

**Testimony Before the United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries**

**Legislative Field Hearing  
*H.R. 215 Working to Advance Tangible and Effective Reforms for California Act*  
*H.R. 872 Federally Integrated Species Health Act*  
Tulare, California**

**April 11, 2023**

**Aaron Fukuda, General Manager, Tulare Irrigation District**

Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the drastic local conditions that our growers and communities are experiencing. My name is Aaron Fukuda and I am the General Manager of the Tulare Irrigation District. The Tulare Irrigation District is one of the oldest irrigation districts in the State of California, formed in 1889 to deliver irrigation water to the lands in and around the community of Tulare. Since its inception, the District has developed an irrigation system with over 300 miles of earthen canals, management and operation of 1,300 acres of recharge basins, and a water supply portfolio that includes water rights on the Kaweah River and a Bureau of Reclamation Contract on the Friant Division of the Central Valley Project.

To quote my friend and colleague Eddie Ocampo, Director at Self-Help Enterprises, “the culture of our region is Agriculture”. For far too many years, our region has suffered tremendously due to climate-induced hydrologic shifts between consecutive drought years to extremely wet years, like the one we are experiencing this year. What we have found is that there is a lack of preparedness due to limited investment in aging and even new infrastructure to address these hydrologic swings, compounded with the burdensome regulatory atmosphere in California, which stresses the agricultural fabric of our region from the fields to the communities and is devastating the ag culture of our region.

During the last several years of drought and limited water supplies made available by the state and federal projects, the District was faced with three consecutive years where the water supplies available did not meet the minimum volume needed to deliver to growers and our communities. Therefore there was no irrigation run. This put the District and our growers under economic stress, with only one year of financial reserves for operations and questions as to the ability to have enough water in the coming years due to the lack of surface water storage throughout the state. With no surface water for irrigation, growers turned to groundwater to meet their minimum irrigation demands to keep their businesses and community intact. Without sufficient surface water supplies, a dependence on groundwater exists and the groundwater levels in the area have declined significantly during this period, reaching our all-time lows in the Fall of 2022. This not only devastated the agricultural viability in our region but, more importantly, had a significant impact on our communities which are predominantly “Disadvantaged”, like

Okieville, where numerous domestic wells went dry. This need to use groundwater was one driven by the necessity to keep our agricultural communities alive. The region saw significant crop stress and damage, and our small communities suffered from ongoing dry wells.

In the Fall of 2022, we all were preparing for another drought season based on early forecasts that indicated La Nina conditions would prevail and a greater than 50% chance of dry conditions through the winter. In December 2022, the Central Valley was greeted with a much-needed wet cycle, including nine atmospheric rivers that hit the Valley and the Sothern Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. While we enjoyed a short reprieve in February 2022, in early March, we received several warm atmospheric river systems that have wreaked havoc on most of the Southern San Joaquin Valley rivers, streams, and creeks. For the first time in decades, local reservoirs were put into spill conditions, and downstream rivers received flows that exceeded channel capacities. Widespread flooding conditions were experienced in the upper Kaweah River system, lower St. Johns River system, and down in the historic Tulare Lakebed. Crop damage is significant and extensive, with farmers losing winter wheat crops and others losing permanent citrus and nut crops due to extended flooding. Small communities such as Lindsay, Woodlake, Alpaugh, and Allensworth that surround our hearing today have all experienced severe flooding conditions requiring residents to abandon their homes with very little notice.

Given these dramatic swings in hydrology and the annual unpredictability, our growers and our communities are barely able to manage from one disaster to another. While there are hard times, I would posit with this Committee that our region is working hard to lean into these issues, banding together and trying to prepare for our inevitable next disaster. So how are we doing this, and how can this Committee help?

In the face of drought conditions, our agricultural community came together in 2022 to implement an Emergency Ordinance to allocate and reduce the use of groundwater for agricultural production. This was not a popular program but a necessary program. In 2022 our program reduced groundwater consumption by 13%, which is approximately 20,000 acre-feet. This then allowed our growers to move to the wet season and increase our recharge capacity. Our historic recharge capacity was approximately 700 acre-feet per day, and with the Emergency Ordinance in place, growers accrued groundwater credits for over-application of irrigation supplies in the winter, which increased our recharge capacity to 1,500 acre-feet per day, a doubling of our recharge efforts.

With the ability to now reduce groundwater demand, we still have the need to drill new domestic and community wells down to safe levels that guarantee a resilient and clean supply of groundwater. Federal funds to assist in this effort and our well mitigation plans will provide our landowners with confidence that our wells are ready for droughts and floods.

There is no better way to buffer extremes than with multi-benefit water storage projects. Our Seaborn Reservoir project is a shining example of a project that will serve multiple purposes for our agricultural community. We are grateful to our congressional members, Congressman Valadao, Congressman Costa, and Congressman McCarthy who are graciously aiding our efforts in trying to secure funding for our new reservoir. The Seaborn Reservoir Project is an abandoned gravel mining operation owned by the District and a private ditch company and will be turned into a multi-benefit reservoir located immediately off stream of the Kaweah River. It includes the development of an 8,000 acre-foot (AF) off-stream reservoir with a habitat restoration zone around the reservoir and a community center to be used for educating the community and our youth about agriculture and the habitat supported in the area. This project will

allow the District to help the region by providing much needed flood relief during high flows, drought resiliency by allowing for increased recharge opportunities, including recharge in and around disadvantaged communities, and the development of a community educational center.

Last but not least, our region needs water supply reliability and regulatory relief to ensure that we can have the water supply guaranteed to us under our contractual obligations with the Bureau of Reclamation as well as our Pre-1914 water rights. H.R. 215 and H.R 872 represent a path forward for securing those needs. By ensuring that our water supply is governed by sound and modern science in an adaptive manner such that the Central Valley Project is operated to support the needs of our region and deliver the contractual amounts due to its users, we can ensure that our region has the water supply to achieve sustainability.

On behalf of the Tulare Irrigation District, I thank the Committee for holding this hearing here in Tulare. We are committed to working with members of Congress and the administration to ensure that we have a thriving agricultural culture, with vibrant and healthy communities, and that begins with a resilient water supply and infrastructure.

This concludes my remarks, and I am happy to answer any questions the members may have.