



# Western States Water

## Addressing Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future

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### **WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL 60TH Anniversary Meetings – Snowbird, Utah**

On June 10-12, the WSWC celebrated its 60th Anniversary at its annual summer meetings in Snowbird, Utah. The Council was created by a resolution of the Western Governors' Conference adopted in 1965 at meetings in Portland, Oregon on June 10-13. The Governors stated: "The future growth and prosperity of the western states depend upon the availability of adequate quantities of water of suitable quality." The resolution added, "The need for an accurate and unbiased appraisal of present and future requirements of each area of the West and for the most equitable means of providing for the meeting of such requirements demands a regional effort."

The first meeting of the WSWC was held in Stateline, Nevada on August 3, 1965, and Nevada Governor Grant Sawyer opened with the following remarks: "A great agricultural, industrial, and recreational economy has been developed in our western States. Today, we stand on the threshold of an expanding economy, greater than could possibly have been foreseen as late as ten years ago. However, you know better than anyone one grave danger lies in the path of this expanding economy – water."

He added, "In many areas in the West our economy is being maintained by the depletion of our groundwater resources. Those supplies are dwindling very rapidly at the present time. Great water supply projects have already been built in the West, but in nearly all cases they are local in scope. We now must take the next step, that is west-wide water development. There is an abundance of water available in this part of the country now wasting to the sea. It needs only storage and transportation facilities to move it from areas of surplus to areas of deficiency.... So, the time has come to...sit down around the table to work out the best plans to meet the needs of the entire West – not just you of the Southwest, which we have heard so much about – not just you of the Northwest – but the entire West." He emphasized the desalination of seawater: "Surely, any long-range plans for water development must include this potential source of water – a well that will never run dry."

He continued, "A guiding hand is a necessary instrument in developing the water needed to meet our expanding economy, and this group...has been designated to provide that guidance.... We must act as fast as we can, for I guarantee, if we cannot get this moving among the States, it is going to be done, and it may be done at a level which may not take into account public interest as we see it. If we cannot work together as combined States, we certainly cannot complain if someone else, specifically the federal government, resolves our problems for us. We cannot complain about federal control when it is invited by our own inaction."

The WSWC has been a "stable, long-lasting...Council of vigorous action," as envisioned by Western Governors, according to Governor Sawyer. His remarks were insightful, but while many of the same challenges remain, other conditions have changed. While marking the Council's 60th Anniversary, and addressing current topics and sunset resolutions, the meetings also included an extensive facilitated discussion of future strategic directions. Council members had previously identified potential changes through a survey and follow up discussion in Lincoln, Nebraska (WSW #2658). Ideas included shifting from presentations to more interactive state discussions; choosing priority focus topics; adjusting meeting schedules; enhancing new-member orientation; creating comparative reports of state practices; refining the policy resolution process; and strengthening advocacy efforts. Although they recognized the need for prioritizing topics given limited meeting time, members were reluctant to narrow the agenda to a number of annual topics because of diverse state priorities and the dynamic nature of water issues. They discussed a desire to focus on those issues unique to the Western States that cannot or are not addressed by other organizations.

The discussion highlighted WSWC's "superpowers," notably its unified, governor-appointed voice that addresses the West's intertwined water quantity and quality challenges, distinct water rights issues, and unique state-federal dynamics. This collective voice grants the Council high federal credibility, enabling it to engage congressional and regulatory staff, inform

legislation with western-specific considerations, and serve as a forum for States to share experiences and best practices. Members also highlighted WSWC's advocacy for data collection and accuracy, recognizing the importance of data for good water management. Members explored ways to streamline policy resolutions to be more user-friendly and advocacy-effective, and to establish criteria for sunseting outdated positions. They also discussed criteria important to members in the selection of a new Executive Director.

WSWC revised and re-adopted four sunseting positions relating to: (1) support for the preservation of radio frequencies for weather forecasting and water management; (2) strengthening the resiliency of the nation to the impacts of extreme weather events; (3) urging congressional and federal support for water research and development programs; and (4) hydraulic fracturing.

