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Dr. Peter Gleick Calls on the Senate to Move on Specific Water Policy Reforms

Recommends Fundamental Changes to Ensure Sustainable Water for the U.S.

December 8, 2011, Washington, D.C.: Pacific Institute President Dr. Peter Gleick presented a set of recommendations to Congress on Thursday for a more effective and sustainable 21st-century national water policy. Dr. Gleick, one of the world's leading experts on freshwater issues, [testified](#) before the Subcommittee on Water and Power of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources that coordinated federal planning for water is needed in the face of new water challenges such as climate change, unregulated or inadequately regulated pollutants, and decaying physical water infrastructure.

“Growing human populations and demands for water, unacceptable water quality in many areas, weak or inadequate water data collection and regulation, and growing threats to the timing and reliability of water supply from climate change call for fundamental changes in federal policy,” said Dr. Gleick. “The water crisis around the nation and around the world is growing, presenting new direct threats to our economy and environment – but it also offers opportunities for better and coordinated responses.”

Peter Gleick laid out for Sub-committee members the freshwater challenges facing the U.S., including growing scarcity, disputes over water allocation and use among neighboring states, unmitigated water contamination from both known and new pollutants, threats to our energy production, a clear and present danger associated with climate change, inadequate investment in critical water infrastructure and data collection systems, and threats to national security associated with water problems outside of our own borders.

Dr. Gleick observed that while many water problems are local, and require local responses, specific and focused policy actions by Congress are needed as well. He testified that reforms offer the potential to meet economic demands with less water through “soft path” water solutions including water conservation and efficiency, smarter water pricing, new technology, and more participatory water management.

“Since the 1970s, the U.S. has been improving the productivity of water use, growing more food and producing more goods and services without increasing the demand for water,” said Dr. Gleick. “On a per-person basis, the nation uses far less water today than in 1980. This is a tremendous increase in water productivity, showing that limits to water availability do not have to mean economic hardship or suffering. Indeed, additional investment to repair and upgrade infrastructure and technology for water use, treatment, and delivery has the potential to create hundreds of thousands of new jobs nationwide.”

(more)

In his testimony, Dr. Gleick presented nine targeted recommendations for fundamental change in federal water policy:

1. Federal water-related agencies and programs are fragmented and require better coordination.
2. The nation lacks, and must develop, an adequate understanding of water supply, use, and flows.
3. More appropriate economic strategies can create more sustainable water-use patterns.
4. Water policies and infrastructure should be designed to evolve with changing climatic conditions; the federal government should develop a national strategy for climate change adaptation to unavoidable climate impacts.
5. Existing Federal water laws should be updated and adequately enforced: in particular, Congress must modernize the antiquated Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act.
6. Twenty-first century water management must encompass decentralized solutions such as water demand management, stormwater capture, recycled water, greywater, and other nontraditional approaches.
7. Federal water policies must be integrated with other policies, including energy, agriculture, and climate change.
8. Environmental justice principles must be integrated into federal water policy, using benchmarks of measurable progress toward eliminating disproportionate impacts in low-income communities and communities of color.
9. The federal government should lead by example, establishing new rules and targets for its own water use and operations. For example, all federally managed buildings should meet or exceed WaterSense standards for fixtures and appliances.

Peter Gleick's full testimony is available on the Pacific Institute website at www.pacinst.org/publications/testimony/new_national_water_policy.pdf.

In 2012, the Pacific Institute will release a new book on a 21st-century U.S. water policy, published by Oxford University Press.

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