

Insights from the Field: Community Engagement and Planning That Works



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Arizona State University

Arizona Water Innovation Initiative



Community Engagement

Southwest
Decision
Resources



WRRC Conference

April 2026



Southwest Decision Resources



- An Arizona-based facilitation firm supporting complex planning, decision making and problem-solving processes across the Southwest since 2004
- Our Mission: More inclusive and informed decision making that leads to improved outcomes for the environment and communities
- Help partners navigate complexity




Projects with Low Levels of Community Engagement

- Traditional projects have used the **Decide, Announce, Defend** approach
 - Decisions made behind closed doors, announced to the public, then defended against criticism
 - Seemingly more efficient but treats community members as obstacles vs partners
- When communities feel blindsided or ignored, opposition hardens (e.g., Tucson in the face of a hyperscale data center project)
- Projects get delayed, costs increase, some viable projects die, and communities may miss opportunities to shape projects



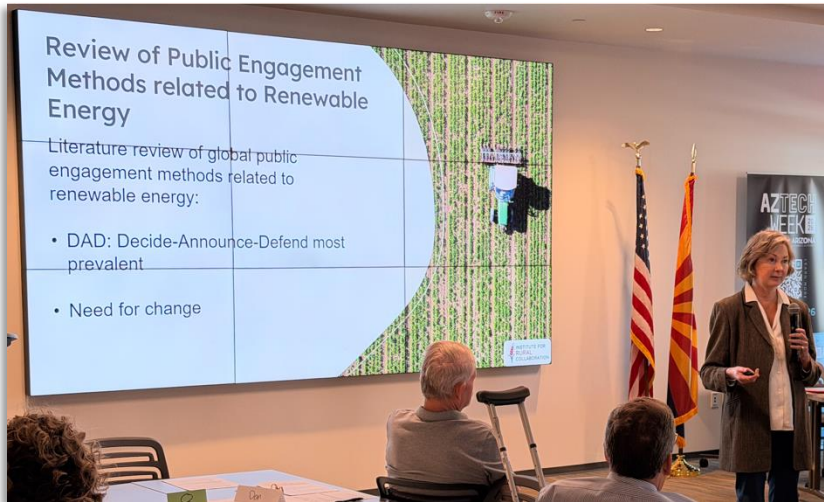
Spectrum of Participation (IAP2)

Increasing engagement 

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Energy Development and Community Engagement

- Workshops:** **Collaborating to Advance Arizona's Energy Economy**
Two statewide workshops held in Phoenix and Tucson - February 2026
- Convenors:** **Arizona Governor's Office of Resiliency and the Institute for Rural Collaboration**
- Facilitation:** **Southwest Decision Resources**
- Purpose:** Build shared understanding and improve community engagement practices around renewable energy, energy infrastructure, and large load facilities.



Who Participated and Workshop Format

93 participants from across Arizona, representing:

- State and local government
- Tribal Nations
- Nonprofit organizations
- Utilities
- Academia
- Agriculture
- Energy developers
- Community members

Workshop Format

- Short presentations
- Interactive table discussions and sticky note work to identify and discuss challenges and needs/solutions



Community Engagement & Energy Planning – Workshop Outcomes

Meaningful, effective engagement

- Shift from one-sided processes to collaborative, interactive approaches that foster meaningful input and robust dialogue
- Focus on collaborative approaches featuring stakeholder assessments, meetings with small-group breakouts, and other strategies to foster meaningful input and robust dialogue
- Not check-the-box
- Neutral facilitation and collaborative community engagement are critical for inclusive, objective, and constructive dialogue during planning processes

Collaborative, two-way learning

- Ongoing education and knowledge-sharing across government agencies, developers, utilities, subject matter experts, and residents to ensure informed and constructive engagement
- Help communities better understand the constraints faced by developers and what may or may not be feasible for a given project, and developers better understand community interests

Community Engagement & Energy Planning (continued)

Proactive planning (before there is a specific project)

- Establish local energy priorities, preferred development areas, community benefits, zoning standards, and engagement expectations *before* projects are proposed to reduce uncertainty for communities and developers
- Planning forums allow communities to clarify their regional energy role, assess future energy demands, align interests, and explore efficiency or conservation strategies

Early engagement (specific project)

- Engage communities early in a project lifecycle to identify stakeholder interests, understand concerns, and evaluate tradeoffs of different alternatives
- Community stakeholders should include a representative range of community interests, perspectives, knowledge and authorities - local governments, residents, business owners, organizations and groups, and industry representatives, among others
- Non-disclosure agreements prevent effective early engagement

Community Engagement & Energy Planning (continued)

Prioritize early Tribal Consultation and engagement

- Respect Tribal sovereignty, data sovereignty, cultural resources, and traditional knowledge throughout all engagement efforts
- Treat Tribal Consultation as a distinct process beginning at the earliest stages of planning and project design — separate from general public engagement

Identify and seek alignment with community needs

- Energy planning and project development should prioritize meaningful local input and clearly articulate long-term community needs
- Clarify tradeoffs and ensure that economic, environmental, and social benefits are defined in partnership with affected communities.
- Tools such as Community Benefits Agreements and Development Agreements may be helpful to identify community needs and ensure alignment in the context of consideration of renewable energy or large load projects

Take aways

- Communities want to be involved and heard, from the beginning
- Two-way learning is essential to creating informed, workable, and acceptable outcomes
- Don't fear community engagement – when done well it will improve the process and likely the outcomes
- There are many community engagement resources and professionals who can assist

A scenic view of a desert valley with mountains in the background and a large saguaro cactus in the foreground. The cactus is tall and green, with several arms and clusters of small green flowers at the top. The valley below is filled with green vegetation and scattered houses. The mountains in the distance are blue and hazy under a cloudy sky.

