North Dakota
Irrigation Association

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Dedicated to strengthening and expanding irrigation to build and diversify our economy

Testimony on SB 2020
Senate Appropriations Education and Environment Division
Steven Hansen, Chairman, North Dakota Irrigation Association
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Appropriations Education and Environment Division, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on SB 2020 on behalf of the North Dakota Irrigation Association. The Association is made up of irrigators, irrigation equipment dealers, businesses and others interested in supporting irrigation and irrigation development.

North Dakota irrigates about 300,000 acres to produce a variety of crops including corn and cereal grain crops, livestock forage, and high value crops such as potatoes, sugar beets, and onions. Irrigation provides strong economic return, with an acre of irrigated land producing four times that of dryland in regular conditions and as much as six times during drought.

Irrigation provides the opportunity to grow higher value crops where top yields and exceptional quality are necessary. High quality coupled with substantial yielding potatoes have made the French fry industry, located in Grand Forks and Jamestown, successful in the state. The acreage of onions in the state is smaller than the other crops, but this crop may have an important role in the future as markets are developed. Irrigation does and can diversify and strengthen the agricultural economy of the state.

Irrigation also provides producers and agricultural processors dependability despite weather conditions. The drought in 2021 heightened awareness of the need for additional irrigation to support the growing value-added agriculture processing in the state. The Association is proud to partner with other commodity organizations and processors in the state to expand awareness of the benefits of irrigation and brainstorm ways to reduce barriers to irrigation development.

These barriers include water availability in some areas of the state and funding for irrigation development. Many of the aquifers that supply water for irrigation are near full appropriation, meaning that there is limited opportunity for further development. The Missouri River remains an ideal place for future development, however. Approximately 300,000 acres in the Missouri River corridor have the water and soils suitable for irrigation. Additionally, the area surrounding the McClusky Canal has much potential for future development that could be jumpstarted with some policy changes from the federal government.

On the funding side, the North Dakota State Water Commission (SWC) was created in 1937 to help develop irrigation. Today, the SWC provides financial assistance to irrigation districts for constructing infrastructure to convey the water to the land. The state cost share assistance for irrigation is limited to irrigation districts or the Garrison Diversion Conservancy District, and can

be used for ‘shared works’. Shared works are the parts of irrigation development that occur off a private irrigators’ land, such as an intake out of a body of water and water pipe to private land. Irrigation districts can receive 50% of the cost of such works from the SWC. The funding for this cost share comes out of the General Water bucket.

Just as important as funding for irrigation development is ensuring the Department of Water Resources (DWR) has the staff and resources needed to process water permit applications. Every irrigator must receive a water permit from the DWR. It is the DWR’s responsibility to ensure that new permit applications do not adversely affect those that are already using the water, known as prior appropriators. In order for the DWR to make timely and responsible decisions on these important permits, it needs staff with the skills and tools needed to analyze the data and process permits. The Association supports the DWR’s request for an additional FTE for the appropriations division. Additionally, the Association supports the DWR’s requests for:

- $80,000 for professional development for appropriations staff in positions that require high levels of technical expertise, and that in recent years have experienced high turnover rates.
- $1.6 million to expand the pushing remote sensors (PRESENS) footprint to improve forecasting, modeling, and overall water management. PRESENS is key to developing good data on aquifer levels so it is known exactly what water may be available for irrigation.
- $750,000 to expand use of airborne electromagnetic surveys (AEM) technology to better understand the extent and availability of ground water, particularly in glaciated regions.
- $94,665 to acquire groundwater modeling and hydrologic analysis software to perform many of the scientific analytical functions and related modeling activities in support of DWR’s water appropriation responsibilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.