

Spring 2024 Countywide Plenary for Water: Summary

May 2, 2024

El Dorado Water Agency (EDWA) convened the Spring 2024 Countywide Plenary for Water (Plenary) on Thursday, May 2nd 2024 from 9:00 am – 1:00 pm at 1101 Investment Blvd, El Dorado Hills, CA. The Plenary, which meets on a biannual basis, was convened in alignment with provided guidance and established policies in the Water Resources Development and Management Plan to support countywide collaborative engagement on water resources-related challenges and opportunities. The theme for this Plenary was “**Investing in Our Watershed Health for Climate Resilience: A \$1.6-Trillion Incentive**” and approximately 50 representatives from water suppliers, local, state, and federal agencies, and agricultural and business interests were in attendance. A Workbook containing the agenda and materials for discussion was prepared and distributed to attendees and is available for future reference on the EDWA’s website.

OPENING REMARKS & ICE BREAKER

Lori Parlin, Board Chair of EDWA and County of El Dorado Supervisor, District IV welcomed Plenary attendees and affirmed that although this meeting constitutes a special meeting of the EDWA Board, no decisions would be made. Supervisor Parlin highlighted that the purpose for the Plenaries is to foster a shared understanding of water challenges and opportunities in the region. Today’s discussion will focus on leveraging the value of the El Dorado County watershed, building from the recently published economic valuations of ecosystem goods and services (EGS) and outdoor recreation in the upper American River watershed. Supervisor Parlin shared that due to unforeseen circumstances, this Plenary would not include a Keynote Address. Instead, she welcomed **Emily Finnegan**, Facilitator at Stantec, to lead the group in an ice breaker activity.

The ice breaker activity prompted plenary participants to identify as many areas of commonality with their seatmates as possible, and then started the group thinking about investment needs in the watershed. Many reflected that economic development, infrastructure improvements, and environmental protections are closely interrelated and that management strategies need to balance growth with sustainability to be effective in both the near and long terms. Examples of



Plenary participants gather at their tables to meet one another.

investment needs the groups identified included subsidies for transporting fire logs, establishing mobile biomass centers to manage post-fire vegetation, restoring flood-prone areas, replacing aging infrastructure such as Silver Lake Dam, enhancing fire-safety measures like home protections and evacuation plans, and increasing access to recreational areas without degrading the quality of those ecosystems.

OVERVIEW OF THE UPPER AMERICAN RIVER WATERSHED PLAN AND ECOSYSTEM GOODS AND SERVICES VALUATION

Rebecca Guo, General Manager of EDWA, presented about the Upper American River’s Programmatic Watershed Plan (PWP) and subsequent EGS valuation report which assigns economic value to the watershed’s

working landscapes. General Manager Guo described the team’s methodology for completing the valuation and provided a deeper dive on the value of outdoor recreation, specifically.

PANEL: INVESTING IN OUR WATERSHED HEALTH FOR CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Following General Manager Guo’s presentation, Ms. Finnegan introduced the group of panelists and moderated a discussion on how the agencies, organizations, and community interests represented at the plenary can collectively work to leverage the EGS valuation to enhance climate resilience.

David Batker, President of Batker Consulting, consultant to EDWA, discussed his role in developing the EGS valuation and highlighted the importance of investing in the region despite budget constraints, drawing parallels to historical funding mechanisms that were established during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Trevor Joseph, Manager of Technical Services at Regional Water Authority, shared about resilience planning and pilot projects from a regional perspective, including the role of partnerships with agencies like the California Department of Water Resources.



EDWA General Manager Rebecca Guo describes ecosystem valuation methods.



Karen Garner speaks with her fellow panelists.

Karen Garner, Director of Planning and Building for El Dorado County, touched on how EGS can inform the County’s long-range planning and policy updates in the General Plan.

Phil Saska, Co-founder and Chief Scientist at Blue Forest, elaborated on the economic valuation of watersheds, emphasizing the long-term benefits and the importance of conservation finance.

