

# Western Water

COMMUNICATIONS LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT



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The Water Hub uses story-based strategies to advance water justice and resilience. We work to make water communications more accessible, and activism more effective, so the people most impacted by water challenges have greater agency to determine the solutions.



## OUR VISION

The Water Hub envisions a world where all people have equitable access to safe water and sanitation, as well as a voice in the management of this shared and sacred resource. We envision living rivers, thriving communities, and water systems that work with nature.

*“Right now, a lot of the water conversation in the media is about plumbing. It ignores the ecological and cultural dimensions of the issue.”*

– **GARRIT VOGGESSER**, [National Wildlife Federation](#)

*“We need to have folks that oversee funding and legislation out in underrepresented communities to see what’s going on firsthand.”*

– **EDDIE OCAMPO**, [Self-Help Enterprises](#)

*“Organizing is the heart and soul of this work. We aren’t going to have people show up and be extractive and exploitative. These aren’t characters to us.”*

– **NATALIE GARCIA**, [Community Water Center](#)



## OVERVIEW

Water Hub staff spent the second half of 2019 studying the Western water news and opinion landscape, and speaking with as many advocates and experts as we could to learn more about the policy priorities and communications needs of prospective partner organizations.

In total, we spoke with nearly 100 people, hand-coded more than 650 stories and op-eds across 15 newspapers, reviewed more than a dozen polls, and surveyed more than 3,000 voters.

Throughout this process, we were listening and looking for recurring themes to inform our work:

- Water challenges facing many communities
- Water issues rated as priorities by several groups
- Narrative needs that came up repeatedly
- Stories widely considered important but underreported

We also asked interviewees to reflect on broader communications needs and opportunities, using this input to inform the development of the Water Hub's initial service mix. Because the Water Hub is a new program designed to serve a broad field of activists and experts, we expect to continue learning and evolving our work over time.



# MEDIA ANALYSIS

This report is a chance to reflect back to our network what we have heard and learned to date. The following summary is by no means exhaustive, but we tried to do justice to the ideas and information everyone shared along the way.

Our media scan included a review of all the water stories, op-eds, and editorials in the Los Angeles Times, New York Times, USA Today, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Albuquerque Journal, Arizona Republic, Denver Post, Fresno Bee, Sacramento Bee, San Francisco Chronicle, San Jose Mercury News, Salt Lake Tribune, Houston Chronicle, and Las Vegas Review Journal from March 15, 2018 to March 15, 2019. We also used Trendkite to analyze news coverage about water supply, groundwater management, and water safety across the West. This analysis included radio and television coverage, as well as newspapers and blogs

While we found the most in-depth water coverage in newspapers, far more respondents in our November 2019 poll of Western voters indicated they rely on local and network television for water news than newspapers.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Weather is the biggest driver of water news, and we are increasingly seeing weather stories that talk about climate-driven trends, water supply and quality, and infrastructure.
- Water management news tends to be quite technical, focusing on this regulation, that permit, etc.
- Many stories are written around process milestones (environmental impact reports, deadlines, decision points, etc.)

- Most focus on individual projects or policies rather than exploring the issues that connect them. However, a number of themes surfaced in our scan:
  - Extreme weather events, like last fall's Hurricane Rosa, and increasingly strong atmospheric rivers that have been swamping the West
  - Changing conditions, like aridification and rising temperatures.
  - Conflict over high-profile infrastructure projects like dams, pipelines, canals, and desalination plants
  - Concerns about water safety, especially in California where the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund campaign generated considerable press
  - Concerns about water supply and a look at potential solutions — from the Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan to California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act
  - Water challenges facing farmers, and the steps they are taking to increase resilience
- The pro/con framing of many water stories tends to reinforce old binaries, like fish versus farms or economy versus environment.
- Water is a hot topic in the opinion pages of newspapers, generating frequent op-eds and editorials in local and regional outlets.
- There is a lot of negative news — widespread pollution, potential shortages, failing infrastructure, etc. — and these kinds of problem stories are often widely covered.
- Solution stories tend to be more local: farmers flooding their fields to provide salmon habitat, a community that fought to get connected to a public water system and succeeded, etc.
- Serial coverage is mostly happening at local and regional outlets. Those with water-focused reporters tend to set the frames.
- Water is most often covered as an environmental issue, although our scan did turn up some coverage from health and equity-focused reporters.
- Coverage is quite limited in community newspapers and ethnic media outlets.
- Television stories tend to be event-driven, and rarely given much context for the news.
- Stories tend to quote the same kinds of spokespeople, primarily environmental organizations, utility and elected officials, and academic experts. Community, fishing, farming, and business voices tend to be less well-represented.

# PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

Water Hub staff spent considerable time reviewing publicly available polls on WaterPolls.org, paying particular attention to annual polls like Conservation in the West, Value of Water, and PPIC's Californians and the Environment, which allow us to track opinion over time. We also spoke with Dave Metz of FM3 to get his sense of gaps in current research, and surveyed more than 3,000 Western voters to try to fill in some of those gaps. The results of our November 2019 poll are summarized here.

Below, we outline our top takeaways from public opinion research:

## KEY FINDINGS

- Concern about water supply is strong and growing, although it can vary from year to year based on the weather.
- People are noticing the change in precipitation: lack of rain and snow, drought, and low levels of water in rivers and reservoirs generate concern across state and party lines.
- Most Westerners report having experienced extreme weather, and a strong majority believe climate change is impacting water supply and quality in their state.
- People want the government and utilities to do more on water and are willing to pay more for better service.
- People care a great deal about water safety, but most think it's a problem somewhere else.
- People intuitively like the idea of local (versus imported) water. Most prefer conservation and reuse over increased diversions from rivers.
- Water infrastructure is far from top of mind for Western voters, but there is broad support for updating aging water systems.
- People support a range of solutions to increase water security — from groundwater management to agricultural efficiency — but the idea of building new dams and reservoirs is relatively unpopular.
- We see the strongest concern about water safety and security among people of color. The same groups indicate the strongest support for government action.
- The messages voters find most compelling as a reason to stretch water supplies and develop new sources reference changing weather, population growth, and the power of working together.

# STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

In order to understand the communications needs of prospective partners, Water Hub staff interviewed 98 activists and experts across a range of sectors (including environmental, equity, agriculture, outdoor recreation, tribal, and academic) and geographies. We took extensive notes during these conversations, which explored each person's sense of the water communications landscape, their organization's project and policy goals, and areas where they see a need for increased capacity, coordination, or content. Below we summarize the key takeaways from these interviews.

## THE STATE OF WATER COMMUNICATIONS

Most interviewees said they think water awareness is on the rise in the Western United States. High profile events like the historic drought, the Flint lead crisis, and Oroville dam breach have highlighted the vulnerability of our water systems and the need to invest in clean water, safe infrastructure, and reliable supplies. However, several people noted that we have work to do to translate broad public concern into effective advocacy.

Themes that came up repeatedly in our conversations about the current water communications landscape included:

- The tendency to talk about water in technical terms, which makes it difficult for non-experts to engage
- The overwhelming negativity of water news and focus on areas of conflict
- The lack of a shared vision for water progress
- An empathy gap that allows lawmakers to defer action on issues that primarily impact marginalized groups
- A movement that centers mainstream organizations and tokenizes frontline groups
- An overreliance on grassroots advocacy and underinvestment in community organizing

*“There is an empathy gap... I want people to be shocked by the reality of California water and ask if there is any explanation other than overt racism.”*

– **Camille Pannu**,  
Aoki Water Justice Clinic

*“Certain areas are either willfully neglected or simply ignored and treated as invisible. And sometimes it's both.”*

– **Tim Douglas**,  
Leadership Counsel for  
Justice & Accountability

*“What is the shared vision and messaging in the water space? We need to get clear and get the chorus on board.”*

– **Michael Johnson**,  
NDN Collective



## THE VARIED GOALS OF ADVOCATES AND EXPERTS

Given the range of water challenges facing Western communities, it is no surprise that our interviews turned up dozens of different goals, from defeating desalination plants and restoring rivers to promoting urban water conservation, expanding regenerative agriculture, and reforming water governance.

