



Integrating Economic and Racial Equity into Water Decisionmaking

Fostering Resilience: Leading on Sustainable Water Solutions

October 26, 2016

Panelists

- **Nancy Sutley**, Chief Sustainability & Economic Development Officer of the LA Department of Water & Power (LADWP)
- **Laurel Firestone**, Co-Executive Director, Community Water Center, CA
- **De'Sean Quinn**, Water Quality Planner, King County WA & Councilmember, Tukwila, WA
- **Jessie Buendia**, Community Benefits and Social Responsibility Manager, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission
- Moderator: **Debbie Franco**, Community and Rural Affairs Advisor and Local Drought Liaison, CA Governor's Office of Planning and Research

The What and Why of Equity

Jessie Buendia, Community Benefits and Social Responsibility Manager at the [San Francisco Public Utilities Commission](#), stressed the importance of understanding that there is a difference between equality and equity. "Equality means we believe that everyone should be treated the same, that there should be the same service because we have the same needs, with the idea that there's a level playing field. What equity does is challenge some of these assumptions to say that because of institutionalized racism and inequality, we don't actually start out with a level playing field, and that there are various and specific needs." Buendia explained that SFPUC prioritizes equity with focused initiatives in capital planning, especially service equity, contracting equity, and stakeholder outreach and engagement.

Laurel Firestone, Co-Executive Director of the [Community Water Center](#), provided context about California's leadership in establishing access to safe, affordable water and sanitation as a human right through the state's 2012 law. "There are a variety of decisions made by state agencies and local implementers on a regular basis that can help or hurt our ability to achieve a basic level of equal service and access to water." Firestone stressed the importance of engaging communities "because the people that are most impacted need to be driving the decisionmaking that affects them and be truly a part of that process."

De'Sean Quinn serves as both a Councilmember in Tukwila, WA and a [water quality planner with King County](#), and he emphasized the central importance of equity in his work for both roles. “Equity is, to me, meeting people where they are.” He pointed out that often conservation initiatives incorrectly assume that people of color aren’t already prioritizing environmental justice. “The reality is, we as people of color are engaged in environmental work, and we deserve to be considered in information that is put out by agencies, and to be engaged at a high level.”

Identifying Inequities

Nancy Sutley, Chief Sustainability & Economic Development Officer at the [LA Department of Water and Power](#), explained the utility’s innovative work to develop equity metrics. The utility has nearly one million water customers, serving a diverse population by income, race, and ethnicity, making equity “an important issue in terms of making sure that we are able to reach every Angeleno, because our mission is to provide them with safe, reliable, low-cost water and power, and to do that, we have to be able to meet them where they live.” Sutley describes that this framework was bolstered with leadership from LADWP’s board, appointed by the Mayor, in pushing for better metrics to determine the true impact of their decisions on the utility’s customers. The metrics – [adopted as official policy by board resolution in 2016](#) – are used to identify disparities in service reliability, rates, contracting with diverse constituencies, reach of efficiency programs, and access to employment and training.

Firestone spoke about historical disparities driving present inequities in California water systems. “In order to address inequities, we have to be able to identify what peoples’ needs are and listen, in terms of where people are experiencing inequities, what would be most effective in addressing those, and how we got there.” She provided context about historical disparities in political power (and thus also water) that centered white, wealthy landowners while creating policy to explicitly push communities of color to the margins of cities and prevent access to city water systems for these unincorporated areas; these challenges continue today in many areas adjacent to, but not part of, cities – particularly in the West.

Buendia underscored the importance of understanding historical and ongoing inequities. “A lot of cities across the country are challenged like San Francisco in that we have a history of policies and programs that have had negative impacts on communities of color. That has resulted in a serious trust deficit, where communities of color don’t trust their local governments and often they don’t see themselves really represented in the systems under current processes,” Buendia noted. SFPUC has begun to build partnerships in communities by providing community benefits, such as investments in education and training in underserved neighborhoods. “We believe that it’s our job to ensure that we are leveraging our resources and provide real benefits to communities we serve.”

Advancing Solutions

Quinn described the development of [King County’s equity initiative](#) and its applications in water management. Established in 2010 under the leadership of County Executive Dow Constantine, the initiative examines disparities and potential solutions to build equity across a range of residents’ needs, from access to affordable transportation, housing, services such as water, to disparate outcomes in the justice and educational systems. Quinn has led implementation of this framework in the County’s water resource planning, a key component of which is the use of demographic mapping to track impacts of proposed plans on people of color and low-income people. The County has also expanded job training

programs. Whether examining the type of current and future capital facilities serving a neighborhood, or considering installation of a beneficial green infrastructure tool, the equity focus has transformed water planning in King County.

Firestone urged utility leaders to implement affordability programs, as well as to look outside existing service area boundaries to communities in need of access.

As Sutley noted, “you have to ask the questions” – correctly identifying existing inequities is a necessary step to find the best infrastructure solutions. “There’s the optimal engineering answer, and there’s the public policy and equity answer, and hopefully those two work together well, but until you ask the right questions and start to look at the indicators and data, it is hard to have the conversation without talking past each other.”

Buendia highlighted SFPUC’s leadership as the [nation’s first utility to adopt racial justice policies](#). She recommended a range of solutions: create a sense of urgency around the need for environmental justice; prepare people of color to sit on utility and other boards; develop equity policies agency-wide; include equity in levels of service and capital planning; use tools like triple bottom line analysis; [rework contracting to prioritize equity](#); develop project labor agreements and partnerships to [realize community benefits](#). She pointed to the [Government Alliance on Racial Equity](#) as another resource in this work.

In the discussion that followed, moderator Debbie Franco, Community and Rural Affairs Advisor and Local Drought Liaison in the California Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, recommended direct install programs as a more equitable efficiency upgrade program than appliance rebates.