

# ROADMAP TO BETTER

# DECISIONS



# From the Institute for Science & Policy

**We bring diverse people together to talk about complex, societal issues that matter to them, their community, and our future.**

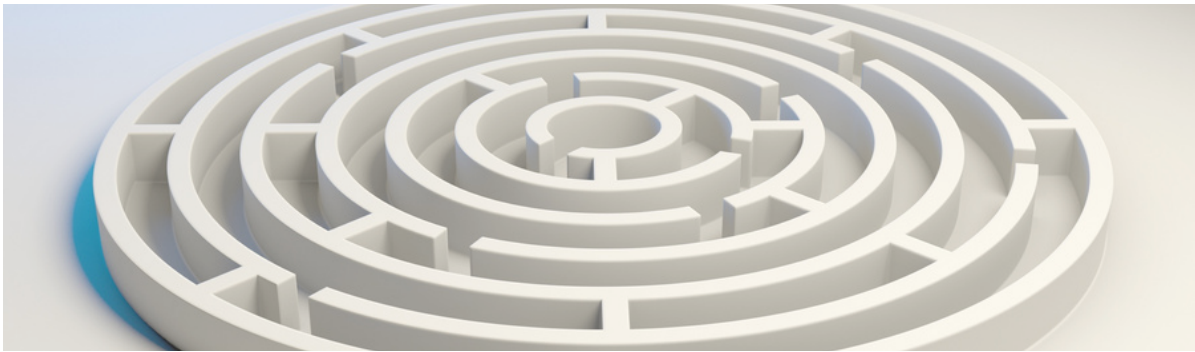
We strive to build bridges and relationships among people who may not have the opportunity to learn from those with conflicting or opposing points of view. In 2022, the future of Colorado's water – under increasing pressures from climate change, growing populations, and an overstressed system – was a target focus of our work. Using our ability to convene, we hosted a series of discussions working towards greater awareness and new ideas on how we can use science and coalition building to shape the future of water in our state.

We recognize that systems change is difficult, taking significant amounts of time, effort, money, and influence. But we also know that incremental change – that starts at the individual, relational level – can make a huge impact by creating a ripple effect beyond any one person. From the beginning, we wanted this convening to be about the participants, their experience, and their needs. The convening discussions were a space for people to be vulnerable, ask questions, learn from each other, test ideas, build relationships, and work towards a greater understanding of how their own work or role could be most impactful.

This document serves as a reflection on the process, highlighting the approach and lessons so that not only the participants can continue having much-needed difficult conversations but also others who want to do the same. There are ways that we can all engage in more productive, thoughtful dialogue. But it takes effort, a capacity to be open to new perspectives, and a willingness to build trust.

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# Executive Summary



When wicked problems arise in society, the outcomes are often unclear and reaching a solution may be just as difficult as the problem itself.

Wicked problems are those that have a seemingly infinite number of solutions, interconnections to other problems, and incomplete or contradictory knowledge needed to solve the problem. These problems do not have an easy “fix” and interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for effective change.

The Colorado River Basin is facing a 20-year mega drought, exacerbated by climate change. The increase in dry conditions and extreme heat, resulting in aridification, is creating long-term impacts for Colorado irrespective of the ongoing drought. From reduced snowpack to increasing evaporation of surface water due to rising temperatures, the pressures on the water cycle are layered. The 100-year anniversary of the Colorado River Compact reminds us of the importance of collaboration, as well as the changing conditions and inequities in the legal frameworks that have governed water law in the West.

From July through October 2022, a diverse group of local leaders, decision-makers, and

community members came together to discuss the difficulties of developing solutions to the challenge of managing water in the West.

They focused on solutions that were multi-disciplinary, far-reaching, and forward-minded, involve many diverse stakeholders and groups, and reduce losses. Through a process of collaborative conversations, idea sharing, and envisioning ideal futures, the cohort realized that engaging and sharing perspectives from across the state may have been more valuable than any individual solution itself. In designing a process for convening Coloradoans to discuss the future of water and climate in our state, the groundwork of trust and relationship building must come first.

Within this roadmap is the process taken to start having these difficult, yet essential conversations. This roadmap can serve as a guide so that others can change the way they work on difficult problems, no matter what context or problem is at hand.

