

ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation envisions a California that manages, stewards, and conserves its water and land to support a resilient environment and healthy communities. This snapshot, prepared as the Foundation nears conclusion in 2020, documents essential aspects of the Environment Program's water portfolio.



Water portfolio

 S. D. BECHTEL, JR.
FOUNDATION
STEPHEN BECHTEL FUND

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation's water program is rooted in the belief that California can manage its water to meet the needs of people and nature – but only if these needs are considered together and only if management strategies jointly address surface water, groundwater, water quality, and flood protection challenges.

Goal

Ensure that water management is informed by research, grounded in best practice, and enabled by sound policy so that California transitions to a water system that meets the needs of people and nature – and is resilient to a changing climate.

Approach

- ▶ Demonstrate the effectiveness of integrated water management solutions; pursue state policies and incentives that support sustainable water management.
- ▶ Strengthen the water field by supporting leadership development, organizational capacity, and strategic partnerships.
- ▶ Mobilize researchers to produce high-quality knowledge and engage policymakers; elevate data as a water management priority, including establishing data norms and advancing information systems.
- ▶ Engage other grantmakers in water solutions and support funder collaboratives.

Progress¹

- ✓ **The Central Valley addressed flood risk.** In 2012, local leaders adopted the comprehensive Central Valley Flood Protection Plan, which incorporates ecosystem goals.
- ✓ **The state reformed groundwater management.** In 2014, California passed the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, landmark legislation establishing a statewide regulatory framework.
- ✓ **Water data became more open and accessible.** In 2016, California passed the Open and Transparent Water Data Act; this legislation and Foundation-funded partnerships including OpenET, the Internet of Water, and the California Water Data Consortium make timely, accurate data available to decision makers.
- ✓ **Los Angeles County financed efforts to address stormwater.** In 2018, local voters passed Measure W, a parcel tax supporting the County's Safe Clean Water Program; it is projected to collect \$300 million per year.
- ✓ **Drinking water quality gained needed resources.** In 2019, California created the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund with up to \$130 million annually; first state to advance the UN "Human Right to Water" Resolution.
- ✓ **Philanthropy increased investment in freshwater systems.** In 2014, the Foundation helped launch the Water Funder Initiative, which has already coordinated and aligned more than \$345 million in grantmaker support, including \$80 million in new funding.



Lessons Learned

- ▶ **Flexible, multi-year funding is essential.** Grantees operated in an inherently dynamic context, continually responding to the hydrologic and political realities of California. The Foundation worked closely with these organizations to build their core capacities, enhance their resilience, fund their work beyond initial commitments, and support their ability to pivot and create impact as windows of opportunity opened.
- ▶ **Supporting improved policy can result in large-scale change – and requires implementation resources.** For example, after the passage of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act the Foundation provided additional funding for community engagement, technical assistance, and network coordination to ensure high-fidelity implementation.
- ▶ **Intermediaries add value.** Through intermediaries, including the Foundation-seeded Water Foundation as well as community foundations and the Sierra Health Foundation, the Foundation was able to pool resources and fund a much broader range of projects and organizations than it otherwise could have. In turn, intermediaries grew their expertise, connections, and capacity.
- ▶ **Funder collaboration calls for a distinct mindset and organization-wide involvement.** Experience showed that making collaboration part of everyone’s job elevated the approach in practice. When trustees, presidents, and staff from collaborating organizations joined in convenings and meetings, it brought energy and excitement that encouraged existing partners to do more, and attracted new funders to join in water grantmaking and partnerships.

Opportunities

Water management requires integration – and collective mindsets and practices.

California, and the world, are grappling with a pandemic, severe climate impacts, a recession, and racial injustice. Water is connected to each issue, and the field will need to address these challenges in an integrated fashion. Success will require unprecedented collaboration, sustained resources, and humility. In particular, grantmakers can no longer work in isolation, provide episodic investment, and hoard power.

Leadership development is a systems intervention with long-term benefits.

Policy wins are only possible through authentic, diverse, cross-sector partnerships, and they are only effective if there is sustained support for leaders who can guide implementation. Funders can support and learn from a range of leadership development programs that uplift community voices and support the power of marginalized groups.

¹ The Foundation believed that policy plays an important role in systemic change and that advocacy is a key strategic tool for influencing policy. The Foundation supported organizations that engage in issue-based policy and advocacy, including raising awareness, building networks and coalitions, nurturing champions, conducting research, etc. The Foundation did not earmark funds for lobbying activities as defined by the Internal Revenue Code and applicable Treasury Regulations, nor for reportable lobbying activities as defined by the California Political Reform Act or the federal Lobbying Disclosure Act.

Resources

- *Toward Water Sustainability: A Blueprint for Philanthropy* (2016), Water Funder Initiative
- *Managing California’s Water: From Conflict to Resolution* (2011), Public Policy Institute of California
- *California’s Water: Paying for Water* (2018), Public Policy Institute of California
- *Water and the Future of the San Joaquin Valley* (2019), Public Policy Institute of California
- *Internet of Water: Sharing and Integrating Water Data for Sustainability* (2017), The Aspen Institute
- Environment Program [snapshot](#) on capacity building (2020), S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation
- [Chapter 3](#), Sooner Rather than Later: The S. D. Bechtel Spend-Down Series (2020); includes information on the Environment Program as well as the Foundation’s overarching approaches to capacity building



The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation invests in a productive, vibrant, and sustainable California through two program areas – Education and Environment. Learn more and access the series of program snapshots and reflections: sdbjrfoundation.org.

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