

PRACTITIONERS DROUGHT CONVENING POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER: *WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?*

COMMUNITY WATER CENTER

NOVEMBER 10, 2015

I. INTRODUCTION

On August 27, 2015 the Community Water Center, in partnership with Fresno State University Office of Community and Economic Development and California Water Institute (CSU Fresno), organized a meeting, named the Practitioners Drought Convening (“the Convening”) at CSU Fresno to bring together federal, state and local agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to discuss drought impacts and solutions in the San Joaquin Valley. The Convening focused on small community drought impacts and access to drinking water, but also identified other impacts such as economic and health impacts.

The Convening was focused on helping those most involved in providing drought aid to better coordinate limited resources, share information, and identify challenges and solutions to pressing community drought impacts. The objectives of this meeting were to:

1. Convene drought responders from the state, regional, and local levels to identify challenges to providing drought assistance to disadvantaged communities and to discuss strategies for streamlining processes; and,
2. Develop better relationships and encourage future collaboration between state, regional, and local agencies and drought responders by sharing information and best practices, lessons learned and ideas for best addressing local drought needs.

The Convening was an opportunity for the drought service providers to explain their services and for the counties and NGO’s to report on how those services are being received in the communities, and to report on unmet needs.

During this time of severe drought, all entities are working hard to provide services to those in need. However, the needs are so great it is critical that service providers are as efficient and effective as possible in implementing their substantial, but limited resources. The needs of the affected communities and those providing assistance “on the ground” must be known and understood so that appropriate actions can be taken address the needs of all Californians experiencing the most devastating impacts of drought, such as complete loss of water to their home.



This paper summarizes the discussion at the convening and provide recommendations and next steps. No one can predict when California's drought will end or when the next drought will occur. Even with a forecasted El Nino this winter, the remnant impacts of multiple record drought years are likely to linger for several more years. The purpose of the convening and this paper is to review our experience this year and position ourselves to make improvements for next and future years.

II. PARTICIPANTS

In a widespread disaster like the current drought, a myriad of voices can be heard. The Community Water Center and CSU Fresno (jointly the "Conveners") decided to invite key leaders in State and Federal agencies involved in drought relief. Counties are on the front lines of local drought relief, while many NGO's and community representatives are working alongside governmental agencies to provide direct drought relief. In order to have a manageable discussion, the conveners strategically invited specifically targeted NGOs, agencies and residents to represent the many communities and organizations involved and impacted by drought relief.

The following were represented at the Convening:

California Department of Water Resources
California Office of Emergency Services
California State University, Fresno
Community Water Center
Fresno County
Kern County
Kings County
Governor's Office of Planning and Research
Madera County
Porterville Area Coordinating Council
Proteus
Rural Community Assistance Corporation
San Joaquin County
Self Help Enterprises
State Water Resources Control Board; Department of Financial Services
Tulare County
United Farm Workers
United Way
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Yolo County

III. FINDINGS

After a wide ranging round table discussion of services and needs, the Conveners identified the following five areas that generated the most discussion: Communication, Coordination, Eligibility and Funding Constraints, Leadership and Political Will, and Drought-Health links. Below are summaries of the points raised identifying the Challenges and Opportunities for each.

1. COMMUNICATION

CHALLENGES

1. Capacity. County drought-specific staffing is limited, or existing staff lacks expertise in drought response. Additionally, county departments are often unprepared for addressing immediate community needs.
2. Communication exists within counties at a local level, but thorough conversation between counties, NGOs, and different levels of government is lacking.
3. Clarity is lacking in who the key contact people are at both the local level and state offices and their roles.
4. County departments besides Offices of Emergency Services (OES) are unsure of their role in drought response and not adequately informed of County programs being administered.
5. Residents often distrust government and lack of understanding of available resources and status of programs in their counties.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. Create a hub of information with complete list of federal, state, regional, and local drought resources and key staff contact information.
2. Create positions at the state and county level to act as regional disadvantaged community (DAC) coordinators to facilitate communication between counties and other agencies.
3. Coordinate drought resources messaging and information production (including updated webpages, emails and fact sheets). This reduces duplication of work and creates consistent messaging. This could be administered and updated regularly by Cal OES. Foundations, such as The California Endowment, may also be interested in this role.
4. County OES should contact State OES for information. Other local entities should communicate directly with their county OES.
5. Provide tailored and targeted from state, regional, local level drought responders for drought impacted communities, especially state small systems, private well communities, and renters.
6. Work together to facilitate additional similar regional convenings to share information.

