

**Congressman Dan Newhouse (WA-04) – House Transportation and
Infrastructure Committee – Member Day Testimony**

May 1, 2019
(5 minutes)

Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, Members of the Committee,

It is an honor to be before you today as the Committee continues its consideration of a comprehensive legislative package to address our nation's chronic needs and ailing infrastructure. I come before you to share my earnest belief that any such effort absolutely must include water infrastructure, including vital water storage and water conservation projects, in order to face our nation's serious hydrological challenges.

In recent years, particularly in the West, severe droughts have threatened water delivery, farm and ranching production, and our rural way of life. Over the last decade, even with above-average precipitation in several regions of the United States, we continue to see drought conditions. Americans across the country demand a safe and reliable water supply. With the prospect before us to make serious, substantial steps forward in addressing this chronic need, I am here before you to implore the Committee to not pass up this opportunity to help to serve communities—both rural and suburban.

To provide you a few examples for context, the Colorado River Basin, despite wet conditions this winter, continues to experience the longest dry spell in recorded history. Hydrological conditions in California over the past decade were the worst the region has seen since the 13th century. In my

own neck of the woods in the Pacific Northwest, we have seen severe droughts over the past five years. In the beginning of April, a declaration of drought emergency has already been declared for the Upper Yakima River, Methow, and Okanogan basins in my District in Central Washington.

The federal government's lack of investments to address these conditions, not only in recent years but over the past several decades, has left communities to face severe water challenges essentially on their own. One example is the Columbia Basin Project. Authorized in 1943, the project authorized over 1 million acres of productive land for investments to provide a reliable source of water for the Basin. However, 300,000 of these acres of land are underutilized. Within this region, the Odessa Subarea's groundwater is being withdrawn at a rate beyond the aquifer's capacity to recharge, and aquifers in the Subarea are quickly declining. Groundwater is virtually depleted to such an extent that water must be pumped from wells as deep as 2,400 feet. Water pumped from such depths is hot and has dangerously high sodium concentrations.

Municipal, agricultural, commercial, industrial, and domestic water supplies—as well as water quality levels—are all so compromised that this is most certainly and clearly at crisis-level. In 2016, a deep well that supplied a municipal water system in the City of Lind began to fail. The well pumped white foam, with high fluoride content, approximately 80 degrees in temperature. Other wells are at the point of drawing air. Irrigation wells near the City of Othello have been recording temperatures as high as 105

degrees and smelling of sulfur. High levels of sodium in groundwater used to irrigate our crops are posing a serious threat to our agriculture sector, and Othello projects it will run out of water in about three years, or sooner.

Mr. Chairman, I don't say this lightly, but I think I can safely assume the last thing we want on our nation's hands is another Flint-like water crisis for any one of our communities, and I've got to tell you that my constituents in these rural towns are absolutely concerned—and rightly so—that we are not far off from seeing just that in these areas.

In closing, I again respectfully urge the Committee to take this opportunity to include water storage, conservation, and water delivery systems—as well as policies and processes to streamline the construction and implementation of water projects—in any comprehensive infrastructure package considered. The federal government has fallen behind in investing in our nation's water infrastructure and we must prevent further crises from plaguing communities in the West and across the country. With investments in our water infrastructure, we can ensure that our constituents, our agricultural community, and the nation have a long-term and reliable water supply for generations to come. I sincerely thank you for your consideration.

(697 words)