Across the board, there was a sense that we need to evolve our relationship to water, honoring the ecological and cultural value of living rivers while recognizing the human right to safe and affordable drinking water. Part of that is pushing back on the commodification of water, which is showing up in the privatization of infrastructure and profiteering off land-based water rights. We talk more about this field-wide shift in the section that follows.

Five threads that ran through our conversations about groups' programmatic goals were:

- Promoting multi-benefit solutions, such as water efficiency, recycling, and green infrastructure
- Shifting from blaming entire industries to highlighting problematic practices and sustainable alternatives
- Maintaining momentum on water conservation regardless of the weather
- Shining a light on under-reported challenges, like drying wells and plumbing poverty
- Tapping into the personal connection people have with waterways

*“Helping lawmakers maintain the attention on efficiency and sustainability despite the return of rains.”*

– **Kirsten James**,  
CERES Connect the Drops

*“Cities are an opportunity to build water literacy — that’s where population and most power resides.”*

– **Bart Miller**,  
Western Resource Advocates,  
Colorado

*“Lifting up the untold positive stories on agriculture. The current narrative makes it hard for agricultural leaders to engage.”*

– **Radhika Fox**,  
US Water Alliance

*“Focusing on stream access, because public lands and waters are the great equalizer.”*

– **Katie McKalip**,  
Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

## FIELD-WIDE COMMUNICATIONS OPPORTUNITIES

When asked about opportunities to strengthen the water movement, interviewees spoke about the need for increased water literacy among members of the public and policymakers. They noted that some key concepts like groundwater, nonpoint source pollution, and watersheds are still not widely understood. People also mentioned the opportunity for greater collaboration across organizations and coalitions, to ensure we maintain momentum between campaigns, and help stakeholders and decision-makers understand the intersections between issues.

Lastly, a number of people talked about the need to create a new water consciousness that recognizes our interdependence with nature and with each other.

The key themes we took away from our conversations about field-wide needs included:

- Recognizing the ways water connects our communities and cuts across issues
- Breaking water out of the environmental silo by making an economic and equity case for proposed projects
- Ensuring impacted communities have a seat at decision-making tables, and respecting people's time and expertise
- Painting a clear picture of the water future we want, which includes healthy communities and healthy rivers
- Working together across campaigns and coalitions, so we can build power and advance progress

*"How do we create relatingness ... start to articulate the spiritual values into something that the basin can understand?"*

– Daryl Vigil,  
Water & Tribes Initiative

*"Seeing these challenges as shared challenges, and solutions as shared solutions ... How do we create a sense of interconnectedness and bring more people to the table?"*

– Laurel Firestone,  
California State Water  
Resources Control Board

*"Recognizing the intersection of water, housing, and environmental justice... And connecting youth to nature. That is how we build a new consciousness around water."*

– Andres Ramirez,  
Pacoima Beautiful



## CONCLUSION

The insights and ideas people shared during our discovery process informed the Water Hub's initial Theory of Change and 2020 priority list. With a team of three communications strategists — which soon will grow to five — we can't pursue all the opportunities that came up in our conversations. Instead, we have outlined a handful of focus areas, and will reserve about half of our staff time to provide on-call support to partners working on other timely topics.

We expect to continue refining our strategy as we learn, and welcome feedback along the way. In that spirit, if you have feedback about this landscape assessment, or input that should be reflected here, please contact Water Hub Managing Director Nicole Lampe at [nicole@waterhub.org](mailto:nicole@waterhub.org).

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# APPENDIX: INTERVIEWEES & ADVISORS

Water Hub staff are incredibly grateful to the following individuals that shared their perspective on the water field, communications and movement strategy, and program design.

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