Thank you!

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Growing Water Smart: Integrating Water & Land Use Planning to Advance Water Resilience

**Eliza Stokes, Growing Water Smart Program Manager
Sonoran Institute**



**SONORAN
INSTITUTE**

The Sonoran Institute

A group of four people are wading through a shallow, clear stream in a wooded area. They are seen from behind, moving away from the camera. The person on the far left is wearing a grey shirt and dark pants. The person next to them is wearing a red shirt and blue jeans, carrying a backpack. The person in the middle is wearing a red shirt and blue jeans. The person on the far right is wearing a blue shirt and denim shorts. The stream is surrounded by lush green trees and grass. The scene is bright and sunny, with long shadows cast on the water.

The Sonoran Institute's mission is to connect people and communities with the natural resources that nourish and sustain them.



Growing Water Smart is a training & assistance program that empowers local leaders to implement plans and policies that support community and regional water resilience.

Since 2017, the Babbitt Center and Sonoran Institute have partnered to deliver Growing Water Smart to cities, towns and counties across the Colorado River Basin.

www.growingwatersmart.org



The Workshop Steps



Develop an Interdisciplinary Team



Assess Current Conditions



Set Goals



Identify Opportunities



Develop a Water-Smart Message



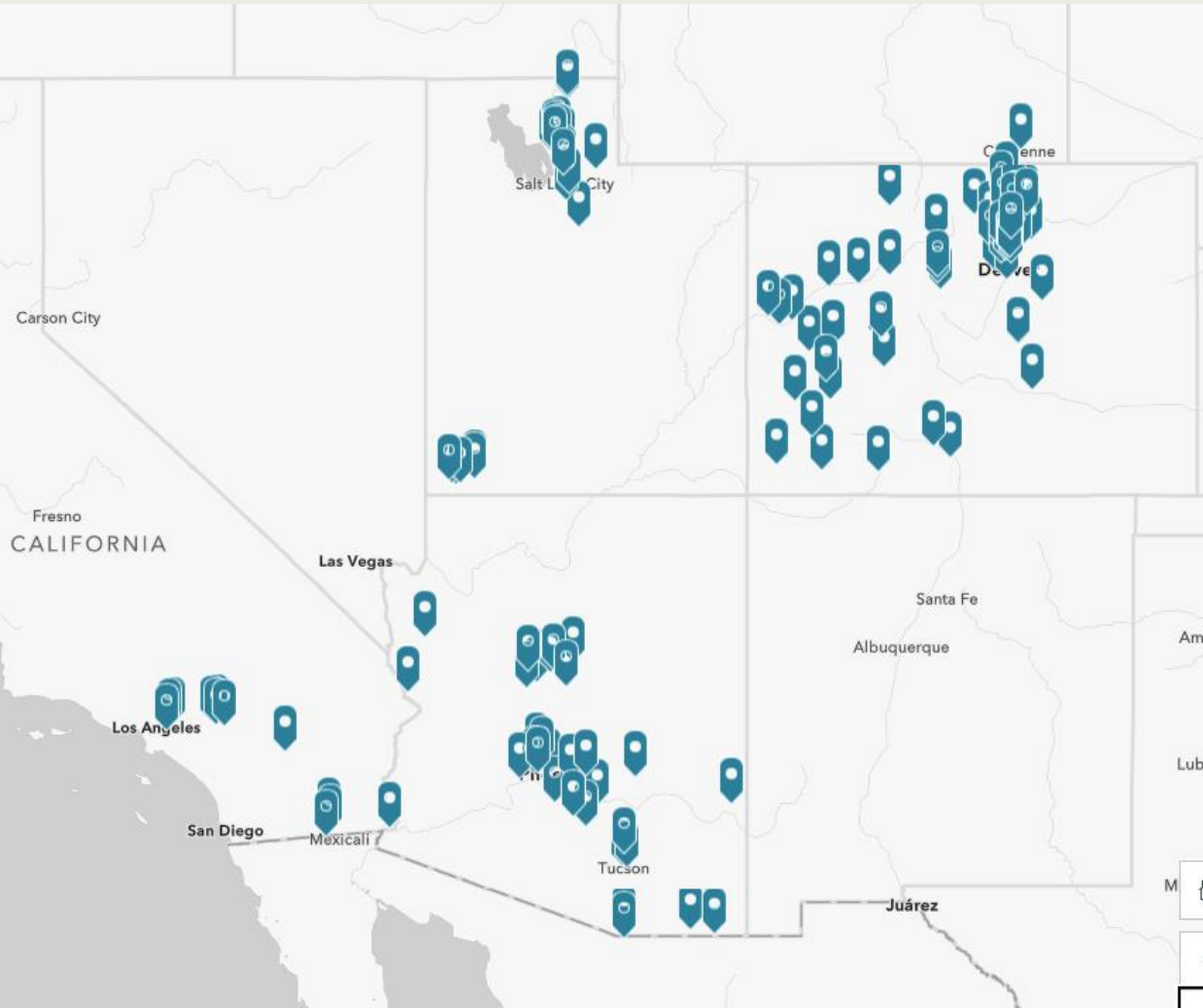
Establish an Action Plan



Implement



Where We Work



Impact Across the Colorado River Basin

- 27 workshops
- Over 1,000 participants
- 160+ cities, towns, and counties
- 42 technical assistance projects



Key Aspects of Growing Water Smart Approach with Implications for Large Water Users

- Breaking Down Silos: Interdisciplinary Planning
- Visioning and Planning Processes
- Water Allocation Policies



Communities Breaking Down Silos



**Land Use
Planning**



**Water Resource
Management**



**Public
Decision-Making**



Cross-Sector Collaboration



Visioning & Planning

General & Comprehensive Plans

Consistency Requirements

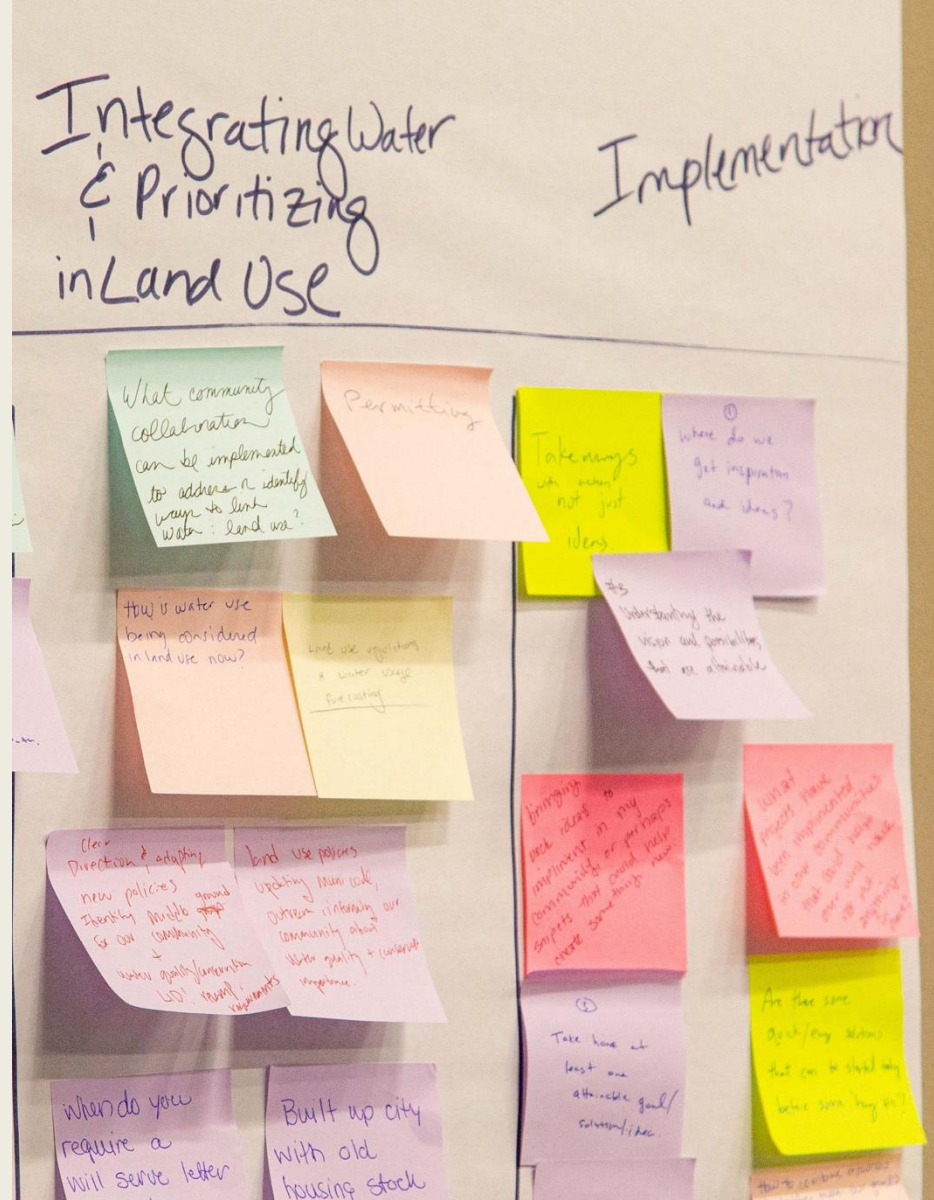
Alignment across Sectors and Plans

Plans are Measured and Tracked



Water Allocation Policies

- Water allocation policies align the distribution of water supplies to stated community goals and values.
- Help communities determine how to respond to development proposals in advance, including those from large water users.



