TOWARD WATER SUSTAINABILITY
A CAMPAIGN TO SUPPORT TRANSFORMATIVE WATER SOLUTIONS
AS OF NOVEMBER 2020
A NOTE FROM THE FUNDERS

Water is the essence of life and vital to the well-being of every person, economy, and ecosystem on the planet. But around the globe and here in the United States, water challenges are mounting due to climate change, population growth, and other developments that together threaten the health of our communities and our environment.

In response, we are working together as a group of philanthropic leaders to help shift the trajectory of our river and water systems from continued degradation toward a sustainable and resilient future. We are aligning our investments around priority strategies, developed with our partners, to help people and nature thrive.

To elevate our sights and inspire others to do the same, we have committed over $100 million between 2018-2021 to transformative water-related solutions, as part of a $150 million Water Campaign aimed at leveraging multiples of that funding from other private and public partners.

We make these commitments knowing that our water problems are solvable. We have also seen how water can be a unifying issue in a divisive era, which increases our confidence that we can build the partnerships and diverse coalitions required to achieve lasting change. With this in mind, we hope others will join us in working on this most important issue. Whether you already consider yourself a ‘water funder,’ or you are working on one of the many issues water touches – public health, social justice, climate change, rural prosperity, and more – we welcome your involvement.

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Philanthropy has a window of opportunity to dramatically improve the way water is managed for people and the environment. To capitalize on this moment, funders working together at the Water Table are launching a Water Campaign ("campaign") to foster new partnerships, expand the field of water philanthropy, and ultimately increase philanthropic, public, and private funding for transformative water-related solutions.

**WHY NOW?**

Water is the essence of life and vital to the well-being of every person, economy, and ecosystem on the planet. But around the globe and here in the United States, water challenges are mounting as climate change, population growth, and other drivers of water stress intensify. In the U.S. West, increasingly unreliable water supplies threaten nearly a third of the U.S. population and GDP. We cannot continue to operate with deteriorating infrastructure and outdated policies that compound water stress to jeopardize human communities and freshwater ecosystems.

Over the past few years, philanthropy has taken action to address these challenges and shift the trajectory of our water systems from continued degradation toward a sustainable future. Starting in the West, funders have supported approaches applicable to water crises across the nation and globe, while also looking to lessons from other regions to help develop transformative water-related solutions.

Since 2015, more than two dozen funders have collaborated through the Water Table to forge new partnerships, develop and align strategies, and coordinate investments in key policy reforms and new management practices. The members of the Water Table—the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation; Gates Family Foundation; William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; Lyda Hill Philanthropies; Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation; Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation; Pisces Foundation; Rockefeller Foundation; and Walton Family Foundation—have collectively been a key driving force behind this work.

Together, Water Table funders and partners have made gains that suggest large-scale, lasting impact is within reach if philanthropy continues to elevate its sights. Examples of such successes include helping to secure agreements between the U.S. and Mexico to share in Lake Mead deficit reduction and restore the Colorado River Delta and between California and the federal government to restore the Salton Sea, thereby laying the necessary foundations for a groundbreaking agreement among seven states and the federal government in March 2019 to conserve and manage water across the Colorado River Basin. Collectively, these agreements will help secure a more sustainable water future for the 40 million people and 5 million acres of farmland that depend on Colorado River water.
The next few years of policy actions, agreements, and infrastructure investments will profoundly affect quality of life in the U.S. In California, implementation of the landmark Sustainable Groundwater Management Act is a once-in-a-generation chance to bring the state's water use into balance and confront the urgent issues of sinking lands, declining groundwater levels, and drinking water pollution. In the Colorado River Basin, as negotiations to determine how the Colorado River will be managed after 2026 begin, advancing flexible water management approaches to carry out the Drought Contingency Plan agreements could secure a system-wide solution that reduces water stress and incentivizes conservation at minimal cost. Careful, strategic water management decisions and investments will be crucial to shore up vulnerable rural communities dependent on irrigated agriculture and shape inevitable land-use changes to secure benefits for people and ecosystems. The stakes of decisions like these are high. They will determine whether water will be managed to ensure clean, reliable supplies for people and nature, including recovery of freshwater ecosystems, and will be crucial to help cities, rural communities, and industry thrive in the face of climate change.

