

MICHAEL F. BENNET
COLORADO

COMMITTEES:
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
FINANCE
INTELLIGENCE

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0609

WASHINGTON, DC:
261 RUSSELL SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510
(202) 224-5852

COLORADO:
CESAR E. CHAVEZ BUILDING
1244 SPEER BOULEVARD
DENVER, CO 80204
(303) 455-7600

<http://www.bennet.senate.gov>

November 17, 2020

Mr. Clint Evans, State Conservationist
Natural Resources Conservation Service-Colorado
Denver Federal Center
Building 56, Room 2604
PO Box 25426
Denver, CO 80225-0426

Dear Mr. Evans:

I write to express support for the application submitted by the Upper Rio Grande Partnership to Preserve Agriculture and Restore Aquifers (PARA) to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, for funding from the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). If awarded, PARA will implement an innovative ground water conservation easement model to pilot in the San Luis Valley of Colorado.

The San Luis Valley is part of the Upper Rio Grande Basin and supports large-scale crop production, a staple of the regional economy. A rich network of wetlands, together with the crops, the San Luis Valley provides critical habitat for a variety of waterfowl and most prominently, the Sandhill Crane. Additionally, a historic drought in 2002 revealed the unsustainable nature of the current level of groundwater withdrawals, leading the state of Colorado to impose a deadline for the community to come to a solution or face a shutdown of groundwater wells.

PARA focuses on coupling permanence and flexibility to address groundwater depletion while maintaining a community's agricultural economy and the wildlife habitat it creates. The partnership brings together the groundwater management experience of water districts with the collaborative expertise and conservation tools of land trusts to work with irrigators on a voluntary basis to bring aquifer levels to a sustainable level. If funded, PARA will purchase conservation easements in the San Luis Valley that will focus on groundwater pumping restrictions to keep 8,000 acre-feet of water in the aquifers. Additionally, monies will enable a cost-share program to allow irrigators to install surface capture irrigation systems to remain viable as they reduce or discontinue groundwater pumping. This new tool would enable a community to build resiliency to recover and maintain sustainable aquifers, to the benefit of residents, visitors, and wildlife.

I learned about this project first-hand during a field visit this past August outside Center, Colorado. As a long-time supporter of RCPP and member of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee, this proposal meets many of the priorities Congress intended including land and water conservation, which will serve as a model for groundwater solutions across the United States. I encourage you to give the application submitted by the Upper Rio Grande Partnership to Preserve Agriculture and Restore Aquifers every appropriate consideration consistent with all applicable laws and regulations. Thank you for your consideration, and please notify my office of any funds awarded.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator