

Nation must not forget that while the Midwest United States has recently suffered from severe flooding, and my home State of New Mexico is currently not lacking precious rainfall, last year the Southwest experienced the worst drought in over 100 years. The results were nothing less than disastrous.

In New Mexico, for example, the drought decimated the State's agricultural community. Every county in the State received disaster declarations from the USDA. Farmers in the southern part of the State were forced to go to water wells, depleting an already-taxed aquifer. In northeastern New Mexico, winter wheat crops failed for the first time in anyone's memory. It was estimated that ranchers lost up to 85 percent of their capital, and 40 percent reductions in livestock herds was not uncommon.

The drought also had a catastrophic impact on New Mexico's forests. The incredibly dry conditions brought on by the drought sparked fires, which were exacerbated by the lack of water needed to extinguish them. In all, there were over 1,200 fires in New Mexico last year that burned over 140,000 acres of land and wiped out dozens of homes and businesses.

The drought also taxed municipal water systems to their limits, and forced many cities and towns to consider drastically raised water rates for their citizens. And the drought meant that critical stretches of the Rio Grande River were almost completely dry, which in turn meant vastly reduced amounts of water for wildlife such as the endangered silvery minnow.

However, New Mexico's problems were those of just one State; the 1995-96 drought devastated the entire Southwest. Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, and Kansas were all severely damaged by the drought. We in the Southwest are fortunate that this year is proving to be a much better year for precipitation than the last. But we do not know what the next year will bring. Another drought could again send towns scrambling to drill new water wells, sweep fire across bone-dry forests, and force farmers and ranchers to watch their way of life blow away with the dust.

But I do not want to give the impression that severe droughts are solely the curse of the Southwest. Every region in the United States can be hit by these catastrophes. In 1976-77, a short but intense drought struck the Pacific Northwest, requiring the construction of numerous dams and reservoirs to secure millions of additional acre feet of needed water. The 1988 Midwest drought caused over \$5 billion in losses. And the infamous 7-year drought of 1986-93 experienced by California, the Pacific Northwest, and the Great Basin States caused extensive damage to water systems, water quality, fish and wildlife, and recreational activities. Recently, areas of Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania suffered unusual drought conditions.

Yet, while drought is so pervasive and even though it seriously affects the economic and environmental well-being of the entire nation, the United States is poorly prepared to deal with serious drought emergencies. As a result of the hardships being suffered in every part of my State last year, I convened a special Multi-State Drought Task Force of Federal, State, local, and tribal emergency management agencies to coordinate efforts to respond to the drought. The task force was ably headed up by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and included every Federal agency that has programs designed to deal with drought.

While FEMA has done a tremendous job in responding to sudden disasters such as flooding, the impact of drought emerges gradually rather than suddenly. Unfortunately, what the task force found was this: although the Federal Government has numerous drought related programs on the books, we have no integrated, coordinated system of implementing those programs. Drought victims in this Nation do not know who to turn to for help, and when they finally do find help, it is too late and totally inadequate. The gradual nature of drought devastation underscores the need for drought management rather than drought response.

We must be vigilant, and prepare ourselves for quick action when the next drought cycle begins. Last year's devastating drought and the chaotic manner in which governments responded to it, confirmed my belief that this legislation is needed. With recommendations from the Western Governors' Association, the National Governors' Association, and the Multi-State Drought Task Force, I introduced the National Drought Policy Act of 1997 in January. This legislation, which passed the Senate today, will be the first step toward finally establishing a coherent, effective national drought policy. S. 222 creates a commission comprised of representatives of those Federal, State, local, and tribal agencies and organizations that are most involved with drought issues. S. 222 charges the commission with providing recommendations on a permanent and systematic Federal process to address this particular type of devastating natural disaster. On the Federal side, the Commission will include representatives from USDA, Interior, the Army, FEMA, SBA, and Commerce—agencies which all currently have drought-related programs. Equally important will be the non-Federal members, including representatives from the National Governors' Association, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and four persons representative of those groups that are always hardest hit by drought emergencies.

The Commission also will be charged with determining what needs exist on the Federal, State, local, and tribal levels with regard to drought; reviewing existing drought programs; and de-

termining what gaps exist between the needs of drought victims and those programs currently designed to deal with drought. The Commission will then make recommendations on how Federal drought laws and programs can be better integrated into a comprehensive national drought policy.

In recognition of the national nature of drought emergencies, this effort has garnered bi-partisan support. Senator BOB KERREY and other witnesses encouraged amendments which include collaboration with the National Drought Mitigation Center as well as the Western Drought Coordination Council. These suggestions ensure that the Commission would receive important input from existing entities on the needs at the Federal, State, local, and tribal levels to prepare for and respond to drought emergencies.

Unfortunately, drought conditions are a way of life in my region of the country. But better planning on our part, and with the recommendations of the Drought Commission established under S. 222, may limit some of the damage. I look forward to passage of this legislation, which is important to the entire United States, in the House of Representatives early next year.

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the committee amendment be agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The committee amendment was agreed to.

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the bill, as amended, be considered read a third time and passed, the motion to reconsider be laid upon the table, and that any statements relating to this bill appear at the appropriate place in the RECORD.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The bill (S. 222), as amended, was read a third time and passed.

COMMENDING THOSE WHO WORKED ON THE ISTEAL BILL

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, before I close, I do want to acknowledge the good work that was done on the ISTEAL highway and transportation infrastructure bill. A number of Senators and Members of Congress worked on this legislation and did a very good job—of course, Senator CHAFEE, the chair of the committee; Senator BAUCUS, the ranking member; Senator WARNER; Senator BOND; and others.

Also, I want to thank their staffs for the work that they did well into the night last night. I know their names have already been mentioned, but I just want to add my commendations because I know that they really worked hard to get an agreement.

Of course, this was just a preliminary bout of what will be a major fight next year in getting the big long-term bill done.