

# One Water at Its Core

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One Water is best understood by tracing its story—a story that began in the early twenty-first century when forward-thinking water professionals sought new solutions to increasingly complex water challenges. These professionals recognized that modern communities were vastly different from the ones the nation's water systems were originally built upon over 100 years ago. Population centers had swelled and shifted, economic changes were putting new strains on water systems, and weather pattern shifts were increasingly burdening aging and ill-equipped water systems across the country struggling with intensifying floods, droughts, wildfires, and other extreme weather.

**The story we trace reveals that One Water is, at inception, a mindset.** The founding leaders thought differently, engaged with a broader range of people and perspectives, and looked beyond the existing regulatory, financial, and governance structures that forced water into individual drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater silos. These leaders embraced opportunities to connect water management needs for better outcomes, seeing water not just as a resource to manage for regulatory compliance but rather as a means to address broader community needs.

Today, we call this way of thinking a One Water mindset and the solutions it produces One Water approaches. The One Water mindset brings new approaches to life every year. These approaches consistently deliver greater social, environmental, and economic benefits than traditional approaches—and often at lower costs. Further, these approaches have common characteristics and continue to develop and evolve as more people apply them to new challenges and contexts.

**One Water is growing.** The founding leaders from across the water sector created a dedicated home for One Water by starting the US Water Alliance in 2008. Today, thousands of professionals from a broad array of backgrounds and organizations are working to develop and implement One Water approaches in communities across the country.

So, where is One Water leading us?

**One Water's driving vision is a sustainable water future for all.** In response to the complex challenges that spurred its creation, One Water calls for holistic thinking—attending to the interconnected needs of people and the planet over time. While One Water remains grounded in core goals like universal access to safe and affordable water, its broader vision is not a fixed endpoint but rather a living pursuit shaped by changing conditions and needs.

Our ever-evolving water landscape requires the sector to be adaptable. Whether as a mindset, resulting approaches, or driving vision, One Water offers the strongest framework for navigating a rapidly shifting social, economic, and environmental landscape. ***It's essential to understand how to rise to this imperative and make One Water the prevailing way we view, value, and manage water nationwide.***

Table 1:  
Summary of the elements of a One Water Mindset  
including examples of approaches and outcomes.

A One Water Mindset						
Values water at every stage and in every form	Focuses on achieving multiple benefits	Approaches decisions with a systems mindset	Uses watershed-scale thinking and action	Centers inclusion and partnerships	Accounts for climate action urgency and opportunities	
Examples of One Water Approaches						
Onsite water treatment, reuse, and recharge to diversify and stretch water supplies						
Green infrastructure to manage stormwater while enhancing community and health benefits						
Regional economic and environmental planning coordinated with capital planning across various agencies and departments						
Cross-sector partnerships, such as those between agricultural producers and municipalities to protect water sources and offset risks to producers						
Sustainability and innovation through solutions like recovering resources from wastewater						
Community engagement across interests (including those most impacted) throughout planning and implementation						
Community capacity building on water data, education, and solution development						
Creative financing tools such as incentives, credit trading, and impact bonds to attract partners and capital or incentivize performance						
Outcomes						
Thriving communities	Reliable and resilient water management	Sustainable and competitive industries and businesses	Sustainable agricultural systems	Social, economic, and environmental justice	Healthy watersheds	A livable planet

One Water, One Future.

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