

# CFEE

CALIFORNIA FOUNDATION  
ON THE ENVIRONMENT  
AND THE ECONOMY

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Water Conference 2025

*California Needs Its Next Generation of Water Leaders...  
Who's Ready to Drink from the Fountain of Knowledge?*

November 20-21  
Parker Hotel, Palm Springs

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*Don't let the complexities and conflicts of California water discourage your engagement. It is time for a new generation of California water leaders to rise to the surface.*

*From parched Central Valley fields to the Colorado River's shrinking reservoirs and the Sierra's shifting supply, California faces water challenges that demand fresh thinking and creative courage in this evolving era of climate change, aging infrastructure, and competing demands. One thing is for certain, nothing happens without water – people, business, agriculture, etc., etc., etc.*

*Our 2025 Water Conference is a launching pad for the next generation of policy leaders to dive into the wild world of California water while learning from today's experts. We will explore federal-state challenges, escalating water costs, the future of California farming, and how to turn the promise of "abundance" into reality.*

*Who's ready to drink from the fountain of knowledge?*

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 20****Ballroom**

11:30 – 12:45pm	<b>Arrival – Check-In and Lunch – Ballroom Lawn</b>
12:45 – 1:00pm	<b>Welcome – Conference Overview and Roundtable Introductions</b>

Preview of conference topics, speakers, and goals

**Jay Hansen**, President & CEO, CFEE

1:00 – 2:15pm	<b><u>Session 1</u> Surfs Up! Riding the Choppy Waves of Federal-State Engagement</b>
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Even in the most harmonious times, California water presents a complex challenge for federal and state coordination. Now, with the Trump Administration and Congressional leadership frequently at odds with the Newsom Administration and the California State Legislature, these coordination challenges have intensified. How can California better surf these choppy waters of federal-state interaction?

- What are the top water and natural resource priorities for the Trump Administration? What areas align with California’s current leadership? What are the main points of tension?
- What water infrastructure does the federal government operate in California? How is this operation coordinated with California water managers? What are the areas of competition or conflict between the two systems?
- What are significant projects for potential partnerships or joint efforts? i.e. Sites Reservoir; Delta Conveyance Project; etc.
- With the Trump Administration seeking to enforce certain federal laws differently as well as revising the biological opinions (BiOps), how is that affecting how water is managed in California?
- There is an effort to significantly reduce federal funding for the National Weather Service (NWS), National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) – how will that impact California? How are state and local agencies preparing for this anticipated loss of operational and forecasting capability? What will happen to remarkable successes with forecast-informed reservoir operations (FIRO)?
- What role can the California State Legislature play to enhance California’s water supply and prepare for floods and droughts while federal-state disharmony percolates?

**Karla Nemeth**, Director, California Department of Water Resources

**Ian Lyle**, Director of Federal Relations, Association of California Water Agencies

**Marty Ralph**, Director, Center for Western Weather and Water Extremes, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC San Diego

2:15 – 2:30pm	Break
2:30 – 4:00pm	<b><u>Session 2</u></b> <b>Seriously...What's the Plan for Managing the Rising Cost of Water?</b>

Affordability remains a top concern across California, and water costs are no exception. Water rates are climbing faster than inflation, even before we account for the expensive infrastructure upgrades on the horizon. Complicatedly, reducing water usage rarely decreases rates, sometimes it increases unit costs. What is the plan for managing these escalating costs? And in the absence of a “grand strategy,” what are the most promising opportunities to maintain water affordability?

- How much did federal and state governments spend historically to initially build California’s patchwork system of reservoirs, canals, treatment plants, and pipes? How much public funding is available today to upgrade aging facilities?
- What is the federal appetite to build new infrastructure and modernize existing facilities? Is there a plan to help pay for these costs?
- With inflation, tariffs, aging plants, emerging contaminants, and lengthy construction timelines all pressuring budgets, what are the biggest cost drivers facing water agencies and utilities today? How can the Legislature work with water providers to support their cost management efforts?
- Is it time for the state to pay for low income customers as opposed to ratepayers? What are the tradeoffs maintaining the status quo versus asking the general fund to do more?
- How are bond outlooks for water agencies expected to increase water costs? Is there any way to pay for those other than customer rate increases?

**Jennifer Pierre**, General Manager, State Water Contractors

**Deven Upadhyay**, General Manager, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California

**Terence Shia**, Director for Water Division, California Public Utilities Commission

**Jennifer Capitulo**, Executive Director, California Water Association

4:00– 4:15pm	Break
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4:15 – 5:30pm

**Session 3****“Abundance” Sounds Great...More Housing! More Energy! More Water!  
But What Will It Take?**

California policy leaders are increasingly embracing the “abundance” agenda, a new framework that seeks to make it easier and faster to build infrastructure and housing in California. And after muscling through significant changes to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the Governor and the Legislature may get a chance to see abundance play out in reality. It sounds great in front of the cameras, but what must be done to ensure thoughtful water planning and workforce development are integrated into abundance in practice?

