

Lessons from the National Voter Poll on Water

An Interview with Nicole Lampe

Lilli Watson • January 2023

The [Water Hub](#) is a program of [Climate Nexus](#) that provides communications help to water advocates and experts, uplifts traditionally marginalized voices, and adds capacity to groups that have historically been under-resourced. Last June, the Water Hub published a [National Voter Poll on Water](#) in collaboration with partners at the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication. For this blog, the Duke Water Policy Program's Lilli Watson interviews Nicole Lampe, managing director of the Water Hub at Climate Nexus.

Lilli Watson: To start, can you tell me a little bit more about the Water Hub at Climate Nexus? What spurred the idea to create a pro bono communications team for water advocacy?

Nicole Lampe: Absolutely. The idea came from the [Water Funder Initiative](#), which is a group of funders that are trying to improve their impact by funding together. They did a landscape assessment in 2017 that looked at the strengths and weaknesses of our field. One of the areas of potential growth they identified was communications. The Water Hub was built in Climate Nexus's image in that it is a field resource and has some strategic flexibility. The difference is we started out with a Western regional focus and we also were explicitly frontline-serving from the beginning. When we did our own [landscape assessment](#) in 2019 and looked at where the greatest capacity needs were, we felt like grassroots and frontline organizations were really close to the problems [and] driving a lot of innovative solutions but weren't being centered in water policy or water news because of the lack of capacity. We set out to

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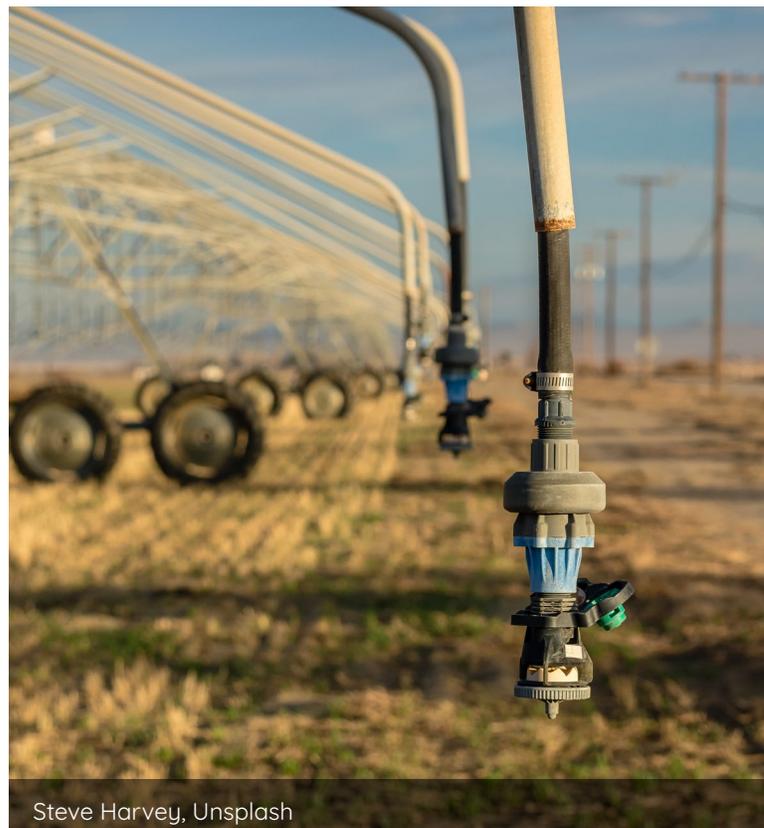
change that by providing an extra set of hands, but also research tools, and skill-building trainings to try to add extra know-how and bandwidth where it had been light previously.

Lilli Watson: The poll came out last summer. What made that the right moment to do a national water poll?

Nicole Lampe: It had been about a year since [our last national voter poll](#) and we had a bunch of questions about policy pieces that were either moving then or that were going to begin moving in earnest in 2023. A lot of our partners are working on infrastructure so that was a central focus of the poll. How do we target [infrastructure dollars](#) that we've won? The other two big policy pieces that we focused on were the [Farm Bill](#) and the [Clean Water Act](#).

As one of my colleagues says, a poll can either be a roadmap or a weather report. Either you can view polling data as prescriptive, and only speak to what voters already care about and support, or you can view it as a weather report and say, okay, well, there needs to be some education here. People don't yet connect the dots between these issues or don't yet understand how this policy addresses the thing they're worried about. We use polling to inform our communications and media strategy because we zoom in on areas where people are worried about the problem but don't yet necessarily have strong support for the solution or the public is there on the solution but policymakers aren't there. We need to demonstrate that their constituents are on board and that there's a benefit for them politically in supporting this funding or law.

Lilli Watson: The poll showed that voters were almost twice as likely to blame the growth of cities and suburbs for water shortages as they were to blame overplanting of crops and dry areas, even though agriculture actually uses the vast majority of western water. Why do you think so many people overestimate the impact of urban and suburban growth and underestimate the impact of agriculture?



