



# WESTERN WATER PUBLIC OPINION & MESSAGING POLLING

**The Water Hub at Climate Nexus conducted a survey of 3,296 registered voters in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming from October 30 to November 6, 2019 to learn more about how Westerners perceive water challenges, explore support for water solutions, and test various messages used to build support for water conservation or supply efforts.**

## KEY FINDINGS

- Water shortages, pollution, and extreme weather are perceived as problems in their state by roughly three-quarters of Western voters.
- Water supply tends to elicit more concern among Western voters than water quality.
- More than 7 in 10 Western voters say climate change is affecting their water supply and quality.
- Voters want their government and utility companies to do more on water issues.
- While water infrastructure is not top of mind for voters, there is broad support for updating aging infrastructure.
- Voters support a range of water solutions, but most want utilities to focus on maximizing local supplies rather than increasing the reliability of imported water.
- Most voters in the West believe that we all have to sacrifice to ensure sustainable water supplies.
- Messages that reference drier weather and a growing population are considered most convincing as arguments for saving water and developing new sources, followed by a message about the potential to work together to ensure healthy rivers and a thriving economy.

# WATER SUPPLY, QUALITY, AND CLIMATE IMPACTS

**Water concerns rank high for Western voters, especially among environmental issues.**

When asked to rate a range of issues facing their states:

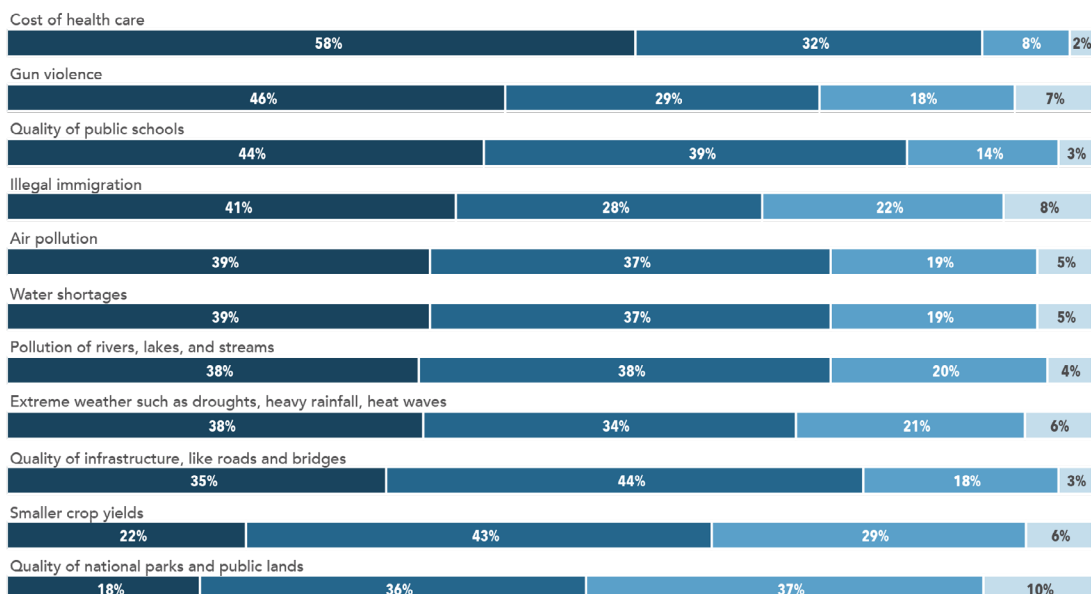
- 76% say water shortages
- 76% say pollution of natural waterways are very or somewhat serious problems in the places they live
- 72% say extreme weather, such as droughts, heavy rainfall, and heat waves, is a serious problem
- 65% say smaller crop yields are a serious problem

When asked to name the biggest water-related problem in their state, **Westerners tend to focus on water quantity over water quality.**

Lack of rain and snow was the top pick across the region (21%), followed by wasting or overusing water (17%), low levels of water in lakes and rivers (12%), and aging infrastructure (10%).

**Below are some specific issues facing Western states. For each, please indicate whether you think it's a very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious, or not a serious problem at all for your local area.**

● Very serious problem ● Somewhat serious problem ● Not too serious problem ● Not a serious problem at all



### The biggest challenges in each state are as follows:

- **Arizona:** Lack of rain and snow (21%), wasting or overusing water (18%)
- **California:** Lack of rain and snow (23%), wasting or overusing water (15%)
- **Colorado:** Lack of rain and snow (16%), wasting or overusing water (15%), aging infrastructure (14%)
- **Nevada:** Low levels of water in lakes and rivers (29%), lack of rain and snow (19%), wasting or overusing water (18%)
- **New Mexico:** Lack of rain and snow (24%)
- **Utah:** Wasting or overusing water (26%)
- **Wyoming:** Aging infrastructure (22%)

### Voters recognize the impact climate change is having on water.

- At least three-quarters say climate change is having a large or some impact on water supply their state's agriculture (78%) and extreme weather (75%).
- 71% say climate change is affecting water quality, recreational activities like fishing and boating (67%), and the health of people in their state (66%).
- Notably, 58% say climate change is impacting their family's health.

### Additionally, most voters report experiencing extreme weather.

- 61% say their local area has been impacted by extreme heat and report their local area has been affected by drought (52%) or wildfires (47%).
- Just 17% say their local area has been affected by flooding.
- Arizonans (76%) and Nevadans (73%) are more likely to have experienced heat in the last year, and New Mexicans (63%) and Californians (60%) are more likely to report experiencing drought.
- Notably, black voters in the West are more likely than white voters in the West to report their local area experienced extreme heat (73% vs. 60%) and flooding (29% vs. 17%).

# INFRASTRUCTURE & MAXIMIZING LOCAL SUPPLY

## Westerners support water infrastructure investments.

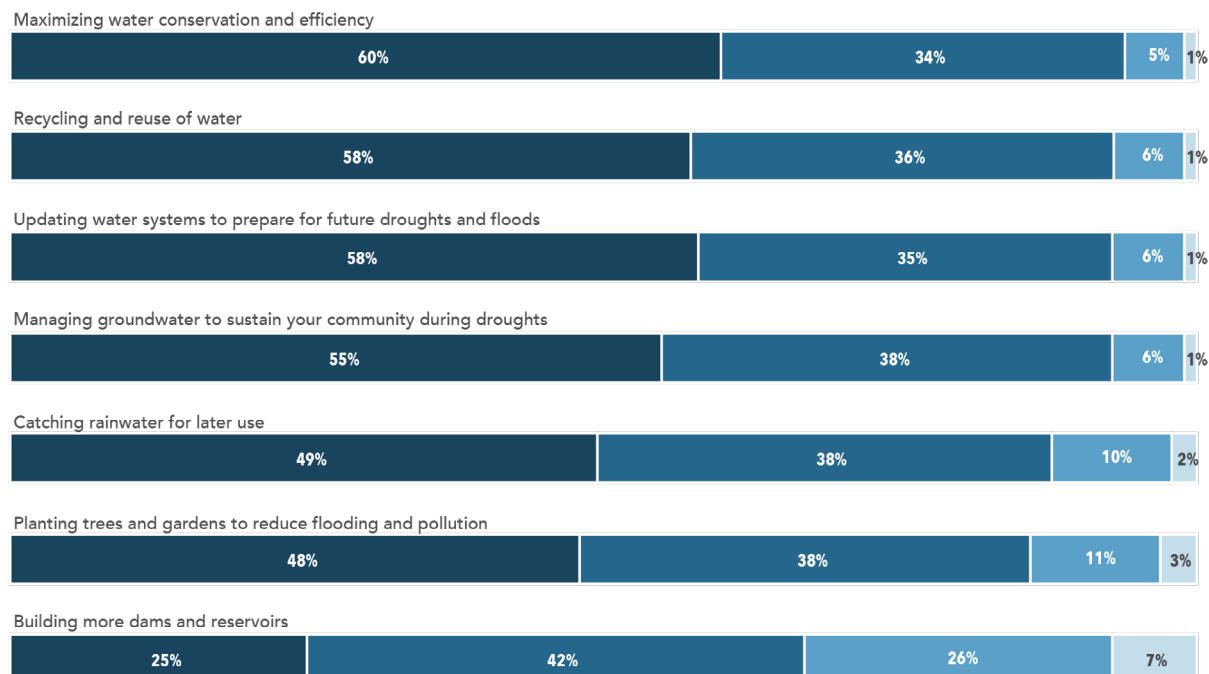
When asked what comes to mind first when thinking about infrastructure, the majority (56%) of voters in the West say “roads and bridges.” Far fewer think of water infrastructure like drinking water systems (7%) or sewage and wastewater disposal (2%).

While water infrastructure is not top of mind for voters, there is broad support for updating aging water systems.

- 44% consider the condition of water infrastructure in their local community excellent or good, and most would like to see it modernized
- 80% support increasing government investments to update aging water infrastructure in their local community.