- What are the state’s current water needs? What about future needs?
- How are water managers planning for this anticipated growth in housing? How much water is typically provided per housing unit?
- Between the need to build new housing and the need to modernize water infrastructure, what is needed to coordinate these priorities and actions?
- How can recent CEQA revisions be utilized to more quickly build and modernize water infrastructure?
- Are recent CEQA revisions sufficient for expedited project development? What else can be done to move things along responsibly?
- What can be done to support workforce development so that we maintain a strong pipeline of skilled and trained workers capable of building these new projects? How can we ensure that abundance and pro-labor sentiments go hand-in-hand?
- What is the plan to work with disadvantaged communities as project timelines accelerate? What do these communities hope to see as homebuilding (hopefully) picks up pace and water planning adapts?

**Jay Ziegler**, Delta Watermaster

**Sarah Macdonald**, Assistant General Manager, Western Municipal Water District

**Keith Wilkinson**, Senior Operator, Sunol Valley Water Treatment Plant, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission

6:00pm

**Reception & Dinner – Palm Court**

Our fabulous reception will begin at 6pm in the Palm Court. A bountiful buffet dinner will follow. We will be enjoying al fresco dining in the cool desert air, please dress accordingly.

**FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 21****Ballroom**

8:00 – 9:00am	Breakfast – Ballroom Foyer
9:00 – 10:30am	<b>Session 4</b> <b>Seeds of Change – California Agriculture &amp; Communities in Transition</b>

In 2024, California farms and ranches sold 400 different commodities and earned \$61.2 billion in revenues. It was an impressive haul for one of California’s keystone industries, overcoming mounting operational challenges resulting from the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), climate impacts, contested water rights, and flow restrictions. This panel will examine what is happening in agricultural communities and consider what can be done to ensure the seeds of change we plant today grow into lasting solutions for food security, community prosperity, and environmental stewardship tomorrow.

- What commodities are hardest hit by policy, economic, and climate changes? What crops may no longer be grown at scale in California?
- Is there an overarching gameplan to support the communities reliant on these commodities or is a more localized, ad hoc approach emerging? How can federal engagement help support these areas?
- What is the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), and what is the status?
- While SGMA deadlines for sustainability won’t arrive until 2040/42, many communities are having a hard time getting on track – what are some of their key challenges, and how can the state step up to ensure the goals of SGMA are achieved?
- What is groundwater banking? How can it support SGMA implementation?
- For those areas where farming may no longer happen, are there proven or promising models of “multi-benefit” land repurposing that can actually deliver tangible environmental, economic, and community benefits?

**Paul Gosselin**, Deputy Director, Sustainable Water Management, California Department of Water Resources

**Johnny Amaral**, Chief Operating Officer and Chief of External Affairs, Friant Water Authority

**Arohi Sharma**, Senior Policy Analyst, Nature, Natural Resources Defense Council

**Sarah Woolf**, President, Water Wise

10:30 – 10:45am	Break
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10:45 – 12:00pm

**Session 5****November 2026 Here We Come! The Water Agenda for the Next Governor**

In the spirit of the “5 Ps” – Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance – California will soon have a new Governor with her or his own priorities to chart the state’s water policy. What should they be? And who better to help develop their agenda than the distinguished crowd that CFEE brings together?

For our final panel, we will leverage all that we learned in this conference and elsewhere, add a dose of our own aspirations, and ask a savvy group of panelists to help us think through what could, and should, be the guiding water principles for the next Governor’s Administration.

- What work will be left undone by the Newsom Administration? What could be picked up by the next administration? What should be de-prioritized? What are the “wait and see” items?
- With declining snowpack and increasingly intense precipitation events, what should be done to further buildout infrastructure that can better capture and store rainwater?
- What fate should await the Delta Tunnel? Should the next Governor bring the solo Delta Tunnel to life or instead hit the reset button, just as Governor Newsom had once done to Governor Brown’s twin tunnel proposal?
- With hundreds of thousands of Californians still lacking access to clean, affordable, and reliable drinking water, how can the next Governor approach this challenge? What local government and industry partnerships can be further leveraged to make additional progress?
- As artificial intelligence (AI) sweeps across all aspects of our society, the next Governor will need a plan for how to thoughtfully accommodate AI’s integration into decisionmaking and beyond – where can AI (and other promising technologies) be channeled to advance water sector priorities?
- Mitigating wildfires and floods will necessarily be one of the top priorities for the next Governor – what more can be done to prepare and respond to these impending disasters?
- Perhaps most importantly, where is public opinion on these issues? And how might public opinion end up shaping where candidates want to go?

**Letitia Grenier**, Director, Water Policy Center, Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC)

**Martha Guzman Aceves**, Former EPA Regional Administrator, Region 9, and Former CPUC Commissioner

**Adam Probolsky**, President, Probolsky Research

12:00pm

**Closing Remarks and Adjournment**