2. COORDINATION

CHALLENGES

1. Syncing interim solutions with long term solutions.
2. Inconsistency in programs being administered at different counties.
3. Bridging the gap between entities with money and the people who need it. The specific conduit for state funds to communities is often unclear.
4. State needs willing and able local participants to apply for and administer drought programs.
5. Project cost estimates are often required before applications can be submitted, but applicants often lack resources to determine initial estimate.
6. It has gotten increasingly more complicated and difficult to find parties willing and able to provide water for hauling to communities in need.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. Addressing immediate needs, by providing resources such as bottled water and hauled water tanks, with an eye to more permanent solutions, such as infrastructure improvements and consolidation.
2. Identify anticipated drought impacts and pre-plan for future needs.
3. Make funding available for pre-planning processes.
4. Engage in local drought task force meetings, as well as region wide convenings to help streamline and/or standardize processes for local drought response.
5. Utilize available funding resources (e.g. Proposition 1) to provide technical assistance and encourage legal organization formation for communities.
6. Work together to facilitate additional similar regional convenings to coordinate efforts.

3. ELIGIBILITY & FUNDING CONSTRAINTS

CHALLENGES

1. Funding is insufficient and highly competitive. Grant and loan caps for community projects hinder complete solutions, and targeted resources for communities without water is insufficient.
2. Funding is lacking for ongoing operation and maintenance of improved water supply systems for DACs.
3. Assistance requires local action from local governments, especially pertaining to funding requests and project implementation and management.
4. Renter assistance is highly inadequate. Water is available for renters, but installation of tanks has required approval from property owner, adding the need for negotiations and workarounds since rental housing is seen as a commercial enterprise.

5. Private well owners are ineligible for most state funding programs, and available funding is highly insufficient.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. Counties must determine how best to solve issues such as renter eligibility for their communities; Cal OES is unable to prescribe solutions. This is a topic of discussion with Governor Brown's Drought Task Force.
2. Residents and other local stakeholders must encourage county supervisors to apply for assistance and establish sustainable governance structures
3. Local and state level funding fairs and workshops exist. Entities can table and provide outreach on programs they administer.

4. LEADERSHIP & POLITICAL WILL

CHALLENGES

1. Funding is available but is not being secured by local governments and/or requested by impacted communities.
2. Limited community drought resources are being used in areas where less attention has been paid to acute drought impacts or historical water challenges.
3. Zones of benefit are not established well.
4. Grants pay for projects but not operations and maintenance, creating a debt to the county.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. Utilize media attention to stimulate political will
2. Education must start from the bottom up. Educate local leadership on drought effects and response. Empower individuals and small groups to send the message upwards.
3. Engage in local drought task forces.
4. Resources (i.e. staffing and funding) for drought response are increasing. Local leadership must be proactive in designating and funding drought response staff to specifically address this ongoing and growing issue.

5. DROUGHT-HEALTH LINK

Attention to drought impacts is often focused heavily on infrastructure and economic impacts. Impacts to individual health, particularly mental health and substance abuse, require more research and discussion. This was not discussed in great detail at the Convening because a thorough discussion would require expertise that was not in the room.

IV. ANALYSIS

All levels of government, NGOs, and community leaders should be praised for dedicated work addressing the severe impacts of this drought in the San Joaquin Valley. But with limited resources and substantial needs, improvements at all levels are necessary. A drought of this severity is without precedent, so it is understandable that implementation of relief programs will take time. However, in some communities the needs are immediate and growing.

While drought impacts are widespread throughout the San Joaquin Valley (and the whole State), there are pockets that are more severe than others, for example, Tulare County. A “one-size-fits-all” approach does not work.

The State of California has dedicated large resources in funding and staff towards addressing drinking water drought impacts. The California Office of Emergency Services, California Department of Water Resources and the State Water Resources Control Board are on the front lines with local governments in providing services.

The Federal Government, primarily through the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development agency is providing funding for well construction and service, rental assistance, and emergency water for drought impacted rural communities

County governments have expanded their services to address drought impacts, but county funding and staffing are severely limited and has been identified as a bottleneck in getting resources to impacted communities. Tulare County has County Drought Task Force (“Task Force”) and a full-time Water Resources Program Manager, which appears to be unique within the participating central valley counties. The Task Force, plays a critical role in connecting interim and long-term solutions as well as coordinating drought response and funding programs with the state. Other counties may be experiencing less severe impacts, but deliberating coordinating key persona on a routine bases and more specifically, a person to work across departments with respect to drinking water issues is crucial for drought preparedness and response. The State relies on county government to identify needs. Hiring or reassigning staff to manage drought response will prevent possible impediments to addressing local water needs.

