confluence west

A consulting consortium of preeminent Western water leaders

September 2020

Friends of Western water - ***Now what?***

A few months ago, we were tackling 'aridification', mega-droughts, catastrophic wildfire, uncertain supply and how to best ally with low-income, people of color communities.

A few months later, all those challenges are still there but we're now working in a both terrifying – and hopeful – time.

How do we effectively, economically, and equitably ensure a secure water supply in the American West, leveraging opportunities and challenges?

We have three recommendations for you – and the deep experience to help you, your agency, your business, or your NGO make them happen.

This report *Three Paths Forward to Western Water Security* gives you an overview of three paths forward: Partnership, Allyship, and Embracing VUCA.

How can we help?

Regards,

Kimery Wiltshire

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Three Paths Forward to Western Water Security

August 2020

1. Partnerships – Beyond Collaboration

"We all think of zones of responsibility. But that doesn't work anymore."
Andy Fecko, Placer County Water Authority (CA)

Partnerships are the effective evolution of collaboration. Partnerships mean that there's a diverse group at the table - including the key players who have skin in the game, regardless of their institutional power. In some cases, these may be people who've never sat at a Western water or forest management table. They may represent low-income communities far downstream, public health leaders tackling wildfire impacts, or farmers or local elected officials.

Why is this important? Climate change is now bringing challenges we've never thought of only a few years ago. The money needed to implement projects is staggering. For solutions to be successful in the long term, they need to be championed by durable partnerships that leverage all available political and funding connections, and reflect a broad range of perspectives.

There are great stories of durable, diverse partnerships including the Rio Grande Water Fund, the French Meadows Project, and the Pure Waters Partners program. You can read about these and many others here.

We've catalyzed many of these projects – through connecting multi-jurisdiction leadership, identifying funding, ensuring that the best science is used, promoting water equity, and executive coaching.

2. Allyship :

a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability with historically disregarded communities.

"When you talk to farmworkers about no water, poor water quality, and increased water rates – now we're talking about the impact. It's all in the way we discuss climate change. Once we understand the impacts, then we can work on a collective vision for what we want sustainable agriculture to look like. And then we can get to the solutions, right?" **Susana deAnda, Community Water Center**

Allying with water justice leaders and low-income communities of color in the climate emergency is critical for two reasons. The first is practical: Western water and climate solutions will succeed or fail based on how well they reflect the leadership, priorities and needs of the people of color communities that are the new majority in the West, and whose political power will determine the future of the region.

Cities, water utilities, public agencies, businesses and NGOs need to work hard to shift their exclusive cultures to generate the kind of support needed to fund water-climate-resilience projects.

The second reason is a moral one which goes to the heart of what it means to be a Westerner. The rapidly changing climate in the American West has already brought disproportionate misery to low-income, people of color communities. If we're committed to building a resilient West in the face of climate change, joining forces with those who are most impacted is not only the right thing to do, it's also the way that the deep wisdom of these communities can inform solutions.

For years, water justice advocates and Native American leaders have pointed out that allocation of Western water can match both human water needs, and the needs of the environment. But they have also rightly noted that decisions about Western water allocation do not include everyone affected, and must do so.

We've learned that a central component of being an ally is to mindfully go with your strengths. For example, a white-led NGO will likely be a lousy – and unwelcome – organizer in people-of-color communities. Our ally work focuses on one of our key strengths – amplifying the people of color voices and issues through our newsletters and social media touching over 3,500 folks in the western water world.

You can read more on here and on this report from the Pacific Institute.

Photo credit: Raise the River

3. Planning for VUCA: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity

"A 'big surprise' is the pace and scale of change. The models are chasing the observations. Climate change is happening faster and stronger than projected in earlier studies." **Dr. Holly Hartmann, Arid Lands Information Center, University of Arizona (ret.)**

Headlines shout: "Drought is back!" or "Drought is over!" But the realities driven by climate disruption are far more complex than a headline can convey. Planning for drought without planning for fire, or planning for floods without planning for drought, or planning for fire without planning for the impacts of the floods that follow the fires, all mean we are missing important parts of the picture. Instead, as challenging as it is, we must reckon with the reality that we are living in the age of VUCA.

VUCA is the "new normal" for Western water decision-making, and attending to all four dimensions of this new normal is a hallmark of the most innovative solutions. VUCA is the best framework for understanding the rapid pace of the changing climate. The smartest solutions reflect a deep attention to all four dimensions of this memorable acronym.

VUCA teaches us that because the pace, scale and impacts of climate disruption are accelerating, we must go beyond the 2000's axiom that stationarity is dead.

Often the solutions that meet the VUCA challenge are the ones already designed by nature, with the most cascading set of effects for resilience. Often these solutions fall squarely into the "multi-benefit, no-regrets" bucket, and can be less expensive (though usually politically more demanding) than traditional infrastructure projects.

There are two solution sets that we think are among the best examples of facing VUCA head-on: healthy headwaters and beavers. And yes, you read that right.

Healthy headwaters approaches, also known as headwaters forest preservation and restoration or source water protection, are both protective and proactive solutions. They help reduce fire risk, ensure water supply and quality, and leverage funding streams from upstream and downstream communities. In the face of increasingly erratic fires, floods and temperatures, healthy headwaters forests are a cornerstone of resilience.

The arid Western landscape is due in part to the loss of healthy beaver populations. Before fur trappers wiped out the beaver populations in the 1700 and 1800s, the land was more lush and wet under the management of beavers. When farmers and ranchers arrived, they thought that the dry landscape had always been that way.

It's no surprise then that the reintroduction of beavers is recommended by many hydrologists. In areas where beaver reintroductions aren't practical, scientists encourage the building of beaver dam analogs, or human made beaver dams. Both actual beaver dams and analogs can improve water quality and increase base flows.

Photo credit: Ben Goldfarb

Figuring out the most effective and equitable way to address VUCA has been central to our work. One of the ways that we've been most successful is in connecting the science with leadership in water utilities, NGOs, agencies and businesses. Good examples can be found here.

Conclusion

Partnerships, allyship, and planning for VUCA are, in many ways, not so revolutionary. Many leaders, agencies, community groups and utilities are starting to put these golden rules into practice. Funding and political support remain the huge challenges.

How can we help?

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A consulting consortium of preeminent Western water leaders. We bring new approaches, allies and evidence to challenging Western water issues. With partnerships and science, we help guide your team to solutions.

Headwaters restoration in New Mexico, new wildfire funding in Flagstaff, tackling climate change and supply in the Willamette Basin, negotiations in the Colorado Basin, clean drinking water in California, effective climate change adaptation communications – these are all examples of successful work by western water leaders. Confluence West is building on those and other successes.

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