GOALS
Water Table funders are launching this campaign to accelerate progress towards a shared vision for a sustainable water future, focused on two overarching goals:

1) Bring Basins and Watersheds Into Balance for People and Nature. We must conserve and protect our water supply and quality so that, over the long term, there is clean water to support healthy communities, vibrant ecosystems, and thriving economies.

2) Strengthen Resilience of Watersheds and Water Systems in a 21st Century Climate. Extremes are becoming the norm as the planet warms, and many impacts of climate change will manifest through water systems. Water management must be flexible and resilient enough to mitigate risks from hotter, drier conditions and more frequent and severe weather events so that urban and rural communities, agriculture, industry, and ecosystems can adapt to these changes and thrive.
PRIORITY STRATEGIES

The Water Campaign aims to secure $150 million by 2021 to support water solutions, toward these goals of balance and resilience, where philanthropy can have the greatest impact. Such solutions were highlighted as priority strategies in Toward Water Sustainability: A Blueprint for Philanthropy. The Blueprint was developed by the Water Funder Initiative and is based on workshops with more than 150 stakeholders to determine how philanthropy can help to transform water management, starting in the West. These strategies have evolved based on collective learning to date and are described below.

Enable flexible distribution of water: As the U.S. grapples with increasing water scarcity and demand, extreme weather, and changing economies, we need efficient and effective systems that can easily shift water to different uses. Philanthropy can help demonstrate the value of beneficial transactions and flexible management strategies, such as water markets and water banks; support advocacy for healthy trading systems and strong institutions to manage them; and involve all relevant stakeholders and important social equity and environmental considerations in the design of these systems.

Strengthen communications to build political will: Everyone has a fundamental interest in clean, reliable water, yet existing outreach, journalism, and other media about water typically fail to engage the public’s hearts and minds. Philanthropy can help spur the development of more compelling narratives and broader coverage of the issue to build interest and demand for action.

Drive decisions with data: Better data about water systems can enable rapid, science-based, and flexible responses to water challenges – from managing scarcity to ensuring clean drinking water to prioritizing urgent infrastructure upgrades. Philanthropy has unique potential to advance innovations in water data by elevating open, accessible water data as a priority and brokering and catalyzing relationships between governments, businesses, and researchers.

Develop new funding sources: Underfunding for the operations, facilities, data, transactions, and planning crucial to sound water management is chronic. Philanthropy can help diversify funding for sustainable water management and infrastructure by integrating water risk and value into investment decisions, building a pipeline of impact investment opportunities, and catalyzing public and private investment in water solutions.

Improve water governance: Oversight and management of water is fragmented across many utilities, districts, and agencies with overlapping, piecemeal, or otherwise uncoordinated roles. This fragmentation leads to unrepresentative, inefficient, and contradictory decision-making, which impedes transparency needed for democratic accountability. Philanthropy can promote governance structures that raise up leaders representative of, and accountable to, the communities they serve, including disadvantaged communities, and that advance sound water management decisions (e.g., reduce risks associated with over-allocation, promote water conservation practices, protect environmental values, improve water quality, and respond to climate variability).

Accelerate innovation: New technologies and practices can advance transformative changes in water management. For example, innovative improvements in stormwater management and green infrastructure can help reduce pressure on cities to build costly and environmentally damaging dams and diversions. Funders can continue to foster development and deployment of innovative technologies and practices to advance goals in the urban, agricultural, energy, and environmental water sectors.

The Campaign will drive funding to advance these strategies in regions where Water Table members and their funding partners are most active.
MATCHING FUNDS ARE AVAILABLE FOR KEY INITIATIVES

The four-year Water Campaign (2018-2021) was launched with $10 million available to match new and increased funding to specific initiatives. Matching funds, available on up to a 1:1 basis, are aimed at attracting more resources to transformative water-related solutions, starting with initiatives already underway and outlined below, and the anchor organizations leading these efforts. Additional initiatives may emerge during the campaign. Interested funders should contact the Water Funder Initiative team and Water Table members for more information.

IMPROVE WATER SUSTAINABILITY AND PROTECT PUBLIC HEALTH IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY.

California’s Central Valley is a microcosm of the most urgent opportunities and challenges arising from water crises in the West. It is one of the most productive agricultural areas in the world, and its rivers provide water for 25 million Californians. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of people within the Valley do not have reliable access to clean water. On top of that, its freshwater ecosystems – key to the health of the Pacific Flyway and many endangered species like endemic salmon, chub, and minnow – are severely degraded. With implementation of California’s Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) underway, there is an historic opportunity to transform how the state manages water so that people, economies, and the environment can flourish. The Water Foundation is working with a diverse array of organizations to achieve water balance, improve community health, and transform Central Valley ecosystems. This holistic approach employs two of the Water Foundation’s core system interventions – changing the way water is moved and shared and broadening who makes water decisions. Integrated projects within this initiative include expanding water trading, empowering rural communities, coordinating land and water management, creating a fund for safe drinking water, and advancing voluntary settlement agreements for the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers and Delta.

PROTECT AND RESTORE THE COLORADO RIVER BASIN.

Nearly 1,500 miles long and serving more than 40 million people, the Colorado River is by any measure one of the world’s great river systems. Faced with tenacious drought and ever-increasing water demand, the Colorado is under tremendous strain. Remarkably, however, it is becoming a testament to how innovation, flexibility, and broad political will for change can drive solutions. Over the last several years, collaboration among seven states, the federal government, and water stakeholders across the region has resulted in significant victories, including the recently-enacted Drought Contingency Plans (DCPs). The Colorado River Sustainability Campaign is working with its conservation partners to protect the Colorado River and the ecosystems and communities that depend on it by advancing flexible, voluntary demand management programs that can help implement the DCPs and secure benefits for the whole system. Simultaneously, it is working to deliver support to ecosystems in need of protection and restoration, such as the Salton Sea and the Colorado River Delta.
BUILD STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE ON WATER. Water can be a political winner and a unifying issue, but current water communications, both by NGOs and journalists, largely do not yet capture this potential. Two recently created projects can improve the water field’s communications capacity. The Water Hub is an unbranded strategic communications project that will elevate the visibility, importance, and urgency of water issues. The ‘Hub’ will be housed at Nexus to leverage its experience in unbranded communications. The Water Desk will increase the volume, depth, and impact of water-related journalism. Housed at the University of Colorado-Boulder’s Center for Environmental Journalism, the Desk is intended to layer on top of increased capacity in local organizations, to bring their water-related coverage from the front lines to influential national, regional, and state-level media outlets. Ultimately, the goal of the Hub and Desk opportunities is to build political will for change by increasing public engagement with water issues while making a consistent, compelling case for sustainable water management.

FILL CRITICAL WATER DATA GAPS TO ENABLE BETTER MANAGEMENT. Philanthropy plays a unique role in working with governments, businesses, and researchers to improve the data available to inform water management. Two major advances are underway and ready to move to scale with philanthropic support. First, the Internet of Water (IoW) is building an integrated and dynamic network of regional data hubs, coordinated by a backbone organization, to create easily accessible, interoperable, and usable water data from a starting point of fragmented, incompatible, and rarely shared regional datasets. The IoW will make it possible to quickly check the water quality at the school your kids attend, see if a river or lake is safe for swimming, and receive real time warnings for harmful algal blooms, droughts, or floods. Second, OpenET combines Google’s computing power, data from a suite of NASA satellites, and decades of research and innovation by the scientific community to measure agricultural water use essentially in real-time and at the individual field level. Managed by the Environmental Defense Fund, OpenET will make this data accessible via a user-friendly platform that can power customized tools for different users, such as farmers and groundwater managers, filling one of the biggest gaps in water management data.