NGOs in the San Joaquin Valley play a critical role in supplementing government response. Groups such as Self-Help Enterprises and United Way are actively providing drought services in communities by implementing state and local government funding, as well as private funds. Other NGOs such as Proteus provide assistance to residents for related drought impacts, including economic and health impacts, such as rental assistance and temporary employment.

Participants at the Convening identified several possible improvements to the delivery of drought relief services. It was clear that communication was the top concern shared by most of the participants. While the pipeline of services from the state and federal government to local needs exist, how can it be improved?

1. **Resource Listing.** One repeated comment was a lack of a single database, in the form of a document or webpage, that explains services and funding available from all levels of governments and from other resources such as NGOs, as well as contact information for staff managing drought programs. That document could be used by counties to match local needs to state and federal resources and by local communities to advocate themselves for assistance. The document would need to be regularly updated to reflect changes in programs and new programs.
2. **State Coordination.** The three main state water agencies (Cal OES, DWR, and SWRCB) and the USDA each have separate funding sources to address drinking water drought impacts. How are they coordinating to ensure that the highest priority needs are being met? Is there funding "left on the table"? Do they need more funding and/or funding for specific programs?
3. **Office of Emergency Services.** There is a well-established emergency/disaster response process in California. Each county has a local OES that is directly linked to the state OES through a well-documented communication and action process. This process works well for disasters such as earthquakes and fires. However, in response to a long drought emergency, is this the best structure to deliver state resources? A county OES is often staffed by personnel well trained in traditional disasters and are often law enforcement and fire personnel. They are not accustomed to working with other branches of county government involved in drought relief. Some frustration was heard at the Convening that county OES was not the most effective way to coordinate services.
4. **County Government.** The State looks to the counties to identify needs and sometimes to act as a conduit for funding. Someone needs to formally apply for funding and enter into agreement with the state for services and funding. The state sometimes has cumbersome processes to get funding "out the door". Although these processes can be streamlined in an emergency, it does take significant local resources to tap into these funds. This critical bridge between local needs and state and federal funding needs to be strengthened.
5. **Long Term Solutions.** The drinking water problems brought on by the drought are often emblematic of long standing water supply problems in the community. While immediate drought relief is needed, the drought provides an opportunity to address longer term water issues. Funding could be strategically applied to integrate short term solution into longer term solutions. For example, an emergency well should be constructed to standards that would allow it to be incorporated into a community water system. Connection of private well properties to a public water system or consolidation of smaller districts should be considered.
6. **Private Wells.** Property owners and renters on individual wells often lack attention to their needs. Most state resources are geared towards public water systems - having a minimum of 15 connections. Residents dependent on individual wells are the most vulnerable to acute drought impacts as well as water contamination. Individual well problems, for various reasons, are known to be underreported and the number of individual well problems increase daily as the drought continues. Targeted resources are necessary for providing long-term solutions for these marginalized communities.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommendations suggested by the Community Water Center based on the discussion that occurred at the Convening and our experience in dealing with this drought over the past few years. These recommendations need to be further discussed by a broader group and more recommendations may be warranted.

1. Some entity must be designated as responsible for actively maintaining a current and readily accessible listing of drinking water drought relief services available that includes State and Federal resources. The list needs to include county level resources for at least those counties that are severely impacted by the drought. CWC has started this process by providing those who attended the Convening a list of the participants, their contact information, affiliation, role, and programs administered. However, an entity, likely a state agency should be responsible for maintaining and releasing this information publicly to a broader audience.
2. The State needs to document how it is coordinating its drought efforts among themselves and with Federal agencies. The decision making process as to how funding decisions are made needs to be transparent. The coordination feeds into the listing of drought relief services mentioned above.
3. The Board of Supervisors for each county needing drought assistance needs to hire new staff or designate an accessible county contact person that state agencies and local interests can contact to coordinate resources and needs. The state should help fund these positions in severely impacted counties.
4. When drought assistance is provided, consideration should be given to integrating relief with longer term solutions; however immediate emergency relief must not be held up.
5. Alongside infrastructure and emergency water supplies, health and mental health impacts of the drought need to be better addressed. State resources should be directed toward programs to collect more information and identify solutions for addressing these impacts.
6. A permanent mechanism for mobilizing and coordinating drought response in the Central Valley as needed in the future should be established that involves the entities attending the Convening.

VI. NEXT STEPS

This paper will be widely circulated for comment and edited to reflect comments from participants. A final document will be circulated by mid October 2015.

A second Practitioners Drought Convening should be held in fall of 2015 to review the recommendations in this paper and determine steps necessary to implement agreed upon recommendations.

The sponsors will need to balance the number of people and entities who would want to attend with the practicality of having a productive discussion resulting in implementable actions.