

# Thirsty California: The Fight for Water Resources

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by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Thirsty California: The Fight for Water Resources**

Following a series of drought seasons, California has tightened its water consumption policies. Interest groups compete for the water allocation policies they favor. Farming groups demand water for agriculture, environmentalists demand more sustainable water allocation practices, and residents demand water for local communities. How do interest groups in California advance their agendas on water resource allocation?

California is a major contributor to the U.S. agriculture sector. However, the future of California's agriculture is imperiled by persistent water shortages. According to the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), California accounts for over a third of the country's vegetable production and three-quarters of the country's fruit and nut production (CDFA, n.d.). Escrivá-Bou et al. (n.d.) state that drought conditions in the Sacramento Valley and North Coast regions have led to a significant decrease in crop yields and a loss in revenue. The agricultural sector has lost about 1.7 billion dollars in revenue while approximately 14,600 jobs were lost in 2021 alone (Escrivá-Bou et al., n.d.). Responses to such shortages include greater diversion of water from ecosystems, causing environmental harm. Person et al. (2022) note that the state's largest farming region has over-drafted groundwater by an excess of 2 million acre-feet annually. According to Cho (2015), the harmful effects of overpumping groundwater include falling water tables and land subsidence, which in turn lead to saltwater intrusion that contaminates fresh drinking water sources. Overpumping also diverts water from lakes and rivers, harming vegetation and wildlife (Cho, 2015). Competition for scarce water resources can also exacerbate community inequities. Underserved rural communities that rely on domestic wells or small water sources are especially vulnerable to the shortage, while those communities that normally use less water on average are unprepared to adapt to the shortage since they have

less flexibility to reduce their use (Person et al., 2022). According to Rodriguez-Delgado (2022), many communities of color and low-income communities have insufficient access to safe drinking water. Furthermore, the California State Auditor reported that the state water system failed nearly one million Californians (Rodriguez-Delgado, 2022). Water supply concerns threaten California's position as an agricultural superpower in the United States, its environmental status, and the equity of access to this vital resource, making it imperative to address this growing problem.

Groups including the California Farm Water Coalition (CFWC), California Water Alliance (CalWA), and the Agricultural Council of California (ACC), advocate for a greater share of limited water resources to be allocated for agricultural use. The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Sierra Club California (SCC), and the Planning and Conservation League (PCL) aim to protect California's natural resources by promoting sustainable and wildlife-friendly water management policies. The Community Water Center (CWC) and the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water (EJCW) promote equitable allocation of limited water resources to underserved communities. Interest groups in California employ innovative strategies to increase their influence on water resource allocation while addressing agricultural, environmental, and communal issues in the face of growing water scarcity. This is achieved through educational outreach, strategic alliances, political advocacy, grassroots mobilization, and fundraising. To maximize the effectiveness of these techniques, interest groups present their positions as just, fair, or beneficial to the public.

Studies that examine how social groups promote their agendas using various social, psychological, organizational, and political techniques are the most relevant to the current work. The current work aims to contribute to the existing scholarship by examining the techniques

nongovernmental groups (NGOs) in California use to organize themselves while increasing their influence on water allocation.

As Folke (2005) argues, knowledge is a key component in managing periods of change. Knowledge is utilized by self-organized groups in managing environmental resources. Some small communities have benefited from the combination of local and scientific knowledge systems to improve natural resource management. Additionally, the author asserts that organizational learning serves as an effective tool for individuals and organizations undergoing environmental change, as it provides a means to accumulate and apply knowledge. Also referred to as “social learning”, this type of learning challenges people’s underlying assumptions and norms, therefore improving their understanding of complex issues. Social learning allows organizations to build a shared vision with others (Folke, 2005). Ritchie (1995) states that NGOs struggle to get the government to adopt a particular course of action. However, lobbying allows them to effectively convey their messages. Ritchie further states that a coalition's worth can be gauged by the services it offers, thus NGOs work hard to provide meaningful outputs that help their members and causes. This is achieved by spreading information, gaining support, promoting policies, raising awareness, and generating hope and enthusiasm among its members (Ritchie, 1995). Binderkrantz (2008) argues that groups with cooperative channels to political and administrative actors often focus their efforts on influencing policymakers with techniques including lobbying and direct political contribution. On the other hand, other public interest groups are more likely to employ tactics such as gaining influence by capturing the attention of the media and mobilizing members (Binderkrantz, 2008).

