Opening Statement

Rep. Mark Udall (D-CO)
U.S. House Committee on Science

Hearing: *Improving Drought Monitoring and Preparedness: H.R. 5136, the National Integrated Drought Information System Act of 2006*

May 4, 2006

First, I would like to thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for scheduling this hearing and markup and assisting the speedy consideration of this bill.

I would also like to welcome our witnesses here today. I am very interested to hear from each of you about your experiences with planning for drought as well as the potential for a system such as the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS).

As most of you know, the western portion of this country have experienced severe drought conditions in the past few years. In my own home state of Colorado, the reduced precipitation in addition to high temperatures have caused extreme wildfire conditions, water restrictions, a decline in tourism, reduced crop yields, and many other harmful effects.

There is no doubt that drought has extremely harmful affects on our economy, however it is not always addressed as a natural disaster because it is slow to develop. Unlike disasters such as tornados, droughts do not have a clear beginning or end, but rather precipitation slowly declines and our reservoirs and soil become increasingly drier.

While the Department of Homeland Security is working to prepare for natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes, the Federal Government is not doing enough to mitigate and reduce the effects of drought.

I do not want to disparage the current efforts of NOAA and the Drought Monitor. This program provides important seasonal drought information that has aided countless communities to make decisions to mitigate drought. But I believe there is much more NOAA can do to provide detailed seasonal and long-term drought monitors on a regional and localized basis.

I also believe we must do this by making information easily accessible and understandable to the general public. There are several different Federal agencies that have some involvement in drought monitoring or forecasts. Often their information is not available to the general consumer, or requires a user to visit several different locations to piece together an accurate picture of the drought conditions in their area.

The Federal investment in drought research and mitigation is only useful if decision makers can obtain and utilize the information. This is where I believe NIDIS can be most useful. Not only will this allow for more comprehensive drought monitoring and forecasting, but it also can provide a one-stop shop for drought information.

As one of the sponsors of this legislation, it is no surprise that I am supportive of the NIDIS proposal.

But we are here today to hear from our witnesses about NIDIS. And I am intrigued to learn their opinions about NIDIS and how it can be most effective as well as what improvements we can make to our drought monitoring systems to provide the most informative data.

I again thank our witnesses for joining us here today and look forward to your testimony.