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Senator James Risch: Advocating for Western Water Needs and Local Water Management



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Senator Risch and his wife, Vicki, on their ranch.

United States Senator James Risch of Idaho has long been considered a western water champion. In this interview, conducted by Idaho Water Users Association President Paul Arrington, Senator Risch touches on recent water management legislation and continuing efforts on the Columbia River Treaty. He also strongly advocates “prioritiz[ing] local input and leadership on decisions that will yield real, positive results for Idaho water users and the West.”

Paul Arrington: Please tell our leaders a little about your background.

Senator Risch: I am a proud graduate of the University of Idaho, where I studied forestry and later attended law school. Since then, I have dedicated the better part of my professional life to serving the people of Idaho. I was elected to the United States Senate in 2008 after serving as a state senator, the lieutenant governor, and the governor of Idaho.

It is a tremendous honor to represent the Gem State in such important roles and to strive for solutions that benefit Idahoans.

While having a law degree is not unique in Congress, my background in forestry truly is. As one of the only trained foresters in either chamber, I have a rare perspective on the commonsense solutions that are required for on-the-ground resource management. I bring my knowledge of the distinctive challenges of the West to my work advocating for Idahoans in the Senate.

Outside elected office, I am a rancher; small business owner; and most importantly, a proud father, grandfather, and husband. My family is truly the light of my life. My wife, Vicki, and I have been blessed in our marriage with three wonderful children and now enjoy every minute of being grandparents. Witnessing the next generation get involved on the ranch, pursue their careers, and start families of their own is such a gift.

Paul Arrington: What are your committee assignments?

Senator Risch: I am a senior member of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and the chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. On the Energy Committee, I am also a member of the Subcommittee on Water and Power, where I focus on western water issues and the Bureau of Reclamation. The committee and subcommittee allow me to push back on heavy-handed regulations that impede the responsible use of our natural resources. I am also the most senior Republican on the Committee on Intelligence and the Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and I sit on the Committee on Ethics.

Paul Arrington: In Idaho, we have long considered you a water champion. Your office regularly takes the lead on water issues important to our state. Why do you believe you are drawn to water issues?

Senator Risch: I know firsthand that difficult problems—especially those relating to natural resources—are best addressed when local stakeholders come together to develop creative and tailored solutions. Unfortunately, it seems that the federal government is increasingly trying to impose one-size-fits-all mandates that do not work for Idaho and certainly do not work for Idaho water. As a senator for

Idaho and a member of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, it is my job to ensure that Idahoans have a seat at the table and maintain our right to manage Idaho's natural resources.

As a rancher, I recognize the critical role agriculture plays in Idaho's economy and identity. Water is at the heart of our agriculture industry. When it comes to the issues that matter most, keeping Idaho's farmers and ranchers in the driver's seat is my top priority.

Paul Arrington: During your tenure on the Foreign Relations Committee, you received a front-row seat to the efforts to renew the Columbia River Treaty. Would you tell us about the treaty and why it is so important to Idaho and the Pacific Northwest?

Senator Risch: The Columbia River Treaty coordinates U.S. and Canadian hydropower and flood risk management in the Columbia River basin, an area spanning the northwestern United States and British Columbia, Canada. The Columbia River System and its water infrastructure projects are essential to the region for electricity generation, flood control, irrigation, navigation, and recreation. Negotiating a modernized and updated treaty is important for delivering and balancing these essential uses. I meet with the treaty negotiators regularly and continually underscore the importance of Idaho water.



Senator Risch with a constituent in Idaho.



Senator Risch on his ranch near Boise.

Paul Arrington: During the 118th Congress, you sponsored Senate Bill 2160, which deals with extraordinary maintenance on urban canals of concern. Please tell us about this legislation.

Senator Risch: My Urban Canal Modernization Act would allow Reclamation's aging infrastructure funds to be used for repairs on urban canals with extraordinary maintenance issues. These agricultural canals currently do not have easy access to funding but pose a significant risk to surrounding urban communities. This bill passed the Senate at the end of the last Congress, and I am hopeful we will be able to get it all the way across the finish line this Congress.

Paul Arrington: Why is the topic of urban canals of concern important to Idaho and other states in the West?

Senator Risch: *Urban canal of concern* is a technical term applying to canals whose failure would be devastating for an especially high number of people. Across the West, agricultural canals that were built in once-rural areas now have houses, schools, and businesses nearby. The New York Canal, which starts in Boise and runs through the now heavily populated Treasure Valley in Idaho, is a good example of such a canal. Resolving the extraordinary maintenance needs of canals where people and property are now a factor is a critical need. Advancing measures to enable these repairs keeps our communities safe and water flowing to our producers.


Paul Arrington: Being in Congress gives you a special perspective on not only the challenges that water managers are facing in the West but also the politics of addressing those challenges. What do you see as the biggest issues affecting water use and management in the West?

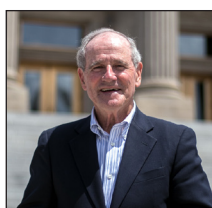
Senator Risch: People outside the West struggle to understand the distinctive challenges we face. This is especially apparent when it comes to western water management. Idaho has been a leader in water innovation and conservation, employing aquifer recharge, surface water infrastructure upgrades, and other water-conserving technologies to ensure that our most valuable resource, water, remains available to future generations. Unfortunately, continuous overreach and regulation from the federal government, even on matters about which agencies have received clear direction from Congress, disrupt these tailored and effective efforts. Local stakeholders have the best ability to solve these difficult problems, and the federal government needs to leave states room to manage their water.

Paul Arrington: How can we rise above the politics and find meaningful solutions to these challenges?

Senator Risch: Everyone needs water. I frequently work with my Senate colleagues on both sides of the aisle to find solutions that we can agree will benefit consumers. Often, these issues are not so much left versus right as East versus West. I have partnered for years with Senator Cantwell, a Democrat from Washington, to advocate for the Northwest's interest in the Columbia River Treaty negotiations. I also joined Senator Cantwell and Senator Daines of Montana in introducing legislation to improve dam relicensing.

Paul Arrington: What is your vision for the future?

Senator Risch: We must put tools back in the hands of our local water managers and stakeholders. As we work to rein in the disastrous overreach of the past 4 years, I will fight to prioritize local input and leadership on decisions that will yield real, positive results for Idaho water users and the West. With the new Congress and Trump administration, there have never been more opportunities to achieve these goals, and I'm proud to lead the charge for the people of Idaho. 



Senator James Risch represents Idaho in the United States Senate. For more on Senator Risch, visit risch.senate.gov.