# Executive Summary



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A special thanks to the participants for showing up, sharing their perspective, and engaging in tough conversations. Each engaged as individuals, rather than representatives of their organizations, and this report should not be attributed to any one individual listed below.

Cindy Chang, Groundwork Denver

Happy Haynes, Denver Parks and Recreation

Heidi Pruess, Climate and Sustainability, Larimer County

Jaime Garcia, Getches-Wilkinson Center for Natural Resources, Energy, and the Environment

James Henderson, Farmer & Rancher, Colorado Farm Bureau

Kathleen Curry, Gunnison Basin Roundtable

Kelly Mahoney, NOAA Physical Sciences Laboratory

Maria Garcia-Berry, CRL Associates

Mike Camblin, Rancher, Camblin Livestock

Nora Flynn, Colorado Water Conservation Board

Raquel Flinker, Colorado River District

Russ Schumacher, Colorado State University

Sara Porterfield, Trout Unlimited

Stefan Tangen, Great Plains Tribal Water Alliance

Tahlia Bear, Western Resource Advocates

Taishya Adams, Colorado Parks & Wildlife Commission

Tony Massaro, Business for Water Stewardship

Travis Bray, Denver Water



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# SCOPE THE PROBLEM

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Does the issue have multiple competing interests, sides, or perspectives?



Is there a sense of urgency around this issue or a sense that something should be done today?



Is the “how” to solve this problem elusive?

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If the answers to these questions are yes, then this approach to dialogue might serve as a useful tool.

Scoping the problem is sometimes the hardest part. It can feel too big, too daunting or too intractable. But it is sometimes those challenges that make for rich discussions and unique ideas.

When scoping a problem for this type of work, identify one that would benefit from dialogue, listening, and relationship building. Most modern problems are deep, complex, and seem intractable. So going in with a desire to completely “solve” will ultimately lead to frustration and disengagement. Instead, approach the problem as a question where there are many solutions. It’s also important to research priorities, recent or pending decisions, and successes and failures. Putting soft boundaries around the scope will help keep it focused – such as geography, time frame, or subject. It’s also important to distinguish between technical problems (if we build a bigger reservoir, then this town will have water to meet its needs) and educational problems a homeowner needs to know how to reduce their water consumption), where the solutions are straightforward. This type of work benefits problems that often have competing values and interests, involve political and policy implications, require collective action, and impact the public.

# SCOPE THE PROBLEM

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## How did we scope the problem?

In 2022, Colorado was facing myriad problems when it came to water, as well as lots of attention on the issue. For example, it was the 100-year anniversary of the signing of the Colorado River Compact, the state was experiencing the effects of a 20-year drought, a draft of the second state water plan was about to be released, and tensions were rising among varied interests and groups working in the water space.

While water use has been a topic for debate for hundreds of years in the West, many people want to rethink the way that we collaborate, learn from each other, and make decisions. We know that greater empathy, engaging different perspectives, and creating a safe environment to explore information and biases will lead to better decisions.

Another factor was that water management and law are complicated, deep topics that require years of practice to understand, which makes it difficult for many people to engage in meaningful ways. The complexity of these topics creates inherent barriers and creates a new challenge for those with deep topical knowledge to communicate in ways the public can understand so that they can make informed decisions. Engagement must be accessible so that everyone can engage, not just subject matter experts. It also means that trying to “solve” a crisis that affects the drinking water and livelihood of millions of people does not have a neat or easy solution. It may even seem impossible. Trying to unpack these wicked problems – with multiple actors, multiple perspectives, and many potential solutions – was ideal for this type of convening. These factors and more made for a good opportunity to host an in-depth conversation with a diverse group of stakeholders.



# COME TOGETHER

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Identify the key voices and participants to form the group, focusing on unusual perspectives, collaborative mindsets, diversity, and those not usually at the table



Set expectations and guiding principles for engagement that focus on openness, empathy, confidentiality, and trust



Create an environment that is inclusive, welcoming, and neutral



Value people's time in a way that is equitable and respectful by evaluating payment, comfort, and needs based on someone's experience and organizational support

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There is immense value in sharing different perspectives. Yet there can sometimes be barriers to engagement that must be addressed for people to feel respected and valued. Before any conversation can occur, understanding and designing for the unique needs and perspectives of all the participants requires the utmost attention.

