

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 6, 2018

The Honorable Wilbur Ross  
Secretary of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Ave. NW  
Washington, DC 20230

The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Ross and Secretary Perdue,

We are writing to ask for a review and update of the United States Drought Monitor's measurement criteria and process. As you are well aware, Oregon has been struggling with significant and prolonged hot, dry weather with accompanying wildfires and water shortages.

In order to make the process more efficient and less subjective, in the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress stipulated drought levels would be determined solely based on the national drought monitor's designation. We are fully supportive of science-based and objective measures to ensure that Oregon farmers and ranchers have access to the Farm Service Agency (FSA) disaster programs that keep these rural operations in business.

However, it has come to our attention that some measures considered by the University of Nebraska's national drought monitor are dated and/or less relevant to the Western United States. For instance, one favored metric, the Standardized Precipitation Index, only relies on precipitation. In the western US, extreme temperatures exacerbate drought by increasing demand for water in the summer and limiting important mountain snowpack in the winter. In addition, the Drought Monitor heavily favors reservoir storage and capacity in the western US, but not all users are served by reservoirs. Our constituents are concerned that this is a narrow view of drought for the western US and omits important potential indicators, such as newer drought metrics that include temperature in their calculation, "snow drought" or reduced winter mountain snowpack that is a warning sign for summer drought, shut offs to senior water rights, increased irrigation demand due to extreme temperatures, soil moisture levels, lack of livestock water in pastures, ecological stress on forests, wildfire activity and danger, and streamflows.

When disaster program access depends on the drought monitor level, and the livelihoods of our rural ranchers and farmers are at stake, it is imperative the ratings are accurate, timely, and based on updated science.

We would encourage both the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the US Department of Agriculture to conduct a review of the measures used and process for ensuring that county-level and state-level input is duly considered in drought designations.

In addition, we would like answers to the following questions:

- What scientific measurements are currently used by the drought monitor authors? Do these measures reflect current published, peer-reviewed science and technologies? Is there a plan to collect consistent data from local FSA directors or other independent on-the-ground sources?
- It is apparent that the National Drought Monitor includes a rotation of authors. How are these authors selected? Is there sufficient attention to including scientists from the Western United States? Is there a system for vetting the e-mail list serve of contributors to ensure the right expert voices are being amplified?
- Do you have a strategy for appropriately incorporating state and local data and ensuring that drought designations are fair and accurate?

Again, thank you for your service to our nation and rural communities. We greatly appreciate your immediate attention to this very important matter affecting much of rural Oregon

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden  
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator