

Water Boards Racial Equity Initiative: Sharing What We Learned Public Listening Sessions Highlights and Summary

Executive Summary

From November 30 through December 3, 2020, the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) and the nine Regional Water Quality Control Boards (Regional Water Boards and, together with the State Water Board, Water Boards) held a series of four public listening sessions to help inform the development of a resolution and action plan that address racial inequity both within the Water Boards and as we implement programs and policies that preserve, protect, and restore California's drinking water and water resources. Over the four day period, 86 members of the public, including high school and college students, agricultural workers, and other community activists, participated in the listening sessions to discuss five topic areas: 1) water in your community, 2) public participation and decision making, 3) improving accessibility and data sharing, 4) funding, and 5) workforce and capacity building. Collectively, participants provided comments, perspectives, and recommendations reflecting the concerns of urban and rural water users and water users in disadvantaged and low-income communities, including majority-Black, indigenous, Latinx, and Asian communities throughout California. This document summarizes key points and suggestions provided by participants in the listening sessions.

Racial Equity Initiative Overview

At its August 18, 2020 meeting, the State Water Board directed staff to develop strategies and action plans that address institutional and systemic racism throughout the Water Boards and in the communities we serve. A Racial Equity Steering Committee and a Working Group, comprised of Water Boards staff, were established and charged with developing robust and inclusive racial equity resolution(s) and action plan(s) that aim to ensure that (1) Water Boards' programs and policies preserve, protect, and restore California's water resources equitably for people of all races; and (2) that we create a workplace that is equitable, diverse, and inclusive where all employees feel that they belong and can contribute, and where we proactively work to eliminate systemic racism and its effects.

Listening Session Overview

The Water Boards held four public listening sessions to gather input to help inform the development of a racial equity resolution and action plan.

Members of the public were invited to share their perspectives and priorities for addressing racial inequity in the Water Boards' work in the context of the five topics. One listening session was held in Spanish. All sessions followed the same agenda format and discussion questions. Listening sessions began with an introductory presentation that outlined concepts of racial inequity and racial bias and identified the goals and objectives of the sessions. Participants were then split into small group "breakout sessions" to discuss water in their community, including recreational lakes and rivers, drinking water, sewer services, and water rates. The guided discussion topics included community accounts and experiences of racial injustice or inequity, improving community access to our data, information and decision-making processes, capacity building, funding, and language access. Participants then returned to the larger group for a debrief discussion. Water Boards staff took notes during the sessions but did not collect information that could identify participants or participant's specific comments/feedback.

Summary of Feedback

The following is a summary of themes, patterns, and takeaways gathered from the public listening sessions. A more detailed overview of the feedback collected during the sessions is presented in Section 4 of this report.

Recurring Themes

- Public Fear and Building Trust in Government
- Big Government vs. Grassroots Engagement
- Economics of Tap Water vs. Bottled Water
- Balancing Technical and -Plain Language
- Accessibility to Telecommunications Technology
- Water Boards Presence and Messaging

Patterns

- Distrust of government in general, including the Water Boards.
- Black, Latinx, and low-income communities feel excluded from decision-making processes that ultimately affect them.
- Many communities have to buy bottled water due to poor tap water quality, and purchasing bottled water is burdensome in multiple ways—economically (e.g., community living below poverty line) and physically for the elderly and the disabled (large bottles of water need to be transported, lifted, etc.).
- Translations are too technical (e.g., website, staff reports, notices, board meeting agendas, etc)
- Many low-income communities do not have access to the internet. This makes webpages, virtual meetings, and emails largely ineffective in reaching them.

- There is a disconnect between the Water Boards and the communities we serve. People are unsure of who we are, what we do, and they are not sure how our work relates to them and their needs.

