Water-Related Technologies for Sustainable Agriculture in U.S. Arid/Semiarid Lands

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Foreword

Water is a major limiting factor in most areas where Western arid and semiarid agriculture is currently practiced. Increasing water demands from nonagricultural users plus growing problems of ground water depletion, salt buildup in agricultural soils, and water-quality deterioration are causing heightened concern about the sustainability of Western agriculture. A major part of this concern is focused on whether the Federal agricultural system is prepared to meet the changing needs of Western agriculture and whether technology can assist in providing the Nation with Western agricultural production that is sustainable and profitable over the long term.

This report assesses existing and emerging water-related technologies for their ability to support long-term productivity of arid/semiarid agricultural plants and animals in the context of institutional factors, water supply/use relationships, and the characteristics of the renewable natural resource base on which agriculture depends. The study was requested by the House Committee on Agriculture and endorsed by the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Subcommittee on Water Resources. The technologies examined by the study are generally directed toward: 1) improving efficiency of water use, whether for rain-fed (dryland and rangeland) systems or irrigation; 2) improving water management, storage, and distribution for agriculture; and 3) augmenting existing supplies with additional water not previously available. The report also identifies a number of options for congressional action. A background paper containing examples of application of arid/semiarid agricultural technologies in foreign countries has been published separately as part of this assessment.

The Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) greatly appreciates the contributions of the advisory panel, working groups and workshop participants assembled for this study, the authors of the technical papers, and the many other advisors and reviewers who assisted us, including farmers, ranchers, agricultural scientists in government and universities, and experts in the private sector. Their guidance and comments helped develop a comprehensive report. As with all OTA studies, however, the content of the report is the sole responsibility of OTA.
Water-Related Technologies for Sustaining Agriculture in U.S. Arid/Semiarid Lands Advisory Panel

James B. Kendrick, Jr., Chairman
Vice President, Agriculture and University Services, University of California, Berkeley

Alton A. Adams, Jr.  Adams & Associates  Virgin Islands

Thomas G. Bahr (resigned May 1982)*
Director
Water Resources Research Institute
New Mexico

Wilbert H. Blackburn  Professor
Department of Range Science
Texas A&M University

William T. Dishman  Farmer/Rancher
Idaho

Harold E. Dregne  Professor
Department of Plant and Soil Science
Texas Tech University, Lubbock

Chester E. Evans  (Retired, USDA Research Director)
Colorado

Larry J. Gordon**  Director
Albuquerque Environmental Health Department
New Mexico

Robert M. Hagan  Professor
Department of Land, Air, and Water Resources
University of California, Davis

David E. Herrick (Retired, USFS)
Western Agricultural Research Committee
Colorado

Helen Ingram  Professor
Department of Government
University of Arizona, Tucson

Cyrus McKell  Director of Research
Plant Resources Institute
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Milton E. Mekelburg  President
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Washington

Cynthia Reed  Rancher
South Dakota

Luis Torres  Program Director
American Friends Service Committee
New Mexico

Casey E. Westell, Jr.
Director of Industrial Ecology
Tenneco, Inc.
Texas

Norman K. Whittlesey  Professor
Department of Agricultural Economics
Washington State University, Pullman

* Resigned to head office of Water Policy, U.S. Department of the Interior.
* * Until August 1982 Deputy Secretary of New Mexico Health and Environment Department
OTA Water-Rekted Technologies for Sustainable Agriculture in Arid/Semiarid Lands Project Staff

H. David Banta, Assistant Director, OTA
Health and Life Sciences Division

Walter E. Parham, Program Manager, Food and Renewable Resources Program
Barbara Lausche, Project Director
Phyllis Windle, Analyst
Rita Dallavalle, Research Analyst
Donald Alford, In-house Contractor
John Willems, Research Assistant
Kathryn White, Editor-Contractor

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