

Interstate Council on Water Policy's National Water Policy Charter

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The roles of federal, state, regional and local government in water management have evolved over the past 230 years. Recently, in response to stronger fiscal, demographic, land use and other significant influences, these roles have been undergoing more rapid change. This Charter provides the principles to guide that change.

This Charter has been adopted by the Interstate Council on Water Policy (ICWP), which is an organization of state and regional water management officials with a long history of experience and advocacy in water policy at the state and national levels. The principles in this Charter are rooted in widely recognized precepts and most of them have been advanced by the ICWP and other leadership organizations for many years. The ICWP has added principles that reflect recent progress and new challenges in water resource management. It is our hope that a wide variety of organizations, agencies, and individuals within the broader water community will join in the endorsement, promotion, and integration of these guiding principles.

The principles encompassed by this National Water Policy Charter are stated briefly below and described further in the following pages. Each of these principles has been stated separately to highlight and clarify an essential aspect of water policy, but all nine are interrelated and should be viewed in context and considered as an integrated set.

- Manage water for sustainable, long-term goals recognizing both human needs and the health of water-dependent ecosystems.
- Manage surface and groundwater as an integrated hydrologic system, considering water quality and quantity and all phases of the hydrologic cycle.
- Improve government performance by streamlining, consolidating, and integrating programs and by increasing their responsiveness and effectiveness.
- Develop the information and models needed to set water management priorities based on relative risk, giving consideration to the cost, benefits and uncertainties of management alternatives.
- Invest in and rely on the best science available in setting water policies, making management decisions and in implementing and operating projects.
- Improve the quality of public dialogue on water resource issues and alternatives and engage all affected interests in making water policy and program decisions.
- Use incentives whenever regulatory mandates can be avoided, to achieve the desired management objectives.

Manage Water for Sustainability

Water is an essential and renewable resource, but its availability and utility are limited. We must manage our uses of water, and our activities that affect it, for long-term sustainability as an integral part of our ecosystem.

Our increasing demand for water supplies to satisfy diverse human needs (for drinking, washing, irrigating, transporting, generating power, having fun, *etc.*) presents escalating social and economic tensions. These tensions are becoming familiar in regions of our country where water has been considered abundant.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the vital need for clean water in the functioning of all ecosystems; environmental functions must be recognized and protected or restored. Our municipal, industrial and agricultural activities affect water quantity and quality, requiring better science and closer attention in balancing our needs and expectations within the dynamic limits of the hydrologic system; maintaining that balance is essential in protecting our communities.

Resource conservation and pollution prevention principles must be integrated into our development and management strategies.

The overriding goal of water management should be the sustainability of water uses for the long term based on our own community objectives and the ecological needs within our watersheds.

Manage Water As An Integrated System

So many competing demands are interrelated and get superimposed in our management of water resources that an integrated approach is the only effective means of informing and updating our stewardship capabilities.

Water resources should be managed on the basis of hydrologic units, considering uses and contributing factors in all portions of a watershed and the associated aquifers. Political jurisdictions rarely reflect appropriate geographic or hydrologic boundaries, so it is usually necessary to include all appropriate jurisdictions in the identification and solution of water problems.

All factors affecting the hydrologic cycle, including precipitation, evapotranspiration, infiltration, sediment and pollutant loads, water storage and consumption, *etc.*, need to be understood and accounted for as part of our water management programs. Surface and groundwater are interrelated, as are water quality and quantity, and they must be understood as an integrated system on a “watershed” basis.

Improve Government Performance In Water Management

Clear allocation of resource management responsibilities is essential. Many water management functions are shared among or duplicated by other federal, state, tribal, regional, and local government programs. This sharing and duplication often causes inconsistent policy and complicates implementation, reducing the efficiency and effectiveness of our water resource management efforts. It also causes confusion and increases frustration among the regulated community, the public and the agencies themselves, especially when they complicate emergency response.

The federal government’s ability to set national priorities, maintain consistent standards and provide financial, scientific and technical assistance continue to be essential so that states, tribes and local governments can develop adequate capability to carry out their responsibilities. Its’ direct management role, however, should be limited to issues of national priority, intervening

only when requested by state, regional, or local governments, and as directed by the Congress. The federal government should support the states, tribes and local governments through nationwide data collection and monitoring activities, and through relevant research. The federal government must also serve an important role in helping to resolve disputes among states and to develop projects that have interstate or international benefits.

The states bear primary responsibility, authority, and accountability for water resource management, and should delegate appropriate responsibilities to regional, local and private-sector institutions with the ability to carry them out.

Where it is economically feasible and would improve agency performance, as well as accessibility and responsiveness to the public, similar water management programs and functions should be consolidated and streamlined. A key objective in this consolidation should be the integration of similar functions and clarification of requirements and responsibilities.

Where consolidation is not desirable, improved coordination and accountability are essential to facilitate efficient problem solving and minimize confusion, inconsistency and duplication.

Set Priorities Based On Risk And Benefit/Cost

It is time for federal and state water management institutions collaboratively to develop new planning and evaluation tools that fully incorporate the costs, benefits, and risks of management actions, including economic, social, and environmental values, so that better informed policy choices can be made.

Techniques for multi-objective evaluation have been available and in use for years to evaluate the cost and benefits of various water management decisions, but they have not adequately quantified and incorporated non-economic values, such as environmental and social trade-offs. As a result, risk-based decision making has gained considerable support.