Case Study: City of Chandler

- Water allocation policy filters out high-volume water users who do not meet Chandler’s identified employment targets for new development.
- New high-volume water users that don’t align with Chandler’s “quality of life” priorities are approved only if they provide additional water supply to the city.





To create a reasonable assurance that remaining water rights will be tapped for purposes that will help strengthen the community, its workforce, families, institutions, and businesses.

LAND USE CATEGORY	SINGLE FAMILY EQUIVALENCY (SFE) WATER ALLOCATION
EMERGENCY USE	47.3
INFILL	90
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (Commercial, industrial, & other non-residential uses)	40
PUBLIC, NON-PROFIT, OR INSTITUTIONAL FACILITIES	20
AFFORDABLE, ATTAINABLE, & WORKFORCE HOUSING	75



Key Takeaways

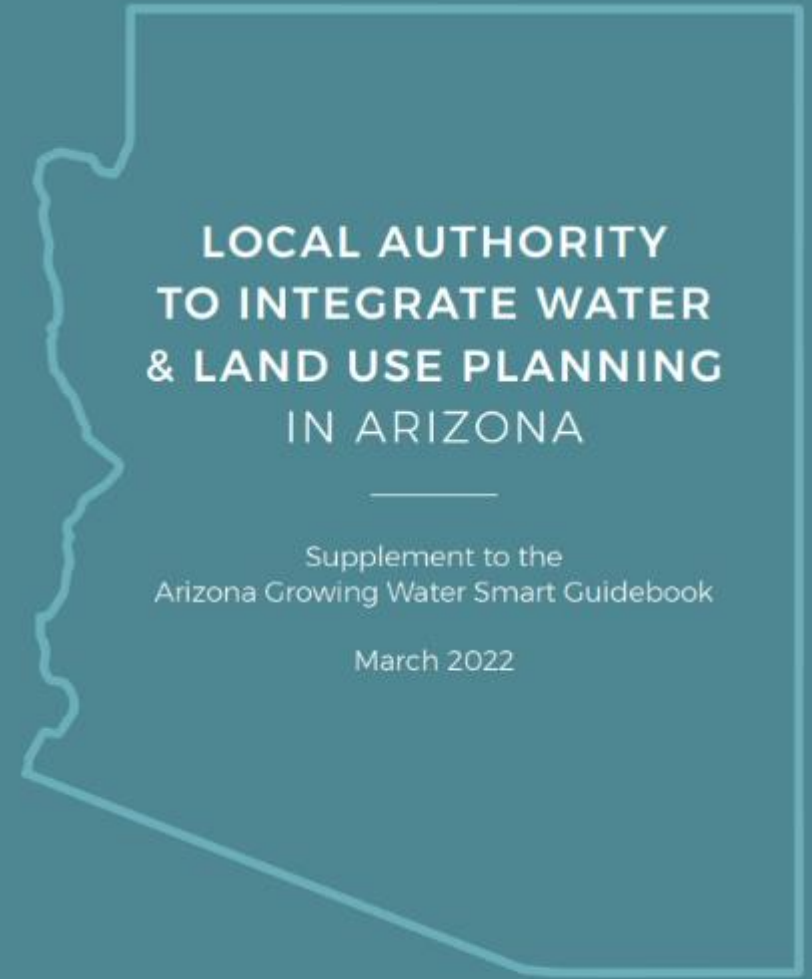
- These are cross-cutting conversations that are most effective when many disciplines and leaders in a community are present and in alignment
- “Can we do this?” and “Should we do this?” are different questions
- There are several local-level policies and processes communities can adopt to ensure large water use proposals align with community values (or provide protections if they don’t)



Additional Resources

- ✓ Local Authority To Integrate Water & Land Use Planning
- ✓ Growing Water Smart Water & Land Use Nexus Guidebook
- ✓ Integrating Water Into Comprehensive Plans
- ✓ Growing Water Smart Webinar: Water Allocation Policies (October 2023)
- ✓ Growing Water Smart Webinar: Local Policies for Large Water Users (March 2026)

www.growingwatersmart.org



Thank you!

