

WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL

Critical Federal Water Data Member Survey

Preliminary Results & Emerging Priorities

DRAFT FOR COUNCIL REVIEW | October 22, 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thirteen responses from 10 of WSWC's 16 member states provide a clear lead signal: USGS streamgaging is the strongest priority (90% state-normalized Top-3 support; 75% as the single highest priority), followed by NRCS Snow Survey/SNOTEL (62% Top-3; 10% #1). The survey does not clearly resolve the remaining 1–3 slots. Landsat, NOAA forecasting/drought capabilities, and federal water-quality monitoring/support form the next tier. Nearly all respondents report providing nonfederal investment in these programs, while federal staffing/capacity constraints are the most frequently reported change since Spring 2025. Las Cruces should be used to validate the emerging priorities and sharpen the Task Group's next phase.

Key Takeaways

- Two anchors are clear: USGS streamgaging and NRCS Snow Survey/SNOTEL.
- The next tier is less settled. State-normalized Top-3 support was 35% for Landsat, 30% for NOAA drought/climate services, 25% for USGS water-quality monitoring, and 23% for EPA state water-quality monitoring support.
- Viewed as broader capability families, NOAA hydrologic forecasting + drought/climate services received about 42% state-normalized support; federal water-quality monitoring/support received about 28%. These are staff synthesis categories, not literal survey choices.
- Twelve of 13 respondents reported state/local/tribal/partner contributions of funding, staff, equipment, or other resources.
- Federal staffing/capacity constraints were reported by 9 respondents; 7 reported loss or threatened loss of monitoring sites/services; 6 reported funding uncertainty and 6 reported rising nonfederal costs.
- Six member states were not represented in the survey (Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas), so results should guide—not replace—Council discussion.

1. Participation & Methodology

Participation. The survey received 13 responses representing 10 member states: Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. California submitted two responses and Wyoming three; each other responding state submitted one. Six member states did not submit a response: Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Texas. No WestFAST/Federal responses were submitted; federal partner input will be incorporated through Task Group review and subsequent discussion.

State-normalized priority analysis. Because the purpose is to identify Council-wide advocacy priorities rather than count individual respondents, each responding state is assigned a total weight of 1.0 for the Top-3 and #1 priority questions. Within states with multiple respondents, that state weight is divided equally among respondents (California = 0.5 each; Wyoming = 0.333 each). Weighted selections are then divided by the 10 responding states. Raw respondent counts are shown alongside the normalized results for transparency. This weighting is an analytical tool, not a formal state vote; multiple responses from a state were not reconciled into a single official state position.

Important note. One Montana respondent used the "Other" field to state that streamgages and SNOTEL were the top needs and that NOAA products, Landsat, and AgriMet/Hydromet were tied as a second tier. Those second-tier write-ins are noted qualitatively but are not counted as formal checkbox selections below.

2. Priority Programs / Capabilities

Respondents selected up to three priorities, then identified one as the single highest priority. The state-normalized result is the best measure for comparing priorities across states; raw counts show the underlying respondent selections.

Program / capability	Raw Top-3 (n=13)	State-normalized Top-3	Raw #1 (n=13)	State-normalized #1
USGS streamgaging	12	90%	10	75%
NRCS Snow Survey / SNOTEL	8	62%	1	10%
Landsat	4	35%	0	0%
NOAA drought & climate services	3	30%	0	0%
USGS water-quality monitoring	3	25%	0	0%
EPA state water-quality monitoring support	3	23%	0	0%
USGS groundwater monitoring	2	13%	1	10%
NOAA/NWS hydrologic & water-supply forecasting	3	12%	1	5%
Reclamation AgriMet/Hydromet	0	0%	0	0%

Staff synthesis of the “next tier.” If related survey choices are grouped into advocacy families, NOAA hydrologic/water-supply forecasting plus NOAA drought/climate services together produce approximately 42% state-normalized Top-3 support. Landsat stands alone at 35%. USGS water-quality monitoring plus EPA state water-quality monitoring support together produce approximately 28%. These grouped figures are interpretive and should be considered as staff synthesis rather than direct survey results.