SUSTAINABLE WATER MANAGEMENT IN THE TEXAS HILL COUNTRY. The Texas Hill Country encompasses more than 11 million acres in 18 counties in Central Texas, including the rapidly growing cities of San Antonio and Austin, as well as extensive rural areas. It is also home to the headwaters of 12 of Texas’s rivers, flows from which sustain life from the ranchlands and thriving cities of Central Texas to the coastal estuaries of the Gulf of Mexico. The water and natural resources of the region, however, face serious threats from sprawling development, groundwater over-use and increasingly extreme floods and droughts. A recently-formed coalition of several conservation organizations, academic institutions, agencies, and local government representatives—called the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network—are working together to address these critical water management and natural resource challenges. Over the next five years, the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network aims to increase sustainable funding for land and water protection; protect urban water supplies through integrated management; support rural community efforts to mitigate urban and ex-urban growth pressures on water resources in order to maintain spring and river flows; and grow awareness and support for Texas Hill Country conservation.
RESILIENT RIVERS TO BENEFIT PEOPLE AND NATURE. When rivers thrive, so do people and nature. Rivers support communities and ecosystems, sustain native cultures, irrigate crops, provide clean, safe drinking water and recreational opportunities, serve as habitat for fish and wildlife, fuel local economies, and more—especially in the U.S. West. However, our rivers are increasingly threatened by climate change, unsustainable development and demand, and outdated infrastructure like dams and culverts. Improving river resilience through water policy, holistic management, and new research and public communications efforts can help balance the environmental, human, and economic demands on Western rivers. This Initiative focuses on rivers and waterways where both people and nature can benefit from such resilience investments, work is underway with committed funders, and there is a window of opportunity for impact. By focusing on rivers and waterways that present opportunities for diverse coalitions to work collaboratively on multi-benefit solutions, we will learn what resilience – built and determined by local stakeholders – looks like so that communities and ecosystems are prepared for a 21st century climate. To start, efforts are underway in the Rio Grande, Klamath, and Snake Rivers, which are in various phases of work and have the potential to achieve significant change.

MOBILIZING INVESTMENT IN SUSTAINABLE WATER SOLUTIONS. Ensuring reliable, clean water for people and nature, even amidst climate change impacts, is essential and achievable. The solutions are known: replace aging grey infrastructure with green, multi-benefit infrastructure; provide equitable access to clean water and water decision-making to all communities; implement nature-based solutions that deter flooding and recharge aquifers; deploy innovative technology and proven conservation techniques to reduce water use across sectors; replenish stream function and flows; and incorporate water risks into investment decisions. While there are barriers in governance, policy, law, and political will to implementing these solutions across the U.S., a major challenge is how to pay for them—particularly in this moment when local, state, and potentially federal budgets have been deeply affected by the COVID-related economic crisis. The goal of this Initiative is to mobilize public and private financing to improve water management by investing in solutions at scale. To start, this effort will focus on opportunities that scale investments in equitable and sustainable water solutions by securing near-term relief and long-term recovery funding, mobilizing public and private financing, and catalyzing investor and corporate leadership.
The Water Funder Initiative (WFI) facilitates the work of the Water Table, a collaborative of funders dedicated to identifying and activating promising water solutions through strategic philanthropic investments in the United States. Learn more at waterfunder.org.

THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEVERAGE GREATER CHANGE

The time is now for philanthropy, working with partners, to accelerate progress towards healthy water systems for people and nature. Collectively, the philanthropic funding devoted to these initiatives has the potential to leverage significant additional public and private sector funding and in-kind support to drive change toward the solutions we seek. For example, Google and NASA are already making in-kind contributions to the setup and operation of OpenET. Our partners’ work in California on groundwater is poised to help optimize the use of the $400 million in public funding made available by Proposition 68 for SGMA implementation. Water Table funders’ efforts in the Upper and Lower Basins of the Colorado River aim to leverage funds committed by the seven states of the Colorado River Basin, the federal government, and the Mexican government, which will collectively disburse over $43 million to implement Minute 323, over $380 million to restore the Salton Sea, and hundreds of millions more to further prepare for water shortages under the Drought Contingency Plans.