

Extension water outreach extends source water education to the Treasure Valley

AT A GLANCE

Water is integral to life in the Treasure Valley, yet climate change and rapid urbanization are pressuring groundwater availability. Extension water outreach is informing the public about “water wise” practices.

The Situation

The University of Idaho Extension Water Outreach program spans the state, but over the last dozen years has focused mostly on the water quality issues in northern Idaho. Water education in the Treasure Valley originates with the Public Works Departments of Boise and Nampa, Bogus Basin, Ada County Soil and Water Conservation District, other agencies and non-profits, and UI Extension to a limited degree. Most education focuses on water quality and pollution prevention topics, with some conservation topics and limited water supply topics present. Incorporating groundwater and water supply topics into water conservation education across the Treasure Valley and throughout southern Idaho will empower the public to make “water wise” choices as individuals and as a community.

Our Response

University of Idaho Extension Water Outreach teamed up with the Idaho Water Resources Research Institute (IWRRI) to obtain competitive funding to hire a dedicated water educator for the Treasure Valley area. The new water educator worked with Boise State University (BSU) and IWRRI to conduct a robust water education needs assessment. The needs assessment included semi-structured interviews conducted jointly by



Water Educator Christa Howarth teaching about source water to Boise School District's Environmental Field Experience.

Boise State University and University of Idaho, and additional unstructured interviews with concerned water experts conducted by University of Idaho Extension and IWRRI. This helped us understand the range of existing water education programs, identify which organizations and agencies had capacity to engage in water education, and where the education gaps were. We then began building presentations and programs to help meet those needs.

Program Outcomes

We found there are five categories of water education organizations: 1) State and federal agencies, 2) city and local governments, 3) non-profit organizations, 4) universities and 5) drinking water suppliers.

Cities and non-profits have the staff and facilities to develop strong education and outreach capacity. Many municipalities and county governments operate under federal and state permitting processes that require a specified amount of funding or effort go towards water-related education programs. The capacity of state and federal agencies varies based on mission and administration. The agencies and government entities devoted to water regulation have limited time and resources for outreach.

Strong partnerships exist between many organizations and agencies across the valley, which is a huge strength for water education. Extension water outreach will be building on these partnerships and working closely with each of these organizations to co-develop and leverage educational resources, and to develop strong, consistent messaging.

Extension water outreach intends to meet the needs of all audiences, but there are vast differences in needs. Elementary school children receive more water education and outreach than middle and high school students, who have more demanding class schedules and requirements. Adults primarily receive education through groups they choose to participate in or information they seek out. Adults also face information overload and are generally interested in information that is relevant to them.

Finally, there’s a lot to cover related to water: drinking water, stormwater, snow science, water conservation, stream/pond biology and groundwater are all specific areas of inquiry. Strong water quality, stormwater and snow science education exists through a variety of organizations. Groundwater supply and water management education is more limited. And our needs assessment found there are mixed messages about the water supply in the Treasure Valley. Extension water education is working with a wide range of water purveyors and researchers to unify data informed messaging and education around water conservation. To get started

on the outreach needs, Extension water outreach joined a team of writers from BSU and IWRRI to help update the informational Treasure Valley Water Atlas.

UI Extension Water Outreach, Idaho Water Resource Research Institute and BSU have submitted a grant application that, if awarded, would fund an additional water educator and valley wide water data literacy outreach for adults and high school students.

Extension water outreach will leverage the strengths of community partners to implement the successful northern Idaho watershed curriculum, The Confluence Project and the Youth Water Summit, in Treasure Valley high schools.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

The organizations in Table 1 and more have signed letters of commitment to facilitate The Confluence Project.

Organization	Type	Typical Audience	Confluence Project Role
Idaho Water Resource Research Institute	University	High school, adult	Leadership
City of Boise WaterShed	City	K-12, families	Leadership
City of Nampa Public Works	City	K-12, families	Outreach
Ada County Soil and Water Conservation District	County	Elementary	Leadership
Department of Environmental Quality	State	Adults	Outreach
Veolia	Utility	Elementary, adults	Leadership
Bogus Basin Snow School	Nonprofit	K-12	Outreach

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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