



# Public Policy Review

Some of the many water policy students Dr. Megdal has taught each spring and the various sites they have visited as part of her class.

## Learning About Water Policy

by Sharon B. Megdal

I write this column shortly before the Spring semester starts. Once again, I am going to be teaching a graduate-level water policy course. With the exception of 2012, when I was on sabbatical, I have taught Arizona Water Policy every year since 2005. This year the course has a new name – Water Policy in Arizona and Semi-arid Regions. I changed the title to reflect the course’s geographic and topical coverage, which includes Arizona, the Colorado River Basin, California, the border with Mexico, and areas in the Middle East.

As I get ready for the upcoming semester, I face something of a struggle in determining how to spend our precious class time. How many guest speakers do I invite? What readings and class activities do I assign? What is the most effective way to expose the students to the complexities and nuances of water policy? While it may seem like a course in water policy is “easier” than one on hydrologic modeling, for example, I suggest that learning about water policy is also quite challenging. So much depends on context, which changes continually and in unexpected ways.

In actuality, one cannot teach water policy. The best one can do is expose students to the different shapes and forms of water policy. I offer some lectures at the beginning of the semester and at various points during the semester. The all-important guest speakers bring their varied experiences and expertise to the classroom. I myself learn a lot from the presentations and discussions on a variety of topics, such as water management in California, Tribal water rights and management, water utilization and management by the agricultural sector, and water quality, just to name a few that have been covered by expert guest speakers in recent years.

What is gratifying to me – and I think for the speakers as well – is the interaction between the students and the guest experts. In the somewhat intimate setting of the WRRC’s Sol Resnick Conference Room, where all students sit at the oblong conference table, students have a unique opportunity to pose questions and engage in discussions with a sampling of our region’s foremost experts.

An important and fun course activity is the all-day field trip. Seeing projects first-hand is something I value. And I learn something new each and every time I am out in the field. By visiting Tucson Water’s recharge facilities for Colorado River water delivered through the Central Arizona Project (CAP) and Sweetwater Wetlands and recharge basins, students see how policies related to groundwater use, water banking, and reclaimed water use are implemented. Visiting CAP’s Twin Peaks Pumping plant enables them to see the CAP canal, which is so important to water policy in Central Arizona, and how the project goes about pumping water uphill! And they hear about agricultural activities through a lunch meeting with BKW Farms. The field trip provides another opportunity for students to interact with experts, who are generous with their time and patient in answering questions.

Writing a policy-oriented paper, a key requirement for the course, requires students to explore a policy topic in greater depth than can occur through a class lecture and associated readings. I request that they acquire information not only from written documents, be they scholarly publications or agency and other reports, but also through personal interviews with water experts. Last year I asked each to prepare a short briefing memo on their paper topic, as if they were writing for a decision-making body. This was in addition to their end-of-semester paper presentations, which I recently shortened from 20 minutes to 10 minutes, followed by 10 minutes of questions from their classmates and me. Both exercises are designed to encourage students to convey their

material succinctly, a valued skill in real-world formulation and evaluation of water policy.

I encourage students to attend the WRRC's annual conference, which this year is entitled "**The Business of Water**". They are also encouraged to attend seminars held on campus, including those we schedule as part of the WRRC's Brown Bag seminar series. Most WRRC Brown Bag seminars are broadcast live via the web, with recordings of them posted on our web site soon after the seminar. Our goal is to schedule seminars that are of broad interest so that experts can share their water policy and management experiences with UA students, faculty, and staff, along with many others. Seminar attendance on an annual basis is roughly evenly split between attendees from campus and non-campus communities. Information about our exciting schedule of Spring 2018 Brown Bag seminars can be found at <https://wrrc.arizona.edu/brown-bag-seminars>. Information about our seminars and other activities can be obtained through subscribing to our Weekly Wave email news digest. To subscribe, please go to <https://wrrc.arizona.edu/subscribe>.

A few years ago, I decided that a good way of exposing my students to the variety of policy topics was by asking them to read the full set of my public policy columns. Counting from my first column, written after joining the Water Resources Research Center in February 2002, this is my 73rd column. All of them can be found at <https://wrrc.arizona.edu/columns>. We spend some time at our second class meeting discussing them.

Having listed the major ways in which I endeavor to expose students to what I sometimes describe as the "messy" world of water policy and water policymaking, I think it is only fair for me to share that I believe that beyond classwork, gaining an understanding of water policy is often best accomplished through on-the-job training. That's how I learned about water policy and management in Arizona. My water training began when I was a member of the Arizona Corporate Commission in the mid-1980s. It continued as I worked as a consultant

and served as a board member for the Southern Arizona Water Resources Association. About 30 years ago, I was one of the people who felt her eyes glaze over when the intricacy of terminal storage for the Tucson Active Management Area or Harquahala Valley groundwater was discussed. My on-the-job training accelerated considerably when, in the early 1990s, I became Executive Director of the short-lived Santa Cruz Valley Water District. And it has continued through my Extension and research activities at the Water Resources Research Center and through my public service as a member of the Central Arizona Water Conservation District board of directors.

I can speak from experience when I say that delving into water issues is no easy undertaking. Learning will take perseverance and time. There are no simple answers to questions about water. Details and context matter. Try as I might to be succinct and avoid embellishing lectures and responses to questions with unnecessary information, I am now one of the people who is likely guilty of causing eyes to glaze over.

So, what advice do I offer to students and others wishing to become more knowledgeable about and involved in water policy making? Spend time exploring and learning. Subscribe to and read feeds of stories and articles about water. Attend seminars and webinars. If a student, take advantage of internship opportunities. In fact, the University of Arizona offers students many opportunities to interact with the real-world of water policy. In particular, the Master's program in Water, Society, and Policy requires that students complete a six-unit internship or project (equivalent to 270 hours). Students I have advised in this program have completed policy-oriented internships with public and private entities. Whether a student or already a professional, take advantage of opportunities to attend conferences. Most importantly, ask questions! And please encourage your friends and colleagues to become informed about water policy. Formulation as well as implementation of good water policy depends on expert professionals and, very importantly, an informed public. 🌍



**Sharon B. Megdal, Ph.D.**

*Director, Water Resources Research Center  
The University of Arizona*

All of Dr. Megdal's Public Policy Columns are available here:

<https://wrrc.arizona.edu/columns>