert, 1976). In his letter, the Deputy Assistant acknowledged the difficulties in responding to agricultural drought since its effects are cumulative and not readily identifiable, as are those of other types of natural disasters.

The Special Cabinet-level Drought Committee was formed on October 26 and asked to undertake the following tasks: 1) monitor the agricultural drought situation to assess adequacy of Federal assistance under existing authorities, 2) arrange necessary field coordination, and 3) speed the processing and delivery of assistance provided (OMB, 1976).

The first meeting of the Special Cabinet-level Drought Committee was held on November 11 and served as a review or "show and tell" session for existing agency programs. At this meeting, the committee proposed to establish a working group to review existing legislative and regulatory authorities and to obtain data on federal activities in drought affected areas (USDA, 1976). To accomplish this second task, each agency was to prepare a state-by-state report for the December meeting containing the following information: 1) personnel and other resources in each state; 2) description of agency activities in each state, program funding levels, etc.; and 3) problems encountered in program delivery and proposed solutions, including changes in regulations and legislation (Jeffers, 1976).

The report of the Cabinet-level Drought Committee was submitted to President Ford on December 28, 1976. By this time, 325 counties had been declared emergency disaster areas. The report summarized federal response to 172 that date, reviewed the current drought situation, and identified problems. These included drought effects on Indian tribes, inadequate supplies of surface water, the depletion of ground water supplies, and the "ripple" effect of drought on the economy. These findings suggested to the Committee that current assistance programs might be inadequate if the situation worsened (Bell, 1976). The report cites a conclusion of the 1971 National Interagency Drought Committee: when drought occurs it is difficult to determine the nature and extent of Federal assistance required, and some emergency programs are not designed to cope with agricultural drought.

Most of the expenditures for federal drought assistance in presidentially declared emergency areas up to December 1, 1976, were made through the Agricultural Stabilization and

Conservation Service (ASCS) Disaster Payment Program and the Farmer's Home Administration (FmHA) Emergency Loan Program. Data on these expenditures were attached to the Drought Committee's report. Maps of pasture and range feed conditions (November 1976) and of the Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI) were also provided (October 2, 1976). PDSI maps attached were almost two months old despite the fact that more recent maps were available. This report of the Drought Committee was channeled through the Domestic Council but did not reach President Ford until January 3, 1977, seventeen days before the end of his term of office.

Federal drought response during the Ford Administration can be described as reactive in nature. Little, if any, planning was done to evaluate alternative federal actions under various scenarios of future weather. No new programs were developed and no coordinated effort was initiated to respond to deteriorating conditions.

The major thrust by the Ford Administration came only days before the presidential election with the creation of the Special Cabinet-level Drought Committee that reviewed actions taken prior to its creation. The impetus for this committee, however, appears to have originated in FDAA, stimulated by Representative James Abdnor of South Dakota, rather than by the administration. The Drought Committee met only twice and produced a report for the President that summarized federal drought response activities. The outcome of the November presidential election made it almost inevitable that positive federal initiatives would await the new administration. This Cabinet-level Drought Committee became inactive in early 1977.

The Carter Approach: 1977

In January of 1977, states began to form regional alliances to put added political pressure for action on Washington. On January 23, 1977, the Western Governors' Task Force on Regional Policy Management met to discuss the scope and magnitude of western drought (WESTPO, 1978). Following this meeting, the Western Governors' lead agency for water policy and development, the Western States Water Council (WSWC), began to monitor the drought situation regularly. The governors also requested a meeting with Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus to discuss state needs and federal actions to mitigate the impacts of the drought. This meeting with Secretary Andrus on western drought conditions concluded (WESTPO; 1978) with "(1) a commitment by Secretary Andrus to seek the appointment of a White House-level drought coordinator to be located in the Executive Office of the President; (2) a commitment by Secretary Andrus to encourage the President to set aside time for a discussion of the drought issue during a meeting with the nation's governors scheduled for February 28; (3) a commitment by the governors to consider the need for and alternative approaches to cooperative, multilateral actions in response to the drought and its impacts; (4) a decision by the governors to designate a drought coordinator in each state; and (5) a decision by the governors to consider and make decisions with regard to more concrete approaches to these issues at a meeting the following week in Washington held in conjunction with the winter meeting of the National Governors Conference." This meeting with Secretary Andrus represents the first joint discussion of mitigation alternatives by state and federal officials. The slowness of this development is disturbing considering the

