



WESTERN STATES WATER

Addressing water needs and strategies for a sustainable future.

Issue #2697
May 5, 2026

Chair - Julie Cunningham; Executive Director - J.D. Strong; Editor - Elysse Ostlund Campbell

MEETINGS

Spring (209th) Meetings, Washington, DC

On April 22-24, the WSWC held its 2026 Spring Meetings (209th) in Washington, DC, bringing together state water managers, federal agency partners, and congressional representatives.

On April 21, WSWC members conducted a full day of Congressional Hill visits to meet with western lawmakers and their staff. Council staff met with twelve Congressional offices, including staff for House Appropriations Committee Chair Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK) and House Committee on Science, Space and Technology Chair Rep. Brian Babin (R-TX). Council staff shared state perspectives on water data and forecasting, water infrastructure, drought, Indian water rights settlements, Clean Water Act implementation, Farm Bill, energy and water nexus, Good Samaritan remediation of abandoned hardrock mines, and cooperative federalism.

On April 22, the WSWC and the Interstate Council on Water Policy (ICWP) co-hosted a Joint Water Planners Conference at the Reservoir Center for Water Solutions. Federal leaders Jessica Kramer of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Andrea Travnicek of the Department of the Interior (DOI), Aubrey Bettencourt of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS), Matt Grosso of the Department of Energy (DOE), Tim Petty of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and Karen St. Germain of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) convened to discuss the critical role of the federal Water Policy Committee in breaking down administrative silos. The panel highlighted how the Committee serves as a vital forum for interagency coordination, enabling a unified, "whole-of-government" approach to western water management. A central theme of the discussion was the interconnected nature of federal water responsibilities. Representatives detailed how foundational forecasting and remote-sensing data provided by NASA and NOAA act as the "scientific

engine" that empowers operational agencies to make informed, real-time decisions.

Through the Water Policy Committee, the agencies are actively aligning their resources to support state and local efforts. Shared federal priorities highlighted during the panel included: (1) modernizing aging infrastructure—including expanding hydropower capacity at existing dams and advancing desalination technologies; (2) providing direct technical assistance to agricultural producers; (3) advancing comprehensive water reuse initiatives and streamlining infrastructure funding; (4) providing transparent, efficient regulatory frameworks; and (5) leveraging cross-agency partnerships and minimizing duplicative efforts.

Next, the bipartisan Congressional Topics panel featured Rep. Melanie Stansbury (D-NM) and key Senate committee staff. The discussion highlighted strategies for advancing water infrastructure, state-federal coordination, and the importance of Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (SRF) set-asides. Rep. Stansbury noted that despite overall political polarization, strong bipartisan work on water infrastructure continues. In the afternoon, a panel of experts featuring Brian Cosgrove (NOAA), Dianna Crilley (USGS), Chad Wagner (USGS), Heather Hofman (NRCS), and Sharon Vasquez-Ray (NASA) discussed "Communicating Water Information," including data accessibility, trust, and how to sift through "data overload" to find what decision-makers need.

On April 23, the WSWC convened its Organizational Meeting, chaired by Julie Cunningham. Members reviewed strategies for engaging Congress and the Administration on key priorities, including the promotion of federal financing avenues such as State Revolving Funds (SRFs), USDA's Rural Development program, and USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Members also identified data center impacts on water resources as a top Council priority for the year. Members proposed hosting dedicated workshops and closely tracking ongoing state-level legislation and pilot projects.

Members raised concerns about staffing and funding cuts for federal data programs, stressing that the loss of institutional knowledge and field personnel—particularly those managing USGS streamgages and NRCS SNOwpack TELemetry (SNOTEL) networks—is a threat to states' ability to make informed water supply and regulatory decisions. Members emphasized the need to address hiring freezes and personnel shortages in future coordination and advocacy efforts.

Members touched on post-Sackett WOTUS implementation and Good Samaritan abandoned mine cleanups, highlighting the need for clear federal messaging. As federal regulatory jurisdictions shift, agencies must communicate clearly to prevent confusion for the public about what permitting is still required at the state level. Members stressed the importance of state water agencies coordinating closely with mining agencies to ensure Good Samaritan projects successfully align with water protection goals.