Takeaways

- Water Boards should engage trusted community leaders, attend their meetings, and engage with and include local government in outreach and engagement efforts.
- Water Boards should do a better job publicizing/advertising their presence, mission, work, available funding programs and actions.
- The Water Boards do not reflect the diversity of the communities they serve and should lead by example by increasing diversity at all levels of the organization.
- Water Boards should improve their web-based content and use other outreach, media, and social media tools. The Water Boards should also use non-internet-based outreach methods.
- Water Boards outreach should include STEM outreach to schools and internships and mentorship for youth.
- Many comments/feedback reflected pervasive systemic issues, such as lack of access to education and healthcare, food scarcity, poverty, etc.

Water Boards Racial Equity Initiative Public Listening Session Summary- Full Report

1.0 Introduction

The Water Boards held a series of four listening sessions to hear public input on how best to ensure Water Boards' programs and policies preserve, protect, and restore California's drinking water and water resources equitably for people of all races. The input collected from these sessions is being used to inform the development of resolution(s) and action plan(s) that promote racial equity within the Water Boards' and our work statewide.

This report has been divided into the following sections:

- The Water Boards' Racial Equity Initiative (Section 2)
- Racial Equity Public Listening Sessions (Section 3)
- Summary of Feedback by Topic (Section 4)
- Conclusion (Section 5)

2.0 The Water Boards' Racial Equity Initiative

The Water Boards are part of the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) and are responsible for protecting water quality and water resources for the people of California. During its August 18, 2020 meeting, the State Water Board directed staff to implement the Racial Equity Initiative. The priorities for the Racial Equity Initiative are to:

- 1) Establish a foundation of internal and external engagement that values listening and collaboration to drive action;
- 2) Draft a racial equity resolution to be considered for adoption by the State Water Board and used as a model by the Regional Water Boards; and
- 3) Develop racial equity strategies and action plans to drive our efforts over the coming years.

To accomplish these goals, the Water Boards established a Racial Equity Steering Committee and a Racial Equity Working Group. The Racial Equity Steering Committee and Working Group are developing racial equity resolution(s) and action plan(s) that aim to ensure that Water Boards' programs and policies preserve, protect, and restore California's water resources equitably for people of all races in the work we do and that we create a workplace that is equitable, diverse, and inclusive where all employees feel they belong and can contribute, and where we proactively work to eliminate systemic racism and its effects.

3.0 Racial Equity Public Listening Sessions

3.1 Listening Session Overview

The Water Boards held a series of four public listening sessions to gather comments and feedback to help inform the development of a resolution and action plan that address racial inequity both within the Water Boards and as we implement our mission. Members of the public were invited to share their perspectives and priorities for addressing racial inequity in the Water Boards' work. All sessions followed the same agenda format, presentation, and discussion questions.

The four public listening sessions took place from November 30 through December 3, 2020; the listening session held on December 2, 2020 was in Spanish. There were a total of 86 participants and 9 small breakout discussions. Many participants were employed in the water industry or otherwise involved in water resource supply or protection, e.g., working for water districts, environmental consulting, environmental advocacy, or tribal resource groups. Participants also included high school and college students, agricultural workers, and other community activists.

Most participants reported that they had received notice of the listening sessions from a Water Boards electronic service (Lyris) list notification or from a friend, community leader, or colleague who had received one. The listening sessions were held in an online format and some participants called in using a telephone line. The sessions were not recorded, but Water Boards staff took notes on the comments received both in the small-breakout and full-group discussions. Water Boards staff did not include information identifying participants in their notes.

In the small breakout sessions, facilitators asked participants a series of questions based on five topic areas: water in your community, public participation and decision making, improving accessibility, funding, and workforce and capacity building.

3.2 Discussion Topics and Questions

All listening sessions used the same discussion questions. During the small-group breakout discussions, facilitators asked participants the following questions:

TOPIC 1: WATER IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- 1) Are there any challenges with your community's drinking water, sewer/ wastewater system, or local recreational areas (e.g., rivers, lakes, streams), including access to these systems?
- 2) Why do you think these challenges exist?
- 3) Do you believe that racial inequities contributed to these challenges in your community? How so?
- 4) What challenges is your community facing while addressing those problems?

