



Speaker Biographies

Keynote Address: Strengthening California's Water Resilience

Karla Nemeth

As director of California's Department of Water Resources, Karla Nemeth oversees nearly 4,000 employees who manage and protect the state's water resources and support the reliability of the state's electrical grid. She is focused on preparing the department and the state for more extreme weather under climate change – investing in aging and nature-based infrastructure, improving groundwater management, stabilizing Colorado River supplies and strengthening local water resilience.

Nemeth became director in January 2018 as an appointee of Gov. Jerry Brown. Gov. Gavin Newsom reappointed her to the post in June 2019. In March 2024, Gov. Newsom tasked her as advisor on the administration's water priorities and to lead implementation of key water projects in his Water Supply Strategy: Adapting to a Hotter, Drier Future.

Prior to joining DWR, Nemeth served as Gov. Brown's deputy natural resources secretary and senior advisor for water policy and as the state's Bay Delta Conservation Plan project manager. Prior to her work in natural resources management, Nemeth lived, worked and traveled extensively in eastern Europe promoting the development of democratic institutions. In 2010, she traveled to the Philippines as an election monitor. Nemeth earned a bachelor's degree in political science and Latin American studies from UC San Diego and a master's degree in public administration from the University of Washington. She grew up in San Diego where she learned to love baseball, the Pacific Ocean and the eastern Sierra.

Embracing Creative Options for Managing Water

John Bednarski

John Bednarski is interim assistant general manager of Water Resources and Technical Services for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. He oversees engineering services, water resources management, Bay-Delta initiatives and other key areas. Bednarski joined Metropolitan as an associate engineer in 1991 after working at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power for 10 years. Most recently, he led Metropolitan's support for the conceptual design of the Delta Conveyance Project and managed the development of the Regional Recycled Water Program and the advanced water purification demonstration plant. A registered civil engineer in California, Bednarski earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Claremont McKenna College and a master's degree in public administration and environmental engineering from the University of Southern California.

Aaron Fukuda

As general manager of the Tulare Irrigation District, Aaron Fukuda promotes groundwater sustainability and conjunctive use operations by the agency and its growers. He has worked with cities and growers to dramatically increase groundwater recharge in the region. He helped develop a sustainability plan for the Mid-Kaweah Groundwater Sustainability Agency and currently serves as its interim general manager. Fukuda joined Tulare Irrigation District in 2006 as the district engineer and was appointed general manager in 2018. He previously worked with Summers Engineering Inc. specializing in agricultural hydraulic design. Fukuda earned a Bachelor of Science cum laude in civil engineering from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and a master's degree in public administration from Fresno State.

David Rabbitt

David Rabbitt chairs the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, serving his fourth term representing the Second District. He was first elected to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors in November 2010 after serving four years on the Petaluma City Council. Rabbitt serves on several local, regional and state boards, including the Association of Bay Area Governments, the Golden Gate Bridge District, Metropolitan Transportation Commission, North Bay Water Reuse Authority and Sonoma County's Regional Climate Protection Authority. Rabbitt is an architect who earned his architectural degree at the University of Oregon. He lives in Petaluma with his wife Jane, a nurse at UC San Francisco, and has three adult children.

Julie Rentner

Julie Rentner is president of River Partners, where she has secured over \$100 million in government grants to buy conservation properties and restore riparian and floodplain habitat along major California rivers. Rentner has also led stakeholder processes supporting the integration of flood control and ecosystem enhancement at the regional level, resulting in several multi-benefit projects and the Mid San Joaquin River Regional Flood Management Plan. She joined River Partners in 2008 as a restoration ecologist in the San Joaquin Valley. She is also president Reclamation District 2092. Rentner earned a Bachelor of Science in forestry at the UC Berkeley and a Master of Science from the University of Hawaii, Manoa. She completed the California Agricultural Leadership Program in 2015.

Building Better & More Accessible Data

Heather Bischel

Heather Bischel researches safe water reuse and waste resource recovery as an associate professor of civil and environmental engineering at UC Davis. Her 20 years of research experience includes the development of new strategies to monitor viruses in wastewater, evaluating wastewater treatment efficiency, and understanding fate and transport of poly- and perfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). From 2020 to 2022, Bischel led a wastewater-based disease surveillance initiative for Healthy Davis Together, a public health collaboration between the city of Davis and UC Davis to combat COVID-19. Bischel now co-leads Healthy Central Valley Together, a partnership with public health and wastewater officials in eight cities and three counties that supports public health action and equity through wastewater-based epidemiology (WBE) in rural, underserved and agricultural communities. She collaborates with researchers and practitioners in public health, biostatistics, engineering and microbiology to advance WBE and improve access to public health data derived from wastewater.

Erik Ekdaahl

Erik Ekdaahl is the deputy director for the State Water Board's Division of Water Rights. The division administers California's water rights system with the goal of protecting existing rights, water quality and the environment. Ekdaahl joined the water board in 2008, focusing on nitrate and groundwater contamination. He has worked in the board's divisions of financial assistance and water quality and as director of the Office of Research, Planning and Performance. Ekdaahl is a licensed engineering geologist, with a Ph.D. in geology from the University of Michigan.

Robyn Grimm

Robyn Grimm is chief executive officer and president of California Water Data Consortium. Her career focuses on bringing diverse perspectives and institutions together to fill critical research, decision-support and other information gaps to enable more sustainable land and water management in the West. Grimm previously served as senior director of Applied Research and Innovation for Climate Resilient Water Systems at Environmental Defense Fund (EDF). Before that, was a director within EDF's water team, where she helped lead the OpenET consortium, working with NASA, the Desert Research Institute, Google Earth Engine a dozen other organizations in developing an online open platform for estimating consumptive water use. Earlier, she worked as a water resources policy analyst for the consulting firm CH2M Hill, advising California's Department of Water Resources on flood and water planning. Grimm holds a Ph.D. in hydrologic sciences from the UC Davis and has contributed to many California flood control and water management studies.

