

Spring 2022 Countywide Plenary for Water: Summary

The Spring 2022 Countywide Plenary for Water (Plenary) was held on April 26, 2022, from 9 am to 1 pm at the Corker Building in the El Dorado County Fair and Event Center. The Plenary was convened by El Dorado Water Agency (EDWA) per the policies and guidance for implementation of the Water Resources development and Management Plan (WRDMP), a policy-level countywide water plan developed through collaboration and adopted by EDWA Board in 2019.

Approximately 35 participants represented water purveyors, federal, state, and local agencies for resource management, agricultural and other business interests, and citizens in El Dorado County. A workbook containing the agenda and materials for discussion was prepared and distributed for convenience of the attendees and for future reference.



Don Ashton, Chief Administrative Officer of the County of El Dorado, kicked off the Spring 2022 Countywide Plenary for Water by discussing the recent large-scale challenges the county has faced in the last year, including the Caldor Fire and COVID-19 Pandemic. Don praised the work done to address these issues and urged the Plenary to continue working collaboratively and proactively on long-term water resource planning and watershed-scale management of the County. Don emphasized the strong partnership with EDWA developed in recent years and highlighted many accomplishments aiming at and promoting countywide benefits. Concluding his opening remarks, Don stated his strong support for the Plenary as a venue to continue collaboration.

Following opening remarks, the panel discussion *A Look Back at Our Accomplishments and Moving Forward* was facilitated by Lisa Beutler, Senior Principal Facilitator with Stantec. The panelists provided their corresponding perspectives on recent accomplishments and critical issues and challenges ahead:

- Ken Payne, General Manager of EDWA, gave background on EDWA, including the organizational changes in the past few years to refocus on the mission provided by authorizing legislation. Ken also provided a report of the organization's recent progress, accomplishments in implementing the WRDMP, and the importance to collaborate with partners to adapt to the fast-changing environment of climate and regulations.
- Mike Miller, Partner of The Ferguson Group, gave background on the Ferguson Group's assistance to EDWA in promoting water management in El Dorado County on a federal level. Mike provided three takeaways: (1) Organize locally and regionally to put together a unified "ask" when approaching Congress or agencies for funding or assistance. (2) Engage with agencies early regarding grants (e.g., pre-application briefings). The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law created new programs and added significant amounts of funding to existing water infrastructure accounts, and organized groups are likely to secure a larger portion of newly available infrastructure funds. (3) Start planning for FY 2024 funding now. Identify priorities and funding needs.
- Carla Hass, Director of Communications and Outreach of the Caldor Fire Recovery Operations Center (ROC), introduced the ROC's work in the wake of the Caldor Fire. Carla outlined the ROC's organizational structure and lessons learned in their response to the Caldor Fire. Carla discussed the devastating impacts of the Caldor Fire to the communities. The recovery efforts in El Dorado County were able to stay ahead of the curve, benefiting from experiences of other counties from previous fires. Carla, supporting Mike and Ken's previous points, emphasized the importance of establishing priorities, over-communicating, and working collaboratively.

- Scot Rogers, District Ranger of the United States Forest Service, discussed the importance of prescriptive fires as a tool for watershed management and fuel reduction. Scot stated that prescriptive fires prior to the Caldor Fire reduced its damages in treated areas; however, not enough had been accomplished prior to the Caldor Fire, emphasizing the importance of proactive watershed and fuels management. Scot discussed needed changes in forest management based on lessons learned and noted the success of the SOFAR group as a similarly collaborative group. Scot encouraged expanding collaboration throughout the county and watershed.

After the panel discussion and a short break, Ken Payne gave a presentation to formalize the Plenary with a draft charter. The Charter outlines the charge, structure, members, protocols, and other specifications of the Plenary. A draft Plenary Charter is in the Spring 2022 Plenary Workbook.

The Plenary Charter would allow member agencies to leverage the Plenary to meet multiple needs such as legislative needs and funding applications where formal collaboration groups are strongly considered. These needs would be met through the Plenary's proposed flexible structure to accommodate subgroups with specific functions. The structure provides significant advantages in competing grant opportunities or efficiency in meeting regulatory and statutory requirements. Examples include County's drought and water shortage task force required by Senate Bill 552 for improving drought planning of small water suppliers and rural communities, and the watershed group proposed by EDWA for a WaterSMART grant provided by U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation).

Participants expressed support of the Plenary formation as a countywide collaboration forum. The participants also emphasized the importance to manage the Plenary to maintain its novel purposes, and to reduce reluctance of participation by facilitating active involvement of members.

Following the discussion of formalizing the Countywide Plenary for Water, the Plenary participants split into two breakout sessions: (1) Implications of Senate Bill 552 implementation for drought planning and resilience of small water suppliers and systems in El Dorado County, and (2) Upper American River watershed planning. These two topics related to two primary programs among five for implementing the WRDMP: Water Security and Watershed Management, respectively. While these two topics have different triggers for their significance to El Dorado County, both have emphasis on long-term resilience for communities.

Kyle Ericson, Water Resources Engineer with EDWA, led the discussion of Senate Bill 552 implementation for drought planning and resilience of small water suppliers and systems in El Dorado County. Kyle discussed the relevant legislation preceding Senate Bill 552, existing planning documents that may be leveraged during implementation, and the actions required for compliance (e.g., abridged Water Shortage Contingency Plans). The group was supportive of the additional drought and water shortage resiliency that Senate Bill 552 would provide for El Dorado County; but, expressed concern over the ability of many small water suppliers and systems to meet the requirements required in the legislation. Water system consolidation was discussed as a possible solution that would still address the requirements in Senate Bill 552, although obtaining funding for consolidation could be challenging.

Yung-Hsin Sun, Vice President with Stantec, led the discussion of the Upper American River Watershed Planning, for which Reclamation has awarded EDWA a grant to form a cooperative group. Yung-Hsin elaborated that SOFAR is a good example collaboration group for specific purposes; however, a group covering the whole West Slope and all watershed topics is needed – similar to the Tahoe Basin under the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. The group expressed support for the cooperative watershed group and agreed that the plan and actions should follow the science. The group shared a strong sense of urgency to act in order to preserve our future, and recognized that it required policy changes, innovation, and collaboration. The concept of a working landscape, a cohesive unit of land that is ecologically, socially, and economically connected, was discussed as a potential framework to shape the watershed plan vision.

Ken concluded the Spring 2022 Countywide Plenary for Water by thanking everyone for their participation and expressing his excitement for continued work and collaboration with the Plenary.