fact that many areas were then entering their second, and some their third, consecutive year of drought.

The regional drought action initiatives by the western governors had almost immediate impact on federal policy. Two days after the February 20 meeting, President Carter appointed Jack Watson, Cabinet Secretary and Special Assistant for Intergovernmental Relations, to be the Federal Drought Coordinator.

By February 25, Watson had already expressed President Carter's deep concern about drought conditions and the need for greater emphasis on the coordination of federal assistance programs to the 13 federal agencies with responsibility in this area. Watson requested each agency to prepare a report that would focus on the following subjects:

1. A brief evaluation (state by state, if possible) of the impacts of the drought and drought-related problems in each agency's area of responsibility.
2. A full list and brief description of each agency's appropriate drought assistance program, including legislative and regulatory limitations on eligibility for assistance under these programs.
3. Information on any administrative or funding problems that served to impede the full use of these authorities.
4. An evaluation of complaints most frequently received by each agency from officials of state and local governments or from drought victims regarding the timing or quality of Federal disaster assistance.
5. Suggestions of legislative changes or initiatives that might help better organize and deliver Federal assistance in support of State and local government efforts (Watson, 1977).

Watson asked that these reports be completed by March 3, giving respondents a lead time of less than one week. The group of representatives from the 13 federal agencies became known as the White House Drought Study Group. The purpose of this group was to collect data and make technical assessments on the extent, severity, and impact of the drought (White House Drought Study Group, 1977). Material was to be updated periodically and transmitted to the Drought Coordinating Committee.

The agency reports submitted to Watson, totaling several thousand pages, lacked uniformity and the data suffered from inconsistency. Watson recognized the inability of the Drought Coordinating Committee to restructure the raw information provided by the agencies into a format that would be useful in the decision-making process (Kallaur, 1977). On March 11, the Corps of Engineers was asked to coordinate this assimilation process. The Corps accepted responsibility for this, a task which was to be completed in one week. The 13 agencies that submitted reports were invited to participate in this effort; about half of them continued to work closely with the Corps until the task was completed on March 18. The Drought Appraisal Report produced by the Drought Study Group was to serve as the basis for the President's drought program.

Upon completion of the report, the Drought Study Group was to continue to assist the White House in the following areas: (1) projecting surface and groundwater supplies un-

der various scenarios, (2) estimating potential savings from water conservation, (3) assessing state programs, (4) identifying impediments to the reallocation of water supplies (e.g., legislative or administrative at state and federal levels), and (5) assessing the potential for the redistribution of projected supplies among users and the possible impacts of these decisions (Kallaur, 1977).

The Drought Appraisal Report of the White House Drought Study Group described drought conditions in the United States and addressed questions of water conservation (demand reduction), water supply increase and management measures, and potential immediate mitigating actions. The report concentrated heavily on the far West, sometimes to the point of neglecting the extreme drought areas of the Midwest and northern plains states. Minutes of the Drought Study Group on March 11 show the following priority order assigned to the various areas affected by the drought:

1. California
2. Pacific Northwest: Washington, Oregon, Idaho
3. Northwest Nevada and Montana
4. North Dakota
5. South Dakota
6. Nebraska
7. Upper Colorado, Kansas, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah

The Drought Appraisal Report indicated that by the spring of 1977 the most severe effects of drought were being experienced in the agricultural sector, principally dry-land and irrigated crops. Forage supply was a problem only in the Souris-Red-Rainy basin of North Dakota-Minnesota. However, lack of soil moisture throughout the western states created considerable concern for crop prospects for the 1977 growing season. Dryland production was projected at only 50-60 percent of normal, with \$4 billion of losses projected. Crop production under irrigation was projected at only 75 percent of normal for a loss of \$2-3 billion. The Great Plains states were not included in these estimates of production shortfalls (White House Drought Study Group, 1977).