To create a dynamic group, identify voices that will add to the conversation by bringing a range of expertise, experience, and perspective. Include participants from groups whose ideas may be contradictory to the perceived goals. The scope will change throughout the process as new ideas are shared and interpreted. Consider involving voices that some people don't want to hear from and reflect on their reasoning and what working through that conflict can add to the conversations.

Having diverse and different representation throughout the group can be challenging as people often disagree. However, the group must only agree that there is a problem that needs to and can be solved. Each may have a different understanding of the problem and how to solve it, but that initial agreement opened the door for collaboration. Everyone has a specific and unique perspective that comes with its own strengths and value. Remember to integrate each other's ideas into the work by supporting truly collaborative processes and discussions.



# COME TOGETHER

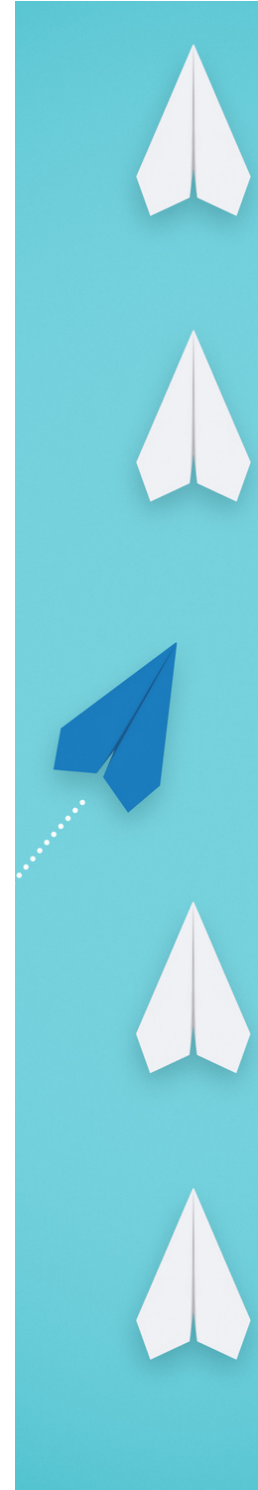
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## How did we bring people together?

We began by creating a master list of the sectors in the Colorado water space: water providers, recreation, agriculture, science, policy and law, development, conservation, water users, as well as indigenous and tribal groups, community leaders, and non-profits. From there, we worked with a group of advisors to compile a list of key organizations, groups, and people and began narrowing our list, ensuring that we had representation from the above, with even distribution across both urban and rural, and representation from each of the river basins in the state. We wanted to make sure that for each sector we identified there were multiple participants so that different views could be expressed. As the group was beginning to take shape, we filled in gaps as needed to ensure a wide breadth of voices were included. We had discussions with participants in advance on their interest and commitment to the convening, as well as what types of perspectives they would like to hear from and would add value to their work. As the convener, co-creating the list of perspectives with the participants can add value to the group and reduce gaps you may be unaware existed.

Even still the group was not perfect, and there is no magic formula. From the very first meeting, we discussed which perspectives were missing and revisited this question throughout. The group was even asked to channel those missing voices. For future conversations, perspectives from finance, and urban planning, and real estate development, among others, would have been valuable.

We purposely capped the group at a small number of less than 20 participants knowing that throughout the process there would be attrition and scheduling conflicts. It felt important to start small to be able to build relationships and trust. For future iterations of the convening, the group discussed adding additional members as schedules and the needs of the group change. For example, during discussions on potential solutions the perspective of developers and builders would have been helpful. But changing the original make-up of the group can bring its own challenges – such as changing the group dynamic, impacting existing relationships, and needing to build trust with a new participant – much of which takes shared experience and time to form.