This work will confirm researchers’ findings on the methods interest groups use to advocate for their cause. Interest groups in California leverage knowledge to spread facts,

observations, and awareness about how they believe water should be managed, challenging traditional viewpoints, which is a form of social learning. Interest groups advocate for their preferred water policy by lobbying through policy critiques and letters. These groups also mobilize members to spread their cause and gain media attention.

This study will add to existing research on advocacy by examining the use of strategic alliances. Additionally, the study will introduce new political techniques, such as litigation, and examine various forms of grassroots mobilization, including events and campaigns. It will also investigate the use of fundraising as an advocacy technique. This study's unique contribution lies in the emphasis on framing positions as advantageous over others, emphasizing the pivotal role of public perception in shaping advocacy efforts.

## **Educational Outreach**

Educational outreach and information distribution are crucial tactics organizations use to further their respective agendas. Interest groups can successfully mobilize support and exercise influence over important decision-makers by providing current and relevant information to the public. They rely on qualitative and quantitative data and observations to support their respective stances.

Through educational outreach, agricultural groups advocate for their fair share of water resources. The CFWC emphasizes the consequences of abandoning California farms, pointing out that each acre left unplanted due to a lack of irrigation water results in 50,000 salads that would not be available to consumers (CFWC, 2022). According to CalWa, the prioritization of fish over agriculture amidst the water shortage has resulted in farmers having to sacrifice up to 800,000 acres annually (CalWa, 2020). The ACC highlights the impact of the Sustainable

Groundwater Management Act on farmers, stating that it is “creating significant heartburn” to a sector necessary to “our long-term future” (ACC 2022a).

Environmental groups use educational advocacy to promote sustainable and environmentally friendly water management practices. The NRDC states that the Bay-Delta water board has regularly provided exemptions for flow and water quality standards, “weakening the standards protecting fish and wildlife and agricultural users in the Delta” (Obegi, 2016). SCC highlights the effect of excessive diversions of water for farming and urban use, noting that “California fisheries are in the worst condition they have ever been in,” which is “jeopardizing the quality of life for which California is famous” (SCC, 2016). The PCL found that there were “Recent dramatic declines in several fish species dependent on the Delta...” emphasizing a need for habitat restoration and water quality control to improve ecosystem functioning (PCL, n.d.-c).

Community advocacy groups engage in educational outreach to promote equitable water allocation within their respective communities. The CWC cites the Human Right to Water, which asserts that “every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes” (CWC, n.d.-a). Furthermore, they highlight that the community of East Porterville was hit the hardest during a drought with more than 300 wells going dry, resulting in thousands losing running water (CWC, n.d.-a). The EJCW found that the most severe impacts of drought were experienced by low-income households, people of color, and communities already burdened with environmental pollution (Feinstein et al., 2017).

## **Strategic Alliances**

By building partnerships with others who share the same goal, organizations magnify their voices and put pressure on decision-makers. Strategic alliances help interest groups overcome financial limitations, expand their reach and influence, leverage additional knowledge and expertise, and provide legitimacy and credibility to their organization.

To advocate for a greater share of water resources, agricultural groups establish strategic alliances. The ACC partnered with the California Rice Commission, Northern California Water Association, California Agricultural Aircraft Association, California Warehouse Association, California Tomato Growers Association, and Western Plant Health Association in launching a website to access information about the California Small Agricultural Business Drought Relief Grant Program (Ag Council, 2022b). Agricultural groups including Helena, Farm Credit, and Harris Farms partnered with CalWa to help them achieve their goals (CalWa 2020). The CFWC thanks its partners and sponsors for the Museum of Science and Curiosity farm water exhibits for helping “support accurate, factual farm water information”(CFWC, n.d.-a).

Environmental groups collaborate with other organizations to promote environmentally responsible water practices. The PCL partners with hundreds of California environmental organizations “to provide an effective voice in Sacramento for sound planning and responsible environmental policy” (PCL, n.d.-b). They also created a robust coalition consisting of civic, conservation, environmental justice, historic preservation, and public health groups, as well as business leaders to protect the California Environmental Quality Act, “the most powerful environmental law in California” (PCL, 2023). The NRDC collaborates with international partners to establish stronger environmental safeguards and “build a better future for us all”

(NRDC, 2021). In addition, they work with the media, brands, celebrities, musical and cultural festivals, art institutions, and social media platforms (NRDC, 2020b).

