

Spring 2023 Countywide Plenary for Water: Summary

El Dorado Water Agency (Agency) convened the Spring 2023 Countywide Plenary for Water (Plenary) on April 13th, 2023, from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at 1101 Investment Blvd, El Dorado Hills, CA. The Plenary was convened per provided guidance and established policies in the Water Resources Development and Management Plan (WRDMP), a policy-focused plan 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 “**Adapting to a Paradigm Shift in Water Management**” 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

Lori Parlin, County of El Dorado District IV Supervisor and Chair of the Agency Board, provided opening remarks. Supervisor Parlin highlighted the importance of the Plenary as a forum to facilitate dialogue among resource managers to enhance countywide benefits, embrace resilience through collaborative implementation opportunities, and continue the county’s momentum toward climate resilience. She highlighted the role that climate extremes have played in shaping the county’s landscape and emphasized the need to work collaboratively to address the changing paradigm in watershed management. She also recognized the need for establishing a common valuation of the watershed’s economic assets, referred to as ecosystem goods and services. Supervisor Parlin also announced the upcoming retirement of Ken Payne, General Manager of the Agency, and acknowledged the extensive contributions Ken has made to foster collaboration on water resources development and management in the county. Ken Payne then introduced the keynote speaker.



Lori Parlin, El Dorado Water Agency Board Chair and County of El Dorado Supervisor, District IV, welcomed Plenary participants.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Congressman Kevin Kiley, U.S. Representative for the 3rd Congressional District in California, delivered a keynote address to Plenary participants. In his address, Congressman Kiley stressed the importance of removing barriers that exist to addressing the county’s resource management challenges. He highlighted his office’s efforts to improve the accessibility of federal resources and answered questions from participants related to climate preparedness and response actions.



Congressman Kevin Kiley, Representative for the 3rd Congressional District of California, delivered the keynote address.

PANEL

Following opening remarks and the keynote address, Emily Finnegan, Lead Facilitator with Stantec, moderated a panel discussion focused on how decision-makers are adapting to the paradigm shift in watershed management, and what agencies can do to collectively address climate challenges, overcome watershed management obstacles, and prioritize investments.

Ken Payne began the panel by discussing the Agency’s role in coordinating the county’s response to climate change. He emphasized that rather than dictating actions, Agency’s priority is bringing people

together to make collective decisions. Ken pointed to the Plenary as an example: everyone present was invited for a reason and has an important role to play in enacting the paradigm change. Through coordination at Plenaries, people and agencies across the county can assemble cooperative teams, avoid unnecessary internal competition, and leverage opportunities.

Mark Egbert, District Manager of the El Dorado and Georgetown Resource Conservation Districts, echoed Ken's comments and emphasized the need for agencies to demonstrate action at the local level in order to build trust with communities. Mark called attention to the need for leadership and commitment to collaboration, and acknowledged the current disconnect between restoration efforts and economic valuations, even though they are intrinsically linked.

Ken Pimlott, Chair of the El Dorado County Fire Safe Council and retired CalFire Chief, highlighted the importance of taking a holistic approach to preparing communities and watersheds for wildfire. He cautioned that any one risk preparation strategy cannot stand on its own and should be considered in the context of the overall system. He recognized the work currently underway by the U.S. Forest Service, local firefighters, and others, to prepare for wildfire through activities like hazardous roadside fuels reduction.



Michael Ranalli, President of the El Dorado Farm Bureau (middle), Ken Pimlott, Chair of the El Dorado County Fire Safe Council (left), and David Batker, President of Batker Consulting (right) discuss watershed resilience.

Michael Ranalli, President of the El Dorado Farm Bureau, began by providing background on the county's agricultural working lands. He shared his perspective on increasing water resilience through local and regional collaboration, recognizing that many of the county's neighbors have co-equal goals that can be achieved through coordinated efforts. Many of the current regional projects point to the paradigm shift underway in water management, shifting from single-agency, single-purpose projects to multi-benefit collaborative projects. Michael also spoke about the significant subsidence that has occurred across the state in his lifetime and the critical importance of recharging our groundwater aquifers, including through aquifer recovery wells.

David Batker, President of Batker Consulting, encouraged Plenary participants to consider the upper American River Watershed as a working asset. He noted that once we understand the scale of our watersheds' assets, we can plan for the scale of the investments necessary to maintain them. David emphasized the role that all beneficiaries play in preserving the health and value of the watershed, including the needs of communities downstream and outside of the county.

