

RON ESTES  
4TH DISTRICT, KANSAS

2234 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515  
PHONE: (202) 225-6216  
DISTRICT: (316) 262-8992

estes.house.gov

Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515-1604

COMMITTEES:  
WAYS AND MEANS  
CHAIRMAN OF SUBCOMMITTEE  
ON SOCIAL SECURITY  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TAX  
BUDGET  
JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE

February 10, 2025

The Honorable Doug Burgum  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, N.W.  
Washington DC 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum,

Congratulations on your confirmation as the 55th United States Secretary of the Interior. I look forward to working with you on the critical issues that impact the 4th District of Kansas.

The ongoing water impairment at Quivira National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is paramount to my district. As you are aware, the Refuge holds the senior water rights in the region, with many family farms and communities in the area holding the more junior rights. The ongoing drought in western Kansas has significantly reduced the amount of water available to meet the demand for all the area's rights holders. This lack of water has impaired the Refuge's senior water rights. For nearly a decade, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has engaged with the State of Kansas, Groundwater Management District 5 and the local community to find a suitable long-term solution.

Unfortunately, one of the significant barriers to achieving a long-term solution is the threat of the FWS exercising their rights under Kansas water law to call for exclusive water rights to the Refuge at the expense of the junior water rights holders. This action would significantly harm the economy of the entire Rattlesnake Creek Basin. Agriculture is the basin's primary industry, generating millions of dollars in direct and indirect revenue. Losing the ability to irrigate crops would reduce these revenues by tens of millions of dollars, forcing many of these already struggling family-run farms to exit the industry entirely. Any reduction on the farms' ability to irrigate would be an economic disaster for the thousands of hardworking Kansas families that rely on water to grow our food. Furthermore, local governments, schools and hospitals in the region depend on the taxes these farms and other agricultural businesses generate to provide critical services in this rural area.

Thankfully, FWS has already committed to not calling in the Refuge's rights for the entirety of 2025 as all parties try to work toward solutions, including water well augmentation, equipment modernization and voluntary water rights retirement. These efforts show that stakeholders in the region are committed to finding workable solutions to address the Refuge's water rights while maintaining economic stability and growth in their communities.

As we quickly approach the 2026 growing season, Rattlesnake Creek Basin communities need additional assurances that they can continue their farming efforts without fear that FWS will call for water. I respectfully ask that, as soon as possible, you commit, in writing, your Department to preventing FWS from calling for water for Quivira NWR during 2026. This reassurance would signal the Department's commitment to continue working with these communities toward long-term solutions.

Respectfully,



Ron Estes

Kansas 4<sup>th</sup> District