

US Water Alliance  
**Three-Year Strategic Framework**  
**2020 to 2023**





**We face complex, unprecedented threats to a safe and secure water future for all.**



**It's time to rise to the challenge—  
TOGETHER.**

# About this Strategic Framework

Developed in collaboration with the US Water Alliance's staff, Board of Directors, One Water Council, key allies, and incredible partners, this Three-Year Strategic Framework is our North Star. It outlines the fundamentals that will guide us for the next three years. We are grateful to all who contributed ideas, debated concepts, and counseled us in the creation of our Three-Year Strategic Framework. The issues we tackle—be it infrastructure investment, smart utility management, agriculture-municipal partnerships, water equity, climate resilience, or water's nexus with arts and culture—will be in service of achieving the goals, objectives, and outcomes in this framework.

## Water is the Defining Issue of Our Time

Water is the defining issue of our time. The costs of providing reliable, safe water services are rising in many communities. The pipes, pumps, plants, and infrastructure we rely on are aging. The planet's climate and habitats are changing rapidly—putting people, ecosystems, and economies at risk. These complex and multi-faceted dynamics compromise America's water future—from safe water and working toilets in the home, to food security, to being able to afford monthly bills. The decisions we make about water today will have profound implications for generations to come.

How water is currently organized, regulated, managed, and integrated into communities is a barrier to overcoming these challenges. Water is cyclical—the same water comes out of a tap, flows down a stream, careens through a storm drain, or is treated at a plant. Yet, as water passes through a typical American community, it passes through the jurisdiction of many disparate entities. These include drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater utilities, regional authorities, planning districts, and more. In the

United States, water management is spread across hundreds of thousands of organizations and agencies. This makes scaling innovation and efficiently stewarding public resources difficult. Meanwhile, the public's trust in water systems is wavering in the face of visible water crises that splash across headline news. Business as usual must change.

The One Water approach has emerged as a framework for transforming water management in America. It is gaining significant traction with utilities, private companies, community organizations, environmental groups, research institutions, and more. Utilities are reimagining their approach to water management with an eye towards multiple benefits, including economic growth, environmental sustainability, and equitable outcomes. Meanwhile, organizations who historically have not worked on water recognize how essential it is to community well-being and are building partnerships with water utilities and traditional environmental interests. From our farmers and ranchers, to philanthropies, to the companies and workers who have dedicated their careers to the water sector—people are reimagining their roles in stewarding life's most essential resource and recognizing that acting alone can only get them so far.

A new wave of One Water innovation and progress is happening in different ways, and in diverse community contexts. **Under the US Water Alliance banner, passionate people from multiple disciplines are finding common ground and driving a transformation in how the nation views, values, and manages our water resources.**

**At the US Water Alliance, we find common ground solutions to our nation's pressing water challenges.**



## Who We Are

The US Water Alliance aligns diverse stakeholders—utilities, public agencies, community organizations, environmental groups, agricultural interests, labor, researchers, artists and culture bearers, and many others—to find common ground solutions to our nation’s most pressing water challenges.

## OUR VISION

**A sustainable water future for all.**

## OUR MISSION

**To drive One Water breakthroughs that positively transform our environment, economy, and society.**

## OUR VALUES

- Collaboration
- Innovation
- Tenacity
- Equity
- Integrity
- Accountability
- Humility



**Our approach is inclusive—  
we bring all stakeholders together to  
co-create and leverage solutions.**

## Our Approach

### We focus on strategic drivers to advance a sustainable water future for all.

The US Water Alliance believes the nation needs a robust, cohesive, highly visible movement to build upon the One Water innovation and progress in the water sector. We need to move from promising, isolated examples of One Water to it being the operating paradigm in every urban, suburban, and rural community.

The US Water Alliance unites diverse interests to find common ground on complex problems no one sector can solve alone. Comfortably working with like-minded people won't secure the nation's water future. Progress depends on the knowledge, insights, and support of diverse parties. The US Water Alliance mobilizes a community of practice—people and organizations from all walks of life—to generate breakthroughs for One Water.

Given our focus on catalyzing systemic change, we are cognizant of where our role ends. We actively partner and leverage the talents of our colleagues—inside and outside the water sector—to forge progress.

## Levers for Change

### Success means transforming the water landscape in this country. It requires:

#### Integration and alignment

One Water requires integrating wastewater, drinking water, and stormwater management. But, it's more than that. Managing water sustainably, while meeting human, natural, and economic needs, means pushing the boundaries of integration and aligning with those in agriculture, community organizations, philanthropy, the private sector, policy makers, unions, and more. When we align, we can reverse problematic narratives and enact greater change together.

**1.7 million people are directly involved in designing, constructing, operating, and governing US water infrastructure.**

#### The will to invest

Water is essential, but many take it for granted. As the nation's systems of pipes, pumps, and plants reach the end of their intended lifespan, decision-makers need public support to invest in water infrastructure—including a focus on watershed services, pollution prevention, green infrastructure, and a skilled workforce trained to build and maintain it. Most often, innovative financing options and right-sized solutions are a product of local and regional ingenuity where decision-makers are balancing investments with programs to keep water affordable. Water stakeholders need to strategically communicate the value of water and design financing solutions and projects to keep people healthy, the economy strong, and our environment clean.