## When it comes to investing in water infrastructure in your local community, how important are each of the following?

● Very important   ● Somewhat important   ● Not too important   ● Not important at all



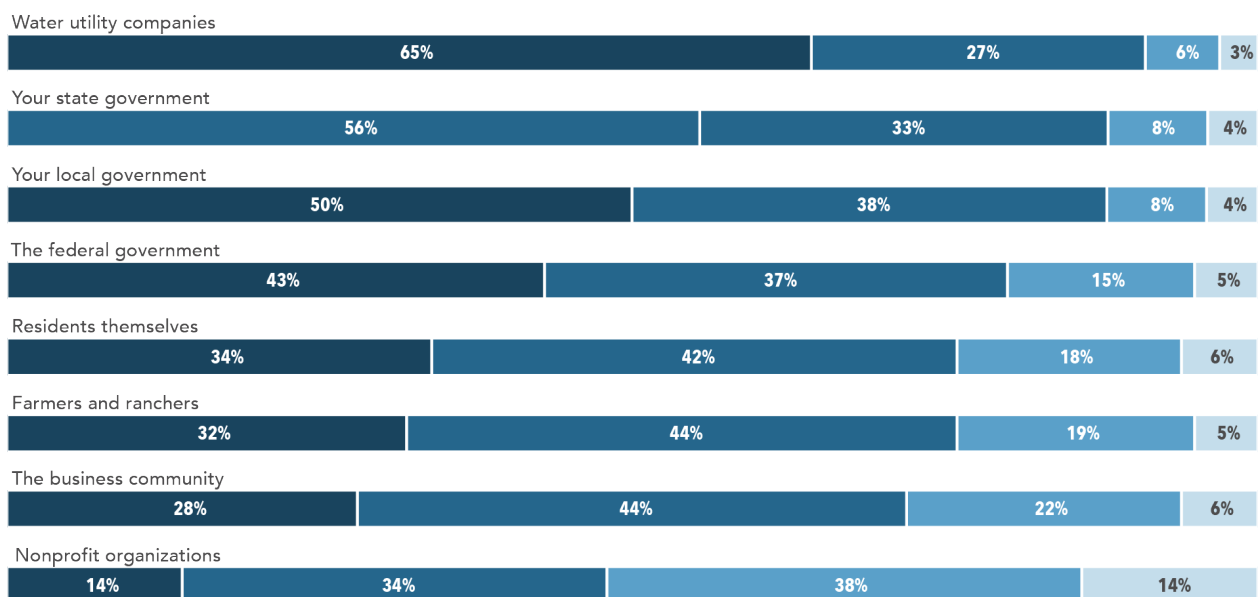
# ACTION FROM AGENCIES

## Residents want action on water issues and support a range of policies to save water and develop new sources.

Westerners believe government and utility companies have the most influence over their personal water supply and quality. They want utility companies, government, and others to do more to prepare for a hotter and drier future.

### How much influence do you think each of the following has on your personal water supply and quality?

● A lot   ● Some   ● Not too much   ● None at all



Close to 9 in 10 (86%) want water utility companies to do more on water issues. Roughly 8 in 10 also want their state government (85%), local government (82%), and the federal government (78%) to do more to prepare for a hotter, drier future, though only about 6 in 10 (61%) are confident that their state government can solve the water issues faced by their state.

About 8 in 10 say residents in the West (81%), the business community (79%), and farmers and ranchers (76%) should be doing more, and more than 6 in 10 say nonprofits (64%), as well as themselves (63%), should be doing more.

## Voters in the West express broad support for a variety of policies to save water or develop new water sources.

When asked how they would prefer for their water agency to invest its funds, 80% said they want agencies to maximize local water supplies by developing new sources and boosting water efficiency, and 20% said they want agencies to increase the reliability of imported water.

When asked about various water supply proposals, voters expressed strong support for a range of options, but more support conservation and efficiency measures than desalinating seawater or building new dams and reservoirs.

### Below are some proposals that some have introduced to save water or develop new water sources in your state. Do you support or oppose each of the following?

