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Sound water policy starts with the states that manage water.

WESTERN STATES WATER

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WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL

Western Water Leadership After the 2026 Elections: Continuity Amid Change

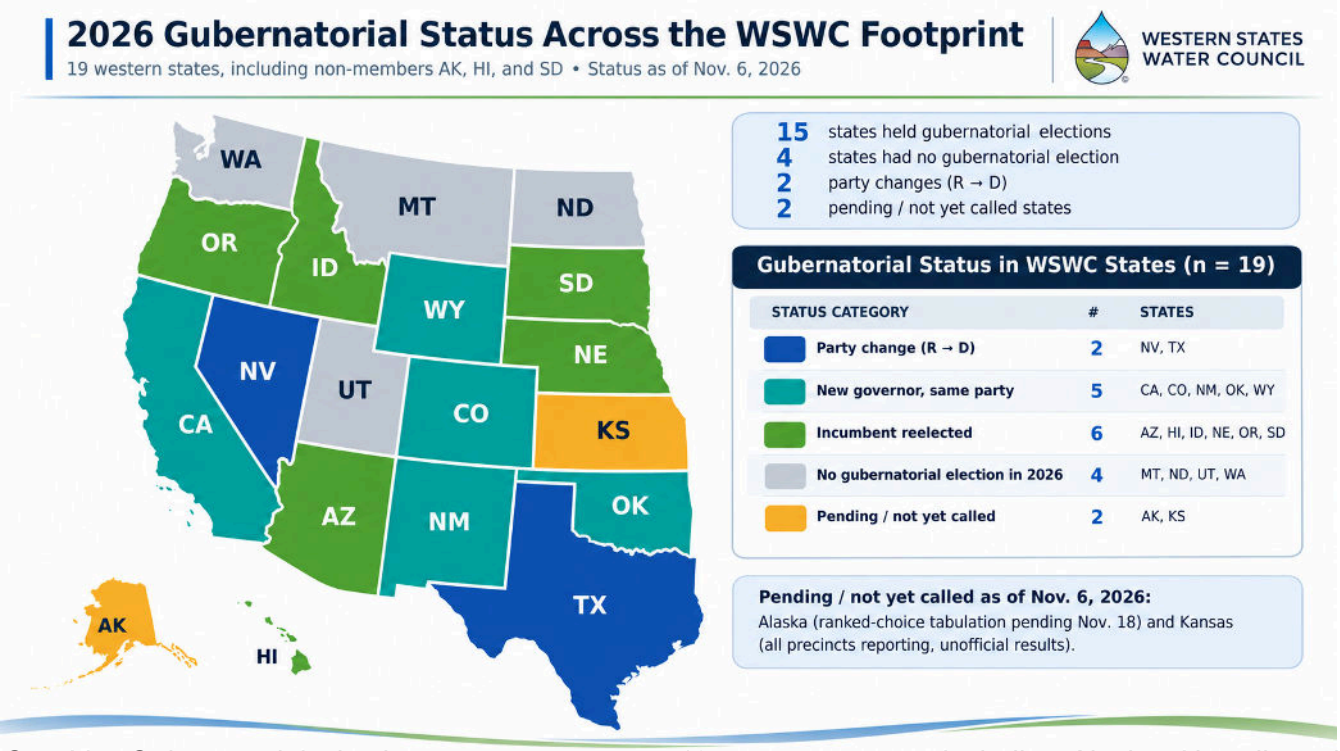
By J.D. Strong, Executive Director, Western States Water Council

The November 3 elections brought significant changes to the political landscape across the American West. Across the 19 western states within the Western States Water Council's (WSWC) geographic footprint, 15 held gubernatorial elections this year. At least nine will begin the next term with a different governor.

Two states changed political parties, five states elected new governors without changing parties, and six incumbent governors won reelection. Two gubernatorial contests remained unresolved as of November 6.

For western water officials, elections are only one part of a much longer timeline. Water supply planning, infrastructure development, water rights administration, drought and flood preparedness, water quality protection, Indian water rights settlements, and interstate river management routinely span multiple gubernatorial administrations. Regardless of the political landscape, the West's water challenges do not observe election calendars.

Since its creation by western governors in 1965, WSWC has brought state water leaders together to exchange information, develop consensus policy positions, and collaborate on



Graphic: Gubernatorial election outcomes across 19 western states, including Alaska, Hawaii, and South Dakota, which are not currently WSWC members. Results reflect information available as of November 6, 2026.

matters of regional and national significance. These roles are particularly valuable during periods of political transition. Through WSWC, states can draw upon their neighbors' knowledge and experience, share approaches to common challenges, and maintain constructive dialogue even as individual administrations and priorities change.

Governors and administrations will change. The West's water challenges will remain. So, too, will the importance of informed, collaborative leadership and strong relationships among the states.

Read the full article here.

WSWC BAAJA Letter

On November 6, the Western States Water Council (WSWC) sent a letter to Senate Majority Leader John Thune and Minority Leader Chuck Schumer commenting on the Bipartisan American Affordability and Jobs Act of 2026 (BAAJA). The Council said it appreciates BAAJA's aim of making federal permitting faster and more predictable. It urged Congress to make sure the reforms protect environmental resources and preserve state authority, and to give particular weight to the views of western governors and state water officials.