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Nicole Lampe: I think it's partly as a result of water conservation education and messaging being all oriented towards urban water use. "Turn off your taps when you brush your teeth, take shorter showers and stop watering your grass." Utilities in particular but also governments have done a ton of work to convince people that they have a role to play in making sure there's enough water to go around. People have internalized that message and said, oh, well, cities and households are the problem. That's not true. It's not to say that people shouldn't be water aware. It's important for everyone to be conscious that water is a finite resource, but I think that we have some room to grow in terms of helping people understand that, yes, agriculture is a vital part of our economy. It's a vital part of our way of life and we want to have local food production, but it doesn't mean we have to grow food the way that we have been. I think that's where the gap is, and part of it frankly is that the farm lobby is incredibly powerful, and they have persistently communicated that if we allocate less water for irrigation, then we're not going to have local food, and that's simply not true. Agriculture tends to function as a very cohesive block and because [their message is] so cohesive and consistent, it has really stuck.

We see the same misunderstanding among voters around sources of water pollution. People tend to think heavy industry is the big problem. When in fact, factory farms are an even bigger problem. People don't appreciate that nonpoint source pollution, [such as] run off of pesticides, manure, etc., are a far bigger problem in our waterways than the battery plant down the street, because they are less tightly regulated.

Lilli Watson: Do you know of many groups who are working on communicating on this, or [is the Water Hub] working on this? How would you work on tackling that information gap?

Nicole Lampe: We're working on both, but we're certainly not alone. In terms of where the lion's share of water is going, that's something that we've been doing quite a lot of work on in California. [We've been] trying to elevate the opportunities for water-smart and climate-smart agriculture that is truly water efficient. There's a lot of talk now about climate-smart agriculture that's really about awarding incentives to industrialized agriculture for things like methane or biogas [capture], when, in fact, they're still remaining really resource-intensive, emissions-intensive, and water-intensive. We've been doing a lot of work to show how much water is going to farming, but also to point to examples of food producers that are using less water and still feeding their communities and still creating jobs. And, by the way, generating all these other benefits like habitat [creation], cleaner air, and cleaner water. There's lots of data out there that shows that people believe that

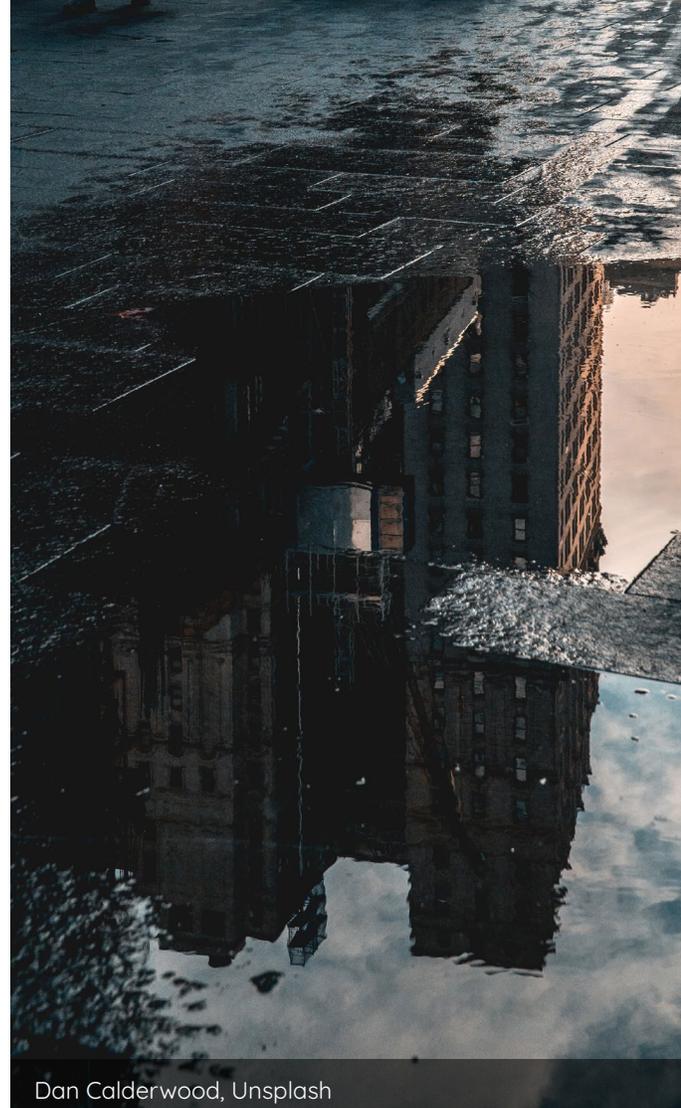
farmers are good stewards of land and water, and rather than going after agriculture, which we all want to see remain in our communities, we try to go after problematic practices and perverse incentives that actually perpetuate harmful chemical-intensive ways of growing food.

Lilli Watson: Shifting gears a little bit. I wanted to talk about One Water. Can you start by telling me a little bit more about One Water, and why it was important to feature this new approach to water management in the poll?