The Drought Appraisal Report concentrated on means for reducing water demand in irrigated agriculture since irrigation then accounted for the major portion (83 percent) of water consumed in the western states. Recommendations included improved irrigation techniques, on-farm management, weed and phreatophyte control, and seepage control. Institutional changes were also suggested. The responsibility for implementing these measures was at the level of the farmer or the water district with assistance to come from federal, state, and local governments. Most of these techniques were medium- to long-term measures requiring several years to implement. Only a few were expected to produce a water savings during 1977. A similar set of water conservation measures was proposed for the residential and industrial sectors. A summary of potential immediate actions available to the agricultural and urban sectors was also included in this report. These recommendations were quite general, at best. It is difficult to imagine how the recommendations of this

report might have been used by the White House or Drought Coordination Committee to construct a more responsive drought assistance program.

By early March, 20 states had appointed state drought coordinators (WESTPO, 1978). The function of these appointees, the offices they directed, and purposes of drought task forces varied from state to state. The purpose of the Nebraska Drought Task Force, for example, was "to lend all possible assistance to those most afflicted" (Lincoln Star, 1977). Membership included representatives of appropriate federal and state agencies, including the University of Nebraska. The objectives of the task force as stated by the Governor were quite specific and long range in scope. Although each objective was addressed briefly by the task force, none was completed satisfactorily. The task force served primarily as a pass-through agency for information on federal drought programs. Examination of task force files, including the minutes of meetings, indicates no noteworthy or long-lasting accomplishments.

From early to mid-March, a considerable amount of information was exchanged between the Federal Drought Coordinating Committee and the Western States Water Council, located in Salt Lake City. The White House preferred to coordinate discussions with WSWC rather than to work with each drought-affected state. This approach facilitated progress toward assessing regional drought problems and coordinating federal agency response. On March 23, 1977, President Carter sent a request to Congress for \$844 million in loans and grants to farmers, ranchers, communities, and businesses stricken by drought. Table 1 provides the details of the President's program. This program was passed, intact, by Congress, except in the case of the Small Business Administration (SBA). The SBA legislation was tied to an omnibus SBA disaster bill and failed to pass Congress. The Economic Development Agency (EDA) loan and grant program was reduced in funds from \$225 to \$175 million (Crawford, 1978). The Water Bank Bill (table 1) was signed by the President on April 7 while other portions of the "package" were delayed until early May. Funding for these programs was to be expended or committed by September 30, 1977.

On March 29, A. Berry Crawford of the Rocky Mountain Institute for Policy Research was assigned by the Western Governors Drought Action Task Force to work directly with Jack Watson and the Drought Coordinating Committee (WESTPO, 1978). One of Crawford's principal assignments was to prepare a directory of federal programs related to drought relief. This directory was completed in early June and copies distributed to appropriate agencies of government and to citizens.

