

Water Leadership Institute

Working in alliance with rural communities

Since 2016, Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) has co-facilitated the Water Leadership Institute in California to ensure that local community leaders have the knowledge and skills they need to shape local water decisions and help develop equitable water strategies. This program aims to support community water leaders, connect them to each other and to regional resources, forging strong relationships to effectively advocate for their communities' water interests.

The Water Leadership Institute (WLI) was created by Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC) out of a recognition of the need to create sustainable communities and develop the capacity of local emerging leaders working hard to manage local groundwater resources. Additionally, Self Help Enterprises contributed significantly in the inception of the WLI.

Most of the small rural communities in California, largely low-income Spanish-speaking farming communities, live in the most critically overdrawn basins and are wholly dependent on groundwater that is unsafe to drink. As the state grapples with groundwater shortages, these communities are often left out of the planning process. Yet, these local community members deeply understand local water challenges and need to be at the center, shaping decisions and solutions for their community's wellbeing.

To address this critical problem, EDF is exploring partnerships in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond to offer a series of bilingual workshops to prepare participants to effectively manage community water resources and take an active, cooperative approach to water decision-making. We are focusing on regions and communities that are impacted by groundwater overdraft, lack access to safe, clean, and affordable drinking water and have been historically underrepresented in water decision-making.

We believe cultivating and strengthening local leadership within communities, rather than relying on external forces to make resource decisions, is critical to ensuring these communities are more resilient in the long term.



EDF is helping to train a new generation of leaders like Jaqueline Flores Gonzalez of Planada, California (above with daughter) to be advocates for their communities amidst water scarcity.

Goals

The Water Leadership Institute aims to:

- Build trust and increase the participation and input of disadvantaged communities in the implementation of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).
- Strengthen local water leadership and grow new leaders.
- Connect participants to information, opportunities, and resources to effectively advocate for their water interests.
- Create spaces for dialogue, unity, collaboration, and mutual understanding.
- Build a support network of community water leaders.

“What I learned from the Water Leadership Institute is something I wasn't expecting. I learned about myself. I learned about the water. I learned about my other board members. I learned that there is help out there. It made me aware of where I want my community to go.”

– Martha Madera, Treasurer, Biola Community Services District

Community Engagement

SGMA mandates groundwater sustainability agencies in overdrafted basins to create plans for bringing groundwater supply and demand into balance and requires these agencies to include all beneficial users in the process. These plans will affect water resources in communities — disadvantaged communities most significantly — across California for decades to come. We must ensure that another generation of leaders from these communities, including many Spanish speakers, have the necessary training to effectively make their voices heard in the process. If not, the opportunity to meet the water needs of their communities could be lost.

About EDF

Environmental Defense Fund, a leading international nonprofit organization, creates transformational solutions to the most serious environmental problems. For decades, EDF has built inclusive environmental coalitions alongside farmers, ranchers, local communities, corporate leaders, and other unexpected allies — teaming up on projects where we can make the greatest impact.

About RCAC

RCAC partners with rural and Indigenous communities to achieve their vision and well being through technical assistance, training, financial resources, and advocacy. RCAC offers a wide range of services to communities with fewer than 50,000 people including environmental infrastructure; affordable housing development; economic and leadership development; and financing to support community development.



Mariana Rivera Torres is a manager within EDF's California groundwater program and leads the program's water equity initiatives and outreach to environmental justice groups and frontline communities.



Lucy Caine is a Project Manager for EDF's Climate Resilient Water Systems and Operations, strengthening synergies by developing improved systems, fostering communications, and planning strategic meetings and events.



Ann Hayden leads EDF's California Water program as associate vice president, climate resilient water systems. The water program creates more resilient water and land systems in the face of climate change and other stressors.



Building Water Leaders in Biola

The impact of the Water Leadership Institute can be felt today in the small rural community of Biola, located just outside of Fresno, California. With a population of 1,440 and a poverty rate of 38.3% as of 2020, Biola is considered a severely disadvantaged community and faces infrastructure and water management challenges.

But that has not stopped local leaders from pursuing solutions. "There are a lot of needs in Biola: the infrastructure, the sidewalks, curbs, gutters," says Reyes Lozano, a Biola Community Services District board member. "And I want to be part of that solution."

Every member of Biola's board (pictured above) attended the Water Leadership Institute hosted in the Central Valley. Today, the community has a seat on the North Kings Groundwater Sustainability Agency board and the opportunity to advocate for their water needs.



Laura Dubin is a lead trainer with RCAC's Building Rural Economies (BRE) program, designing economic development curricula and facilitating workshop series for disadvantaged rural communities and Tribes across the West. She is also part of RCAC's train-the-trainer team.



Blanca Amador Surgeon has been with RCAC since 1995 holding various roles to promote and implement capacity building, including as a trainer and facilitator of the Leadership Institute, assistance provider and community coach supporting rural communities and Native Americans nations.

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