Family Farm ALLIANCE®
PROTECTING WATER FOR WESTERN IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE

Monthly Briefing

A Summary of the Alliance's Recent and Upcoming Activities and Important Water News

SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER 2026 • Issue #290

Board Member Quote of the Month

"Fallowing farmland is like taking timber harvest out of a timber town. Inevitably, that community will wither away and never be the same again. The decisions we make about water, forests and farmland aren't just decisions about natural resources — they're decisions about whether rural communities have a future. We need to manage these resources for the long term and make sure the West can continue to produce food, sustain communities, and support the economy. This has been a challenging year for Western farmers and ranchers, but their strength and resilience continue to show what this industry is capable of — and that resilience gives us the energy to keep leading and fighting for the future."

–Clinton Pline, Family Farm Alliance Board of Directors, Idaho

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Farmers, Ranchers and Water Managers Take Western Water Priorities to Washington D.C.

More than 30 farmers, ranchers and irrigation managers from across the West traveled to Washington, D.C., in September for the Family Farm Alliance's Annual Farmer Lobbyist Trip. Over three days, members met with federal agency officials, Congressional staff and Members of Congress to discuss the challenges facing Western irrigated agriculture and the investments needed to keep farms, ranches and rural communities productive. The message was straightforward: Western irrigated agriculture is under pressure, but water security is a solvable challenge.

The U.S. Capitol, where more than 30 Alliance members carried Western water priorities in September.

Historic drought, aging infrastructure, declining commodity prices and rising input costs are creating significant challenges for producers. At the same time, water managers are working to operate aging systems, respond to changing hydrology and navigate increasingly complex regulatory requirements. For more than 120 years, federal investment and partnerships have played an important role in helping the West develop and manage its water supplies. Alliance members emphasized that those partnerships remain important today, particularly as Western communities confront a monumentally difficult water year.

Responding to Drought — and Preparing for What Comes Next

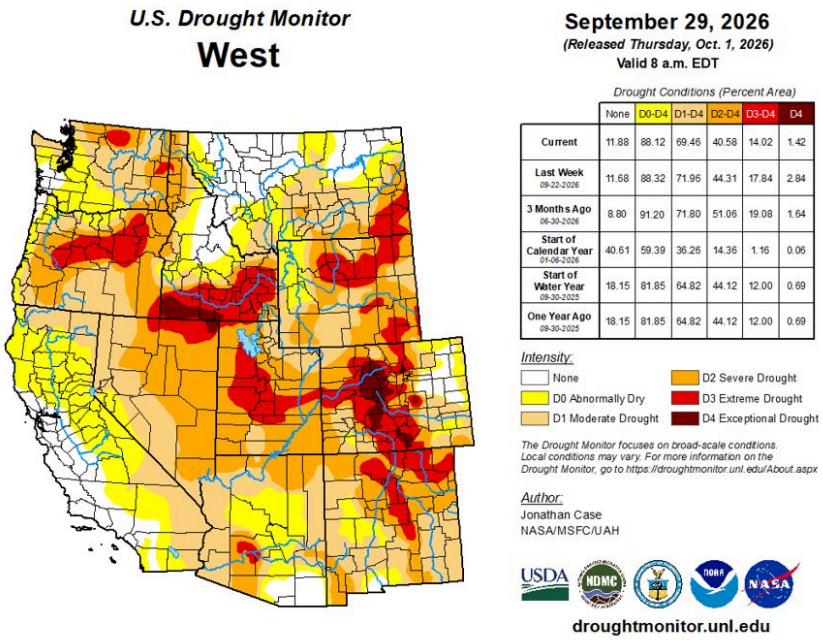
Drought and infrastructure funding were central topics throughout the trip. Every state in the West is experiencing some level of drought this year, with many basins facing historically low runoff and severe water shortages. Alliance members discussed the need for both immediate assistance and long-term investment. In the short term, agricultural water users need resources for temporary, compensated and voluntary water transfers, conservation measures that produce immediate savings, and relief from water and power project costs that continue even when deliveries are reduced or eliminated.

Members also urged Congress to provide $2 billion per year for five years to help Western irrigators and rural communities respond to the current crisis, prepare for changing hydrology and improve drought resilience. Looking beyond the immediate crisis, members emphasized the importance of sustained investment in storage, conveyance, system modernization and new water supplies. Programs such as WaterSMART, Reclamation's Storage and Aging Infrastructure programs and USDA's PL-566 program provide tools for communities already working to improve water reliability.