# COME TOGETHER

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When building the cohort, we made sure that we were not only including overlooked or marginalized perspectives, but also valuing their time and resource needs to participate. We did so by monetarily compensating those who were providing personal experiences or emotional labor for the education of others, and those whose daily duties do not include this type of work. We ensured that anyone traveling from outside the Denver metro area was provided travel and lodging. We also made sure to have meals that accommodated all dietary needs and provided food throughout the long days. We built in multiple breaks into the schedule and allowed time for casual conversation and personal networking to help build relationships. We were fortunate to host the convening at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science – a neutral site with no affiliation to specific policies, political affiliations, or viewpoints. We ensured that people sat next to different participants at each meeting and designed small group activities so that diverse perspectives could be heard. We were attuned to the physical space and aimed to ensure a comfortable and welcoming room where people could be heard and seen.



# BUILD TRUST & IDENTITY

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Spend time allowing participants to get to know one another, including outside of the agenda



Develop capacity to understand biases, value systems, and ways of communicating



Give space for people to be vulnerable in identifying their strengths and needs



Facilitate conversations that allow for time to process, give half thoughts, and opportunities to speak freely

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Building trust between the participants, as well as creating a shared identity of a group, is crucial for making progress on any wicked problem.

Many of our hardest problems to solve include tension, divisiveness, posturing, and fear. To break through some of this, a safe space needs to be created that allows participants to represent their feelings, beliefs, ideals, and values. Using a “closed door” or Chatham House Rule approach gives participants that ability to speak more freely. Participants share their affiliation, experience, and expertise, but are also encouraged to speak from and about their personal perspective. By not tying each participant to an organizational or professional position, participants are able to be vulnerable during difficult conversations. Treating participants as individuals can help reduce polarization, particularly when distrust of certain groups is high. Although, it is important to acknowledge that this process and aspects of some of this work may need to be done in an open and transparent way, and the public should be informed, especially if there are outputs or recommendations.

## How did we build trust and group identity?

We strived to create an environment where people could comfortably, safely, and voluntarily talk about their needs and wants for the future of water, water management, and addressing climate change in Colorado. As a group, we wrote and agreed upon a set of guiding principles to follow throughout the process. These guidelines also had shared principles for participation and collaborative engagement, including:

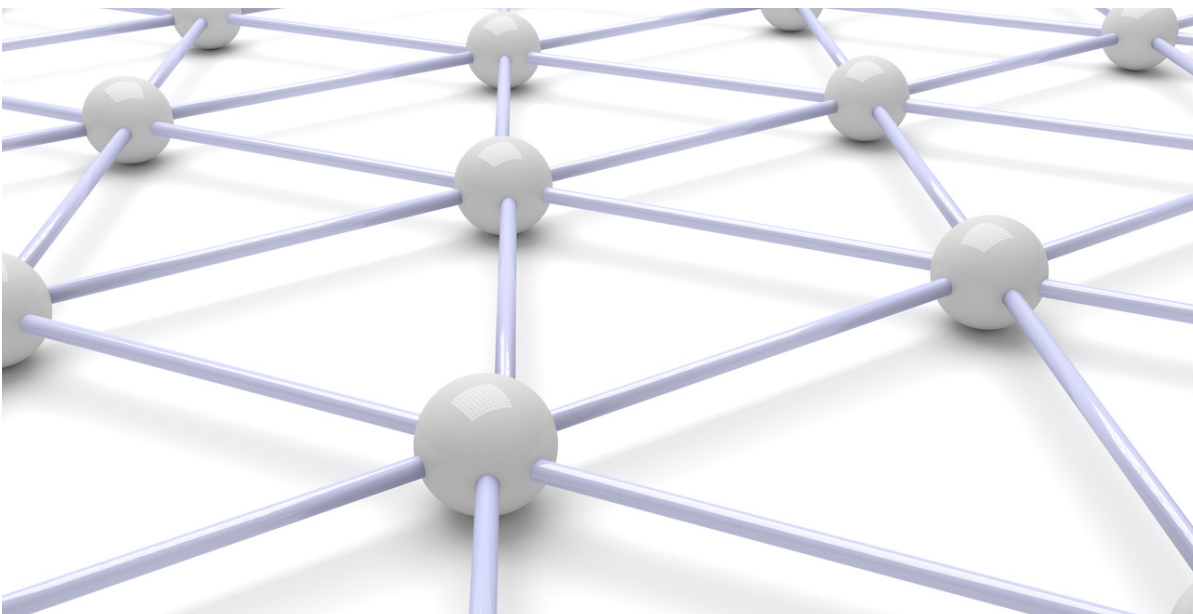
# BUILD TRUST & IDENTITY

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- Understanding each other's interests, respecting that those interests can be divergent, and working toward dialogue that values diverse interests.
- Focusing on science, challenging inherent biases, and orienting toward outcomes.

