

On August 3, a “Water Subcabinet,” addressed members of the Western States Water Council (WSWC), Interstate Council on Water Policy (ICWP), National Water Resources Association (NWRA) and National Water Supply Association (NWSA) at a Water Infrastructure Forum in Washington, D.C. The subcabinet officials included: Tim Petty, Assistant Secretary of the Department of the Interior (DOI) for Water and Science; David Ross, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Assistant Administrator for Water; Timothy Gaullaudet, Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Waters, with responsibility for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA); William Northey, Under Secretary for Farm Production Conservation, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA); R.D. James, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works; and Alex Fitzsimmons, Chief of Staff, Daniel Simmons, Department of Energy (DOE), Assistant Secretary, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy.

Mr. Petty noted the different agencies’ roles and the importance of partnerships, with all the agencies coming together on water. “If the parts of your watch aren’t working together, you are not going to stay on time!” We need to be more effective and are commitment to working with each other to function more efficiently. We need your thoughts and suggestions. He has responsibility for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and specifically noted the importance of NOAA forecasting to determining water supply availability.

Mr. Ross picked up the partnership theme and added that they had the power as a group to change policy and priorities at our agencies. He stated that he started his career in San Diego on a water reuse project. In this job, I’ve asked how EPA can incorporate water reuse under our portfolio and was disappointed that EPA hasn’t progressed more on this front. EPA is developing a framework for a National Water Reuse Action Plan as a national priority and will reach out to States and stakeholders.

What can we do better to coordinate federal policy? What can I contribute? Ross noted that he and I Northey co-chair the National Drought Resiliency Partnership (NDRP). DOE’s Grand Water Challenge is addressing reuse of produced water. How can I contribute?

Mr. Gaullaudet observed that NOAA data, information and predictions is what makes water infrastructure work. He referred to Midwest flooding along the Missouri River, and 3-day excessive rainfall outlooks that provide lead time for emergency managers. The National Weather Service predicted with confidence the 50 inches of rain from Hurricane Harvey in August 2017 that fell in some areas near Houston in 24 hours, which led to early evacuation orders. A graduate of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, he also mentioned prediction of atmospheric river events on the West Coast. He noted that the FY2020 budget includes the use of drones for mapping flooding. Further, NOAA is working to transform satellite architecture from large federal missions to private systems.

In Puerto Rico, Gaullaudet added NOAA is working on coastal and near shore water quality improvements, and to conserve coral reefs. Heavy rain events erode the land with rivers and streams carrying high sediment loads, covering corals and sea grass. In predicting events, the European Union (EU) weather model is out performing U.S. models, but operational model changes are coming to regain lead. He observed that the National Weather Service’s (NWS) daily forecast skill, was once only 50-50, but now NWS makes 10-day forecasts with 90% skill. NOAA is now working to improve subseasonal to seasonal forecasting skill. NOAA is working to help people plan and keep people safe

He also discussed consultation under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and efforts to coordinate with members of this panel to speed things up. They are also working to reduce by 30% the time needed to complete National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) reviews.

Mr. Northey observed, “When we get together, we go often learn much about what we are doing.” A former Secretary of the Iowa Department of Agriculture, he had experience with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which has lots of private/organizational partners. Further, the

Risk Management Agency provides crop insurance delivered through private agents. We need to talk about how we functionally work together with States and within watersheds so our program requirements/regulations are more consistent. The 2018 Farm Bill gave us a little more flexibility with the regional partnership program. We want to hear from you how we can be more effective. There is a State Conservationist in every State. The Farm Service Agency has an executive director in every State. USDA is working on an idea for building a revolving fund for conservation projects. We are looking for creative ways to get more done.

RD James declared, "This is a pleasure compared to some of the meetings I have to go to!" He is responsible for the Army's Civil Works Program, which includes the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps' main missions are flood control, navigation and environmental restoration. The Corps does projects. Once those projects begin to move forward, "...we have to deal with all these people [on the panel]." Mr. James served for many years as a member of the Mississippi River Commission, so he understands public and stakeholder needs. In my 37 years of experience on the Mississippi with other federal agencies were "awful!" We waste time and dollars. We have to provide a smoother road forward. Currently the Missouri River flooding is absolutely awful. The Corps has to try to maximize multiple objectives (eight).

He observed, "Water in the West is so sacred – to people that don't have water." Drought highlights the need for water, but there is also a need for flood control. We monitor watersheds and snowmelt, reservoirs, and flooding (threatening Sacramento). "Water is the most precious thing to life and to man. It is all one thing." Sometimes we have to protect ourselves from water. Water supply needs are growing across the West. Providing water for water supply, takes away storage for flood control. We need more water supply reservoirs. Some areas are going to be in dire need of water. "I am happy to be a part of this group, benefitting the whole country."

Alex Fitzsimmons focused his remarks on DOE's Water Security Grand Challenge which addresses improving our capabilities regarding desalination, produced waters, municipal wastewater, reduce water use by thermal power plants. He also mentioned off-the-grid rural energy and water systems. He noted DOE, EPA and DOI are cooperating on a prized competition focused on research and development of next generation technologies.

In response to questions, the panel noted that they have identified over 240 water-related working groups, taskforces and different programs. They are trying to list every group "we have equity in." They are also working to institutionalize their organization and leverage their resources to address agency priorities as a group. Some of the areas they see a need to work together include the Colorado River, the Ogallala Aquifer and the Chesapeake Estuary. They have begun a constructive dialogue among the federal agencies, and a new effort to set goals and challenge themselves to find ways to meet goals.

Streamlining regulatory processes very important, as is moving towards "One Federal Decision." Another concern raised was the fact that with retirements, we are not replacing our "human infrastructure." The Presidential Memorandum on Promoting the Reliable Supply and Delivery of Water in the West was mentioned.

A panel of non-federal interests preceded the above discussion, that consisted of: Julie Cunningham, Oklahoma Water Resources Board; Darren Gore, City of Murfreesboro, Tennessee; Cheryl Zittle, Salt River Project and Agribusiness and Water Council of Arizona, Heidi Moltz, Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin, and Ben Grumbles, Maryland Department of the Environment.