Water Resources, Water Quality, and Legal Committees met separately to review proposed and sunset positions, new position formatting, and committee workplan structures. The Council formally adopted two new Consolidated Positions on Water Data (#2026-01) and Water Infrastructure (#2026-02) with minor amendments, combining and superseding 22 existing policies. Additionally, the Council reaffirmed with minor updates: (1) Position #496—State Revolving Funds & Assistance Grants; (2) Position #499—Preemption of State Law; and (3) Position #503—Water-Related Federal Rules and Regulatory Actions. The Council considered and allowed to sunset Position #490—Water Quality and Federal Reserved Treaty Rights for Tribes. The Committees reported broad support for moving away from committee-based work plans in favor of a Council-wide Strategic Plan to guide future efforts.

On April 24, the WSWC-WestFAST Principals Meeting was held at EPA Headquarters. The focus was on strengthening state-federal and interagency collaboration on water management in the West. Participants reflected on WestFAST's strengths and identified opportunities to enhance its effectiveness. A central theme was building and sustaining trust between state and federal personnel. Participants highlighted WestFAST's core value as a coordination and networking resource—improving transparency around federal operations, connecting state and federal stakeholders with the right people and funding programs, and facilitating

early conflict resolution. WestFAST was also recognized for fostering coordination among federal agencies and, in some cases, facilitating peer connections among states. Members explored key areas for improvement, emphasizing the need to coordinate on evolving federal permitting processes, better align federal assistance with established State Water Plans, and empower field-level staff to improve critical relationships.

CONGRESS

Appropriations FY2027/EPA

On April 27, the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee convened to examine the EPA's Fiscal Year 2027 budget request, with EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin appearing before the committee.¹

In his opening statement, Chairman Mike Simpson (R-ID) noted the steep cuts to State and Tribal Assistance Grants proposed by the administration: "We likely cannot accept the proposed steep cuts to the State and Tribal Assistance Grants that our states, tribes, and water utilities rely on for implementing federal statutes and providing safe and reliable drinking water and wastewater.... You're not going to see the State and Tribal grants cut by 83%. That was not Democrats fighting back. That was Republicans and Democrats."

In his opening statement, Administrator Lee Zeldin highlighted \$3B in new funding to reduce lead exposure in drinking water, and ongoing work to establish a durable WOTUS definition that would cut red tape and provide clarity for Clean Water Act permitting.

Ranking Member Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) highlighted the 74% reduction of Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds to \$305M for both funds combined. She called the proposal an abandonment of states and warned that poorer rural areas would bear the brunt of the damage. She and other members also aligned with Chairman Simpson's concerns regarding 83% cuts to State and Tribal Assistance Grants.

Zeldin pushed back, arguing that Congressional earmarks remove a significant portion of the funding intended to support the revolving function of SRFs. Rep. Simpson acknowledged that earmarks diminish the function of SRFs, though he expressed continued support for community project funding.

During the question and answer period, Rep. Simpson highlighted the Rural Water Technical Assistance Program. Zeldin confirmed the funding covered FY 2026, reported that 99% of expiring rural drinking water funds had been spent the prior year, and announced that EPA had just committed \$90M to strengthen water infrastructure for tribes and rural communities. Rep. Simpson also flagged the backlog of funding releases for community project funding. Zeldin committed to publishing FY 2026 implementation guidelines in May and to communicating proactively with project recipients, attributing delays to recipients awaiting non-federal matches and shifting cost estimates.

Rep. Dan Newhouse (R-WA) raised the Good Samaritan Remediation of Abandoned Hard Rock Mines Act (P.L. 118–155), signed into law in 2024. The budget requested \$1.7M to stand up the EPA-led pilot program, which would issue permits to volunteers willing to remediate abandoned hard rock mine sites. Zeldin said the EPA planned to issue 5 to 7 permits in FY 2027 and to have all 15 out over the course of the current term, and encouraged interested parties to reach out to the EPA's Office of Land and Emergency Management for pre-application discussions.

Rep. McCollum (D-MN) asked how many scientists were lost in the Office of Research and Development's dismantling and where states should direct PFAS questions. Zeldin said PFAS research continues and promised to provide the requested numbers. On state preemption, Zeldin said he didn't see it as a threat, noting most stakeholders want to implement—not exceed—existing PFOA/PFOS standards. He urged Congress to protect water utilities from cleanup costs so polluters pay instead, and expressed hope new technologies would lower those costs.

On April 29, the Senate Environment and Public Works (EPW) Committee held their EPA budget hearing.² Chairman Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) supported Zeldin's direction, highlighting the roll back of President Biden's Clean Power Plan 2.0, the 2009 Endangerment Finding, and several Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) grant programs. Chairman Capito emphasized the importance of adequately funding bipartisan foundational water programs, such as the Drinking Water and Clean Water SRFs. Ranking Member Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) criticized the EPA's deregulatory course, contending the rollbacks would inevitably result in reduced water quality standards.

