

Setting a Direction for United States Water Policy

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ABSTRACT

The water resources of the United States are increasingly at risk and the nation's water policy is in serious difficulty. Water resources protection laws primarily passed since 1950 often contradict water resources development laws passed before 1950. These contradictions complicate efficient and effective responses to the nation's water resources challenges including climate change, our aging infrastructures, changing population dynamics, drought, floods, wetlands and aquatic species loss, ecosystem restoration and many others. In addition, water law and policy determination, management and enforcement are so broadly distributed between, local, state and federal responsibilities that effective responses again are difficult. For example, at the national level alone, more than a dozen federal agencies have water resources responsibilities including resource development, resource assessment, and resource protection. They are presided over by six cabinet (Ministerial) departments, at least 13 congressional (parliamentarian) committees and 23 subcommittees, and are funded by five appropriations subcommittees. Lastly, good science and the public accountability associated with it are often overshadowed by political considerations at local, state and federal levels. The United States approach to solving water resources challenges is ad hoc – we address problems as they appear or as they merit political support rather than using good science to address our long term water resources needs.

In September of 2002 the American Water Resources Association initiated a series of National Water Resources Policy Dialogues to begin the conversation of identifying strategic direction in United States water policy. This presentation describes the recommendations from the Third National Water Resources Policy Dialogue held in 2007 in Arlington, VA, to address the nation's water resources policy problems and to identify a new direction for establishing water resources policy in this country.