Removing Barriers to Water Projects

Members also raised concerns about the time and cost required to complete water infrastructure and other projects. In many parts of the West, projects that could improve water efficiency, increase storage or modernize

delivery systems can take years to navigate through federal environmental reviews. The Alliance supports efforts to accelerate project delivery while maintaining appropriate environmental protections, including reforms to NEPA and implementation of the Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act and National Historic Preservation Act.



U.S. Drought Monitor, West region, September 29, 2026. Every Western state is experiencing some level of drought this year.

Members also discussed the ongoing realignment of the Bureau of Reclamation and the importance of giving local water managers greater flexibility to manage projects efficiently. The Alliance has consistently advocated for collaboration over litigation, and members highlighted examples from across the West where farmers, water managers, tribes, states and other stakeholders are working together on voluntary solutions that benefit both agricultural production and environmental resources.

Building the Next Generation of Water Supply

The conversations in Washington also looked beyond conservation and efficiency. Alliance members emphasized that meeting the West's long-term water needs will require developing new supplies alongside continued conservation and modernization. Desalination, water recycling, aquifer recharge, precipitation enhancement, precision irrigation, soil-moisture monitoring, canal automation and other technologies are already being deployed in communities across the West. The challenge now is moving proven ideas from pilot projects to broader implementation.

The Annual Farmer Lobbyist Trip gave the people managing water and producing food on the ground an opportunity to explain these realities directly to federal policymakers.

As Alliance members continue that work, the goal remains consistent: keep reliable water supplies available to Western farms and ranches while investing in the infrastructure, technology and partnerships needed to adapt to a changing West.

Congress Returns to Washington With a Long To-Do List – then quickly exits

Congress returned to Washington following its August recess with a long list of unfinished business — and not much time on the legislative calendar to address it. The immediate priority was keeping the federal government

funded. Congress ultimately approved and President Trump signed a continuing resolution funding the government through December 11, avoiding an October 1 shutdown. The measure passed the Senate 90–6 and the House 370–48. That gives lawmakers additional time to complete the FY2027 appropriations process, but it also sets up another significant funding deadline late in the year. The House has advanced all 12 appropriations bills through committee and passed three on the floor, while the Senate process has moved more slowly.

Water Infrastructure Funding Remains a Concern

The Administration's FY2027 budget proposal called for substantial reductions in federal support for water infrastructure, including major proposed cuts to the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds. The proposal also would reduce or eliminate funding for programs supporting water storage, reuse, desalination and USDA watershed projects. While Congress rejected many similar reductions during the FY2026 process, the proposal reflects an ongoing debate over the federal role in financing water infrastructure.

For Western water users, the issue goes beyond any single program. Federal investment in storage, conveyance, aging infrastructure, conservation and new water supplies remains an important part of preparing communities for changing hydrology. As Congress works through FY2027 appropriations, the Alliance will continue to monitor funding levels for the programs that support those efforts.

Permitting Reform Moves Forward

Permitting reform also remains an important issue for water and infrastructure projects. Federal environmental reviews can add years and significant costs to projects that would improve water delivery, storage and system efficiency. There has been some movement in Congress. In late September, a bipartisan group of senators announced an agreement on a permitting reform package addressing environmental review timelines, litigation and interagency coordination for major infrastructure and energy projects. A vote is expected after the November elections, although additional negotiations and amendments remain possible.

The Administration is also pursuing permitting changes through regulatory and administrative actions, including efforts to streamline historic-preservation reviews and changes to EPA permitting requirements. For Western water managers, the broader question remains how to maintain appropriate environmental review while allowing needed water infrastructure and modernization projects to move forward in a reasonable timeframe.

Farm Bill Still Waiting

There is no substantial movement to report on the Farm Bill. The legislation remains stalled, despite its importance to agricultural producers and the conservation programs that support water efficiency and watershed health. Programs such as PL-566 and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program remain important tools for locally driven conservation and infrastructure projects. The Alliance will continue tracking negotiations as Congress considers whether there is an opportunity to move Farm Bill legislation later this year.

Natural Resources Oversight Continues

The House Natural Resources Committee has also continued its oversight activity. In September, the Committee opened an investigation into 19 environmental organizations regarding their use of federal fee-shifting provisions under laws including the Endangered Species Act, NEPA and the Equal Access to Justice Act. The Committee is seeking information about litigation practices and attorney-fee awards as part of its broader examination of federal natural-resource policy. The Committee is also continuing to examine water rights, habitat management,

federal lands and other issues directly relevant to Western agriculture and water users.

