

On March 19-20, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) held its final workshop on Chairman David Ige's (D-HI) Initiative, Reimagining the Rural West. The workshop was originally scheduled to be held in Dalles, OR, but was moved online due to the recent Coronavirus pandemic. The March 19 sessions included: rural water infrastructure; rural banking and access to credit; and innovative solutions for attainable housing; as well as a keynote by Ben Alexander, Senior Program Advisor, Resources Legacy Fund. The March 20 sessions included: broadband collaboration; trends in western agriculture; and managing wildfire risk in rural communities.

The rural water infrastructure session featured: Adam Denlinger, General Manager, Seal Rock Water District; David Flesher, Community Programs Specialist, Rural Utilities Service at U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA); George McGraw, CEO, DigDeep; and Ari Neumann, Community and Environmental Services Director, Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC). Panelists discussed the challenges associated with rural water and wastewater systems. Four main themes arose: (1) the importance of functioning water systems to public health, especially evident with the current COVID-19 outbreak; (2) financing water infrastructure projects; (3) the continuing need for local capacity building and workforce development; and (4) the need for a holistic approach to water issues, as water systems are often the backbone of entire communities.

McGraw highlighted that at least 2.2 million people in America still don't have access to running water and sanitation systems, making them especially vulnerable in times of public health crises like we are currently experiencing. Issues of social justice are directly tied to access to water and wastewater systems. Native Americans are 19 times more likely--and black and Hispanic Americans are twice as likely--as the average American to lack access to running water in their homes. The vast majority of them have never had water infrastructure, and most of the loan and grant programs don't work because there simply aren't enough water users there to maintain adequate rate payments. Building coalitions and being creative about how to fund these systems is critical. We have to look at economic benefits beyond the lack of rate payments. He expressed the need for better community leadership, including more diverse representation on water boards to ensure all parts of the community are adequately represented in decisionmaking. Neumann also stressed the critical importance of water in helping deal with public health issues.

Flesher discussed the financial contributions of the Water and Environment Program (WEP) through USDA's Rural Utilities Service. From 2009-2019, WEP invested \$19.9B in rural water infrastructure and \$288M in technical assistance, which helped provide new or improved services to 26 million rural residents. He highlighted the critical role of partners in getting projects completed. Denlinger echoed the importance of rural assistance programs, and noted that local communities really need a local champion to help navigate the funding process. He suggested first reaching out to state-based finance programs, which can bring funders from different sectors together to help communities identify the best funding package for their needs. Flesher also recommended getting funders involved "early and often," even before completing engineering studies, so that a community only has to go through the planning process once.

Michelle Bushman, Legal Counsel, WSWC, asked the panelists how rural communities or local water systems find access to these programs, and whether they have assistance to identify their eligibility and fill out applications. Business Oregon hosts a finance summit that brings together the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and others to listen to communities present their projects and challenges. They work collectively to map out a funding strategy with scenarios that can accomplish necessary improvements to the system and enables the community to meet funding requirements. The project itself may not start for another 2-3 years, but the actual package is put together. Nevada and California host funding fairs around their states to bring together communities, financial institutions and others, with time for communities to share their projects and make connections. Montana has an online application process that is remarkably simple. Often the application processes are so onerous that communities give up, but Montana's process allows communities to fill out one application, then give other funders access to the same information. Each state is a little different, but getting federal agencies like USDA, HUD, and the Corps involved early in the process can help the community develop the best package at reasonable rates.

Workforce development and local capacity building is also a critical need that many of the presenters identified. Neumann discussed how organizations like RCAC, as a technical assistance provider, help to build capacity within communities to solve problems within their water system rather than solve the immediate need. They are also partnering with local community colleges and the Department of Labor to create training programs that can help booster the local workforce. He mentioned how increasing regionalization in the west is helping to leverage economies of scale for small systems by partnering with larger nearby systems, set up as informal collaborations all the way to physical consolidation. As part of a local utility, Denlinger also touched on the need for workforce development, and that an engineering degree is not required to be a systems operator. Certifications and continuing education can help fill the training requirements, though it is getting more difficult to obtain those certifications due to increasing stringency and regulations.

Panelists recognized the central role that functioning water systems play in economic development, population growth and public health, and the challenges associated with those as water supply is becoming less certain and predictable. Water and wastewater infrastructure planning and workforce development need to include a holistic approach that looks at the goals and potential growth of the entire community. Denlinger reiterated the need for place-based planning to ensure communities can get the services they need. Flesher emphasized the importance of this process to identify the resources to pay for those improvements. Denlinger finished by saying clean water is critical for everyone - but do we adequately value it that way?

Other sessions mentioned the importance of water, including trends in western agriculture and managing wildfire risk in rural communities. In the agriculture session, Jessica Reimer, Policy Analyst, WSWC, asked how water rights affect the ability of farms to grow economically, or new farms to start. Dave Dillon, Executive Vice President, Oregon Farm Bureau, stated that many of the issues related to water and agriculture have to do with both supply and quality, not just water rights. In Oregon, there is a sense there is plenty of water - but west of the Cascade Mountains, it falls at a time of the year when it's not needed. East of the Cascades is a high desert landscape where irrigation is important. Water allocations often get set 50 years out, such as the current federal reauthorization of 13 dams to provide water to the Willamette Valley, and it has a huge impact on farms. He emphasized the critical importance of engaging farmers in these discussions to ensure their needs are met.

During the session on managing wildfire, Will Smith, Senior Planner, Wasco County, discussed how they will work with soil and water conservation districts when planning for fire preparedness, but since there is not a specific hazard planning position to oversee the process, capacity can be an issue. Again, thinking and planning holistically across all natural resources, communities, and economic needs was highlighted as an important goal.

All sessions from the workshop can be viewed on WGA's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/WestGov/>. Featured highlights: <https://westgov.org/news/article/gov-kate-brown-to-speak-at-march-workshop-of-reimagining-the-rural-west-initiative-in-oregon>.