TOPIC 2: DECISION MAKING AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

- 1) How can the Water Boards improve our public involvement process to encourage equitable participation from Black, indigenous, and communities of color?
- 2) What are some of the ways you have engaged with the Water Boards in the past?
- 3) When you engaged, did you feel heard and that your ideas or concerns were valued? If so, how?

TOPIC 3: ACCESS AND INFORMATION SHARING

- 1) How do you, or members of your community, learn about Water Boards policies and programs and opportunities to engage?
- 2) What can the Water Boards do to better inform communities about water issues in their community, relevant programs, and opportunities to engage?

TOPIC 4: CAPACITY BUILDING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

- 1) How can the Water Boards increase access to training that would help develop knowledge, ability, and confidence of community members to engage in water management and resources decisions?
- 2) Do water professionals serving your community reflect the diversity (age, racial, and gender make-up) of your community? If not, how can the Water Boards help ensure that people from your community have access to job opportunities in the water sector?

TOPIC 5: FUNDING

- 1) Do you know how your community funds improvements to its drinking water or sewer/wastewater systems?
- 2) Do you feel your water fees are affordable for your household?
- 3) How can the Water Boards improve access to these funding sources or information about these funding sources?

4.0 Summary of Feedback by Topic

While not every comment or recommendation received could be included, this report generally captures the majority of both the recurring themes as well as salient individual points. Many comments and recommendations were recurring among different participants and across different breakout sessions.

4.1 Topic 1: Water in Your Community

- Rural farming communities lack access to clean and safe water; they are burdened with purchasing bottled water.
- Not all municipal water supplies are clean and safe, and some have offensive appearance, taste, or odor, even when safe.
 - Contaminated tap water, i.e., water that is unsafe to drink or cook with due to contaminants such as:
 - Nitrate
 - Pesticides
 - Arsenic
 - Odor
 - Discoloration
- Tribal water resources have been transferred away from tribal lands to more affluent or “higher priority” users.
- Tribal members were historically moved away from their ancestral water resources and, in many cases, those resources are no longer accessible.

- Regulatory requirements and costs impact water rates in general, but disproportionately impact disadvantaged communities (DACs). In many urban communities, water supplies impacted by past or current industrial activities lead to higher water rates, effectively penalizing the affected community rather than the entity that caused the impact.
- Treated water can become contaminated post-treatment in storage, transport, or point of service and may not actually be safe at the point of use despite the results reported in the water quality report issued by the utility.
- The homeless community also needs access to safe and clean water and water quality impacts by homeless communities should be assessed and addressed.
- Water bodies with recreational beneficial uses near DACs (such as water storage reservoirs used as recreational lakes) are not always accessible for use by those communities.

4.2 Topic 2: Decision Making and Public Participation

- Communities need different forms of communication and alternative ways to comment and participate since many people do not have computers or access to the internet.
 - Suggestions for alternative outreach include: health fairs, bulletins, newsletters
- Language barriers: Outreach materials, agendas, and notices are in English and when materials are translated, they are too technical.
- The internet is a huge barrier for reaching Latinx farmworkers and low-income communities.
 - Zoom is inaccessible.
 - Emails do not reach these communities directly; text messages or phone calls would be more effective.
- Public forums are inaccessible to some communities and past participation has not been positive. Lack of attendance or participation in public meetings is due to lack of access, not lack of interest.
 - Unkept promises made by government
 - Example: Communities with unsafe water were told they would receive bottled water at no cost, but they have not received bottled water and continue to purchase it.
- Many communities feel ignored by government, especially the Black community and the Latinx community.
 - When issues/concerns are raised, people feel they are ignored or placated with solutions that never come to fruition.
 - The undocumented community is fearful of retaliation (mostly, deportation) by people such as government officials, their landlords, employers, etc. if they speak out.

- Historically, the government has not always been transparent with DACs regarding the quality of their water supply and sources of pollution, citing high incidences of cancer and other health conditions in their communities, especially the black community.

