

# Communicating the Benefits of Watershed Investment

**C**ommunicating the benefits of watershed investment programs is a special challenge for utilities, advocates, funders and scientists. As programs take root across the West, and this visionary and practical approach spreads, it's critical to take a strategic approach to reaching key audiences who can support the work going forward.

Through our Carpe Diem West Healthy Headwaters work, we've seen that many of the successful programs in place today carefully consider their goals, audiences and messaging before they launch. We recommend you do the same!

In this brief primer, we walk you through the basics of a strategic communications approach. When you're ready to begin, remember that you're not alone – our Watershed Investment Network is here to support you on your path to investing in the future of your watershed.

“People don't process facts to form opinions. They process stories that trigger existing values. As we have told clients for years, people decide with their hearts, not their heads. By communicating success stories about actions that make us more resilient to climate change, you are connecting with people where it counts.”  
-Scott Miller, Resource Media





## Ask Yourself...

So where to begin? Using this simple pyramid as a guide, we recommend asking these five key questions:



**Goal**  
**Audience**  
**Values**  
**Message**  
**Messenger**

**1 What's your goal?** Funding for a pilot program? Increasing collaboration among agencies? Or simply starting the conversation in an interested community? Getting clear on your real-world goal — what change you want to see — is the most important first step in effective communication. This can take time, and that is OK.

**2 Who has the power to affect your goal?** Once you know where you want to go, understanding who can help you get there is the next most important step. This will vary tremendously by region and by program. For example, in Eugene, OR, enticing farmers to sign up for the watershed protection program meant that program success depended a lot on this key, and small, set of decision-makers. In contrast, in Flagstaff, AZ, innovators put a bond on the ballot and needed voters to understand and support their program in order to make the financing work. To reach your goal, delve deep into the many (or few) folks who have the power to get you to it.





“Those who don’t believe in climate change don’t have to, but we are going to protect their forest too.”  
Charlie Ester, Salt River Project

**3** Once you know who you’re trying to reach, it’s time to get into the more traditional communications-focused questions around messaging and outreach tactics. Ask yourself, **what do your key audiences and decision-makers identified in step 2 really care about?** What are their core values and concerns around water security and source water protection? This will vary tremendously between farmers, policy makers, land managers and downstream utilities. Each player in these kinds of innovative partnerships has distinct “skin in the game” and your messaging must reflect those interests. Do your audiences care about autonomy, their ability to do what they want on their own land? Or are they focused on tight budgets, the threat of fire, or sediment issues? Digging deep into these core concerns will help you develop a solid and effective message in the next steps.





**4** Once you understand your key audience's values and interests, **it's time to develop a message.** Messaging is something we use in all contexts, not just with the media, but in every public or private meeting, in all materials, and in all conversations. It's the core of our communication about watershed investment programs and it's worth taking the time to get it right for each of your audiences. A message always includes three key elements:

- ▶ The problem (e.g. the possibility of a catastrophic fire that will result in overwhelming sediment loads in rivers and reservoirs)
- ▶ The underlying values that animate a solution (e.g. health and safety, the need for clean drinking water, the value of a forest for recreation)
- ▶ The solution (e.g. forest restoration – again tailored to your audience)

If your target audience is conservative landowners in a vulnerable watershed, beware of a message that sounds like a land grab by a public agency. Instead, consider messaging on land protection/restoration in terms of losses – if this landowner participates, she will be decreasing her losses and the losses of her community when fires and floods hit.

## For Example...

When developing messaging, it's critical to remember that a healthy headwaters message will differ greatly between utilities trying to reach ratepayers in Southern California versus Northern. Southern Californians have a different relationship with their water and are geographically disconnected from the area where the majority of their water comes from. For example, messages for a Southern CA audience might target water quality issues, while Northern CA messages might focus on keeping forests healthy for their services and human enjoyment alike.

# Messaging Pointers to Keep in Mind

**Storytelling** is the best way to deliver messages. People are wired for story and will be much more likely to understand your message if it's delivered as a story with a hero/heroine, a challenge, and a resolution.



Gain credibility by being **open and honest about the risks and benefits** of your approach. Talking about no-regrets strategies and multi-benefit strategies is a good way to help people feel more comfortable with these innovative approaches. Framing a program as a wise investment, just like taking out a home loan or a college fund for your children, helps the message hit home.



Use **colorful language and metaphor**. In this field we tend to rely far too much on jargon and acronyms. As you formulate your message, use plain, down-home language as much as possible, and deploy metaphor when you can. "We all need to dig our oars deep in the water to make this project work," for example, is a better way of communicating the need for determined collective action than using those words!





**5** Once you've worked through the above four steps, it's time to **get strategic and creative about messengers and outlets**, if you're doing media work. It can be tremendously helpful to broaden the stable of people speaking about your effort to include unlikely allies. It's a communications truism that the messenger is often more powerful than the message. Reaching out to a diverse group of messengers to deliver your message to key audiences can help broaden your coalition, increase your credibility, and make it easier to reach important outlets. The last step in planning is to work through which outlets, from Facebook to your local newspaper to the trade press for the water industry, will be most impactful with your key audiences. Then create and tailor content for those channels.

## Next Steps

As you embark on these five steps, let us know how it's going, and feel free to reach out to talk through the particular challenges and opportunities of your project with us. When you're ready to dive into planning, we highly recommend downloading [Resource Media's Communications Planning Workbook](#) to work through all the steps of creating an effective communications plan to support your program or proposed program.



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