What Comes Next

With the November elections approaching, the legislative calendar is compressed. Government funding, the Farm Bill, permitting reform, water and infrastructure legislation and other major measures will compete for limited floor time during the remainder of the year. For the Alliance, the priority remains consistent: making sure Western farmers, ranchers and irrigation managers have a voice as Congress considers the investments and policies that will shape water reliability and agricultural production across the West.

Farm Bill conservation programs help fund irrigation efficiency on Western farms.

Bipartisan Permitting Reform Package Takes Aim at Federal Project Delays

A bipartisan group of Senate committee leaders released a major permitting reform proposal September 30 that could have significant implications for Western water infrastructure and other projects requiring federal approvals. The Bipartisan American Affordability and Jobs Act was developed over months of negotiations by the leaders of the Senate Environment and Public Works and Energy and Natural Resources Committees. The bill is sponsored by EPW Chair Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV), ENR Chair Mike Lee (R-UT), EPW Ranking Member Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and ENR Ranking Member Martin Heinrich (D-NM). The more than 400-page proposal is intended to accelerate federal reviews and provide greater certainty for energy and infrastructure projects. Importantly for Western water users, many of its permitting reforms would apply well beyond energy projects, including water, transportation, housing, manufacturing, and other infrastructure.

Faster Environmental Reviews

The legislation would establish firm deadlines for environmental reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA): two years for environmental impact statements and one year for environmental assessments. It would also establish a 150-day window for challenging federal approvals under NEPA, the Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act and National Historic Preservation Act. In general, parties would have to participate in the public comment process to bring a subsequent challenge. For water managers accustomed to projects stretching through years of review and litigation, the proposed deadlines could provide greater predictability for projects involving storage, conveyance, system modernization and other infrastructure.

Changes to the Endangered Species Act

The proposal also addresses the federal Endangered Species Act consultation process. It would shorten the standard formal Section 7 consultation period from 90 to 60 days and reduce the maximum extension from 150

Canal modernization projects can spend years in federal review.

to 100 days without the applicant's consent. For projects requiring NEPA review, consultation would have to be completed within the applicable NEPA deadline. The bill would also allow states to assume Section 7 consultation responsibilities under agreements with the Department of the Interior, while preserving an applicant's ability to work directly with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Other provisions would establish a statutory definition of the "best scientific and commercial data available," require Interior to consider qualifying state-collected data in certain listing and delisting decisions and exempt some activities from consultation requirements.

Narrowing Historic Preservation Reviews

The bill proposes substantial changes to Section 106 reviews under the National Historic Preservation Act. Among other provisions, it would narrow the definition of a federal "undertaking" and establish specific deadlines for determining whether a project is subject to review, evaluating effects and completing consultation. The proposal also would narrow the definition of "adverse effect" to focus on reasonably foreseeable, direct physical changes to historic properties. Certain visual, noise, atmospheric and temporary effects generally would not qualify. For continually operated water and power facilities, where historic-preservation reviews can contribute to significant project delays and costs, these changes could be particularly relevant.

Greater Permitting Certainty

Another provision would limit an agency's ability to revoke an already-issued permit except under narrow circumstances. The proposal also contains changes to Clean Water Act permitting and Section 401 certifications, although the most specific Section 401 provisions apply to natural gas pipelines and interstate transmission lines rather than water projects generally. The legislation includes a number of energy-specific provisions as well, including changes to interstate transmission authority, cost allocation and large electricity users such as data centers.

What Happens Next?

The legislation is not yet law, and substantial questions remain about its path through Congress. No vote is expected until the post-election lame-duck session. Senate leaders have indicated that the bill could be among the first measures considered when the Senate returns in November. The bipartisan sponsorship is notable, but agreement within both parties has not yet been secured. Additional changes are expected as lawmakers continue reviewing the proposal, and its reception in the House remains uncertain.

For the Family Farm Alliance, this is an important proposal to watch because permitting reform is ultimately about more than energy development. The ability to complete water storage, conveyance, modernization and other infrastructure in a predictable timeframe is increasingly important as Western communities adapt to

changing hydrology. The Alliance will continue monitoring the legislation as it moves through the lame-duck session. Members should also keep in mind that the current proposal is a starting point, not a final product, and provisions may change significantly before any legislation reaches the President.