Eliza Stokes

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www.growingwatersmart.org



**Sign up for the GWS
Newsletter**



ASU Julie Ann Wrigley
Global Futures Laboratory
Arizona State University

Arizona Water
Innovation Initiative

Catalyst for Action: Building Rural Groundwater Resilience

*Helping communities move from
conversation to implementation.*

Impact Water – Arizona
Engage | Empower | Activate

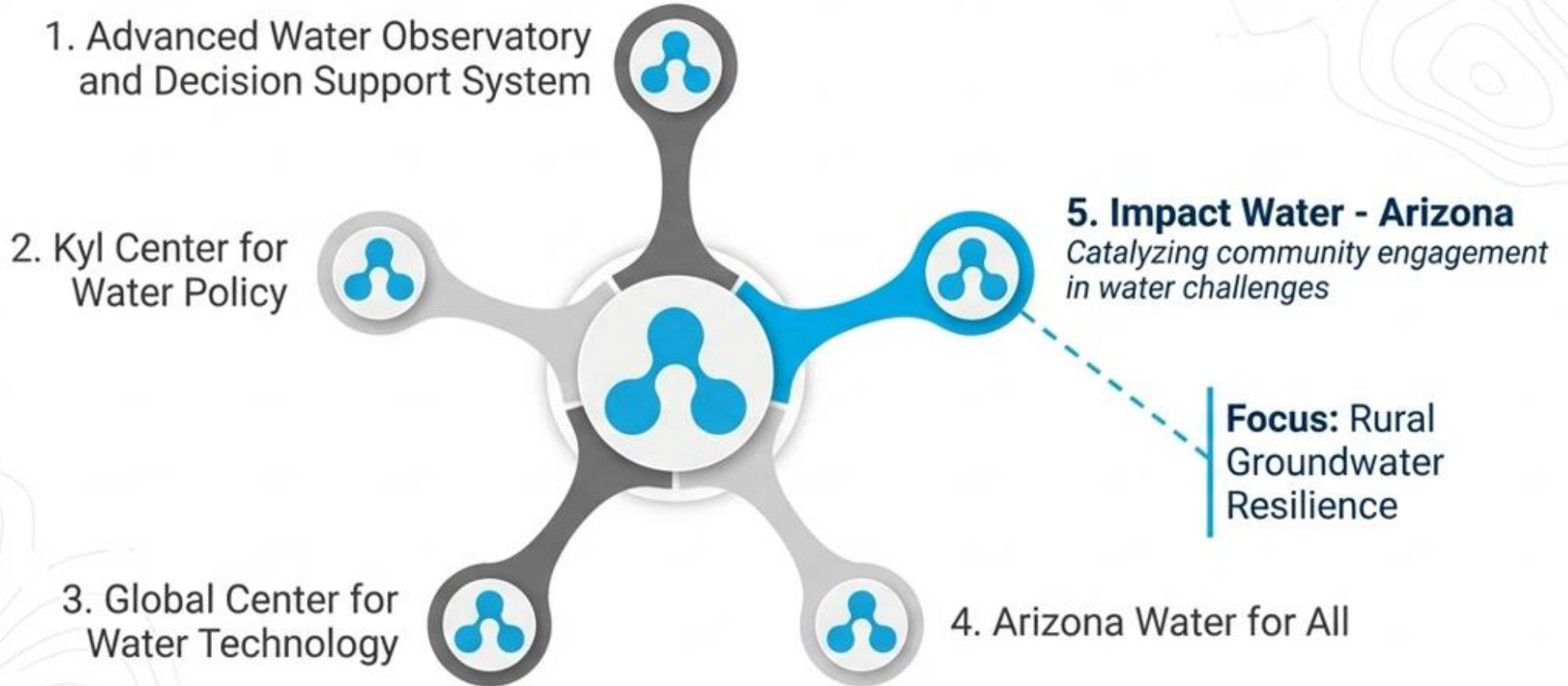


Arizona Water Innovation Initiative

Vision: Water security for a thriving Arizona.

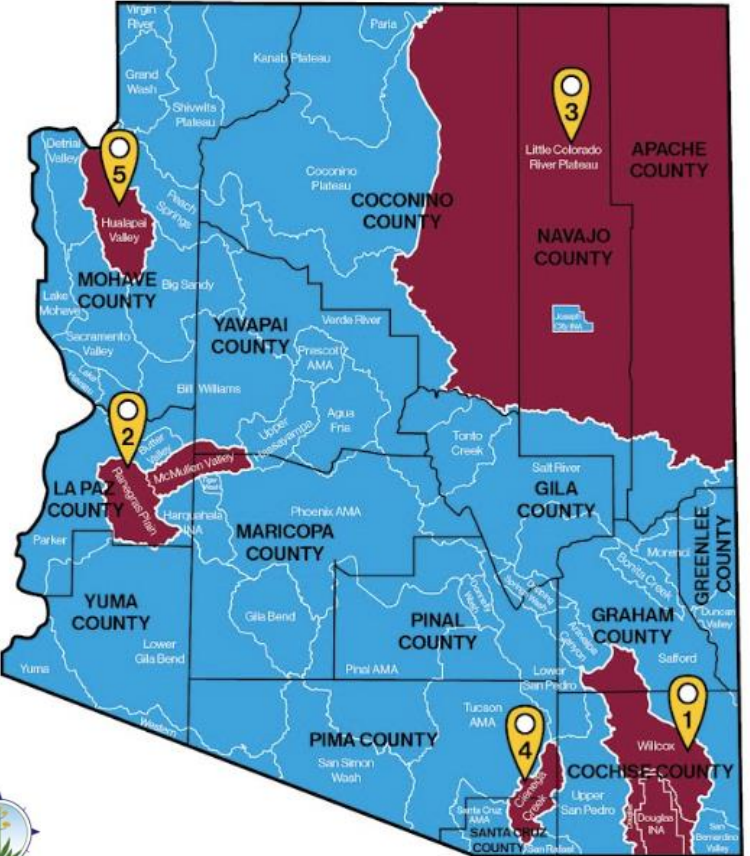
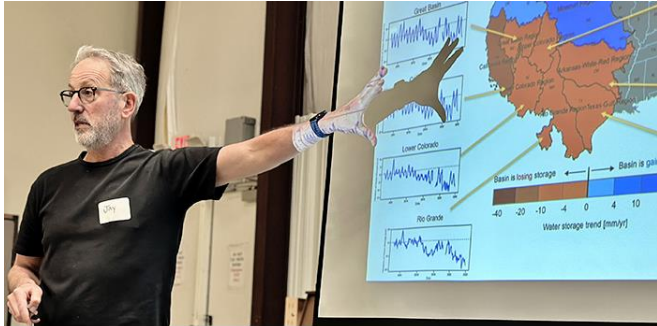
Mission: To drive a thriving water future through discovery, innovation, and action for the benefit of all of Arizona.

