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Healthy Watersheds, Healthy Communities Act

U.S. Senators Michael Bennet (D-Colo.), Deb Fischer (R-Neb.), and Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.)
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The resiliency of American agriculture depends on the resiliency of our watersheds. More and more communities are turning to the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations program (also known as the "PL-566" program) to implement solutions to the natural disaster impacts of extreme drought and flooding. This bill streamlines the program's planning and administration processes, while promoting projects that benefit the health of our waterways and the communities and wildlife that depend on them.

The Healthy Watersheds, Healthy Communities Act would:

- **Make Drought Resilience an Explicit Purpose of the Program**, by amending the declaration of policy to include drought as a natural resource concern.
- **Consolidate Planning of One or More Subwatersheds**: the Act's statutory limitation to watersheds less than 250,000 acres has historically disadvantaged western interests seeking assistance under the law. Consolidated planning is now allowed, so that one or more subwatersheds of 250,000 acres each may be planned together at the discretion of the sponsor of a proposed project.
- **Define Irrigation Efficiency and Water Conservation**, ensuring drought resilience benefits can be realized through projects, similar to flood control benefits under the Act.
- **Include Irrigation Districts as a Local Organization**, making them clearly eligible for assistance under the law.
- **Give State Conservationists More Discretion to Oversee Watershed Plan Review**, to meet state and community watershed priorities and speed planning and construction timelines. This bill shifts project assistance and oversight away from the overburdened national office in DC and to NRCS State Conservationists— allowing for more comprehensive planning and flexibility by state and local NRCS staff most knowledgeable of their watersheds and local partner projects.
- **Simplify Planning Requirements for Natural Infrastructure Project Components**, by reducing agency administrative expenses and giving the Secretary the flexibility to waive the requirement to estimate and assign a

monetary value to fish and wildlife habitat restoration or water quality improvements in a project's Watershed Plan.

- **Require Public Notification and Prioritize Projects with Multiple Benefits**, by requiring the USDA to make publicly available information on project benefits and funding, and prioritize projects that provide multiple conservation and public benefits.
- **Recognize Increased Material and Labor Costs and Encourage Interagency Coordination**, by raising the allowable federal contribution to projects from \$25 million to \$50 million. In just the last two years alone, materials used in irrigation piping projects have increased in cost by an average of 60%. While the bill maintains current cost-share requirements, it does allow for non-USDA federal funding to go towards the local/state-match requirement to encourage projects at the watershed scale.

Supporters include: The Almond Alliance, California Agricultural Irrigation Association, California Farm Bureau, Colorado Farm Bureau, Environmental Defense Fund, Farmers Conservation Alliance, Family Farm Alliance, Irrigation Association, Oregon Water Resources Congress, the St. Vrain & Left Hand Water Conservancy District, the Freshwater Trust, The Nature Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, Western Growers, and the Wyoming Stockgrowers Association.