In his opening testimony, Zeldin highlighted the rollout of a proposed rule to establish a clear, durable definition of "waters of the United States" (WOTUS) that abides by the Supreme Court's Sackett decision. Zeldin also highlighted significant strides made to tackle the decades-long Tijuana River sewage crisis affecting San Diego communities, as well as nationwide efforts to remove lead from drinking water and the advancement of the new Water Reuse Action Plan 2.0.

Chairman Capito sought assurance that EPA would work toward a congressional solution that prevents passive receivers from bearing the financial burden of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) cleanup under Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) liability. Western senators also emphasized the need for reliable federal water partnerships. Senator Alex Padilla (D-CA) sought EPA's cooperation to secure delayed Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA) loans for projects in Hayward and the Las Virgenes Valley. Highlighting the importance of federal support for local water infrastructure across the country, Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS) expressed gratitude for the EPA's critical \$54M funding transfer to help resolve the Jackson, Mississippi water crisis.

Colorado River

On April 17, Senators Mark Kelly (D-AZ) and Ruben Gallego (D-AZ), and Representatives Greg Stanton (D-AZ), Yassamin Ansari (D-AZ), and Adelita Grijalva (D-AZ) wrote a letter to Secretary of Interior Doug Burgum and Assistant Secretary for Water and Science Andrea Travnicek on the recently released Post-2026 Operational Guidelines and Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).³ The Arizona lawmakers stressed that the proposed alternatives in the current DEIS are not viable for Arizona's water security while reaffirming that Arizona remains committed to reach a balanced, durable long-term framework for the Colorado River.

"We cannot take our focus off securing an agreement that acknowledges the environmental realities of a region plagued by megadrought but demands equitable conservation efforts by all Basin States. But in the DEIS, Reclamation risks pursuing an unsustainable distribution of reductions and responsibilities across the Basin States, placing

our constituents and their livelihoods in harm's way.... Arizona has and will continue to do its part to protect the Colorado River, but we cannot do it alone."

The lawmakers cautioned that steep reductions in Colorado River allocations pose significant risks to Arizona communities dependent on the river as their primary water source. The letter noted that the DEIS itself acknowledges "widespread impacts on social and economic conditions may also be possible." Such cuts, the lawmakers argued, could ultimately threaten public health, tribal communities, and key industries throughout the region, including agriculture and the state's growing semiconductor manufacturing sector.

The lawmakers stressed that any long-term framework for the Colorado River must fully account for tribal water rights and the federal government's trust responsibility to Arizona's 22 federally recognized tribes, many of whom hold Colorado River entitlements. Sen. Mark Kelly's news release reminded: "Absent a durable seven Basin State agreement, a decision on river operations could be handed down from Interior as early as July. A plan for post-2026 river operations must be in place before October 1, to fulfill federal treaty obligations with Mexico and provide certainty for Colorado River water users as they enter a new water year."

This letter echoes concerns raised in a March letter led by Rep. Andy Biggs (R-AZ) and signed by five other Arizona Republican members of Congress, including Representatives Paul A. Gosar (R-AZ), Juan Ciscomani (R-AZ), Elijah Crane (R-AZ), Abraham J. Hamadeh (R-AZ), and David Schweikert (R-AZ).⁴

REFERENCES

¹ House Committee on Appropriations "Budget Hearing – Environmental Protection Agency." April 20, 2026. <https://appropriations.house.gov/schedule/hearings/budget-hearing-environmental-protection-agency-0>.

² U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. "Hearing to Examine the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Proposed Fiscal Year 2027 Budget." 2026. <https://www.epw.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2026/4/hearing-to-examine-the-u-s-environmental-protection-agency-s-proposed-fiscal-year-2027-budget>.

³ Senator Mark Kelly "Kelly, Gallego, Stanton, Ansari, Grijalva Demand Equitable Colorado River Protections" April 17, 2026. <https://www.kelly.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/kelly-gallego-stanton-ansari-grijalva-demand-equitable-colorado-river-protections-2/>.

⁴ Congressman Andy Biggs. "Congressman Biggs Leads Arizona Republican Delegation in Formal Opposition to Flawed Colorado River Draft Plan." March 3, 2026. <https://biggs.house.gov/media/press-releases/congressman-biggs-leads-arizona-republican-delegation-formal-opposition-flawed>.

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