Innovation Modes



Rural Groundwater Resilience Workshops

Empower rural Arizonans to protect groundwater and communities



Photos by Faith Kearns

Workshop Goals

Neutrally Convened, Locally Driven



Engage

Support neutral convenings to facilitate dialogue and explore local water management challenges.

Empower

Provide information, trusted data, and hands-on guidance to support community-driven efforts.

Activate

Implement sustainable groundwater management strategies and preparedness plans to ensure long-term conservation.

The Architecture of a Workshop

Phase 3: Post-Workshop (Sustained Action)

Facilitate strategic implementation meetings to prioritize strategies.

Support sustained engagement via projects, partnerships, tool development, and funding access.



Phase 1: Pre-Workshop (Co-Design)

Convene local steering committee.

Conduct focus groups and interviews to gather insights.

Develop invitation lists and promote participation.

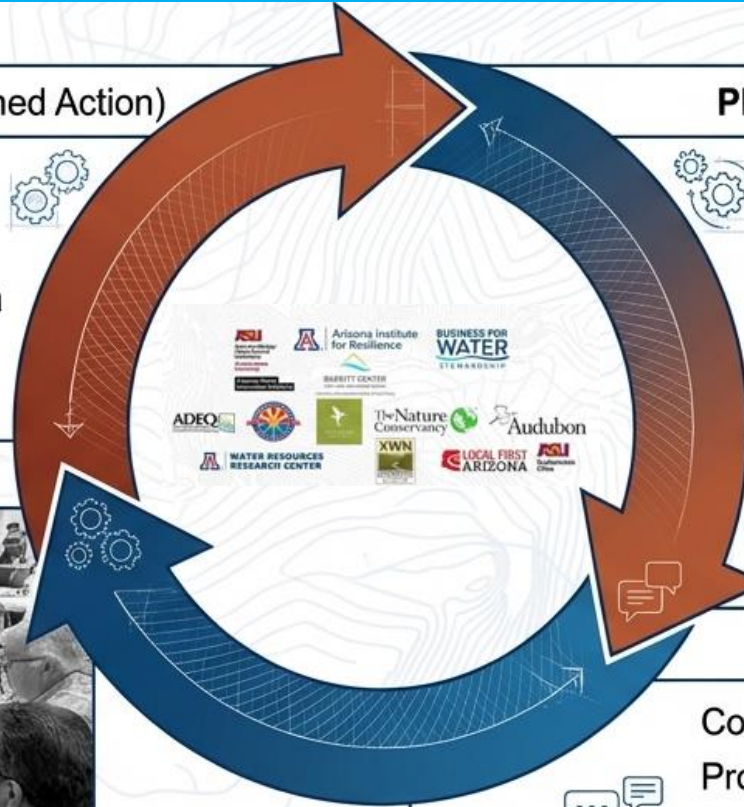


Phase 2: Workshops (Dialogue)

Co-design with community members.

Professionally facilitated conversations.

Develop strategies for adaptive management and resiliency.



Impact

Sulphur Springs Valley | Dec 2025 & Sept 2023

- Formation of the **Sulphur Springs Water Alliance** and part-time coordinator
- **14% reduction** in water use by the largest water users in the Willcox Basin
- **Groundwater User Advisory Council** members appointed by Governor Hobbs
 - Two members Douglas AMA
 - Four members Willcox AMA
- **Recharge Study** funded by Federal Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Grant (BRIC) & Cochise County
- **Riverview Settlement**
- 2 ASU Project Cities projects
- **Advocacy**: subsequent AMAs portability (SB1197) & extension for Willcox GWR (HB2031/2551)



Looking Ahead

- 501(c)(3) status
- Funding
- BOR WaterSMART Grant
- Project Implementation
 - Establish Water District
 - Ag Conservation - Incentivizing fallowing
 - Stormwater Recharge Project
 - Community Outreach Panel Series
 - County Comprehensive Plan

Sulphur Springs Valley | Dec 2025



Post-it
super sticky super colorful super adhesive
(63.5 cm x 76.2 cm) 52 FF / PF (1) 433 nm

Strategy: Establish Water district (Jackie leading)?

