

Legislation and Communications Committee



Results of Focus Groups on Water Issues and Public Trust

Item 6a

May 13, 2024



Metropolitan Water District Focus Groups *Conducted December 2023*

Research Approach

- ▶ This qualitative research project was designed to gather feedback from Southern California residents on overall trust in agencies and institutions generally, and in organizations like Metropolitan specifically.
- ▶ The groups were also designed to generate discussion around specific water-related issues, namely water supply and water quality, and to engage participants as to whether and how their views toward those issues impact their opinions of an agency like Metropolitan.

- ▶ Total of 8 focus groups.
 - 4 groups with Engaged Community Members.
 - 4 groups with Bottled Water Consumers.
- ▶ Conducted online and facilitated by a trained, professional moderator.
- ▶ Mix of key audience segments, including gender, language, and household income.

Focus groups are qualitative research and findings are, by design, not meant to be projected onto a larger population.

Key Findings: Trust in Public Agencies

- ▶ Most participants were strongly distrustful of politicians, government, and corporations. Skepticism has developed from years of perceived inaction or failure to deliver on promises.
- ▶ While most local agencies did not face the same level of skepticism, participants were hesitant to extend their trust to agencies they knew little about.
- ▶ Though many were aware of water supply infrastructure projects and programs, few knew who is responsible for these efforts.
- ▶ Awareness of Metropolitan Water District was low.
- ▶ Metropolitan's low name-recognition insulates the agency somewhat from the distrust placed onto other government bodies.

Key Findings: Trust in Water Quality

- ▶ Participants had relatively high awareness of water supply issues, including drought and water conservation efforts in the area.
- ▶ For many, their preference for bottled water was now a lifestyle choice rather than an active decision based on dissatisfaction with their water.
- ▶ Few saw the financial or environmental cost as a deterrent from buying bottled water.
- ▶ Most had not personally tested their water or checked quality reports, but assumed their water would be unclean.



Trust & Skepticism

General Mood

- ▶ A general feeling of pessimism is pervasive. Trust in government has been severely eroded in recent decades.
- ▶ For a majority of participants, government and politicians are viewed interchangeably; failures of politicians diminish trust that anyone will keep their promises.

“...we see a lot of politicians [...] you see people making talking points so they can get a clip on Fox News [...] and no one's really actually addressing the issue in a meaningful way...”

“We're not in these rooms or on these boards. How do we know if we can trust these folks? How do we know if they're doing a good job? What would that even mean?”

- ▶ Participants were frustrated by perceived lack of progress or lack of success in dealing with big water-related issues.
- ▶ Many believed more rainwater should be captured.
- ▶ Some felt that water supply just shouldn't be an issue in California.
- ▶ Desalination and other large-scale projects were perceived as too expensive and impractical.

“...when there was a lot of heavy rainfall, there were a lot of areas that were flooded [...] And that water could have been reclaimed and unfortunately it wasn't.”

- ▶ Many pointed to “profit incentives” as the source for their trust in private companies.
- ▶ There were indications that public agencies such as Metropolitan could be an effective check on private company and citizen behavior.

“If [a private company’s] reputation sucks, they're not going to make money. Nobody's going to go to them and buy their products or use their services.”

“You need the regional organizations. The water has to get from the Colorado River to my bathtub, it doesn't just magically appear. Someone has to build the pipes and have the water flow through.”

Key Components of Trust

- ▶ **Transparency.** Participants want agencies to share as much information as is practical.
- ▶ **Demonstrated track record; demonstration projects.** People want to see results so they can judge for themselves. They also responded favorably to what they felt were new or novel approaches, such as shade balls in reservoirs.
- ▶ **Independent, third-party validators.** People appreciate third-party validation in addition to self-promotion.
- ▶ **Pure motivations.** For many, a factor of trust in government agencies centered around the fact that they don't have a profit motive and that they are working purely for the public interest.

Perceptions of Metropolitan

- ▶ Awareness of Metropolitan is very low. Some had heard the agency name but there was little specific knowledge of the agency.
- ▶ Some liked the concept of a regional agency overseeing the smaller local water agencies, while others wondered why there was a need for so many different agencies.
- ▶ For some participants, the lack of awareness was an opportunity to develop trust in Metropolitan since they had not heard anything bad about them.
- ▶ However, many opinions were neutral, not strongly negative nor positive. Participants' base-level skepticism of government kept positive opinions muted.



Water Issues

Water Supply

- ▶ Water supply and drought were top-of-mind concerns for most participants.
- ▶ Most recognized that water supply is still an issue in Southern California despite 2023 rains.
- ▶ Many participants say they had personally reduced their water usage, particularly for outdoor landscaping.
- ▶ A recurring perception was that California's water supply issues stem from inefficient management, not lack of rain.

“All of these individual campaigns, while important, I think wouldn't move the needle as much as if we were to build these huge infrastructure and make investments.”

Water Quality

- ▶ Detailed knowledge is very limited, but there are perceptions that tap water quality may be an issue generally.
- ▶ Participants assessed their water quality on many factors, including taste, smell, clarity, and how it felt on hair and skin.
- ▶ Despite overall mistrust and skepticism, many indicated they would trust a water quality report from their water agency. Few had any awareness or knowledge of their own water quality reports.

“If someone handed me a Japanese book, I would believe it's a Japanese book, but I wouldn't understand it... it's kind of the same thing with the water report. I can read it, but it doesn't necessarily inform me.”

“I have it filtered, but from what I see in the report, they're constantly improving the quality of the water. I do tend to believe what the reports say.”

Bottled Water

- ▶ For many, the preference for bottled water was a learned habit, not a reaction to a specific complaint against their tap water.
- ▶ Some noted that water quality concerns in other locations, like Michigan or Mexico, pushed them to err on the side of caution with their own tap water.

“Somebody comes over to my house, oh, God forbid I couldn't pour them a regular glass of water. You have to get a bottled water.”

“I think it all started in the late '80s with bottled water companies advertising on TV, like Arrowhead and Evian and Perrier. That's when the move went into bottled water.”



Conclusions

Conclusions & Recommendations

- ▶ Skepticism and mistrust is pervasive and has been built up over years.
- ▶ Perceptions of government have been soured by instances in which people believe the government (or politicians) didn't deliver on promises.
- ▶ Metropolitan may benefit from effectively communicating the success of its own efforts to address and improve Southern California water supply issues; particularly any new or novel approaches.
- ▶ Communicating the mission-driven work of Metropolitan on water supply and water quality may help distinguish these efforts. People want to believe that their government is working for the public good, not for self-interest.



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