Table 1. President Carter's Proposed Drought Program, March 23, 1977 (WESTPO, 1978)

Title	Purpose/Description	Amount
Emergency Loans Program (FmHA)	5 percent loans to cover prospective losses to farmers and ranchers	\$100,000,000
Community Program Loans (FmHA)	\$150 million in 5 percent loans and \$75 million in grants to communities less than 10,000 population for emergency water supplies	\$225,000,000
Emergency Conservation Measures Program (ASCS)	Soil Conservation cost-sharing grants	\$100,000,000
FCIC Insurance	Increase FCIC capital stock	\$100,000,000
Drought Emergency Program (Bur. Rec.)	Creation of water bank, protection of fish and wildlife, grants to states, 5 percent for water supply and conservation measures	\$100,000,000
Emergency Fund (Bur. Rec.)	Emergency irrigation loans	\$ 30,000,000
Emergency Power (SWPA)	Purchase of emergency power supply	\$ 13,800,000
Community Emergency Drought Relief Program (EDA)	\$150 million in 5 percent loans and \$75 million in grants to communities over 10,000 population for emergency water supply	\$225,000,000*
Physical Loss and Economic Injury Loans (SBA)	Low interest loans for small businessmen (including farmers)	\$ 50,000,000**
	Total	\$844,000,000

*Only \$175 million of this amount was finally appropriated.

**Action on this proposal resulted in the lowering of interest rates for Physical Loss and Economic Injury Loans (both ongoing, funded programs) but none of the additional appropriation originally requested was granted.

In late March and early April discussion was initiated on the formation of an Inter-agency Drought Coordinating Committee (IDCC). The major function of this committee was to designate areas eligible for federal assistance as a result of drought (Cutler, 1977). These designations, however, would apply only to programs authorized by the President's drought package. A designated representative of the USDA was to serve as chairman and the representative of FDAA would serve as secretary. Other members of this committee included representatives of the Departments of Interior and Commerce and the Small Business Administration. Areas designated by the IDCC were referred to as Emergency Drought Impact Areas (EDIAs). Governors were to submit designation requests, with supporting documentation, directly to the IDCC. A Governor could request that all or a portion of his state be designated an EDIA.

During the first formal meeting of the IDCC, held on April 25, 1977, the committee designated 1183 counties as EDIAs. Of these, 842 had already received presidential or secretarial declarations (Stockton, 1977). The EDIAs were located in 24 western and midwestern states. The list of declarations grew during the summer months. By September 12, 1977, the date of the last declaration, 2145 counties (two-thirds of all counties in the United States) were on the list of EDIAs (fig. 1). These designations were to expire on September 30, along with the special authorizations for President Carter's drought program.

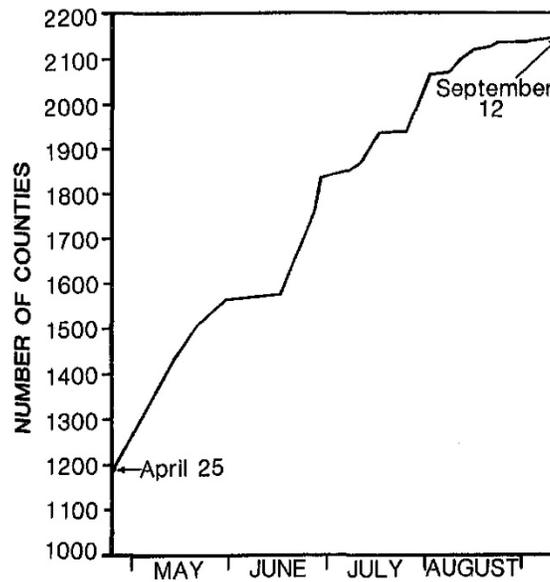


Figure 1. Emergency Drought Impact Areas designated by the IDCC, 1977

In the early stages of the IDCC, there were no distinct criteria for the designation of EDIAs. It was, however, during this period that most of the counties were designated. Kyle Schilling of the Corps of Engineers has indicated that at least one-half of the counties designated during this period were so designated with no supporting documentation (personal communication, 1977). The need for designation criteria was discussed during the third meeting of the IDCC, on May 3. It was agreed that ASCS would draft such a list. These criteria were presented to the committee on May 20.