<h3>Challenges?</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Capacity below wells (will have to drill deeper) this is when people are incentivized to join - communication & info gap → let people know what we're doing - staff capacity - cost? & who will pay? - residents v. private companies at Hilder (contrast) - County limited resources 	<h3>Opportunities?</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fed. Grants - no reference 2025 design → NAD-BANK - configure goal & footprint → USA - outreach? - further education - manage expectations - don't involve politics - grant funding - run district by county & city day-to-day - save cost, more efficient - share resources - talk w/ Graham Co. - goal: 2 waterfill stations - alleviate stress & add more productive conversations
<h3>Who to involve?</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gary (Riverview) } provide study info - Golden rule vineyard - Jackie (coordinate w/ Gary & outreach) - SSWA (outreach & partnership) - Cochise Co - City of Willcox Willcox - other partners - Katherine 	<h3>Steps - how to move forward?</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - design (setup, locations, 2026) - determine well locations - connect w/ Jackie, Gary / Riverview, other partnerships - research grants - Steve Kiesel & Jackie get in touch w/ each other & Katherine - COMM. timeframe: 3 mo. (Jackie)

Sulphur Springs Water Alliance

ACTION PLANNING WORKSHEET

2026 Priority Project

Strategy Selected: Establish a Water District

Project Lead: Jackie

Key Members & Contact Information:

Steve Kiesel	_____
Katherine	_____
Gary from Riverview Dairy	_____

BRIEF DESCRIPTION:

Ongoing work to establish a rural water district, Cochise County taking a leading role, with City supporting.

Goal Objective:
What is the overall goal of this project? (short-term)

Coordinate community outreach by late 2026. Jackie and Gary to share what the Water District is.

Milestones:
What are the key steps or events to be completed?

Jackie's first 3 months: Develop plans one-two pages on benefits (ie cheaper cost) for County Public - have two waterfill stations in place (reduce hauling)

SUPPORT / RESOURCES NEEDED:

- Design (from 2022) for part of Willcox Basin for district
- Federal grants could support

Potential Challenges / Barriers:

Next Steps:
What are the immediate actions to be taken?

- Ask Gary to find intel design & share with Alliance.
- Sulphur Springs Water Alliance can support with outreach (incl. Sunizona area) to Cochise County to take the lead on this.

ADDITIONAL NOTES / FOLLOW-UP:

Many individual wells or haulers north of Willcox. Would be a really nice to join the district later. May come from outside Willcox to haul water from city tap per month.

Jackie can focus on a larger area - some of her role.

Target Completion Date: _____

Next Meeting Date for this Group: _____

Impact

La Paz County | March 2025

- **Water Alliance of La Paz County**
 - Part-time coordinator
 - Mission/goals
 - Bylaws
 - Website/Facebook site
- **Advocacy:** HB 2758, McMullen Valley
 - Website developed (sent to RGRx)
 - AMA appetite
- **LABrary** opened in Wenden in January
- **ASU Project Cities** project
- ASU **La Paz County Community Page**

Looking Ahead

- GUAC member applications
- Pursuing 501(c)(3) status



STOP WATER TRANSFERS FROM MCMULLEN VALLEY

69 people have signed this petition. Add your name now! →

 Gary Saiter  29 Comments



If you are against the transfer of water from McMullen Valley to the suburbs of Phoenix, please sign our petition to make your voice heard. Your support will help us work towards sustainability of our aquifer versus its depletion..



Different Rural Communities


























Shared Groundwater

Challenges

A cross-community synthesis of shared needs and approaches emerging from rural groundwater workshops

DIFFERENT RURAL COMMUNITIES, SHARED GROUNDWATER CHALLENGES

A cross-community synthesis of shared needs and approaches emerging from rural groundwater workshops

Community-Identified Priority Strategy marked by 	PATAGONIA / SONOITA / ELGIN	NORTHERN AZ - LITTLE COLORADO RIVER PLATEAU	LA PAZ COUNTY	SULPHUR SPRINGS VALLEY
GOVERNANCE & POLICY REFORM				
Inform and engage decision-making through data-driven planning				
Reduce pumping through regulatory and growth management tools				
Establish new domestic water improvement district				
Support Northeastern Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement Agreement (NAIW RSA)				
Pursue the creation of an Urban National Wildlife Refuge				
CAPACITY BUILDING & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT				
Establish a new alliance/coalition				
Build capacity through new partnerships and increased collaboration between organizations				
Advance community-led groundwater education, engagement, and stewardship				
Establish thematic working groups to coordinate future groundwater resilience convenings and meetings				

Community-Identified Priority Strategy marked by

PATAGONIA /
SONOITA /
ELGIN

NORTHERN AZ-
LITTLE
COLORADO
RIVER PLATEAU

LA PAZ
COUNTY

SULPHUR
SPRINGS
VALLEY

GROUNDWATER DATA & SCIENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

Enhance basin-scale groundwater monitoring and assessment



Integrate data from state agencies, local monitoring efforts, and Tribal Nations for a more robust view of the region



