

CONGRESS/WATER RESOURCES
Water Project Navigators Act**November 1, 2024**
Special Report #2633

Senators John Hickenlooper (D-CO) and Jerry Moran (R-KS), together with Representatives Juan Ciscomani (R-AZ) and Brittany Pettersen (D-CO) have introduced the Water Projects Navigators Act (S. 5014/H.R. 9506) to establish a new program (\$15M per year, FY24-29) at the Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) to fund technical positions to help boost the capacity for states, tribes and rural communities to develop, fund and implement water management and conservation projects. First introduced as S. 4995, S. 5014 was slightly revised then referred to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which held a hearing on the new bill on September 11.

The bill would direct the Secretary of the Interior to award grants or cooperative agreements to fund a position of “navigator” to assist communities with multi-benefit water projects. The navigator would assist eligible entities with grant writing, project management, feasibility studies, project design, preliminary environmental review, engineering, and other necessary activities. The bill is directed toward the 17 Reclamation states, plus Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. The non-federal cost share of 25% could be met with cash or in-kind services, and could be reduced or waived for certain eligible entities such as tribes, acequias, and disadvantaged communities. The grants or cooperative agreements would be limited to three years, with the potential for certain projects to extend another two years at the Secretary’s discretion. The bill directs the Secretary to coordinate the program with other federal, state, tribal, and local technical assistance programs.

Eligible multi-benefit projects would enhance the overall resilience of water supplies by: (1) increasing water use efficiency; (2) reducing consumptive water use; (3) promoting system conservation; (4) reducing water supply-demand imbalances; (5) promoting water recycling and other advanced water treatments to augment water supplies; (6) improving management or delivery of water resources; or (7) encouraging sustainable surface water or groundwater management. The projects would also provide benefits to communities and ecosystems by improving water quality, watershed health, wildlife habitat, economic development, recreational opportunities, or infrastructure at risk from climate change.

Senator Hickenlooper said: “Rural and Tribal communities deserve their fair share of federal funds to address drought, but all too often are left out. Our Water Project Navigators will help these communities get their share.” Senator Moran said: “Widespread drought is impacting many communities across Kansas, hurting family farms, local municipalities and businesses. While there are federal resources available to help preserve water, accessing these resources can be a challenge for Tribal and rural communities. This legislation will connect these communities with the resources available to them to help combat the impact of droughts.”

Rep. Pettersen said: “The effects of climate change continue to accelerate, and the impact on our critical water resources are felt throughout Colorado. However, many areas – like our most rural areas in Colorado – lack the necessary resources to secure federal funds for water projects. It is critical that we invest in these areas to strengthen and protect our water resources and help communities draw down federal dollars. This bill will fund ‘navigator’ positions to help state and local governments, Tribes, special districts, and other groups implement water projects and access this critical funding, helping bring federal investment to the communities that need it most.”

Rep. Ciscomani said: “In Arizona, water is our most precious resource. As the drought worsens in the West, it is now more important than ever that impacted communities have the necessary tools to secure federal dollars for critical multi-benefit water infrastructure projects. I am proud to have worked with a bipartisan, bicameral group of my colleagues on this legislation that will create a community navigator position through the Bureau of Reclamation to assist our constituents that need it the most in funding their water conservation efforts.”

While USBR has grant programs to help states and local governments manage these challenges, many rural and tribal communities lack the capacity and resources to apply for and access these federal resources. The legislation aims to close this resource gap by creating navigator positions to help communities to plan, implement and secure resources for multi-benefit projects that improve water efficiency, reduce water consumption and enhance ecosystem resilience and sustainability. It would prioritize applicants with the most need, including tribes and rural communities. Eligible entities would also include conservation districts, special districts and non-governmental organizations.

The bill is supported by the Audubon Society, Farmers Conservation Alliance, Kansas Water Office, Kansas Department of Health and Environment and the Kansas Department of Agriculture - Division of Water Resources, National Water Resources Association, The Nature Conservancy, Southwestern Water Conservation District, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership and Trout Unlimited.