

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Hearing – March 15, 2012

Commissioner Michael Connor:

Mr. Chairman, Vice-Chairman Barasso, Senator Tester, Senator Udall, it's a pleasure to be with you today. It's always problematic for me to have to follow [Deputy Secretary] David Hayes and [Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs] Del Laverdure, particularly when Del speaks from his own personal experiences, but I'll give it my best and try and focus very briefly on what Reclamation's role is in respect to Indian water rights settlements. As David mentioned, we are part of a team that helps negotiate these settlements and we have a role – we have access to expertise and we have access to water, which is very important to settle these claims. So, we are glad to participate and be active members of the negotiation process. But what our real focus is these days – and we think we have a special responsibility at the Bureau of Reclamation – is to implement these settlements. We've been charged with significant responsibilities in developing infrastructure that's critical to successfully implement these settlements. Those responsibilities and those benefits are what a lot of you have already mentioned in your opening statements. We want to make progress quickly in allowing tribes to realize the benefits of these settlements. We are focused on the need not to be lackadaisical about the longstanding lack of water that there has been in Indian country. We want to make sure that we help ensure the certainty that these settlements are intended to provide, both to the tribes and access to safe, reliable water supplies as well as for the surrounding communities with the resolution of claims. And then, finally, we think we have a role in promoting prosperity in Indian country through the implementation of these settlements and we take that very seriously. And what I mean by that is that it's both the short-term and long-term role that we have. We look at the settlement responsibilities that we have right now through the Claims Resolution Act four settlements – the Navajo-San Juan settlement that we're responsible for and other matters going on in Arizona, the Arizona Water Settlement Act. We will be needing to expend, over the next decade, on a consistent basis, somewhere in the neighborhood of 150-to-200-million dollars per year to develop the infrastructure needed to implement those settlements. If you look at those levels of dollars and you take the figures that we used in the Recovery Act about job creation – 92-thousand dollars per job – we're looking at, consistently over the next decade, sustaining 16-hundred to 22-hundred jobs per year and expending that kind of money in developing the infrastructure. That has short-term benefits in Indian country, plus as all of you have mentioned here, there's long-term economic benefits from having the foundation of water that's so critical to many communities to have long-term economic benefits. So we have substantial resources in hand, as David mentioned, through the mandatory funds we have available. That's not to say we don't have budget challenges in the future. But, Bureau of Reclamation, we're very much focused on getting to work right now and helping to realize the benefits of these settlements in Indian country. And then, finally, I would just note that I've had a lot of terrific experiences as Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation but none have been more meaningful than the celebrations, the ceremonies that I've got to participate in celebrating these recent settlements. Whether it's in Navajo country, whether it was on the Crow reservation, in the Aamodt celebration that we had in Santa Fe, it's so meaningful to many of

these tribal communities to know that they're going to have access to long-term, clean water supplies and that makes this very rewarding. Thank you very much.