WSWC supported allowing NPDES permit terms of up to 10 years. It asked that states keep the discretion to set shorter terms and that existing authority to reopen permits under current law be kept.

The Council stressed that states are co-regulators, not merely stakeholders, and acknowledged that member states' views on the scope of CWA §401 certification differ. Even so, it warned that the limits raise significant questions about states' ability to address impacts from diversions and other hydrologic changes. It added that the limits could conflict with §401(d), and that the new evidentiary standards and undefined terms could raise administrative burdens, litigation risk, and costs for states. WSWC asked Congress to clarify how states' ability to protect water quality and designated uses would be preserved, to resolve the conflict with §401(d), and to consult closely with states.

The bill would raise the limit for minimal-effects projects to 2 acres and keep five nationwide permits for infrastructure. WSWC asked Congress to clarify when individual permits are still required below that threshold and to preserve the Corps' ability to modify nationwide permits for regional western conditions. It also asked Congress to confirm that the changes do not reduce the authority of states that administer their own §404 programs.

The bill would require EPA to set national §304(a) criteria by rulemaking, which would open them to direct court challenge. WSWC said these criteria should remain recommendations that states may adopt, modify, or replace. It cautioned that rulemaking could make them look like binding standards, that litigation could delay them, and that states would face new costs.

WSWC asked Congress to clarify that temporary hydropower operating variances do not override state water law or §401 conditions. It also asked that FERC consult affected states for its report on market barriers to hydropower. On geothermal, the Council welcomed the bill's reliance on state permits and asked that states be expressly included in Interior's consultation on leasing and permitting procedures.

On November 9, 2026, the U.S. Senate voted 73–25 to overcome a filibuster and bring BAAJA to the Senate floor for debate.

The full letter and the WSWC positions it cites are available here.

ADMINISTRATION/WATER RESOURCES

WestFAST Webinar/Federal Water Funding

On October 29, the Western Federal Agency Support Team (WestFAST) hosted a webinar that provided a rapid-fire overview of water, infrastructure, and conservation funding programs across five federal agencies, a topic requested by WSWC members.

Scott Miller, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Aquatic Resources Program Lead, said

BLM is not a granting agency, but the program enters into cooperative agreements with states, local governments, universities, non-governmental organizations, and tribes. Work must occur on BLM-managed lands or have a significant BLM nexus. The program typically makes 10 to 30 awards per year, ranging from $25,000 to about $1 million, for water quality monitoring, aquatic invasive species control, habitat restoration, and Colorado River Basin salinity control. BLM is looking to diversify its partners, particularly by working more with states, counties, and conservation districts.

Adam Klein of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Region 9 said Flood Mitigation Assistance, which reduces repetitive flood damage to buildings insured under the National Flood Insurance Program, is accepting applications through February 26, 2027, with up to $400 million available. Klein said that, to his knowledge, the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, historically FEMA's largest source of mitigation funding, has not been authorized under any new major disaster declaration since early 2025.

Travis Yonts of the Bureau of Reclamation said most of the agency's competitive funding is offered through WaterSMART, with cost shares ranging from 25% to 75% depending on the program. Eligibility is generally tied to water or power delivery authority in the West. Funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is tapering off as the Act's five-year window ends.

Dana Coelho of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) said FY2026 Landscape Scale Restoration funding opportunities for non-federal lands and tribes are open through January 26, 2027, and encouraged water agencies to partner with their state forestry agency on watershed projects. Two other Cooperative Forestry programs support land acquisition. The Forest Legacy Program helps states purchase land or conservation easements on important forest land. The Community Forest and Open Space Program helps local governments, eligible nonprofits, and tribes acquire locally significant forests.

Kaely Megaro, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Acting Planning Assistance to States Program Manager, said USACE is not a granting agency, but its Continuing Authorities Program can study and build smaller projects, such as streambank protection, flood control, and ecosystem restoration, without project-specific authorization. Floodplain Management Services provides technical assistance at full federal expense. Planning Assistance to States is typically cost shared 50/50, with waivers for qualifying communities.

WestFAST Federal Liaison Jason Olive also pointed to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Fish Passage Program, which can help fund the removal of dangerous low-head dams. A recording of the webinar and presenter materials are available here.

WEBINARS AND MEETINGS

November 17–18—2026 OpenET Applications Conference. Agencies, researchers, and water users will gather in Salt Lake City, Utah to share how satellite-based evapotranspiration data is applied to water rights administration, consumptive use accounting, groundwater management, and drought and conservation programs. More information.

December 1–3—Association of California Water Agencies 2026 Fall Conference. More information.

December 9–11—Colorado River Water Users Association 2026 Conference, Las Vegas, Nevada. More information.

December 17—Who Is WestFAST and What Do They Do for WSWC Members? This “WestFAST 101” webinar for WSWC member state agency staff will cover the history and purpose of WestFAST and the resources currently available to states. More information.