During the Water Resources Committee meeting, Ryan James and Tony Willardson gave a presentation and live demonstration on WaDE, WestDAAT, and WestCAT, highlighting the capabilities of WSWC's data tools to facilitate navigation of state data. Tim Newman provided an update on Landsat Next. He noted that the President's budget proposes to restructure the mission to "study more affordable ways to maintain the continuity of Landsat imagery." Christopher Estes gave an update on development of the National Center for Ecologically Sustainable Water Conservation & Management. Michelle Bushman discussed her testimony to the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries during a hearing on hydropower (WSW #2659) where she advocated for federal investment in water infrastructure and data, and active consultation with States. Her testimony compiled recent state examples on their use of federal water data, and she recommended further discussion at a future meeting.

In the Water Quality Committee meeting, John Mackey provided more detail on Utah's efforts in safeguarding and enhancing its waters. He highlighted management for Utah Lake and the Great Salt Lake, the Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) program, spill response, and streamlined permitting. Council staff provided an update on upcoming Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) actions on Waters of the United States (WOTUS) and Section 401 implementation. Roger Gorke provided an update on EPA water quality efforts and programs including: (1) an exploration of the gaps in Managed Aquifer Recharge (MAR); (2) Technical Assistance to Small Systems for Drought, Water Scarcity and Cascading Disasters; and (3) Good Samaritan Abandoned Mine Cleanup efforts. The Committee held a State Roundtable discussion, allowing each State to report on their respective water quality programs. Common topics included emerging contaminants, water

reuse and recycling initiatives, impacts of drought on water quality, funding, groundwater management, transboundary management, and HABs.

In the Legal Committee meeting, Mark Stratford and Teresa Wilhemsen presented on Utah's legal landscape, focusing on how Utah is adapting its water law and management to respond to environmental change, such as declining levels in the Great Salt Lake. Alf Brandt provided an overview of the National Judicial College's Dividing the Waters program, its evolution, and current offerings including online courses and live webinars for judges. The Committee engaged in a Roundtable discussion for States to update one another on their legal challenges and opportunities. Topics included litigation over consumptive use calculations, litigation related to groundwater management, judicial education, transboundary administration, and conservation programs. Michelle Bushman shared staff updates on legislative and litigation tracking, the up coming Indian Reserved Water Rights Settlement Symposium, and the status of the Western Water Cooperative Committee.

During the Full Committee Meeting, Julie Cunningham reported on the Executive Committee's approval of Tony Willardson's retirement, effective September 1, 2025. Throughout the meeting, members thanked Tony for leadership over his 46 years of service. Julie Cunningham said: "We can't say enough how much we appreciate all your work.... You have truly changed and influenced Western water law in so many ways that we don't even know." Jerry Rigby noted his long history with Tony. "I just want to tell him how much I appreciate working with him and all he's done for this Council and for my family and for Idaho. I appreciate it very much."

Tom Stiles also announced his retirement, effective July 11. Earl Lewis noted Tom's long service to the State of Kansas, and his impact on water policy throughout the years. "Tom has been well received in almost every room he's ever been in. He's well respected and does a great job of delivering messages, sometimes that people don't necessarily want to hear.... He's been a great colleague, mentor and friend." Tom expressed gratitude for the WSWC and its impact on water policy, "That is your superpower: that you're the West.... This organization was always the one that basically had a clear vision of what you wanted to do. So don't lose that."

Roger Gorke provided a WestFAST update. Tanya Trujillo, Erica Gaddis, Roger Gorke, and Michelle Bushman summarized the recent New Mexico Integrated Water Financing Plan effort, highlighting its success as a model for meeting state priorities with diverse federal and private funding (Special Report #2636). They emphasized the critical roles of pre-existing state planning, strong inter-agency relationships, and the need for adaptability in planning and policy.

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**The WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL is a government entity of representatives appointed by the Governors of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.**