3. Validation Questions

Statement	Response pattern	Bottom line
Federal monitoring/data provide capabilities, long-term records and consistency states cannot efficiently replicate	10 Agree; 3 Agree w/ qualification	13 of 13 supportive
USGS streamgaging and NRCS snow monitoring/forecasting are core western priorities	12 Agree; 1 Agree w/ qualification	13 of 13 supportive
Water-quality needs should remain within Task Group scope where federal data materially support state decisions	6 Agree; 2 Agree w/ qualification; 4 Not sure/N.A.; 1 Disagree	8 of 13 supportive
WSWC should focus advocacy on a small number of priorities and practical state uses/partnerships	12 Agree; 1 Agree w/ qualification	13 of 13 supportive

4. What States Use These Capabilities For

Most frequently selected functions (respondent-level counts; respondents could select up to four):

Function	Respondents
Water-supply forecasting & planning	10
Water rights administration & allocation	8
Drought monitoring & response	5
Interstate/tribal/international compliance	4
Flood forecasting/public safety/emergency response	4
Reservoir & infrastructure operations	4
Water-quality monitoring/assessment/permitting/TMDLs	4
Groundwater management & modeling	3
Ecological/environmental management	3
Agricultural & irrigation management	1
Hydropower/energy operations	0
Infrastructure design & planning	0

5. What Has Changed Since Spring 2025

Respondents were asked what had materially changed since WSWC's Spring 2025 state scan. The most frequently reported changes were:

Reported change	Respondents
Federal staffing losses or capacity constraints	9
Loss/reduction/threatened loss of monitoring sites or services	7
Increased uncertainty or reductions in federal funding	6
Increased state/local/tribal/partner costs	6
New technology or monitoring/forecasting opportunities	4
Data gaps or declining timeliness/service levels	3
Increased importance of water-quality monitoring/data needs	3
No material change highlighted	2

6. Federal-State Partnership/Nonfederal Investment

Twelve of 13 respondents answered "Yes" when asked whether their state or state/local/tribal partners contribute funding, staff, equipment, or other resources to support priority federal data programs; the remaining respondent answered "Not sure."

Illustrative contributions reported in the survey include:

- **California:** roughly \$80 million/year in baseline state forecasting and monitoring expenditures, plus an additional \$12.5 million this fiscal year reported to cover snow-survey and river-forecasting gaps created by federal cutbacks.
- **Nevada:** approximately \$2 million/year to USGS for cooperative streamgaging, groundwater monitoring, and hydrologic investigations.
- **North Dakota:** \$538,000 to USGS for streamgages, plus state construction-crew assistance for repair and maintenance.

- **Wyoming DEQ:** a USGS Water Resources Investigations agreement reported at approximately \$900,000 per biennium, currently split about 60% state / 40% USGS.
- **Washington:** more than 50% state cost share for USGS streamflow gages, with the state share continuing to rise.

7. Selected State Examples/Qualitative Findings

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Nevada: USGS asked the state to prioritize cooperative monitoring stations for possible reductions because of staff attrition and lost office capacity—not lack of funding. The respondent identified inability to backfill positions as the underlying issue.

Wyoming: Additional federal data and monitoring are expected to be important as Wyoming develops a voluntary water-conservation program in the Colorado River Basin and as Upper Basin states implement longer-term programs.

State A: Irrigation project runoff forecasts depend on federal collection of snowpack information in the central and southern mountains; the state does not collect all of that data itself.

State B: Public Landsat data enabled the state to automate annual identification of irrigated lands, reducing outsourcing costs and substantially increasing production speed.

State C: USGS streamgages are used in water-right administration, embedded in instream-flow rules, used for seasonal and real-time curtailment, and provide long-term records for evaluating restoration and instream projects.

State D: SNOTEL was described as the only snowpack-monitoring data available statewide; the respondent characterized loss of that information as especially damaging.

Preliminary Task Group Feedback

1. These results support treating streamgaging and Snow Survey/SNOTEL as the first two advocacy anchors.
2. At least two Task Group members favor organizing the remaining 1–3 priorities around specific programs or broader capability families (for example, NOAA forecasting/drought; Landsat/remote sensing; federal water-quality monitoring/support)?

Source: WSWC Member Pulse Survey: Critical Federal Water Data Priorities; responses closed October 8, 2026. This draft reflects staff analysis of survey responses, plus some initial Task Group feedback, but is not a final Task Group recommendation.