

Findings Statement and Call to Action from the Specialty Conference: Connecting Land & Water for Healthy Communities

Approved by the Board of Directors of the American Water Resources Association at its September 13, 2021, meeting.

This [Findings Statement and Call to Action](#) is from the Specialty Conference: Connecting Land & Water for Healthy Communities of the American Water Resources Association with the [Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy](#), the APA Water and Planning Network, and the American Water Works Association

Policy Statement

The management of land and water are intricately related, but their interrelationships are often not adequately recognized or supported. The individuals working with land and water often lack opportunities for connection. This conference convened stakeholders across multiple disciplines, types of organizations, and professions to address the design, integration, and implementation of programs necessary to better connect land and water planning, management, and policy.

Findings

The conveners and attendees of the conference recognize the inextricable linkages between land planning and water use and supply, and the importance of connecting land and water professions, institutions, public policies, management practices, and decision-making processes at multiple scales. They acknowledge the following observations:

- Fostering connections between land and water resource decision-making is critical to the health and safety, economy, environment, and cultural enrichment and humanity of the communities and people our professions serve.
- Fragmentation occurs when:
 - The impacts of climate change and possible responses (i.e., adaptation and mitigation) are not considered in integrated land and water planning and decision-making;
 - There is a disconnect between local entities which drive land use decisions, states which oversee water resource use and allocation, and the federal government which establishes and enforces basic water quality standards and laws affecting land and water resources (e.g., rangelands, forests, fish and wildlife);
 - Groundwater and surface water are not sufficiently managed conjunctively;
 - Land and water governance institutions respond differently to conflicting and competing administrative mandates;
 - Planning for water and wastewater services and local land use planning are not well coordinated;
 - Disparate data sets are collected and interpreted by separate academic disciplines and government agencies;
 - Multiple and diverse property owners exercise divided decision-making authorities over land and water management;
 - Non-government actors and disenfranchised communities are not able to navigate the complex political landscape or participate in the projects that directly impact their communities;
 - Short-term decision-making concerning land and water management is divorced from long-range planning;

- Land and water professions are siloed into their own organizational structures, areas of responsibilities and specialization, and professional affiliations.
- The failure to create connection often results in:
 - Unsustainable growth and land use change in arid regions, at-risk flood plains and coastal zones, and fire-prone wildland-urban interface areas;
 - Increased vulnerability of communities to extreme weather events, water scarcity, flooding, water quality degradation, groundwater overdraft, land subsidence, and other water-related insecurities; and,
 - Further degradation of forests, rangelands, wetlands, flood plains, and riparian ecosystems, which contributes to even greater vulnerabilities for the very people and resources our professions seek to serve.

The urgent need to connect land and water management is exacerbated by the compounding pressures of economic development patterns incompatible with local land and water resources, and migration and geographic concentration of growing populations in areas facing water insecurities, and climate change impacts. Greater integration of the land and water sectors will better equip professionals in both to address critical challenges they repeatedly confront.

Call to Action

Land and water management must be holistically managed to better mitigate risks and uncertainty, promote long-term sustainability, and ensure healthy, resilient communities. The American Water Resources Association (AWRA), the Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy, the APA Water and Planning Network, and the American Water Works Association (AWWA) promote integrated approaches to effectively manage hydrologically and ecologically connected lands and water resources for urban and rural communities. These organizations, along with conference participants, call for adoption of guiding principles to promote this aim.

Commitment

The land and water professionals of the AWRA Summer Specialty Conference on Connecting Land & Water for Healthy Communities commit to the following guiding principles:

- Recognize the fundamental interconnectivity of land, water, and climate to balance the health of human and ecological communities;
- Delineate and protect land critical to drinking water source protection in order to ensure water quality and availability that underpins public health and healthy communities;
- Honor, respect, and learn from traditional ecological knowledge and work with tribal and other place-based communities to holistically integrate management of land, water, and other natural resources;
- Foster diversity in land and water integration by incorporating perspectives, knowledge, and skills of people from different cultural, disciplinary, gender, occupational, and other backgrounds;
- Utilize collaboration, engagement, and boundary spanning tools to connect people, institutions, water utilities, and governments that exert different authorities and responsibilities over land and water;
- Promote integrative conceptual, scientific, and management frameworks, practices, and technologies to foster activities aimed at connecting land and water policies and practices.