Risk assessment is the science of determining a quantitative risk exposure associated with a particular activity (e.g., the cancer risk for an individual exposed to a toxic pollutant). Risk management determines the “acceptable risk” for taking or not taking alternative courses of action and comparing them with the likelihood of achieving the desired management objectives. Comparison of relative risk can be especially valuable in the treatment of management uncertainties and for directing limited staff and financial resources toward the most beneficial water management projects. These comparisons may also prove useful in the allocation of public funds among flood control, drought protection, water quality improvement, power generation, navigation enhancement, habitat restoration and other valued programs.

However, risk management policy choices tend to be value-laden and decision-makers who rely on risk assessment and risk management techniques should clearly acknowledge and explain the information and assumptions used to determine both the cost and benefits of reducing risk. For example, a wide range of opinion will exist as to the “acceptable risk” of losing lives and suffering property and economic loss from floods, droughts, pollution, etc, of any given magnitude. It is important to continue developing a greater understanding of the utility and limitations of risk-based decision making and to improve the consistency of methods across programs and environmental media.

Invest in and Rely On Sound Science

Regardless of our objectives, authorities, partnerships, *etc*, the quality of our measurements, our analytical methods and our interpretive abilities must always provide the foundation for effective community protection, economic development and environmental integrity. If it doesn't get

measured, it won't get managed. The clarity, objectivity, and utility of our water data (and the interpretive and forecasting models and other scientific methods we use to understand them) require continuous investment of effort, creativity and funding.

Information on water use, its availability and quality, environmental relationships, and the results being achieved by water supply, flood protection, pollution control, conjunctive use, in-stream flow protection and other programs need to be more accurately quantified. The same is true for our projections of future water needs and the consequences of future management options.

Paradoxically, as the complexity of interrelated uses and limitations continues to increase, the basis to sustain and extend good scientific information needed to make essential decisions is eroding. As we identify significant gaps in our collection and management of water quality and ground water data, we are losing hundreds of vital stream gages. Salaries and operating expenses consume an increasing portion of the available budget at universities and resource management agencies, straining our ability to measure and analyze even further.

Exciting advances in data collection, data management and accessibility have been made but, as the salaries and opportunities in related fields become more attractive, the water community is becoming less attractive in the competition for future innovators and leaders.

We must sustain our investment in acquiring the best data and developing the best science possible if we expect them to meet our future needs in setting water policies, making management decisions and in implementing and operating projects.

Improve Public Dialogue & Include Affected Interests

A concerted effort is needed to make our nation, its citizens and government leaders, more aware of and more informed about our water resource, their limitations and management alternatives.

The long-term success of any water policy depends upon consistent leadership and sustaining public support. Ultimately, it is the public, through their judgment of the value and effectiveness of the policy, who will determine the extent and nature of continued efforts.

Survey after survey shows that the public is concerned about clean and abundant water, yet most citizens become vocal and active only at times of real or perceived crisis. Clearly, however, times of conflict or crisis are not the best for constructive exploration of the underlying issues.

In too many situations, plenty of information is available about our water resources and problems, but little of that information has been presented in a clear and understandable form. Much of it is, therefore, susceptible to efforts to confuse or misrepresent motives and management options in service to narrow objectives. When we cannot agree on data, for example, it is difficult for anyone to agree on problem definition or solutions.

Involving the interested stakeholders and the public in setting priorities and planning the implementation activities, water management programs gain greater commitment and support for the decisions and the results. Working together in collaboration, government officials, community leaders, water users, land owners, business managers and groups representing other interests should share and build upon past experience, reducing negative influences and competition for scarce resources.

Most government agencies recognize that many diverse interests and stakeholders have legitimate concerns with water management decisions and seek effective ways to keep them informed and involved. It is, therefore, important for government agencies and private organizations to improve our understanding of each other's perspectives on water issues, to

enable and extend more constructive dialogue on water policy and management decision making. All our agencies should improve opportunities for informed participation and effective collaboration in the development and implementation of water management programs.

Use Incentives To Achieve Objectives

Many of our water management programs develop and adapt in response to problems that communities and the marketplace didn't resolve on their own. As a result, regulatory approaches have been the preferred method of water management by government.

There is increasing recognition, however, that command-and-control methods are less efficient in terms of their ability to achieve broader water management goals in many circumstances. While regulatory programs provide an important level of protection, especially for new and persistent problems, a variety of financial and market-based incentives should be developed to promote more environmentally responsible behavior by private enterprise and the public. For example, fees based on the quantity of pollutants discharged have proven to be effective incentives for pollutant reduction and may be more cost-effective and quicker at achieving water management objectives.

Wherever appropriate, existing programs should incorporate non-regulatory strategies, using a mix of tools that will most effectively achieve the desired objectives. Financial incentives and implementation flexibility can be tied to clear regulatory standards to encourage investments in measures that go beyond minimum regulatory requirements. Examples include reduced permit fees, increased permit length, watershed compliance points and subsidized financing in order to reward partnership, innovation, and investment in water conservation, wastewater reclamation, pollution reduction, habitat restoration, stormwater controls and other stewardship functions.



ICWP and its members are working to implement these principles and we pledge to work with others who support them. We will strive to see them implemented through federal and state laws, institutions and programs throughout the United States. ICWP will use this Charter to evaluate water policy proposals under consideration by Congress, state legislatures, and executive agencies.

We invite you to join us!

For more information, please contact us at:

Interstate Council on Water Policy

51 Monroe St, Suite PE-08A Rockville, MD 20850-2421

www.icwp.org

Peter Evans, Executive Director (703) 243-7383

phe@riverswork.com