Michelle Wolfgang, Partnership Coordinator for the United States Forest Service’s (USFS) Eldorado National Forest, discussed the socio-economic significance of watersheds and encouraged collaborative, cross-

jurisdictional projects and management strategies to strengthen grant competitiveness and community engagement.

The session concluded with a brief break before transitioning to tabletop breakout groups.

BREAKOUT GROUP DISCUSSION

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

1. How can rural counties/headwater regions leverage this ecosystem goods and services valuation to advance policies, expand toolsets, and/or expand financing mechanisms to promote watershed health and climate resilience?
2. What other geographic areas could serve as partners in advancing our common goals of improving watershed health and rural community resilience?
3. Aside from outdoor recreation, should any of the other 23 ecosystem goods and services identified in the valuation be analyzed in greater detail and why?

QUESTION & ANSWERS WITH PANELISTS

Breakout groups were asked to report one key takeaway from their discussion and pose one question for the panelists to respond to. Takeaways included emphasizing the value of local agricultural farms and lands aside from agritourism, matching the scale of solutions to the scale of problems, working to improve grant eligibility to better match existing on-the-ground needs using available data, growing the workforce, and the pressing need for sustainable, long-term funding sources.



Breakout groups dive into the discussion questions.

With so many stakeholders wanting to see this succeed, why hasn't it happened yet?

On the funding side of things, panelists offered that formalized agreements between local entities may be needed to facilitate funding and obtain grants. They also offered that past State grants prioritized population centers or specific pieces of infrastructure, but thinking on this has changed over time. Issues related to timing and administrative capacity for grant management can be barriers, and natural infrastructure can be more difficult to invest in due to higher levels of uncertainty and greater maintenance needs.

How can we engage with others on this and past Plenary topics to maximize partnerships and funding opportunities?

Panelists encouraged participants to start with smaller scale, mutually beneficial projects to build trust with partners and develop a track record of success. Listening to downstream beneficiaries can help with leveraging more ambitious partnerships over time.



Facilitator Emily Finnegan records breakout group insights.

How can we break down silos between jurisdictions or between upstream/downstream water users to better support this work?

Treating a watershed as a whole system from headwaters to outflow can help to reframe watershed challenges between up and downstream users. Starting a conversation from a space of shared priorities and values can be key to dissolving silos. In terms of cross-jurisdictional silos, identifying an entity to champion collaborative work can go a long way toward ensuring a concept finds its footing.

What steps can we take to not only protect but increase the value of our watershed?

Ms. Wolfgang elaborated that part of the impetus for this question is that it is much more costly to rebuild and restore landscapes after destructive wildfires than it would be to implement community-level fire protections. Panelists described this approach as a “restoration economy.” Ms. Garner added that County planning can play a role by reevaluating economic development policies to prioritize the right strategies.

Which beneficiaries in the watershed don’t have a seat at the planning table? How do we bring them on board?

Panelists suggested that the healthcare sector has been under-engaged (from a wildfire smoke and air quality perspective), as have groundwater subbasins, grasslands, and the Sacramento Valley region. Tribes have managed these lands from time immemorial and their engagement is important, acknowledging that, like many organizations, they may not always have capacity to participate.



Plenary participants meet in breakout groups.

COLLABORATION LUNCH

Plenary participants engaged with a tabletop activity during the lunch break to review the 23 EGS topics and identify the top 3 to 5 they felt were the most important or imperative to protect, and discuss whether those top resources have been adequately managed. Some suggested areas included sedimentation and erosion control (and the nexus with areas prone to fire), forest health investments, habitat protection for salmonids, and disaster protection from drought, wildfire, and landslides.

At the close of the collaboration lunch, participants responded to an online poll to suggest future Plenary topics. Frequently suggested topics included partnerships and collaboration, projects and infrastructure, and sustainable funding and investments. Other suggestions included fire preparedness, jobs and economic blueprint, and aquifer recharge and water storage.

CLOSING REMARKS

General Manager Guo concluded the Spring 2024 Countywide Plenary for Water by thanking EDWA’s Board of Directors for their support in convening this event and everyone for their participation, and expressed excitement for continued collaboration with future plenaries.