

Meeting Summary

Drought Resilience Interagency & Partners (DRIP) Collaborative

Drought Definition and Narrative Workgroup Meeting
Communication Program Recommendation
California Natural Resources Agency, 715 P St, Sacramento, Room 06-212
September 9, 2025 | 1:00PM to 2:30PM

The meeting recording is available at: <https://youtu.be/eR4Q0Oxj1oA>.

Meeting materials, including the presentation, are available at:

<http://www.water.ca.gov/drip>

Meeting Objective: Develop and consider potential pathways the Communication Program Recommendation can proceed.

Workgroup members in attendance:

- Tim Worley, California Association of Mutual Water Companies
- Laura Ramos, California Water Institute at Fresno State
- Tiffany Tran (for Katie Ruby), California Urban Water Agencies

Absent:

- Suzanne Pecci, Public Member
- Natalie Kuffel, Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation
- Nate Ortiz, California Office of Emergency Services

Also in attendance:

- Glen Low, Earth Genome

Communication Program: Proposed Pathways

Communication Program Recommendation

At the July 18th meeting, members were updated on past co-lead meetings, and it was shared that this workgroup has not met this year. It was determined that the workgroup should meet to discuss potential pathways on the levels of engagement spectrum to inform, complement, or lead because the recommendation is not forming. There were no subject matter experts included for this workgroup meeting.

A quick review of the recommendation's formation and its status.

2023

In 2023, as the DRIP Collaborative was forming, members reflected on past drought communication efforts, noting both successes and confusion in public messaging. There was a clear need for more strategic, audience-specific, and coordinated communication, especially given the long-term nature of drought in California as well as the many different levels of communication; state, regional, and local.

2024

Coming out of 2023 with a problem statement for the Drought Definition and Narrative focus area, a draft template and draft recommendation was developed.

Members gave comments:

- While the recommendation was well-received, concerns were raised about local variability, public understanding, and the need for extensive outreach.
- Overall, the members stressed the importance of unified messaging, sector-specific insights, and simplicity to effectively inform and engage the public and decision-makers.
- A straw poll showed general support for the recommendation, though members raised concerns about timing, cost, and alignment with existing initiatives like Save Our Water and Water Watch.
- Some felt communication efforts should follow the development of drought indicators and metrics.

By the end of the year, the draft recommendation was not finalized and adopted by the DRIP Collaborative as part of its 2024 recommendations. It evolved to consider a phased development, diverse audiences, and avoiding duplication of existing efforts. One aspect of the draft recommendation; to create a flexible, symbol-based, color-coded messaging platform like air quality alerts, with the goal to help water suppliers communicate drought conditions clearly and consistently was moved to the drought indicators and metrics recommendation.

This left the draft recommendation to take a step back and evaluate its scope.

2025

In May 2025, members were given some potential next steps:

- Collect information and review communication platforms.
- Interview communication practitioners about their experiences during the last few droughts to garner informative perspectives.

By July, co-leads began a cursory review of existing communication plans to better understand the drought communication landscape. A common understanding that there were several robust documents developed in the past couple of years since the 2020-2022 drought that were good resources to address many of the comments from the DRIP Collaborative. Due to limited resources, interviewing communication practitioners was not pursued.

For now, the recommendation is still at a decision point to the pathway it can go on the level of engagement spectrum; Inform, Complement, or Lead. More information and feedback will be needed to determine its pathway

Drought Communication Discussion

During the discussion, members were asked to consider different levels of engagement for the communication effort, focusing on three potential pathways: Inform, Complement, and Lead. These levels represent increasing involvement—ranging from simply raising awareness (Inform), to enhancing coordination with existing efforts (Complement), to actively identifying gaps and proposing solutions (Lead). The goal was to clarify how the group might engage moving forward and to encourage reflection on which pathway best aligns with the collaborative's goals and capacity.

Participants discussed how state and local agencies might collaborate more effectively on drought communication, emphasizing the value of shared resources like Save Our Water and California Water Watch. Given the regional variability of drought impacts, a centralized hub offering conservation tools, funding opportunities, and public awareness materials could support local messaging efforts. Members highlighted the importance of coordination—ensuring agencies know when and how to use these resources, especially during specific drought stages. While California Water Watch provides a broad snapshot of water conditions, it lacks tools like grant information, which could enhance its usefulness. The conversation underscored the need for a more integrated, accessible platform to support both state and local drought communication strategies.