**85 percent of Americans support increasing federal investment to rebuild our water infrastructure.**

## Water equity

Water is essential to prosperity and progress. The sad reality is that water challenges disproportionately affect the most vulnerable in America. At the same time, smart and equitable water management can foster opportunity for all people and communities. A range of stakeholders are pioneering equitable approaches to water management. Public and private utilities are implementing low-income assistance programs and workforce development strategies, as well as utilizing capital projects to foster neighborhood revitalization. Community-based organizations are building local capacity to engage in water planning and policy making, nurturing a new generation of leaders. Environmental organizations are incorporating community considerations into their ecological work. A growing number of philanthropic organizations are bringing equitable water strategies into their investment portfolios. Sustaining and scaling these efforts are essential to a One Water future.

### What is water equity?

Equity refers to just and fair inclusion—a condition in which everyone has an opportunity to participate and prosper. Water equity occurs when all communities have access to safe, clean, affordable drinking water and wastewater services; are resilient in the face of floods, drought, and other climate risks; have a role in decision-making processes related to water management in their communities; and share in the economic, social, and environmental benefits of water systems.

**The lowest 20 percent of earners pay from 4 to 19 percent of their monthly household income on water and sanitation services.**

## A community-serving utility ethos

Many advancing One Water are shifting mindsets and methods to better serve and be accountable to the public. Yet, many utility workers continue to operate in a culture of silent service—out of sight, and out of mind to their customers. The utility of the future is much more than a service provider. Utilities that embrace a community-service ethos—where decisions are made transparently and in service of residents—are better positioned to succeed. Building this new ethos requires cultivating change leadership, unlocking new financial and operational tools, and engaging with communities differently.

**Two of the greatest public health achievements of the 20th century can be attributed to advancements in the water sector—the control of infectious disease due to the modern sanitation system and fluoridation of the drinking water supply.**

## Urgency in the face of climate change

The water cycle is changing and becoming less predictable. Most climate change impacts will be experienced through water—extreme storms, persistent flooding, record drought, sea level rise, impacts on water quality, saltwater intrusion. Many of the communities that are being hit first and worst lack the resources and political capital to prepare or recover. As a new era in the planet's history dawns, we need to leverage water investments and policy to protect communities and ecosystems. Whether it's building resilient green and grey infrastructure or integrating climate modeling into capital planning, water can be a force for climate resilience.

**Oceans could rise by up to 6.5 feet by the end of the century.**

## A new era of environmental policy

The laws and division of legal authority governing water in the United States predate modern challenges like climate change, modern food production systems, and growing income disparity. Many of our environmental statutes have not been updated in decades. Moving towards 21st century water policy means forging progress where possible with forward-thinking local, state, and federal policy makers. New thinking on laws, regulation, and enforcement at a regional, watershed level can unlock One Water's potential for positive transformation. The water policy challenge of the next 50 years is finding ways to reinforce the hard-fought wins in landmark environmental policy while allowing the flexibility to innovate at a watershed scale and adapt to change and lessons learned.

**The Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act are nearly 50 years old.**



# Defining One Water

One Water is both a way of thinking and a way of doing. The One Water approach envisions managing all water in an integrated, inclusive, and sustainable manner to secure a bright, prosperous future for our children, our communities, and our country. One Water is a transformative approach to how we view, value, and manage water—from local communities to states, regions, and the national scale.

## Hallmarks of One Water

The hallmarks of a One Water approach are:

- The mindset that all water has value
- A focus on achieving multiple benefits
- Approaching decisions with a systems mindset
- Utilizing watershed-scale thinking and action
- Intervening with right-sized solutions
- Relying on partnerships and inclusion

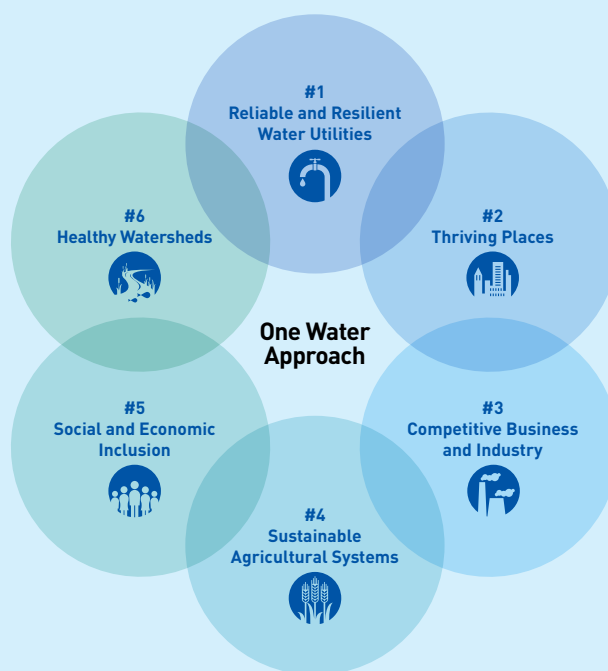
The US Water Alliance network is advancing One Water through six major arenas for action:

- **Reliable and Resilient Water Utilities.** Approaches that create efficiencies in water service delivery. This may include water supply diversification, resource recovery, retrofitting grey infrastructure and balancing it with green infrastructure, forging new business models, and more.
- **Thriving Places.** Approaches that manage water resources to create more vibrant neighborhoods, support climate-resilient development, and reduce impacts to business and industry from unexpected shutdowns due to water emergencies. This may involve coordinating across city departments for “dig once” approaches, leveraging new technologies to manage climate impacts, and water planning across jurisdictions.
- **Competitive Business and Industry.** Approaches that integrate water stewardship into business operations such as conserving water, reusing water, or managing stormwater at industrial facilities.
- **Sustainable Agriculture Systems.** Approaches that balance the growing demand for food, increasing farmer profitability, and protecting the environment

and public health. Some examples include on-farm strategies to conserve water and manage nutrients and watershed modeling for soil health.

- **Social and Economic Inclusion.** Approaches that ensure all people regardless of income, race, or geographical location, have access to clean, safe, and affordable water and wastewater services. This involves building a safety net, leveraging water investment for community benefits, fostering community resilience, and enhancing community capacity on water issues.
- **Healthy Watersheds.** Approaches that maximize natural infrastructure to protect forests and other ecosystems, manage groundwater for the future, and utilize citizen science for ecosystem monitoring and restoration.

Taking action in each of these arenas involves complex and interwoven solutions with many partners across jurisdictions. It requires breaking down barriers not only within the water industry, but also among all the other stakeholders who influence, and are influenced by, the management of water resources. Community and business leaders, industries, farmers, environmental advocates, conservationists, policymakers, academics, and many others, all play important roles in the quest to secure a sustainable water future for all.



# Our goals: Educate, Accelerate, and Celebrate.



# Goals and Objectives

## Goal #1:

### EDUCATE

Build a diverse base of One Water champions through mutual discovery, education, and engagement with all who have a stake in our water future.

## Objectives

- **Build public and political will** for investment in water infrastructure and sustainable water resource management through best-in-class communications campaigns and initiatives.
- **Deepen understanding of One Water, the Value of Water, and related issues** among the media, public officials, and the public.
- **Advance productive narratives through field-defining research** that sets the One Water agenda and lays the foundation for on the ground innovation to occur.

## Goal #2:

### ACCELERATE

Accelerate the adoption of One Water to advance a better quality of life for all.

## Objectives

- **Increase the capacity for cross-sector collaboration** by building a visible, highly connected network of changemakers—in and beyond the traditional water sector—through safe and productive platforms to align perspectives and generate solutions.
- **Equip our network of members and partners** with the skills and capacities they need to make the system of water management more integrated, equitable, and sustainable.
- **Spark innovation** in the water sector through the development and spreading of forward-looking frameworks, reports, tools, policies, and best practices that support implementation of One Water.

## Goal #3:

### CELEBRATE

Celebrate what works to spread and drive innovation in water.

## Objectives

- **Evaluate and spotlight game-changing projects, policies, and programs** through special recognition programs, such as prizes and challenges, to encourage innovation to spread throughout the water sector.
- **Feature innovators** at high impact convenings to inspire replication and reward results and ingenuity.
- **Utilize leading communications** modalities that celebrate water innovation and thought leadership.



**With intentionality, One Water can become the new normal in the United States.**

# Three-Year Outcomes

Our work, and that of our members and partners, is building a critical mass of people, places, and practices advancing One Water across America.

## PEOPLE.

**A national network of One Water changemakers will exist in America.**

- **10,000 leaders** across America will be part of the US Water Alliance network.
- **1,000 members and partners** will self-identify with One Water and be actively engaged with the US Water Alliance to advance One Water policies across the country.

## PLACE.

**Cities, regions, and watersheds across America will be institutionalizing One Water.**

- **50 places** will be institutionalizing One Water practices and policies. These places will reflect the diversity of this country—urban, suburban, and rural.

## PRACTICE.

**One Water will be maturing and shifting the water landscape towards integration, sustainability, and equity.**

- **15 new reports, policy guidance, and other tools** will be developed and deployed to deepen implementation of One Water policy and programs.
- **A strong field framework** will be developed to systematically assess the advancement of the One Water movement in the United States.

**We can accomplish so much  
TOGETHER.**



## Acting for Change

This document is much more than a strategic framework—it's a call to action. Action over the next three years will build the partnerships and networks necessary to drive critical investments in our water infrastructure. Action over the next three years will advance a community-serving ethos within the water sector that will ensure equitable outcomes as our nation's greatest water challenges are addressed. Action over the next three years will further a water policy framework that addresses the most pressing issues of our time, including climate change.

This framework is also an open invitation. One Water can transform water management in America if it's a journey we take together. **Join us on the path to a sustainable water future for all. Now and for future generations.**

## One Water, One Future.

One Water, One Future.

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