4.3 Topic 3: Access and Information Sharing

- Information is disseminated to the community through word of mouth and through community leaders.
 - Community hubs both distribute information and meet other community needs (e.g., food pantry)
- The Water Boards should engage more directly with the community.
 - Suggestions: Trainings and education fairs

4.4 Topic 4: Capacity Building and Workforce Development

- There is a major disconnect between the Water Boards and the public; the general public is unsure of what we do and how our work affects them.
- There are limited water industry jobs in low-income communities.
- Communities want to see more opportunities for young people.
 - STEM careers should be emphasized to youth
 - Outreach to schools including K-12
 - Careers that do not require 4-year degree or other opportunities such as internships and mentoring
- Most water professionals are white, and the environment can be alienating.
- Water Boards staff and other water industry professionals are predominantly white. This does not reflect the diversity of the communities that the Water Boards serve.

4.5 Theme 5: Funding

- Funding sources, allocation and distribution of funds is not well understood by the public.
- Many communities are unsure which programs apply to them or which programs will meet their needs.
- Government decisions regarding funding and resource allocation often appear to favor affluent communities and residents or companies and industries over DACs and low-income residents.
- Some water systems that serve large communities with low-income neighborhoods do not prioritize or equitably address the needs of those areas. Grant funding for system improvements do not require specific allocation or offer priority consideration for those areas.
- Some neighborhoods/communities were not included when regional wastewater treatment or municipal water systems were constructed, and they are on private well/septic or small private water systems with aging infrastructure. In either case, these communities are experiencing water quality impacts with few opportunities for funding.

4.6 Recommendations

Participants in many of the small breakout groups had numerous recommendations for improvement; many of those recommendations were recurring and are summarized below.

- Water Boards should engage with local governments, such as school boards since they are more visible/accessible to the community.
- Community leaders engage community from within, and the Water Boards should consider doing so as well. Water Boards need to come to them and speak conversationally. Leadership or training opportunities for these community leaders is critical.
- Water Boards should simplify technical language and jargon in presentations and outreach materials.
- Water Boards should be prepared to communicate/engage using the language(s) of the communities they are attempting to reach.
- Water Boards should be consistent in our actions and follow through and try to demonstrate that the voices of community members are being heard.
- Water Boards should provide more options and opportunities for individuals and communities to engage.
- Flex water rates and/or regulatory fees (such as permit fees) would make these costs more affordable for lower-income users or users with seasonal income, such as small agricultural users.
- Direct, focused financial assistance to DACs is needed to improve their water and wastewater systems, private wells, and house/building plumbing. Water Boards should provide technical assistance/support to help communities successfully apply for funding.
- The Water Boards and other applicable government entities should require that communities receiving financial assistance allocate those resources equitably to all residents and ensure that disadvantaged communities do not receive a disproportionate increase in rates.
- Alternatives to using census data for determining whether a community is disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged should be allowed.
- The Water Boards should publish demographic information regarding water right holders.
- The Water Boards should lead by example and increase workforce diversity at all levels.
- The Water Boards should expand/increase recruiting efforts to broaden the diversity of the recruitment pool. Include schools, colleges, job fairs, job centers, and professional organizations and societies comprised of students of particular racial groups (e.g., there are several organizations associated with Black, Latinx, Asian, and/or Indigenous/Native American students in various technical disciplines).

Conclusion

Nearly all the participants engaged actively in the breakout sessions, answering and discussing the questions. Many participants reported that they had not experienced racial inequity first-hand (presumably meaning that they had not experienced it *negatively* first-hand), but knew or worked with communities and/or community members that have experienced or suffered from racial inequity, implicit, or explicit racism. Cumulatively, the participants identified a number of significant issues or areas needing improvement and provided many suggestions and recommendations for consideration.

The Water Boards also held a series of internal listening sessions in March 2021. Input from both the public and employee listening sessions is being used to inform the Water Boards racial equity work. The Racial Equity resolution will be presented to the State Water Board for adoption in summer 2021.