Workgroup members provided insights:

- Realization that it has been a struggle to move this recommendation forward because it requires a deeper evaluation due to limited time, resources, and the absence of clear metrics or tools for a proper gap analysis particularly because members are volunteering their time and may not have dedicated resources.
 - There might be an opportunity to broaden some of the work to some of the other workgroup members or to the overall larger DRIP Collaborative Membership.
- Referenced the American Water Works Association [*2022 Designing and Evaluating Effective and Ongoing Drought Communication*](#) document. The document was in-depth on the development of drought communication tools that could be leaned into during the next drought period.
- Suggested taking a step back from the draft recommendation and take a pathway that is more the inform or compliment path particularly since we are not all subject matter experts on communication and drought communication specifically.

Informed Pathway

The workgroup members reflected on the importance of continuous drought messaging, especially around how the state and local agencies are preparing for long-term water resilience. While the state is actively working on infrastructure and supply projects, these efforts take time and may not be visible to the public. Workgroup members emphasized that messaging should reinforce the idea of “staying the course” toward resilience. However, a persistent gap remains in developing a centralized communication program. Despite past discussions and intentions, limited resources

and time have prevented progress on a formal gap analysis or program design. The group acknowledged the need for localized and statewide messaging and suggested bringing in subject matter experts to inform future efforts, especially as regional drought conditions evolve. There is also a perception that the communication “gap” maybe between state-level communications on drought preparedness activities to local-level communications efforts. It would be informative to receive presentations from the state on efforts to prepare for drought and include their messaging to locals. It would also be informative to receive presentations from regional and local entities on their drought preparation efforts and messaging. The regional and local entities’ presentations may vary based on the size and resources of the water agencies with larger water agencies.

Complementary Pathway

Some larger water agencies that may have conservation staff would probably have their own messaging on their drought preparedness efforts. They may have their own tools such as public documents and campaigns in different languages tailored to their local demographics or capacity to hold town halls to communicate messaging. But smaller water agencies may not have those same resources and would need assistance, perhaps from the state or local, larger water agencies with those capabilities. State assistance may come in the form of funding for such tools, but may also be based on the financial capacities at the time of a drought. Additionally, counties are preparing their drought contingency plans required under SB 552. There could be interest in hearing how those county drought contingency plans address communication efforts.

Discussion on Perspective of Droughts as Emergencies

There was a brief discussion on a concept from the Water Commission’s white paper from January 2024, [*Potential State Strategies for Protecting Communities and Fish and Wildlife in the Event of Drought*](#). In their white paper, the concept of considering drought as not an emergency, but to consider it as a normal part of our change climate that would require a different approach of preparedness and response. Because of the growing acknowledgement that our changing climate is forecasted to have more occurrences and longer periods of droughts and water supply shortages, this acknowledgment leads to a potential conclusion that they are not emergencies. Droughts can be considered more continuous and not episodic. The challenge in pivoting the perspective of drought of emergency to non-emergency would require a large momentum on how the state as a whole would address drought preparedness and response. New funding sources, regulation, and authorities would need to be developed to supplant capabilities allowed under an emergency. New governance may also be required to address roles and responsibilities that exist or may currently be gaps. The workgroup members agreed that this is a concept that should be discussed by the larger DRIP Collaborative workgroup members as another potential focus area in the future.

Recommendations

Coming out of the workgroup meeting, there were some thoughts on how this effort could proceed either as informed or complimentary. Either pathway will require more

engagement by other DRIP Collaborative members, subject matter experts, and members of the communication community to garner a direction forward.

Informed

- Receive presentations from state agencies, water agencies (of various sizes and geographies), and small water system representatives on drought communication – could also use a survey as a vehicle to garner information.
- Continue to collect and review existing drought communication plans and documents.
- Develop a white paper on drought communication, consider drought communication principles.
- Share a non-exhaustive list of drought communication templates, tool kits, resources, and materials.
- Understanding what triggers a drought emergency and when and how it is messaged across different levels.

Complement

- Learn about capabilities, methods, and cadence on communicating to different and diverse communities while providing insights on how those capabilities and methods could be shared with others.
- Inform others who are developing communication plans and programs regarding droughts and water supply shortages.
- Receive a presentation from water agencies on their drought communication plans and provide feedback and items to consider while preparing to communicate on the next drought.
- Receive a presentation from counties on their drought contingency plans, specifically about communication plans and provide feedback and items to consider while preparing to communicate on the next drought.

A potential pivot from a communication recommendation would be to include information and effort on any of the bullets above into the annual report. For example, create a non-exhaustive list of drought communication tools and have a solid summary to include in an annual report. Another next step could be to have co-leads give a presentation to the DRIP Collaborative on a non-exhaustive list of drought communication tools while having a subject matter expert reflect on the presentation on the use of such tools in a communication plan. This could help the DRIP Collaborative members decide how they move down a pathway.