To create equitable access to water locally, community advocacy groups leverage strategic alliances. The EJCW conducted research concerning drought and equity in California with a grant from the TomKat Foundation (Feinstein et al., 2017). The CWC works with AGUA, which works to combat the contamination of valley drinking water (CWC, n.d.-d). In partnership with Clean Water Action and Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, the CWC released an action plan to address drinking water contamination (CWC, n.d.-e).

### **Political Advocacy**

Interest groups utilize political advocacy to ensure their priorities are met. NGOs write persuasive letters to government officials, support and critique policy matters, collaborate with policymakers, and undergo legal action to serve their respective interests.

Agricultural groups engage in political techniques to prioritize the allocation of water to agriculture. In a letter to the Governor of California, the ACC criticizes the State Senate drought proposal as it could “decimate communities relying upon agriculture as a driver for jobs and a stable local economy,” therefore requesting funds to be dedicated toward protecting farmland (ACC, 2022a). CalWa critiques Senate Bill 1 which restricts water deliveries to the Central Valley, and will “make California even more unaffordable,” stating that they are working with the media to raise awareness about “this dangerous piece of legislation” (CalWa 2021). Mike Wade, the Executive Director of CFWC, scrutinizes the State Water Board emergency water conservation regulation for “reaching farther and farther into our communities,” suggesting that



“politicians and regulators are not doing the work needed to guard our safe, affordable, domestic food supply during these uncertain times” (UnitedAg, 2022).

Environmental organizations practice political advocacy to ensure ecologically sound water allocation policies. The SCC writes to the Governor of California, urging him to “stand up to the Trump administration on its disastrous proposals for the San Francisco Bay-Delta” by leveraging his legal advantages to protect the state’s “fragile and increasingly challenged ecosystem...” (SCC, 2019). The PCL worked with Senator Pavley to establish SB 981 which supports recycled water use while prevailing in a lawsuit against the Department of Water Resources, for their policies will impact the largest water storage facility in the state (PCL, n.d.-a). The project "Modernizing California Water Law" by the PCL aims to reform California’s current water governance structure to protect aquatic ecosystems (PCL, 2021). The NRDC critiques the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service for their water diversion project, citing potential “devastating effects” on threatened and endangered species. As a result, they filed two cases against the agencies (NDRC, n.d.).

Community advocacy groups advocate for more equitable access to water through political advocacy. The CWC expresses support for policy and legislation that protects water access for vulnerable communities during droughts (CWC, n.d.-b). Furthermore, the CWC works alongside the State Water Board’s Division of Drinking Water to set health protection standards against contaminants in drinking water (CWC, n.d.-b). The EJWC seeks to strengthen the Human Right to Water policy by emphasizing the importance of implementing and enforcing this mandate across the state (Thirsty for Justice, n.d.).

## **Grassroots Mobilization**

Grassroots mobilization is used to rally support and mobilize a given agenda. Interest groups unite community members around shared interests, host public events, and promote other forms of engagement to create change through collective efforts.

Agricultural groups use grassroots mobilization to advocate for a greater allocation of water to agriculture. The CFWC hosts exhibits at county fairs, Farm Day programs, and other public forums to give the coalition “direct contact with the public” (CFWC, n.d.-b). CalWa supporters attend the “Take Back our Water Rally,” where hundreds gathered to draw attention to “the bureaucratic decisions that have had devastating consequences for California farmers” (California Ag Today, 2016). The ACC brings together agricultural professionals, members, and allies in an annual meeting to discuss policy concerns (ACC, n.d.).

To promote sustainable and environmentally friendly water allocation, environmental groups practice grassroots mobilization. The NRDC actively works with residents by providing legal tools and expertise to “create the healthy, vibrant neighborhoods they deserve” (NRDC, 2020a). SCC prompts the public to join the Delta Tunnel Campaign entailing that “You don't need to have previous advocacy experience or be familiar with the Bay-Delta Tunnel project” (SCC, n.d.-a). The PCL empowers individuals to take action at the local level by adopting more conservative water usage practices. (PCL, n.d.-d.).

