

## House Natural Resources

### The Federal Reclamation Program's Next Century

May 20, 2026

#### **Highlights:**

The hearing focused on the future of federal water infrastructure and emphasized that aging reclamation systems are critical to sustaining U.S. agriculture but face growing challenges from drought, funding gaps, and project delays. Lawmakers also highlighted the need to uphold tribal water rights, advance settlement agreements, and improve consultation, while ensuring Tribes and agricultural producers are included in long-term water management decisions.

#### **Key Points:**

- Tribal Water Rights and Settlements Highlighted
  - Lawmakers emphasized that Indian water rights settlements are essential for long-term water certainty and project development
  - There was a call for Congress to advance pending settlement legislation.
- Federal Trust Responsibility Remains Central
  - Interior officials noted an ongoing trust responsibility to Tribal Nations, especially in major systems like the Colorado River Basin.
  - Tribal interests must be considered in:
    - Water allocation decisions
    - Infrastructure investments
    - Basin-wide negotiations
- Tribal Participation in Water Management
  - Tribes are increasingly involved as project partners, water rights holders, stakeholders in basin-wide agreements. In some cases, policies (e.g., procurement reforms) could allow tribes to take a larger role in managing projects.
- Need for Improved Tribal Consultation
  - Members raised concerns about insufficient direct consultation with Tribal Nations on project operations. There were explicit requests for more proactive engagement (not just via BIA), and inclusion of tribes in operational decision-making.
- Economic and Water Access Challenges
  - Tribes with limited resources may need greater federal support to develop water infrastructure and support agriculture and economic development.
- Water Supply Reliability is Declining

- Even when reservoirs are full, agricultural users may receive reduced allocations due to regulatory constraints and operational priorities.
- Farmers face Reduced irrigation deliveries, Increased reliance on uncertain water sources, and the need to shift crops or reduce production.
- Severe drought conditions across the West are affecting irrigated agriculture, and Tribal water systems and settlements.
- Calls for Increased Investment and Modernization
  - Agricultural witnesses prioritized:
    - Expanding storage and conveyance capacity
    - Modernizing canals and irrigation systems (including automation and precision irrigation)
    - Investing in drought-resilient supplies (e.g., water recycling)
- Cost Burden on Producers
  - Farmers and water contractors increasingly bear infrastructure repair cost and operations costs, even when water deliveries are reduced.
  - Witnesses argued the “beneficiary pays” model is no longer balanced, especially when water is used for environmental purposes