We also created a list of discussion guidelines to foster productive working relationships throughout all meetings. We began each meeting with a reiteration of the discussion guidelines, updating as needed, and a verbal agreement to adhere to them throughout each discussion.

We strove to reframe how we view conflict and how we interact with each other. To do this, we employed strategies for listening and reframing our ideas and our preconceived notions by asking questions, questioning our assumptions and biases, and listening with intent. We wanted participants to increase their awareness of inherent biases and create a common understanding that shared learning and level setting of complex topics (like water policy) can benefit the group. Shared learning and level setting, however, can take time with a small group and short timeline. One thing that was provided to the group in advance was a background document highlighting key policies, history, scientific and legal concepts, and some current issues. Additional considerations are always needed to mitigate how much learning needs to be done to ensure productive conversations while recognizing that participants can rely on each other for that knowledge.



# CREATE A SHARED VISION & INSPIRE HOPE

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Dream BIG: Allow for creative and future looking scenarios that are not constrained by reality



Identify the similarities and acknowledge the nuances in the differences, allowing for disagreement



Language matters: Spend time seeking to understanding versus assuming that there is agreement

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Visioning allows us to move past the obstacles of the present and travel into a future, creative world that resonates with our feelings, hopes, and ambition. A shared vision allows participants to find common ground, where they may have least expected it, and learn to be flexible when there isn't agreement. The purpose of creating a shared vision is that it creates buy-in to the process and gives people a sense of the hard work of social change to achieve it and ownership in wanting it to come to fruition.

When doing this work, we must continually remind ourselves of successes, highlighting how those were accomplished, while also recognizing how we got to a place where this wicked problem exists in the first place.

## How did we create a shared vision?

Throughout the meeting, we created opportunities for learning and stage setting. A short lecture about applied history and posterity provided participants with opportunities to engage in framing and reshaping our existing knowledge. We also learned about the art and science of persuasion, reflecting on our biases and ways they can block progress, and some factors that can contribute to better decision making. Through group discussion, we reflected on our values and how to update our thinking and challenge our biases.



# CREATE A SHARED VISION & INSPIRE HOPE

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We also evaluated a number of case studies of water challenges that had some level of success. These included examples of projects that involved multi-stakeholders and resulted in wins for all parties involved. This framing of success and acknowledgement that success is possible helped to set up positivity in a space where conversations are difficult and viewpoints can be negative surrounding what progress can realistically be made.

Our goal for a shared vision was asking participants to create a future in Colorado where water is not scarce and each person in the room felt successful in their role to help achieve that vision. After spending a full day together, each participant felt comfortable sharing their vision with the rest of the group. While there was overlap in many of the visions and the outcomes were similar, the path to that vision was different for every person. Participants reflected on how hard this work will be and require significant commitment from all. We discussed how everyone has unique needs that need to be considered and how even this did not encompass all the needs (including missing perspectives). We did all agree, however, that we should focus on win-win-win solutions that feel proportional and equitable.



# TALK ABOUT SOLUTIONS & TRADEOFFS

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Value history and be open to new ways of thinking and approaches to the problem



Strive for as many wins and benefits, for as many groups, as possible



Recognize that small wins can add up, and not every solution has to fix every problem



Acknowledge tradeoffs as being inevitable and not to be ignored; think about them through different lenses and blind spots



Embrace and continuously acknowledge this work is difficult and focus on the possibility of progress and change

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Deliberation takes place every day in our personal lives. It's the act of deciding what choices to make or opportunities exist to help solve a problem. It's about weighing options: the pros and cons, the costs and benefits, the consequences and tradeoffs.

