

Reclamation Commissioner Mike Connor Discusses Importance of DOI - USDA MOU

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Hi, this is Mike Connor, Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation. In my many trips out west, it's amazing to see the number of areas hit by wildfire. The destruction to the environment and the communities is very easy to see on the landscape. Not always equally visible are other potentially devastating impacts of fire, which can impact Reclamation facilities and, of course, our mission. On Reclamation lands, wildfires can cause erosion, sedimentation, and interrupt operations, which could significantly impact hydropower generation, the availability water supplies and water quality. The cost associated with these impacts can be very significant. Today in Colorado, Secretary Jewell and Agricultural Secretary Tom Vilsack signed an agreement that ensures west-wide collaboration between the Forest Service and Reclamation, which will ensure we take proactive measures to reduce the risk of wildfire and, when it occurs, minimize its impacts and subsequent costs. This Western Watershed Enhancement Partnership that was announced today was specifically mentioned in President Obama's Climate Action Plan. As noted, the partnership will help make natural areas and communities less vulnerable to catastrophic fire. This is incredibly important with the changing climate that we live in. Of course, the most immediate concern with wildfire centers on the health and safety of human life. We were reminded of this in a sobering way just a few weeks ago with the loss of 19 firefighters who were working to contain the Yarnell Hill Fire in Arizona. Any actions we can take to minimize the risk of wildfire can have significant benefits and maybe save human lives. Under the new agreement, Reclamation and the Forest Service will work together and with other stakeholders to initiate preventative measures like fuel treatment, which can greatly reduce the intensity of fires when they start. After a wildfire is extinguished, restoration activities will be carried out to help the recovery of the land and minimize subsequent costs. Not all forest fires can be prevented, but we can do our best to minimize the damage they cause. In this manner, we can protect our water supply infrastructure as well as the communities and people who rely on these critical watersheds. I look forward over the coming months and the next year to supporting and seeing the actions initiated with today's agreement. Thank you for your interest.