

NATIONAL DROUGHT POLICY COMMISSION

Analysis of Existing Federal Programs

Background

Public Law 105-99, 112 Stat. 641, provides, “*Sec. 4 DUTIES OF THE COMMISSION (b)(2) review all existing Federal laws and programs relating to drought; .*”

Methodology

Federal participants in the Commission's Interagency Contact Group surveyed the agencies regarding drought-related Federal programs and compiled the results. The responsible Federal agencies provided the original data and Commission staff later assisted in formatting the information.

Overview

A total of 88 directly and indirectly related to existing Federal programs and were funded within the past ten years. Programs were classified into four broad program categories: (1) preparedness, including planning and mitigation; (2) information, including monitoring/prediction and research; (3) risk management; and (4) emergency response. Seven of these programs provide assistance for drought planning, 42 for drought mitigation, 22 for drought-related monitoring/prediction and research, and 47 for response. These numbers total more than 88 because some programs cover more than one facet of drought.

Preparedness, Planning, and Mitigation. Limited authorities and funds, as well as lack of coordination among and within federal agencies, hinder the planning efforts. In general, requests for planning assistance far outweigh available funds. Authorities often do not allow the agencies to provide financial assistance to requesting entities.

Successful implementation of plans requires practice, particularly when the people who are responsible for dealing with drought may not be the same from drought to drought. Enough time passes between droughts that issues change, water use changes, and professional staff members retire or move to new jobs.

Within Federal government programs, it is often the case that water supply and droughts are considered together. As a result, proactive drought mitigation comprises a broad range of measures—from the installation of livestock watering ponds on ranches to state-of-the-art wastewater treatment that allows reuse of water.

Information, Monitoring and Prediction. Exchanges of information among planners and decision-makers have helped determine the direction of drought-related research. Sharing findings among research entities has helped promote many of the advances in drought-related research. In relation to monitoring and prediction, these programs focus on weather patterns, climate, soil conditions, and streamflow measurements.

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Unfortunately, such programs are not always available in some areas, such as on tribal lands and in remote rural areas.

The wealth of monitoring and prediction information produced by federal programs and others can create a problem for some users because drought information and data are often complex and, for the most part, not presented in a standardized format. Such data can also be difficult to find and interpret. This is especially true for individuals, small businesses, and some communities and Tribes that do not have ongoing relationships with drought management agencies. There appears to be a need for an accessible "gateway" (point of contact) where high-quality, standardized, comprehensible current information and historical data are managed.

Keep in mind that predicting drought remains a complex task on any level, but upgrading technologies and increased coordination can provide improvement in this area.

Risk Management. The best preparedness and proactive mitigation measures will not adequately address all drought-related risks. The Small Business Administration notes that business interruption insurance is available in private insurance markets. However, it is generally not tailored to the needs of small businesses in drought situations. Small businesses may also lack access to information about financial and business risk-management strategies available to them.

For several decades, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has offered crop insurance to farmers as one of the government's major risk-management strategies. Federal crop insurance covers all major field crops in nearly all locations, but it does not currently extend to all vegetable and other crops in all locations nor does it cover livestock. There are several efforts underway to improve this tool administratively and in the legislative area.

Response. A safety net is needed to help overcome the impacts of extreme occurrences of drought or the impacts of multi-faceted disasters (for example, flood/drought or hail/drought). Federal drought assistance is often described as "too little and too late". Documentation acceptable to trigger federal response for one Department of Agriculture emergency program is not sufficient to trigger other Departmental emergency programs. Constituents reported that they often fail to get a clear understanding of what additional information is needed to meet program criteria and this causes confusion for everyone. The Stafford Act and its implementation by the Federal Emergency Management Agency is an effective, proven model for organizing and providing emergency assistance during most catastrophic natural disasters, but has been rarely used for drought. One of the factors that make this program successful is that the Agency can draw monies from a standing fund to pay for disaster assistance.

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However, a Stafford Act declaration for drought does not enumerate any assistance for agriculture and livestock producers.

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.