Declarations by the IDCC after June 1 were based loosely on the following criteria: (1) request from governor, with supporting documentation, (2) the Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI), (3) soil moisture map, (4) monthly reports of the Rural Development Committee (USDA), (5) local information illustrating drought severity, (6) federal agency reports of the drought situation, and (7) review of drought action committee reports for the western states (IDCC Minutes, 1977). According to the General Accounting Office (GAO), the PDSI may have been the principal criterion used by the IDCC (GAO, 1979). An index value no higher than -2.00 for the previous three-month period was needed to qualify (Stockton, 1977). In the event that a request was denied, the applying governor was advised of the reasons and the potential availability of other federal assistance programs.

Minutes of the IDCC meetings are sketchy at best. The committee's actions are documented, but the discussion that led to those actions is usually omitted. Occasional reference is made to the PDSI as supporting evidence for acceptance or rejection of a governor's request for designation. Data related to each of the seven criteria listed above were seldom available.

Considerable confusion developed over IDCC designation. Although it is not specified in the original memorandum of agreement, IDCC designations applied only to programs included in the presidential drought package. Counties designated by the IDCC still had

to meet the eligibility requirements of programs supported by the President's special appropriation. Eligibility for programs not included in the presidential drought package was determined on a program-by-program basis and was not linked to IDCC designations. The only distinction between IDCC-designated and non-IDCC counties was their access to the special drought funds associated with the President's drought package.

IDCC designations were sweeping, usually focusing on states rather than individual counties. The detailed county-level evaluation process was left to individual agencies. Most of the funds appropriated by the President's drought package, particularly ASCS and EDA funds, were expended by early summer. The IDCC expressed concern about continuing to designate counties, given the diminishing supply of funds.

Although the presidential drought package was substantial—probably the largest single allocation for drought relief in the nation's history—it represented only a small portion of the total drought assistance program. The total relief program included some 40 separate programs administered by 16 different federal agencies. GAO (1979) reported that the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, and Interior and the SBA alone administered over \$5 billion in drought relief programs. However, the cost of the total drought program was probably nearer \$7–8 billion.

The drought response program of the Carter Administration was probably the most massive attempt in U.S. history by the federal government to alleviate drought conditions. This effort was not commensurate with the severity of drought. The administration made an earnest attempt to be responsive to the needs of the states and in so doing probably overreacted to the situation. In fact, the 1977 disaster appropriations were 6 to 18 months late and millions of dollars were approved for projects which had little, if any, impact on reducing the effects of drought (GAO, 1979). In addition, the drought designation procedure was inefficient and confusing, and information about drought conditions and probable impacts was insufficient, poorly formatted, hastily assembled, and often untimely. Assistance programs were poorly coordinated between agencies and, sometimes, duplicative (GAO, 1979).

Drought Planning and Response: What Should Come Next?

To improve the response of government to future drought, it will be necessary to better define the role or responsibility of state and federal government and regional organizations. Although generating information of a general kind about drought conditions is a role for the federal government, states should also assume a greater role in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating, in a timely manner, properly packaged information about drought conditions and water supplies. Research should be initiated on crop-specific drought assessment indices so that agricultural impacts can be more reliably determined for the needs of policy makers. Such research should be jointly supported by federal and state government. Policy makers at all levels of government need to be better educated by specialists about drought and its impacts on society. Drought response plans should be formulated at both the state and federal levels in order to improve our "state of preparedness" to contend with widespread and severe drought.

A federal response plan should deal with organizational problems, such as agency responsibilities, and should develop assistance programs ready for implementation in times of drought. State response plans should also deal with organizational roles. A detailed data collection, analysis, and dissemination plan should be developed and tailored to each state's unique water supply problems. Information networks should be as near real-time as possible and operate continuously so as to identify problems and the localities affected as soon as possible.

An important lesson learned from the mid-1970's drought is that regional alliances between states can be quite effective in stimulating federal interest and ameliorative programs in times of drought. Such alliances increase the likelihood that the attention of the federal bureaucracy and of Congress can be focused early on developing droughts and the problems that stem from drought.

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