Develop community science programs



WATER STORAGE, CONSERVATION, INFRASTRUCTURE

Advance groundwater recharge and supply resilience



Implement rainwater harvesting to capture and reuse runoff



SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC & AGRICULTURAL WATER USE

Promote agricultural water efficiency and demand management

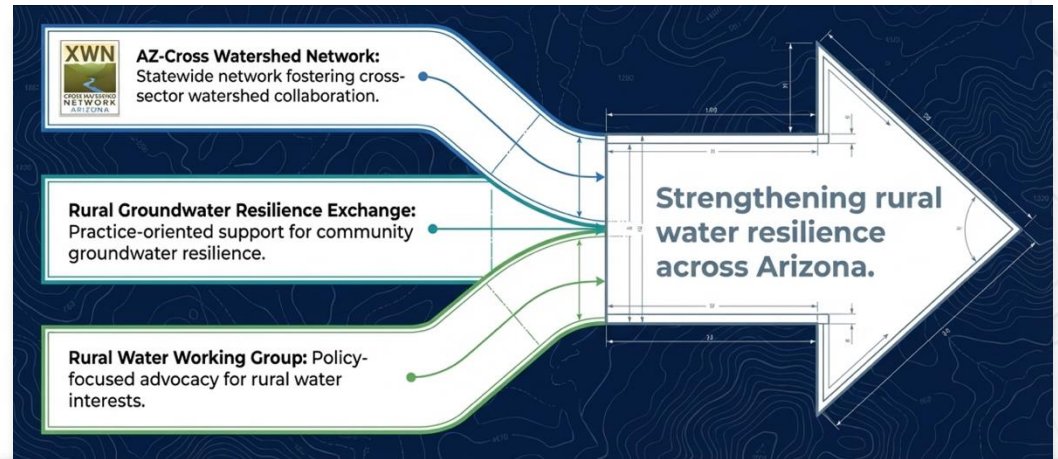
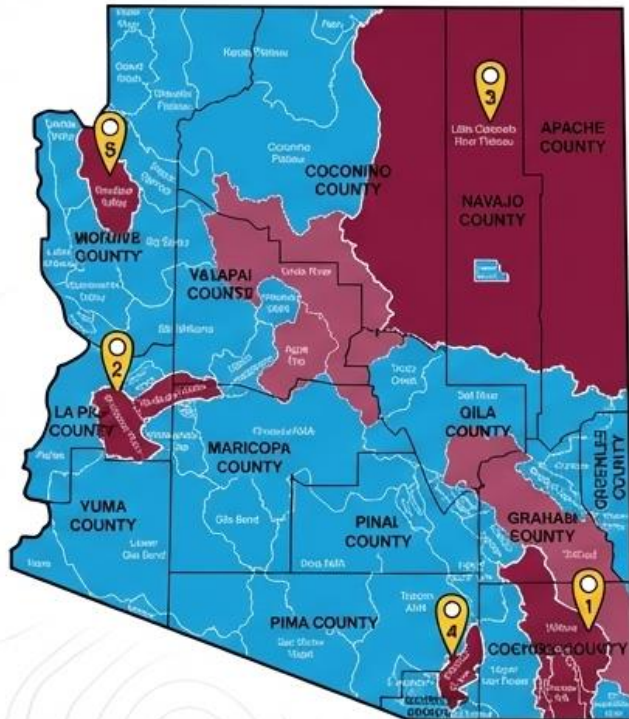


Shift towards a nature-based restorative economic model



Rural Groundwater Resilience Exchange (RGRx)

A neutral, non-advocacy, peer-to-peer learning forum for sharing strategies, addressing common challenges, and advancing locally driven groundwater initiatives through shared learning and cross-community coordination. Engaging 30 participants across 10 groundwater basins – including elected officials and state agencies.



“ Alone, I am not an expert in all things water, but collectively, we are—and that’s powerful.

– Katherine Hamberger, Sulphur Springs Water Alliance

Key Takeaways

Engagement & Inclusion

Bring diverse perspectives together for peer-to-peer exchange.

Understanding & Alignment

Ground local decisions in trusted, neutrally provided data.

Action & Impact

Turn dialogue into strategy, leading to tangible project implementation and capacity building.

Workshops are not the outcome. They're the catalyst for sustained, community-driven action.

The Turning Point in Rural Arizona



Five years ago when we would talk about water and the need to do something before it was too late, it was like talking into an empty bucket. In the last couple of years and even more so today, that is no longer the case. People are now much more aware that there is a problem and that something needs to be done. That's quite a turn around and the credit can be claimed by the news, advocates and ASU's efforts."

– Gary Saiter

Chairman of the Board, Water Alliance of La Paz County

Thank you!

Susan Craig

Director, Impact Water AZ

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Follow us on LinkedIn:

[@impact-water-arizona](#)



Scan here

to explore the resources on
the Rural Groundwater
Resilience Toolkit

Thank you!



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