

Issue Alert

NAS Looks At Bureau

Assessment Of USBR Similar To Users' Views

A study just released by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) provides recommendations on how the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) can improve its mission to deliver power and water to Western customers.

And those very customers are initially pleased with the report's findings.

"Family farmers, ranchers and irrigation districts are the ones who pay most of the costs of maintaining and modernizing Reclamation projects," said Harvey Bailey, who works 1,100 acres of citrus crops in Orange Cove (CALIFORNIA). "We want to see Reclamation operate in the most cost-effective way possible, and it looks like this new report can help us move toward that goal."

THE REPORT that Bailey is talking about is entitled "Managing Construction and Infrastructure in the 21st Century Bureau of Reclamation."

It was released this week by the NAS National Research Council
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The Academy's Key Findings

Key recommendations offered up in the NAS report, and supported by the Family Farm Alliance, include:

- An in-depth review and analysis of Reclamation's Denver (COLORADO) Technical Service Center (TSC) should be conducted to identify how the TSC should be structured for maximum efficiency. Alternative means should be developed for funding the staff and operating costs necessary for maintaining core TSC competencies, thereby reducing the proportion of engineering service costs reimbursable by customers;
- Reclamation's workforce should be sized to maintain the critical core competencies and technical leadership but to increase outsourcing of much of the engineering and laboratory testing work. Reclamation should establish an agency-wide policy on the appropriate types and proportions of work to be outsourced to the private sector;
- Reclamation should assist its customers in their efforts to address economic constraints by adapting repayment requirements that ease borrowing requirements and extend repayment periods;
- Project managers should have professional certification and experience commensurate with their responsibilities;
- Reclamation should develop a consistent process for evaluating project planning and the accuracy of cost estimates.

NAS Sees Ways To Improve Reclamation

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Board on Infrastructure and the Constructed Environment.

THIS DRAFT REPORT assesses the challenges faced as Reclamation's focus changes in a new century and offers recommendations about how Reclamation can best address them.

The NAS Committee was asked last year by the U.S. Interior Department to provide the assessment. The committee is comprised of academics, agency officials, and engineers from the private and public sector, and is chaired by Dr. James K. Mitchell, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

"Successful accomplishment of Reclamation's current mission in the 21st century is impacted, and in some cases dominated by several new realities," Dr. Mitchell wrote in the report preface.

THE REALITY CHECK noted by Mitchell is addressed in the report and includes environmental factors, American Indian water rights, rural water needs, urbanization, increasing budget constraints, a broader set of stakeholders, an aging workforce, and an aging infrastructure.

The report also finds that Western future water demand can be anticipated to increase and that consequences of droughts will have an even greater impact.

Further, it is likely that demand for small water storage, irrigation, and distribution projects will increase and that alternative means for meeting water needs will need to be explored.

IN GENERAL, THE REPORT found that the five Reclamation regions appear to be

functioning well in the face of these new challenges. The NAS Committee found that staff morale and loyalty to Reclamation's mission were "commendable".

However, the Committee also developed recommendations to help Reclamation with changing requirements and the need to maintain the agency's core competencies.

The report's observations and recommendations are generally consistent with views expressed by Western irrigators represented by the Family Farm Alliance (Alliance).

"Based on an initial review of this report, it looks like the NAS Committee heard our concerns," said Alliance Executive Director Dan Keppen, who presented a similar Alliance case study to the Committee for consideration last June in Washington, D.C.

THE FINAL NAS REPORT WILL FORM the topic of a panel discussion at the Family Farm Alliance Annual Meeting on March 3, 2006 in Las Vegas. The panel will include a presentation by Roger Patterson (a member of the NAS committee), and responses by David McCarthy (Reclamation Deputy Commissioner), Tom Donnelly (National Water Resources Association), and an Alliance representative.

If you would like to see a copy of the Family Farm Alliance report delivered to the NAS Committee last June, it can be obtained by downloading it from the Family Farm Alliance website (www.familyfarmalliance.org) or by contacting Dan Keppen at (541) 850-9007.