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The political pulse

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America water policy must get act together

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News items and opinions received from various sources indicates there is little cohesion in a national water policy.

This comes to light in an article written by Laura Brown, Council of State Goverment in Washington, who says critics charge that congressional jurisdiction and agency programs responsible for a federal water policy are fragmented and provide little guidance to states.

James Watt

She said new water policy reform proposals may fall short of creating the coherent federal guidance necessary for a successful national water policy.

To illustrate the point, she said 12 U.S. House panels and 29 subcommittees, along with 10 Senate committees, and 21 subcommittees, are responsible for water legislation.

She added management of water programs is also diversified.

President Reagan, seeking to save $114.5 million in fiscal years 1981 and 1982, wants to abolish the cabinet-level Water Resources Council, Office of Water Research and Technology, and the river basin commission.

In their place, he would have an office of water policy under the supervision of Secretary of Interior James Watt.

Senate Bill provide $36.5 million annually for fiscal 1982-85, roughly half of the amount now spent annually for water planning and research. A House bill would provide $10 million annually for fiscal 1982-84 for state water planning, conservation and management programs but does not authorize water research grants.

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Sen. Jim Abdnor, R-S.D., announced he has introduced legislation to create a cabinet-level National Board of Water Policy that would be charged with developing a comprehensive water management program for the country. Whether this would harmonize with the Reagan plan is unclear. He charges that despite the growing need for water in many areas, there is no comprehensive strategy to plan for such an exigency.

He recalled during the summer of the 1970s many western and midwestern states, and an inreasing number in the east, faced mounting losses because of lack of moisture.

Abdnor contended if the legislation is adopted the nation would have a board with an independent chairman, a strong tie to state goverment, and the authority to advise Congress and the White House on water policy issues. The bill also would authorize funding of state and regional water planning grants and a program of water research. This appears commendable.

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Ray W. Rigby, Rexburg lawyer and former longtime legislator who specialized in water matters, said the main water issues to settle at present are amending legislation to increase water reclamation acre limits and adjudication of water rights.

Rigby, who was just elected vice president of the Western States Water Council, returned recently from Washington where the WSWC subcommittee met with administrative and congressional leaders for proposed amendments to the Federal Reclamation Act of 1902. Discussions centered on increasing the present 160-acre limit for farms using reclamation water.

Past legislation has suggested the increases to more like 1,000 acres for a family farm. Rigby said concerted efforts of western water users will be necessary to complete legislation along this line.

Rigby also attended a Los Angeles seminar where substantive and procedural adjudicative matters were explored in details by leading water authorities in the nation.

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Water topics was one of the main issues aired at the recent Western Governor's Conference at Jackson but no firm stand was taken. Secretary of Interior James Watt did remark there was no plan afoot in his department for interbasin transfer of water, including the Columbia Basin embracing the Snake River. He termed such plans as "economically unfeasible and environmentally ridiculous."

Garrey Carruthers, assistant secretary of interor in charge of reclamation project, did say there are 15 projects given top priority for starts in 1983. They include hydroelectric expansion projects at Palisades, Minidoka and Anderson Ranch dams.

This indicates the Reagan administration is ready to renew reclamation projects after wrapped in mothballs under President Carter but Reagan and Watt said these must be able to stand on their merits.