Nicole Lampe: One water is a concept that a lot of folks have been working on. Some of the key principles are that all water has value, from rain that falls to the wastewater that we flush down our sinks or that comes from our laundry. We need to manage the whole cycle in an integrated way, as opposed to having wastewater be totally separate from freshwater. There's [also] a piece about localizing the water cycle. Right now, we have a lot of long-distance water in this country, especially in the dry West. Relying on imported water from far away means that we're not necessarily valuing or making the most of the water that we have locally. For instance, in California, a lot of groups are working on managing stormwater which, historically, has been treated as a problem and moved away from homes and businesses as quickly as possible.

Because we struggle ourselves to communicate it succinctly, we wanted to do a snapshot of: do people understand the concept? What are the arguments for one water that people find most compelling? It's always a delicate dance trying to construct these sorts of questions, because the more context you give, the more you bias the responses. We could have said a ton about it. We could have given that stormwater example, for instance, but that would actually predispose people to think that this was a drought solution versus a pollution solution or an affordability solution.

What we learned primarily from the poll is that people don't have a great sense of One Water, and I think that what sticks out most to voters right now is this idea of it being a water supply solution. But I think that may largely be a reflection of the



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moment we're in. All across the country, people have been reading about water scarcity so maybe that's the water problem that's top of mind for voters.

Lilli Watson: What do you think was the most surprising thing you learned from the polling data?

Nicole Lampe: What was pleasantly surprising was some of the Farm Bill responses where people think that human health is actually a more important goal for farm policy than keeping store shelves stocked. Especially in this moment of supply chain problems, I was heartened to hear that voters recognize that the way we treat our land impacts our health and that they think that ought to be a priority.

Lilli Watson: Along those lines, since you released the poll, have you gotten any feedback from policymakers, politicians, or other water advocacy groups about how the polling data informed their thinking on something or the approach that they're taking on policy?

Nicole Lampe: We designed this poll in partnership with the [Water, Equity, and Climate Resilience Caucus](#) and [Clean Water for All](#), two coalitions that work a ton on these issues. The Water, Equity, and Climate Resilience Caucus was our thought partner on the infrastructure piece, and I think they were pleasantly surprised by the strong voter support for targeted infrastructure spending which has been a key priority of theirs. Similarly, Clean Water for All is working quite a lot on both Federal and Clean Water Act protection things like how we define [waters of the US](#). But also, how do we shore up state-based protections given the uncertainty around the Supreme Court right now?

We've heard more from advocates than we have from policymakers, but we did just support a Congressional briefing in November about a national water affordability program. [It's] a low-income ratepayer assistance program that would be the permanent version of the [Low Income Household Water Assistance Program](#) that was created during the pandemic. I think that members of Congress who already



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were inclined to support this are really glad to see the strong support. Almost 9 in 10 voters think that access to safe and affordable water is a human right. Also, 75% of voters supported the idea of a permanent Federal water assistance program.

Lilli Watson: Is there any specific advice that you would give to policymakers based on what you learned from this poll, or what you've learned from your previous polling?

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Nicole Lampe: I think the takeaway for policymakers is that voters really care about human and environmental health and are supportive of programs and policies that protect both. I don't think we got into testing any cost questions here, but we have elsewhere, and I think generally voters think that human and environmental health is at least as high a priority as economic growth or prosperity. The voters don't necessarily see those as in conflict. Oftentimes opposition messaging to environmental or health protections is like “Oh, it's too expensive.” Voters don't see that. Voters believe that these are smart things to prioritize and that what's good for our health is ultimately good for our communities.

Lilli Watson: Where do you think this takes you next? What could this information lead to?

Nicole Lampe: It is already informing some of the communications work that we're doing in terms of drought response. Like how do we support Farm Bill advocacy and infrastructure information? We're going to be launching a big infrastructure storytelling campaign in 2023, and I think this gives us some good grist for [questions like]: what are the projects we want to elevate? How do we want to communicate about where the greatest need is, and why we should be prioritizing those communities?

But in terms of research, our next poll, I think, is going to really dig into the language of water equity. You know we got some good insights here in terms of, what's the support for prioritizing communities based on terms like “frontline” or “disadvantaged,” which it turns out, people don't really resonate with. I don't think people totally connect the dots between race and ethnicity and historic disinvestment and increased vulnerability to all sorts of climate and pollution problems. And so, I think if we want to be, for instance, advocating for increased investment in communities of color, then we need to be educating people about the way that those communities have been set up to be more exposed to air

pollution, water pollution, failing infrastructure, climate-driven disasters, etc.

Lilli Watson: And what kind of role do you think data plays in this communication going forward?

Nicole Lampe: I think a huge [role]. We have great data about disproportionality. I wrote a [blog](#) a couple of years ago with the Water Hub, showing how race was a top predictor of everything from plumbing poverty to lead exposure to shut-off risk. But I think what's needed is not necessarily more new data, although we certainly need more new data about water affordability, what's needed more is data visualization and synthesis. The data live in so many different places and part of our job as communicators is bringing it together.

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