



Crafting the Message: Communicating Water Issues that Inspire Action

Moderator:

- Karen Schlatter, Director, Colorado Water Center

Panelist:

- José Aranda, Senior Relationship Manager, Water Hub
- Jared C. Bynum, Environmental Justice Advocate & Organizer

View Speaker Biographies here: <https://watercenter.colostate.edu/water-leadership-summit/speaker-information/>

Resources:

- **Message Guides:**
 - <https://waterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/nature-based-solutions-message-guide-water-hub-aug-2024.pdf>
- **Websites:**
 - <https://justinfrastructure.org/>
 - <https://waterhub.org/>
- **Toolkits:**
 - Narrative Change Toolkit
 - <https://climatewaterequity.org/narrative-change>
- **Online Resources:**
 - <https://waterhub.org/polling-water-messages-that-bridge-divides/>
 - <https://uswateralliance.org/2025-value-of-water-index/>

Presentation 1: How to Talk About Water in Ways That Resonate

Speaker: José Aranda, Senior Relationship Manager, Water Hub

Rooting in Love (Not Fear)

- Start with the people and places we care about most
- Connect with your audience around shared hopes and worries

Our Intimate Relationship with Water

- Home and family
- Faith, spirituality, and culture
- Individual and public health





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- Beloved places
- Growing and preparing food
- Storms and safety

Research Tells Us

- Water tops voters environmental concerns
 - 2025 Value of Water Index - <https://uswateralliance.org/2025-value-of-water-index/>
- There is strong bipartisan support for;
 - Delivering safe water and sanitation
 - Keeping rivers and lakes clean
 - Helping communities prepare for disasters
 - Investing in nature-based projects

Climate Change Is Hitting Home

- 20% of voters lost water service due to extreme weather in past 5 years
- 46% experienced drought, flood, wildfire, freezes, or flooding impacts
- 74% are concerned about future weather-related water problems
- Talking about climate can be polarizing; water can be unifying

Use Simple Terms that describe Impact

- For example:
 - Communities at risk of heat, fire or flooding
 - Communities with high rates of asthma or heart disease

Get Specific

- Green infrastructure → rain gardens, green streets, parks
- Nature-based solutions → healthy forests, natural wetlands
- Agricultural efficiency → drip irrigation, lined canals
- Water quality violations → unsafe lead levels
- Stakeholders → neighbors, farmworkers, consumers
- Recreational users → people fishing, boating, birding
- Health impacts → kids coughing with red, itchy eyes

Humanize! General Messaging “Do”s

- Start with values (family, health, community, fairness)
- Use clear, simple language (avoid technical terms)
- Paint a picture (illustrate with real examples)



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- Describe the impact (rising costs, dying trees, drying farms)
- Focus on the pay-off (cleaner water, safer neighborhoods) rather than the process

Audience Frames & Message Development

Who is your audience?

How to craft an effective message using the VPSA framework.

- **VPSA Message Development VPSA Framework (Value – Problem – Solution – Action)**
 - **Value: Why do we do this work? Why do we want our target audience to act or change their minds?**
 - Example: Every person deserves access to safe water and sanitation.
 - **Problem: Framing the challenges, how does this threaten our shared values? Think beyond statistics and use the power of storytelling.**
 - Example: Millions of families still drink from lead pipes.
 - **Solution: Offer specifics on a better path forward.**
 - Example: Passing this bill would ensure safe water for all households within 10 years.
 - **Action: What should the audience do?**
 - Example: Tell your representatives to support the bill.

Presentation 2: Grasstops Advocacy: Crafting Messages That Work

Speaker: Jared C. Bynum, Environmental Justice Advocate & Organizer

Be Informed

- Community leaders, decisionmakers, and elected officials look to other leaders for insight and guidance.
- Before advocating, learn as much as possible about the topic.
- Prepare for questions, including anticipated counterarguments.
- You don't need to be an expert, but you do need accurate facts.

Understand Your Target's Needs

- Decisionmakers look to problem solvers, not complainers.



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- Decisionmakers have a limited scope to make change: Understand who you are talking to, what they can and can't do, and what options they have in the moment.
- Be prepared to answer questions about the impacts of a policy
- Know when to say "I don't know."

Common questions from legislators:

- Who is impacted?
- How much does it cost? Who pays?
- Why now?
- Who's opposed, and why?
- Who else supports this?

Make It Real

- Decisionmakers already have plenty of facts, stats, and data.
- Your superpower is personal stories — how policies directly affect people.
- Real-world impacts matter more than technical briefings.

Personal Stories Make the Case

- Legislators want to hear actual, on-the-ground impact.
- If you're not directly impacted, find someone who is.
- Direct stories > ideology or second-hand accounts.
- Data provides scale and dimension, but personal context makes it powerful.

No Instant Gratification

- Your top priority is building trust and relationships.
- Success isn't measured by your first ask — you'll interact with the same decisionmakers again.
- Treat legislators as partners, mentors, and allies.
- They want to work with you, and they rely on community insight and feedback.