Community advocacy groups rely on grassroots mobilization to advocate for equitable access to water for residents. The CWC's efforts to address the issue of water scarcity in East Porterville included facilitating media coverage and organizing the community under the banner of East Porterville for Water Justice, resulting in over 750 homes being connected to safe, reliable water (CWC, n.d.-a). Their Civic Engagement Program (CEP) focuses on building a

broader base of supporters to enforce more political influence (CWC, n.d.-c). The Thirsty for Justice campaign by the EJCW calls for active civic engagement in water policy by visiting communities in the Central and Salinas Valleys where groundwater has been contaminated by agricultural run-off (EJCW, n.d.-a).

## **Fundraising**

Interest groups employ fundraising strategies to advance their agendas. By soliciting donations or organizing fundraising events, they acquire financial resources to promote their causes. These funds aid in lobbying endeavors, program and campaign implementation, administrative operations, legal expenses, and other advocacy efforts.

Agricultural groups practice fundraising to support their cause for increased water supply. The CFWC urges members to donate so they can further educate the public “about the water it takes to grow our food and fiber” (CFWC, n.d.-c). They also accept donations to the Museum of Science and Curiosity to “bring informative and engaging exhibits about California's farm water” to schools and the general public (CFWC, n.d.-c). CalWa calls for donations to help deliver its mission of improving California’s water (CalWa, 2020).

Environmental groups rely on fundraising to support their efforts in promoting sustainable water policies. The NRDC website provides an opportunity to contribute towards their work and initiatives through a donation (NRDC, 2021). SCC prompts donations on its website to “preserve California’s environment for future generations” (SCC, n.d.-b). The PCL urges individuals to donate because “It has never been more important than it is right now to support our dynamic advocacy efforts that protect our state’s natural resources and quality of life” (PCL, n.d.-e).

Community advocacy groups rely on fundraising to help increase water equity within their communities. The CWC notes that all donations received will “address the most pressing needs...” of communities without access to safe drinking water and provide resources to low-income communities of color (CWC, n.d.-f). They encourage supporters to host fundraisers, such as dinner parties, endurance challenges, bake sales, and birthday fundraisers (CWC, n.d.-g). The EJCW gains support through individual donations, in-kind donations, and percentage donations when shopping on supported websites (EJWC, n.d.-b).

Various organizations are working towards combating the water scarcity issue in California. These groups must engage in effective communication and outreach efforts to protect the state’s agriculture, environment, and communities. The techniques of educational outreach, strategic alliances, political advocacy, grassroots mobilization, and fundraising can be utilized by interest groups in other areas such as healthcare, technology, education, labor, and energy. The approach of presenting positions as just and fair can be used by organizations seeking to garner public support. It is valuable for future researchers to examine the effects of advocacy techniques on individuals, specifically in the context of achieving effective water management. Researchers should see if these organizations influence people’s thought processes and whether they are effective in sparking the change they seek to achieve. Utilizing theories and methodologies from psychology and sociology will help researchers understand how these advocacy techniques affect attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to water management. Methods including surveys, experiments, and interviews are optimal for understanding these thought processes. This research can be applied to other regions that face resource scarcity, where competing groups vie for the most influence. Because this study examined small non-profit organizations, it can also help understand how groups with limited connections and financial resources can still be somewhat

influential. This research was narrowed to the way groups mobilize in response to a water crisis and compete for limited resources, rather than examining those who are working to prevent the issue altogether. The study's focus on adaptation means that it did not fully explore the potential benefits of mitigation strategies, which aim to prevent or reduce the severity of the crisis itself. Future research should examine if there is a difference between the ways groups fight for their own interests when adapting to a disaster, versus when working to prevent the disaster from occurring in the first place. To examine this, it would be effective to gather information about the various groups involved including agricultural, environmental, communal, and political groups, and the strategies they use. Climate data may help understand how groups address the underlying problem, as it exacerbates water scarcity through its effect on precipitation patterns. Existing policies and regulations concerning climate change and water management are also important in understanding the context in which these groups operate. By examining the advocacy techniques of organizations working towards the common goal of ending an issue, we can learn how to work together towards solutions that benefit everyone, rather than engaging in divisive tactics that only serve to benefit certain groups while discrediting others. This may help gain a more comprehensive understanding of how to address a water crisis and other competitive issues. Although most interest groups are motivated by self-interest, there are methods to address scarcity without undermining the legitimate concerns of any group. Meeting everyone's needs can be a challenging task, especially when resources are scarce, however, a collaborative approach is a promising avenue to explore.

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