● Strongly support   ● Somewhat support   ● Somewhat oppose   ● Strongly oppose   ● Not sure

Modernizing water systems to prepare for a hotter, drier future



Maintaining groundwater reserves so we can rely on them during droughts



Ensuring that farmers use water-efficient methods like drip irrigation and planting more drought-tolerant crops



Helping people switch to water-saving appliances and landscapes at home



Improving natural infrastructure like forests and wetlands



Adapting homes, cities, and farms to catch and store rainwater



Desalinating (removing the salt from) seawater for drinking and other uses



Building more dams and reservoirs



# HOPEFUL VS. ALARMIST MESSAGES

**Voters believe water security will require sacrifice, but rate evidence-based or hopeful messages as more convincing than alarmist ones.**

We tested a variety of messages to learn what voters find most convincing as a reason to support policies to save water or develop new water sources in their state. We developed two sets of messages: one set focused on the idea of water scarcity and another on the idea of sufficiency. Half of the respondents read messages in a scarcity framework and half of the respondents read messages in a sufficiency framework.

The results were mixed.

**While the two messages that most voters found either very or somewhat convincing used the sufficiency framework, more respondents found scarcity messages very convincing.**

Digging into the specifics, we noticed some trends: the scarcity messages that were rated most convincing were evidence-based rather than alarmist, referencing weather and population changes that voters may already know about. Similarly, the most convincing sufficiency message referenced conservation progress that many voters have likely heard or read about. The other sufficiency message rated as very convincing emphasized collaboration, a value we often see resonating with poll respondents.

**Roughly 8 in 10 in the West find each of the scarcity messages convincing:**

- “The West is getting hotter and drier at the same time our population is growing” (82% find this message convincing, including 46% who find it very convincing)
- “We are using more water every year than rain and snow replace” (81% find this message convincing, including 42% who find it very convincing)
- “Rivers and reservoirs are running low, and we could soon be facing official water shortages” (81% find this message convincing, including 39% who find it very convincing)
- “Western cities and farms may run out of water if we don’t change our ways” (78% find this message convincing, including 36% who find it very convincing)

**Close to 9 in 10 in the West find the following sufficiency messages convincing:**

- “Some people are already reducing water use; if we scale up water conservation, we can make a difference” (86% find this message convincing, including 34% who find it very convincing)
- “By working together, we can ensure healthy rivers and a thriving economy” (85% find this message convincing, including 40% who find it very convincing)

**Roughly 7 in 10 in the West find the following sufficiency messages convincing:**

- “We know how to stretch local water supplies; we just need the public and political will to do so” (72% find this message convincing, including 26% who find it very convincing)
- “There is enough water to go around if we use it wisely” (70% find this message convincing, including 26% who find it very convincing)

We asked another, separate question to explore whether voters believe that water security will require sacrifice.

**More than 8 in 10 voters (81%) agree that we all have to sacrifice to ensure sustainable water supplies, while roughly 7 in 10 (69%) agree there’s enough water to go around if we use it wisely.**

Most subgroups express higher levels of agreement with the idea that we all have to sacrifice, with the exception of Republicans (79% agree there’s enough water to go around if we use it wisely, and 74% agree we all have to sacrifice to ensure sustainable water supplies) and voters in Utah and Wyoming (73% and 82%, respectively, agree with the statement about sufficiency, while 72% and 68%, respectively, agree with the statement about sacrifice).

We retested support for policies to save water or develop new water sources after respondents read the messages and found it remained stable. Notably, support after messaging did not differ significantly or at all between the respondents who read messages from the scarcity framework and respondents who read messages from the sufficiency framework, indicating that while there is variation in how convincing respondents say they find the messages, neither frame significantly impacts policy support.



# WATER AND THE NEWS

**Voters want the media to talk about climate-driven events before they occur and rely on a variety of sources for water news.**

**Voters in the West want the media to talk about the relationship between water shortages and droughts and climate change.**

- A majority (51%) want the media to talk about how climate change impacts water shortages and droughts before those events occur, including through the use of seasonal outlooks and forecasts, and close to a quarter want the media to talk about the connection during (19%) or immediately after (4%) water shortages and droughts.
- Only 4% say the media should wait a week or longer, and 9% say the media should never talk about climate change's impact on water issues.

**Slight majorities in the West say the media is not exaggerating water shortages** (52%) or water contamination and pollution (51%), while only about a quarter say the media is exaggerating water shortages (28%) and pollution (27%).

**Voters rely on a variety of news sources for in-depth reporting on water-related issues**, including local television (25%), network television (13%), cable news (10%), and local newspapers (10%).

**Voters do not often talk about water issues with people they know**, like friends, family, or coworkers. One-quarter talk about water issues in their local area daily (9%) or weekly (16%), and another 19% talk about water issues monthly. A majority talk about water issues seldom (42%) or never (14%).

Notably, Hispanic (38%), and black (37%) residents of the West are significantly more likely to talk about water issues daily or weekly.

*The Water Hub is funded by S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Pisces Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, and Water Funder Initiative.*