Questions and Answers

Plenary participants had the opportunity to submit prepared questions in advance or ask contemporaneous questions of the panelists, summarized below:

- In response to a question about how to prioritize action in the context of the scale of the needs, Mark Egbert spoke to the necessity of establishing common ground and working alongside communities to set shared priorities. Ken Payne encouraged participants to look for the opportunities that come with the climate challenges and emphasized the need to coordinate investments to enhance the benefits through collective planning and implementation.

- There was a clarifying question from the audience about whether the statistic referenced by Michael Ranalli (that 80% of the lands in El Dorado County are working landscapes) was inclusive of protected, pristine forwards, for example. Michael added the county is home to rare endemic species that exist no where else on Earth, and that these too should be viewed as assets that require investment to be preserved.
- Panelists reflected on areas for strengthening collaboration within and outside the county:
 - Ken Payne highlighted the need to first articulate the county's assets and priorities, and then engage key partnerships within and outside of the county to support the region's goals. He noted that the Lower American River region has significantly more voters, and highlighted opportunities to partner with our neighbors in the Lower American River to accomplish more together.
 - Michael Ranalli cautioned that it's easy to look only within the county for partnership and resources, but that we can work on building collaborations and partnerships outside of the county. To do so, he stressed that we need to tell our story and highlight the region's amazing assets.
 - Mark Egbert called for a shift in mindsight away from prioritizing individual projects and grants to instead focusing on long-term investments in our natural and built infrastructure.
 - David Batker suggested getting resource managers in the headwaters organized, and working with downstream decision-makers to understand how shared investments can create multi-benefit outcomes.

BREAKOUT GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Plenary participants had the option to participate in one of two Breakout Group sessions: Group A, which focused on *The Value of the Upper American River Watershed – Ecosystem Goods and Services*, or Group B, which focused on *Responding to Extreme Climate Events – Drought to Wildfires to Floods*. Volunteers from each group shared highlights during a full-group “report-out” following the breakouts.



Breakout group participants discussed strategies for leveraging ecosystem goods and services in the American River Watershed and improving preparedness for extreme climate events.

Group A: The Value of the Upper American River Watershed – Ecosystem Goods and Services

David Batker and Yung-Hsin Sun, President of Sunzi Consulting, led discussion among participants in Breakout Group A. Participants considered the opportunities to leverage ecosystem goods and services, identified barriers to incorporating ecosystem goods and services into decision-making, and discussed actions that could be taken to overcome those barriers. Recommended areas for improvement included:

- Increasing education and awareness of the region’s natural assets, both within and outside of the county, to encourage investments.
- Investing in diversified drought resilience portfolio.
- Integrating forest and water management practices.
- Overcoming the disconnect between the public’s understanding of the watershed and the municipal water supply.
- Incorporating biomass energy into the grid efficiently.
- Building resilience for unreliable annual water yields.
- Properly valuing recreational jobs and assets.
- Acting collaboratively across geographic regions, identifying leaders, and prioritizing projects that incorporate cultural, visual, and recreational values.



Mark Egbert and Ken Pimlott shared the stage to report breakout group discussion points related to ecosystem goods and

Group B: Responding to Extreme Climate Events – Drought to Wildfires to Floods

Ken Payne and Kari Shively, Senior Vice President with Stantec, led discussion among participants in Breakout Group B. Participants identified areas for improving the emergency response to extreme climate events, strategies for achieving those improvements, and potential implementation leads and indicators for success. Recommended areas for improvement included:

- Increasing access to local workforce and other resources for planning and implementing fuel reduction.
- Developing evacuation plans for wildfires and managing vegetation at the community level, including increasing community awareness of risks and management tactics.
- Building confidence and accountability between community members.
- Working with outside services and organizations in advance to define jurisdictional roles, develop partnerships, and set priorities for extreme event response.
- Thinking longer term in our resource management, response, and recovery planning.
- Using quantitative metrics to measure success (for example: total acres treated, total flood and fire events, or air and water quality parameters).
- Using qualitative metrics to measure success (for example: the general health and safety of county residents and the production of collaborative documents like comprehensive safety plans).



George Turnboo, County of El Dorado District II Supervisor, highlighted how forest management impacts the region’s water supply, and stressed the need for coordinated planning to preserve our natural landscapes while conserving water.

CLOSING REMARKS

Ken Payne concluded the Spring 2023 Countywide Plenary for Water by thanking everyone for their participation and expressing his excitement for continued work and collaboration with the Plenary.