California Bay-Delta Plan Moves Toward Final Decision

After years of negotiations, scientific review and stakeholder engagement, California's long-running effort to update management of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Bay-Delta is approaching a critical decision point. The California State Water Resources Control Board released its final draft Bay-Delta Plan in August. The proposal is intended to address water quality and fish and wildlife conditions in the Sacramento River, its tributaries and the Delta while also considering water-supply reliability for communities and agriculture.

At the center of the proposal are two implementation pathways. The first is a regulatory pathway that would establish requirements for water rights not participating in the voluntary approach. The second is the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes (HRL) pathway, which incorporates voluntary commitments involving both strategic river flows and habitat restoration. Both pathways would have regulatory effect if the plan is adopted.

A levee along the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

The Healthy Rivers and Landscapes approach has been developed over several years through collaboration among water users, farmers, landowners, conservation organizations and government agencies. The proposal seeks to combine flow improvements with habitat restoration and other actions rather than relying on flow requirements alone. The State Water Board's proposal includes more than 27,000 acres of proposed aquatic habitat restoration and a framework for ongoing monitoring and evaluation. For California's agricultural water users, the stakes are significant. The Bay-Delta system is a critical component of the state's water supply, supporting both environmental resources and millions of acres of farmland. The final plan will establish a framework for how those competing demands are managed for years to come.

The State Water Board received written comments on the final draft through September 18 and is scheduled to consider adoption of the plan at a public meeting October 28–29. Interested parties will have an opportunity to provide oral comments at that meeting. The Family Farm Alliance will continue to follow the process closely, particularly given the significant involvement of Alliance members in California's water management and the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes discussions. The Bay-Delta debate illustrates a broader challenge facing Western water management: developing durable solutions that improve environmental outcomes while maintaining reliable water supplies for farms, communities and the broader economy.

Colorado River Enters a New Operating Era

The Colorado River entered a new operating era October 1, as the operating guidelines that governed the river through 2026 expired and the Basin moved into a new framework for managing an increasingly stressed system. That transition was a central topic at the Colorado River Symposium, held in Santa Fe, New Mexico at the end of September. The invitation-only gathering brought together water managers, scientists, academics, attorneys, federal agency representatives and other water leaders from throughout the Basin. With Reclamation's proposed post-2026 actions finalized just weeks earlier, the Symposium provided an opportunity to look beyond the immediate operating decisions and discuss what comes next.

The "bathtub ring" at Lake Powell shows how far the reservoir has dropped.

The near-term picture is challenging. After more than two decades of drought, both Lake Powell and Lake Mead have reached record-low elevations, with their combined storage at its lowest point since Lake Powell began filling in 1963. The 2025–26 winter also produced the lowest observed snowpack on record, further reducing runoff into the system. In August, the Department of the Interior finalized 2027–2028 Operating Guidelines and a broader 10-year Decision Framework extending through 2036. The framework was adopted after the seven Basin States were unable to reach consensus on a long-term operating agreement, though the federal government continues to reiterate that it will accept and work with any plan the basin states agree to, if agreement is achievable.

For 2027 and 2028, Lower Basin water deliveries will be reduced by 1.25 million acre-feet annually. If the proposed state sharing arrangement is implemented in the lower basin, the reductions would be 760,000 acre-feet for Arizona, 440,000 for California and 50,000 for Nevada. Lower Basin users are also expected to voluntarily conserve and store at least 700,000 acre-feet over the two-year period. The framework provides additional flexibility for Upper Basin reservoir operations and establishes elevation triggers for additional action if conditions deteriorate.

The new framework provides an important measure of operational certainty, but it does not resolve the larger question facing the Basin: how will a river with less water reliably serve the people, farms, businesses and ecosystems that depend on it? That question will continue to drive negotiations, litigation and policy discussions throughout the Basin. The framework itself is designed to accommodate additional voluntary conservation, water storage, infrastructure investments and water-supply projects as conditions change and Basin parties continue negotiating.

Agriculture will be an important part of that conversation. The Colorado River supports approximately 5.5

million acres of farmland and agricultural communities throughout the West. Protecting that production capacity requires more than asking existing water users to continually absorb additional reductions. It requires investment in storage, conveyance, conservation, system efficiency and new water supplies while respecting existing water rights and the communities that have built their economies around them.

