

NATIONAL DROUGHT POLICY COMMISSION

Analysis of Existing Regional Programs

Background

Public Law 105-99, 112 Stat. 641, provides, “*Sec 4. DUTIES OF THE COMMISSION. (b)(5) Collaborate with the Western Drought Coordination Council and other appropriate entities in order to consider regional drought initiatives and the application of such initiatives at the national level.*”

Methodology

The Western Drought Coordination Council submitted a detailed report to the Commission containing several recommendations. Other data was gathered from known regional bodies and by follow up telephone contacts. The National Drought Policy Commission (NDPC) staff compiled the results.

Overview

The NDPC reviewed eight river basin or interstate regional structures ranging from the Upper Mississippi River Basin encompassing Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, to the Interstate Council on Water Policy which encompasses 18 states, six river commissions, five water districts, and nine affiliates.

River basins (and watersheds) are useful, natural drought planning "regions" below the national level, but greater than the state level. Throughout the country there are existing regional (and river basin) organizations with drought responsibilities.

Some commissions have proven that coordination and management of water resources assets on a multijurisdictional, regional basis during drought periods can allow a major metropolitan area to sustain itself. This coordination can be accomplished by annual review of the plan and plan implementation training. Other commissions encourage conservation and end-use efficiency; use alternative methods for resolving inter/intrabasin conflicts; and encourage joint studies to collect data and promote dialog between different sets of water users. They often incorporate interdisciplinary teams, interagency cooperation and public participation in water management planning; and use incentives to conserve water such as pricing water to reflect the costs of its use to society and the environment. Others suggest that a national drought policy must emphasize mitigation and risk management and promote self-reliance. They also emphasize local implementation, innovation, and responsibility.

The Commission staff also reviewed a 1995 report prepared by the U.S. Senate Task Force on Funding Disaster Relief, and a 1995 Corps of Engineers report entitled “National Study of Water Management During Drought.” Inefficiencies in existing approaches and lack of holistic management were cited as flaws by both, as well as the failure to involve stakeholders in water management.

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Strengths of the regional concept: Since drought recognizes no human-imposed boundaries, a regional body brings a coordinated perspective to the issues. Additionally, the regional concept allows greater focus than one size fits all philosophy and accounts for geographical uniqueness and anomalies. The sharing of information fosters a best practices concept among the members.

Weaknesses of the Regional Concept: Historical disputes among jurisdictions may prevent open and full participation. The entity requires a central point of contact and consistent administrative staffing.

Western Drought Coordination Council (WDCC)

The WDCC recommended the following:

1. The activities initiated by the WDCC could be emulated in the remainder of the country as part of a coordinated national effort. With much of the infrastructure already begun through the WDCC's efforts, a national oversight group could provide a clear vision, management, and resources which would ensure success for a variety of drought-related activities on a national level.
2. The WDCC recommends that the NDPC consider linking the national oversight group to regional groups for program delivery. Drought and other water issues have greatly different physical characteristics, impacts, political response mechanisms, and thus informational needs, from region to region. These regional perspectives should utilize existing institutions such as the Regional Climate Centers.
3. It is critical to provide resources and designate a responsible agency or group to produce national drought assessment reports. The "Western Climate and Water Status, Quarterly Report," with its uniquely strong dependence on snowpack and topography, should be maintained--in service of both regional and national needs, and the ability to obtain the requisite basic input data should be strengthened.
4. Basic weather, water, and climate observations are the foundation of the monitoring and assessment activity which alerts the nation to impending drought. It is recommended that the NDPC support funding for maintenance and modernization of the observational networks to ensure that the data will continue to be available into the future. Additionally, it is particularly important that the local, state, and tribal interests are brought into the process to provide input on both climate/water conditions, especially on impacts, and ensure local acceptance of the resulting assessments.
5. Snowpack information is extremely important in assessing drought conditions in the West. Similarly, better and more extensive information on snow extent and water

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content is needed, including via the web, for the northern portions of the Midwestern and Eastern states.

6. Development of long-term soil moisture and groundwater reference networks is recommended. Reservoir storage, streamflow, groundwater, and soil moisture information, both current and historical, must become more accessible, especially via the web.
7. The NDPC should provide specific ideas that Congress could consider in Federal legislation to encourage the incorporation of incentives for drought mitigation and preparedness at the local, state and regional levels, including educational resources that promote the concepts of drought planning. The NDPC should also provide suggestions for funding of the activities associated with mitigation and preparedness.
8. The NDPC should support the establishment of a statutorily designated lead federal agency, adequately funded, that would coordinate communication and cooperation among the various regional groups, to ensure an absence of duplication and the encouragement of complimentary actions including establishment of a clearinghouse, with possible regional subsections.
9. The NDPC may consider developing a drought situation report to determine whether the assistance programs adequately meet the needs of those adversely impacted by droughts. By creatively using the Internet to compile capabilities, policy makers and others would be able to quickly assess historical information and in which areas additional assistance is needed.
10. The Historical Drought Impact Survey data developed by the WDCC should be maintained and expanded to include drought experiences from other regions of the country. Reports should be utilized to take advantage of prior efforts and to help identify primary drought concerns.
11. The Catalog of Federal Assistance Programs applies to all states nationwide and the NDPC should make specific recommendations noting its value and ways to ensure that the catalog be kept current as program information changes.
12. The WDCC was interested in utilizing media to raise awareness of drought issues, but without a national direction, the Council was not able to tap into national and regional media including television, large newspapers and professional association communication vehicles. The NDPC should utilize this opportunity to raise drought issues on a national level.

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Additional information is available from the National Drought Policy Commission. You can access the information at the Commission's web site: www.fsa.usda.gov/drought. All files can be ordered in electronic format or hard copy. Write: National Drought Policy Commission, USDA/FSA/AO, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, Mail Stop 0501, Washington, D.C. 20250-0501.

* A list of acronyms used in this file will print at the end of the report or the meanings for individual acronyms will display at the web site by clicking on the acronym.