Steven Springhorn

Steven Springhorn is a supervising engineering geologist at the California Department of Water Resources' groundwater management office, where he manages the technical assistance section. Springhorn has focused on technical and policy activities related to California's groundwater monitoring, management and data publication since joining the agency in 2005.

Beneath the Flow: The Confluence of Art, Research & Water

Hughen/Starkweather

Hughen/Starkweather is a collaboration of visual artists Jennifer Starkweather and Amanda Hughen. Their research-based artwork investigates engineered infrastructures interwoven with natural ecosystems in the landscape, and the impacts of climate extremes on these systems. Their extensive research process involves interviews with community members and specialists about unintended consequences and possible solutions. The resulting abstract artworks reflect the ambiguities and complexities of the climate crisis. Their artwork references failing dams, shrinking reservoirs, drill bits, gold, drought, flood, fire, ancient aquifers, wetlands, and beaver habitats, among other things. Their work has been shown internationally. Past residencies include Recology, Yaddo, Skowhegan and Headlands Center for the Arts. Starkweather received a Master of Fine Arts from Tyler School of Art and Architecture at Temple University in Philadelphia. Hughen earned a Master of Fine Arts at UC Berkeley.

Fostering Inclusive Approaches to Water Decisions

Eva Dominguez

Eva Dominguez is the Assistant Director of the Community Development Department at Self-Help Enterprises, a nationally recognized housing and community development nonprofit organization. Dominguez works with disadvantaged communities across the San Joaquin Valley to address water and wastewater infrastructure needs and has supported community residents and leaders to better engage in regional and state water management and planning programs. As a former teacher, she enjoys providing training and capacity development opportunities to her staff and community partners. When not at work, Dominguez enjoys spending time with her three dogs: Luna, Dante, and Lola.

Chelsea Haines

Chelsea Haines joined the Association of California Agencies (ACWA) in 2017 and currently serves as the Regulatory Relations Manager. She oversees a team that engages with the state on its development and implementation of water policies on behalf of ACWA's 470 public water agency members. Prior to ACWA, Haines served as a legislative analyst at the State Water Resources Control Board from 2012 to 2017. She holds a master's degree in international environmental policy from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey and a bachelor's degree from Sonoma State University in environmental studies and planning. In her free time, Haines teaches yoga at Sacramento State University and at several Sacramento parks through Yoga Moves Us.

Victoria Johnson

Victoria Johnson is a global equity director at HDR Inc., providing management consulting in large infrastructure programs across sectors, including water, energy and transportation. She is a published author on best practices in people-centered infrastructure and leads a diverse portfolio of work throughout the U.S. and abroad, including Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, the Middle East and South America. Johnson serves in leadership roles in several national professional societies, including the National Skills Coalition Infrastructure Recovery Panel where she is advising the Biden-Harris administration and Congress on legislation, including the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act. Johnson is an alumnus of Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. She is based in Atlanta and is a native of Orange County, California.

Adriana Renteria

Adriana Renteria is director of the Office of Public Engagement, Equity and Tribal Affairs at the California State Water Resources Control Board. She works to ensure the agency's decision-making processes involve the public and incorporate perspectives from underserved communities and California Native American Tribes. Renteria is also the water board's tribal liaison, facilitating consultations with the Tribes for the agency, including its nine regional boards. Previously, she was regional water manager at the Community Water Center and coordinator for the People of Color Sustainability Collective at the UC Santa Cruz American Indian Resource Center. These organizations have years of experience supporting community involvement and representation in water governance, including in the implementation of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. Renteria holds a bachelor's degree in environmental studies and economics from UC Santa Cruz.

Water Summit Moderators

Jenn Bowles

Jenn was named executive director of the Water Education Foundation in March 2014. A veteran journalist, Jenn worked as a reporter and editor at *The Associated Press* in the Los Angeles bureau for 10 years. She later became the environmental reporter at *The Press-Enterprise*, garnering awards for her coverage of water issues in California during a nine-year stint. In December 2016, she led an international journalism workshop on water issues for UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in Iran. Jenn has a bachelor's degree in journalism and history from the University of Southern California and completed a year-long Scripps Fellowship in Environmental Journalism at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Nick Gray

Nick Gray is programs director for the Water Education Foundation. He manages many of the Foundation's workshops, conferences and tours of key water regions across California and the West, bringing attendees up close to dams and other water infrastructure, wildlife areas, farms and other sites involved in water. Before joining the Foundation in 2018, Nick spent 15 years as a science teacher and education director of a science museum. He has also been involved with regional science communication organizations, including Capital Science Communicators. Nick has a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Dayton.

Jennifer Persike

Jennifer Persike is president and founder of Jennifer Persike & Company, a consulting firm focused on innovative management and strategic communications. Previously, she served as executive director of Leadership California, a network of more than 1,600 accomplished women, dedicated to advancing the leadership role of women in business, communities and public policy. Persike worked much of her career at the Association of California Water Agencies where she served several roles, including Deputy Executive Director of External Affairs. She previously worked for Sacramento Municipal Utility District and Sun-Diamond Growers of California, a statewide agricultural cooperative. She earned a bachelor's degree in journalism and public relations from California State University, Chico. Persike is a bestselling author of *The Joy of Work*, released in July 2023. She has been a Water Education Foundation board member since 2015.