

Fall 2023 Countywide Plenary for Water Draft Meeting Summary

October 19, 2023, 9-11am

El Dorado Water Agency (Agency) convened the Fall 2023 Countywide Plenary for Water (Plenary) on October 19th, 2023, from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at 1101 Investment Blvd, El Dorado Hills, CA. The Plenary was convened in alignment with provided guidance and established policies in the Water Resources Development and Management Plan (WRDMP) which was adopted by the Agency Board in 2019. The Plenary meets on a biannual basis to support countywide collaborative engagement on water resources-related challenges and opportunities. The theme for this Plenary was “**Creating Synergy among Economic Prosperity, Watershed Health, and Community Resilience**” and approximately 50 representatives from water suppliers, local, state, and federal agencies, and agricultural and business interests participated in the meeting. A Workbook containing the agenda and materials for discussion was prepared and distributed to attendees and is available for future reference on the Agency’s website.

OPENING REMARKS

Rebecca Guo, General Manager of El Dorado Water Agency, provided opening remarks and thanked everyone for their participation and expressed excitement for the event’s agenda. The two subtopics for the event were selected to facilitate cohesion between the broader Plenary audience and its subgroups: the El Dorado County Drought and Water Shortage Task Force and the Upper American River Watershed Group.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Senator Marie Alvarado-Gil, California’s 4th State Senate District Representative, delivered a keynote address to Plenary participants. In the address, Senator Alvarado-Gil explained how water policy became a top priority, particularly after recent visits to the Lempa River Hydropower facilities in El Salvador and the proposed Alder Creek Water Storage and Conservation Project in El Dorado County. In addition to water, agricultural economy and wildfire are key priorities. Senator Alvarado-Gil expressed a commitment to continue working with local water thought leaders and encouraged Plenary participants to visit the District office for continued dialogue on water policy. Senator Alvarado-Gil also presented ceremonial checks to Grizzly Flats Community Services District and Georgetown Divide Public Utility District.



Senator Alvarado-Gil addresses the Plenary.

PANEL 1: INTEGRATING WATERSHED RESILIENCE WITH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Following opening remarks and the keynote address, **Supervisor Wendy Thomas**, representing El Dorado County’s Third District and Vice Chair for El Dorado Water Agency, introduced the panelists and moderated a discussion focused on how the County of El Dorado (County) can prioritize rural agriculture and economic development while also managing climate extremes and preserving the region’s resources. Supervisor Thomas recognized that El Dorado County residents prefer a quieter, rural life, and prompted the panelists to reflect on how water leaders can work to balance the adopted County General Plan goals for agricultural and economic development, while protecting the region’s environmental, social, and cultural resources.

Zachary Oates, Senior Civil Engineer for the County of El Dorado, Department of Transportation, stated that circulation elements are required to efficiently handle growth over 20-year periods. Newly introduced legislation in 2022 changed the level of service metric to vehicle miles traveled, which incentivizes the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions with the benefit of encouraging infill projects, stopping urban sprawl, and protecting undisturbed lands. These benefits align with priorities in the adopted County General Plan.

Zach Gigone, Environmental Scientist with the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians, discussed how taking advantage of cultural knowledge and focusing on community building can contribute to the adopted County General Plan's agricultural and economic development goals while protecting the region's resources and preferred way of life. Community spaces are vital to these efforts.

James Sarmiento, Executive Director of Cultural Resources with the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians, echoed community and long-term relationship-building as a means to achieving balance amongst the protection of cultural, biological, and other resources. The preconception of Tribes as being adversarial presents challenges to future projects in the region. Instead, they are interested in identifying where long-term collaborative partnerships can be formed.



James Sarmiento shares insights from the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians.

Mike Ranalli, president of the El Dorado County Farm Bureau, highlighted the significance of the agricultural economy in the region. With a visitor multiplier, the agricultural economy recently neared \$800 million. Mike Ranalli stated that farmers play a role in environmental stewardship of their lands. Although development of the General Plan required much back and forth and some conflict, the contentious process of developing the General Plan created a stronger finished product. Participants were encouraged to review the adopted County General Plan policies holistically and identify how the General Plan creates integration throughout.

Anna Leanza, Senior Planner with the County of El Dorado, Planning and Building Department, noted that local planning departments are not usually housed with economic development, however they are inextricably bound to each other. Economic development guides planning and ultimately impacts the region's resources. Anna Leanza noted that many of the priorities in the adopted County General Plan come from State and Federal government policies and align with local priorities. Participants were encouraged to participate in County Board of Supervisor and Planning Commission meetings to provide input on local priorities.