The value of creating a space for open, informed dialogue is that it helps us find more common ground, trust, and honesty when faced with difficult discussions about what actions should be taken and what tradeoffs need to be made. Without effort and relationships, conversations about solutions and tradeoffs are when things can fall apart. Keeping the group focused on the larger vision and goal will help when things feel intractable.

# TALK ABOUT SOLUTIONS & TRADEOFFS

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## How did we talk about solutions and tradeoffs?

As the convening went on, we kept the shared vision centered in the discussion and began evaluating pathways to get there. We wanted to find solutions that benefited as many people as possible and minimize losses. Each conversation was focused on things within our control, and yet we encouraged imagination and creativity in any solution that was presented. Reducing inequities and negative impacts across the state was a key point of discussion. This often meant that if a group or sector would be impacted negatively by a decision, then how could that be minimized or offset by creating opportunities or adding value somewhere else.

The participants engaged in good faith, meaning that the future of Colorado is more important than their personal interests. This allowed us to explore options and ideas that weren't necessarily tied to an organization or person's agenda, consider priorities rather than specific decision points, and reflect on what has worked and should be considered in solutions. When discussing trade-offs, we recognized the difficulty of knowing all possible outcomes due to the perspectives that were missing. However, this just emphasizes the importance of having a diverse group and process that allows for the exchange of ideas and voices that are representative of our community's needs. While discussions about impact and consequences of decisions often left people feeling like there were no easy solutions, there is value in thinking through complexity and focusing on collective impact or small steps forward.



# IDENTIFY PATHWAYS FOR IMPACT

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Create new partnerships and relationships to advance learnings



Give people the tools to carry forward

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When we encourage people to examine where their ideas and biases stem from and to be open to other viewpoints, we recognize collaboration as a necessary tool for problem solving. The ability to connect with people with different perspectives and ways of thinking can help build a community of trust and understanding. It's about building individual capacity to evaluate, grow, empathize, and withstand the difficulties of working on societal problems. Providing the tools and environment to connect as a community with shared goals is what enables progress.

## How did we create a pathway for impact?

Throughout the process we realized the relationships and connections that were made were just as important as the work towards solving the western water crisis. The problem became less individualistic as we expanded our thinking to include the perspectives brought together in the room. One of the most impactful parts of this effort was bringing together people from across the state, over the course of many months, to share their stories, learn from each other, and ask questions they couldn't always ask. The personal connections between participants were invaluable, as this group now has a broader network to rely on in their day-to-day work on this issue.

We hope that as we each continue to reevaluate the way that water is managed, utilized, and acknowledged here in Colorado that the members of this convening cohort will be involved in those conversations and will leverage these tools and relationships going forward for the greatest positive impact.

# REFLECTIONS

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This process was not easy. It was messy and the conversations were emotional.

Water is essential to life and to our state, and to our participants it is their livelihood and their passion. It is challenging to question the way things can be done and realize that maybe things should be done differently. Even still, participants wanted to talk to people with different backgrounds and learn from them to truly understand different ways of thinking, different ways of managing water, and different ways of doing work.

Building trust by respecting others and harnessing the power of collaboration is something we hope will stay with our participants in both their professional and personal lives. Some of our participants shared their takeaways below.

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*"A memorable moment for me during this convening was very early on when one participant used some language to describe water that caused others to bristle visibly. It was a reminder that while water affects all of us, we all have unique views on it, and some of us, because of our professional roles, are entrenched in our profession's way of thinking. Because we were so early on in the meeting and the day's mood was in jeopardy, participants were encouraged to hash out the meaning of their words instead of tamping down difficult feelings. Too often, we hear something that makes us uncomfortable and wait to process it until we're back in our own comfortable echo chambers. It was a great moment for practicing patience and listening."*

*"While participants came from many different backgrounds, viewpoints, and experiences, we all cared deeply about our state and our water and recognized how closely we are linked to our environment. We all strived to understand each other and to work together for the common good."*

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*"The need to continuously engage diverse voices was a clear takeaway for me. We are so fortunate to have expertise across our State that, if harnessed together, could truly help us be ready for the future. I could certainly utilize more convenings around these critical community topics to help inform my own projects and community initiatives."*





# The Institute for Science & Policy

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