The challenges are already visible beyond the mainstem reservoirs. In southeastern Colorado, proposed municipal acquisitions of agricultural land and water have renewed concerns about the long-term effects of "buy and dry." In the Gunnison Basin, historically low Blue Mesa Reservoir levels are forcing difficult decisions among storage, hydropower, recreation, environmental resources, and agriculture. These local conflicts illustrate the broader reality of operating a river system under prolonged scarcity: every decision has consequences somewhere else in the Basin.

The Family Farm Alliance will continue to make sure agriculture is part of those conversations. As the Basin moves into this new operating era, our focus will remain on protecting the ability of farmers and ranchers to produce food, defending the value of existing water rights and advancing practical solutions that increase the amount and reliability of water available to the system. That means supporting conservation and efficiency, but also storage, conveyance, water reuse, augmentation, infrastructure modernization and other tools that can expand and better manage available supplies. It also means keeping agricultural producers at the table as the Basin develops the next generation of operating rules.

The Colorado River has entered a new chapter. The work now is to make sure agriculture has a meaningful role in writing what comes next.

Growing the Pie: Innovation for the Next 100 Years

The challenges facing Western irrigated agriculture are getting bigger. Across the West, farmers, ranchers and water managers are dealing with historic drought, changing hydrology, aging infrastructure, rising costs, regulatory uncertainty and growing competition for limited water supplies. The conversations we had in Washington, D.C., last month made one thing clear: these challenges cannot be solved by simply deciding who gets a larger piece of a shrinking pie.

We need to grow the pie. That is the focus of this year's Family Farm Alliance Annual Conference, "Growing the Pie: Innovation for the Next 100 Years," October 28–30 at the Silver Legacy in Reno, Nevada. The conference will bring together producers, irrigation and water managers, policymakers, federal officials, technical experts and others from across the 17 Western states to look beyond the immediate fights over water and focus on solutions that can increase reliability and strengthen the systems agriculture depends on.

That means talking about the full toolbox: new storage, conveyance and system modernization, groundwater recharge, water recycling, desalination, conservation, precision irrigation, canal automation and emerging technologies that can help produce more with less. It also means asking how we finance these investments and how we can get good projects built faster.

The conference will pick up directly where our Annual Farmer Lobbyist Trip left off. In Washington, more than 30 farmers, ranchers and irrigation managers explained the realities facing their operations and communities to

Members of Congress, Congressional staff and federal agencies. At the conference, we will bring those conversations home and dig deeper into what can actually be done.

Family Farm Alliance Annual Conference, October 28–30, Silver Legacy Resort, Reno.

One of the conference's most important opportunities will be a four-hour joint workshop with the Bureau of Reclamation on October 28. The workshop will bring Reclamation leadership and water-user contractors together to advance the Reclamation Realignment Initiative and its connection to the Department of the Interior's Secretarial Order 3446 and its goals for more efficient project delivery. This will be a working session—not simply another panel. Reclamation staff and water users will work together to identify what is working, where project delivery is unnecessarily delayed, and what changes could improve communication, decision-making, financial transparency, and implementation. Participants will work in mixed groups to identify practical recommendations and determine which improvements can happen administratively and which may require longer-term policy changes. The goal is to leave the room with concrete next steps for continued collaboration.

That approach reflects something the Alliance has emphasized throughout the year: local water managers need to be at the table when decisions are being made about the systems they operate. Strong federal partnerships remain essential, but those partnerships work best when communication runs both ways and the people responsible for delivering water have a meaningful role in shaping the process.

The rest of the conference will continue that conversation. Sessions will examine the outlook from Washington, Reclamation priorities, innovative approaches to financing water infrastructure, new water supplies, technology, collaboration across interests and how we turn promising ideas into projects on the ground. Western agriculture does not have the luxury of waiting for the water crisis to solve itself. We need to build, modernize, conserve, innovate and find new supplies—and we need to do it together. That is what "Growing the Pie" is about.

We hope you will join us in Reno. Registration is open, and space is filling—sign up soon and be part of the conversation about what comes next for Western irrigated agriculture.

Registration Is Open

October 28–30, 2026 • Silver Legacy Resort Casino • Reno, Nevada
Register online: familyfarmalliance.org/2026conf
Full conference details: familyfarmalliance.org/events
Questions? Contact Executive Director Samantha Barncastle at samantha@familyfarmalliance.org or (575) 202-2705.