GROUP DISCUSSION: INTEGRATING WATERSHED RESILIENCE WITH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Plenary participants split into four breakout groups to discuss the following questions:

1. What coordination is needed to better align watershed management, economic development, and cultural and community resilience?
2. What are the institutional and resource barriers that we need to address to create more alignment?
3. Where can we start to gain early success to encourage further alignment in planning and project implementation?

PANEL 1 Q+A: INTEGRATING WATERSHED RESILIENCE WITH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Breakout group facilitators were asked to report one key takeaway from group discussion and one question for the panel to respond to.

Takeaways included support for connecting and maintaining existing collaborative groups and venues, the need for multi-benefit and landscape scale projects and strategies, acknowledgement of resourcing constraints driving maintenance and coordination challenges, identification of opportunities to support watershed resilience through private-public partnerships, and the quantification of ecosystem service

benefits. The breakout groups posed the following questions to panelists:



Breakout groups discuss the General Plan's role in advancing watershed resilience.

What can we put into place to formalize alignments of priorities, projects, and values to be more effective in watershed management?

Panelists replied that water systems are tied to the watershed and its resources, and focused, small-scale projects can have an outsized impact

across the watershed. Executing these projects can help in creating and managing a resilient watershed and building momentum for further collaboration. Panelists encouraged the use of existing collaborative venues to do so.

How does the process of updating the General Plan integrate public and private stakeholders into the discussion?

The previous General Plan development workshops provided a venue for public and private partners to hold at-times contentious discussion, respectfully challenge each other, and collaborate. In addition to participation in workshops, memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and other formalized relationships among partners have been key to sustaining collaboration.

How does the General Plan increase the desirability and accessibility of living in El Dorado County, and how quickly can the General Plan adapt to changing conditions (i.e., extreme events)?

Workforce opportunities and housing affordability are needed for growth and adaptability of the region. These factors are particularly important for agricultural families looking to pass on their farming traditions. Additionally, changing hydrology and climate extremes present adaptation challenges. For example, wildfire and extreme precipitation events impact transportation, and emergency egress. Updates to the General Plan must be made over a 20-year period and the General Plan is crafted to be interpreted in order to be adaptable to future uncertainties. The Housing Element, on the other hand, is revisited every five years and provides an earlier opportunity to include policies that support adaptability and growth (for example, zoning to allow farm worker housing and standard driven development).

Given that the County has to plan for the longevity of the region, what is needed for the rural agricultural economy to be self-sustaining?

Panelists noted that the General Plan has policies in place to protect agricultural lands. These policies should stay in place to protect the rural agricultural economy. In addition, water is needed to make use of agricultural lands, and the affordability of water presents a challenge to farmers. A more competitive pricing structure is needed for the region to ensure agriculture remains economically viable.

PANEL 2: INVEST IN FORECASTING FOR WATER AVAILABILITY AND FLOOD TO IMPROVE MANAGEMENT AND PREPAREDNESS

Recognizing the need for information to refine planning and decision-making in a changing hydrology, Rebecca Guo introduced the panel and moderated a discussion on how panelists would recommend improving information sharing, data technology, and forecasting to support community resilience.

Jordan Baxton, a hydrologist with El Dorado Irrigation District (EID), provided a local water purveyor's perspective. The water provided by EID is entirely surface water and relies on precipitation to feed reservoirs. To adequately project water availability, focus must be given to long-term water supply forecasting, refined reservoir operations, and water rights. It is also important for data to be shared between local entities. Technology and forecast information are crucial for water availability planning, (in particular, it can be more crucial to understand the timing of water availability than total volume). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Weather Service, Center for Western Weather and Water Extremes (CW3E), EID snow course measurements, and Airborne Snow Observation (ASO) were all cited as significant data sources for EID.

Gary Bardini, Director of Planning at the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency (SAFCA), shared that SAFCA has secured a total of \$4 billion in the last decade to improve infrastructure and operations of Folsom Dam and the Yolo Bypass. There is still a need for improving the systems to withstand higher intensity floods, at the 500-year level. Folsom has made use of Forecast Informed Reservoir Operations (FIRO) and benefited from collaboration with Placer County Water Agency and Sacramento Municipal Utility District.



Breakout groups discuss flood forecasting and data sharing opportunities.

Dave Rizzardo, Hydrology Section Manager in Hydrology and Flood Operations Branch of the Division of Flood Management at the California Department of Water Resources, shared a roadmap to climate resilience highlighting the importance of hydrologic forecasts, which play a role in improving hydrologic runoff models. Improving forecasts, including volume indication, is important to help improve outdated technology. One recent solution has been the use of ASO, which started in Tuolumne and was brought to the American River Basin this year. ASO data helps move away from statistical equation by providing physical data measurements of snow across an entire watershed. The technology costs \$10 million to implement, and assistance is needed from local and regional agencies to continue advocacy for additional funding.

Elizabeth Kiteck, Manager in the Water Operations Division of the Central Valley Operations Office at the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), discussed usage of a network of automated hydrologic and meteorologic monitoring stations (Hydromet), noting that operating and maintaining transmission from these stations can exhaust resources. Hydromet data is integrated with other sources of information to provide streamflow forecasting and current runoff conditions for river and reservoir operations. Other sources of data that Reclamation relies on include NOAA and California Nevada River Forecast Center. The California Department of Water Resources and Reclamation coordinate monthly to allocate water to meet environmental regulations and standards. Funding opportunities are available through Reclamation's WaterSMART Water Use Efficiency programs.

GROUP DISCUSSION: INVEST IN FORECASTING FOR WATER AVAILABILITY AND FLOOD TO IMPROVE MANAGEMENT AND PREPAREDNESS

Plenary participants split into four breakout groups to discuss the following questions:

1. What are our water availability and flood forecast needs for El Dorado County and the upper American River watershed?
2. What investments in data and technology are needed to:
 - a. Improve watershed management and community resilience?
 - b. Better account for the benefits the watershed may provide?
3. How can we improve communication and coordination on data acquisition and information sharing?

PANEL 2 Q+A: INVEST IN FORECASTING FOR WATER AVAILABILITY AND FLOOD TO IMPROVE MANAGEMENT AND PREPAREDNESS

Breakout group facilitators were asked to report out one key takeaway from the group discussion and one question for the panel to respond to.

Key takeaways included the need to use the data that already exists deliberately, applying data to assist coordination between upstream and downstream water managers, recognizing the resource constraints and tradeoffs of installing new data stations versus maintaining existing points, the need for improved inventorying of the data collection and data platforms that already exist, and filling groundwater data gaps. The breakout groups posed the following questions to panelists:



General Manager Guo poses a question to panelists.

If you had more data available, what would you use it for?

Panelists suggested it would be useful to better understand how fire alters the region’s hydrology and landscape, and studies are currently underway to better understand those impacts. Panelists highlighted the opportunity available to strategically reforest the fire-altered landscape. They proposed following up to identify the source of that data and understanding what plan exists for maintaining it, since data is more useful when it is maintained for a long time period.

How will plans to expand upstream storage benefit downstream water operations?

Panelists underscored that the State’s surface water supply systems were never designed to bring California through three to five years of drought. In times of drought, there can be optical issues with keeping reservoirs full while water delivery and use is restricted. Additional storage would help alleviate water supply challenges during drought, but it does not solve every supply issue. The American River Basin Study characterizes the projected changes in hydrology for the region.



Director Thomas and Plenary participants take notes.

How are data sensors prioritized and is there an understanding of who is using what data?

Panelists highlighted the value of maintaining longevity in data sensors while recognizing that short-term interest and funds can limit resources. Panelists also discussed microclimates within the watershed and the need for better understanding those areas. With constrained resources, there is a tradeoff between expanding the network of data stations and maintaining the existing system. Elevations in El Dorado County range thousands of feet; one way to prioritize sensors would be by elevation zone. There is a critical 5,000 to 8,000 feet elevation range known as

the “climate change transition zone” where an understanding of local conditions can be most critical. During the Caldor Fire, EID prioritized getting those sensors in the 5,000-8,000 ft-zone back online first.

Acknowledging there is a data gap at a land-owner scale, how are water managers within the region preparing for future droughts and water shortages?

There is a Plenary subgroup focused on drought planning for small water systems. Strong water rights and data to inform execution of those rights are particularly important during periods of extended drought.

CLOSING REMARKS

Rebecca Guo concluded the Fall 2023 Countywide Plenary for Water by thanking everyone for their participation and expressed excitement for continued collaboration with the Plenary.