

ISSUE BRIEF

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND WATER DATA: HOW CAN CALIFORNIA MAKE DATA WORK FOR DECISION MAKERS?

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I. INTRODUCTION: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN CALIFORNIA WATER DATA

Much attention is focused on water data in California, and for good reason. California is struggling to make decisions that adapt its water systems to pressures such as climate change and population growth. Fully informed decisions are impossible without accurate and accessible data and information to support them. California already produces immense amounts of water-related data. However, agencies and stakeholders currently struggle to bring these data together to support routine decision making. Overall, we lack any systematic understanding of whether and how existing data can support the needs of decision makers.

California state agencies are working hard to plan and implement more effective water data systems in California, spurred in part by the Open and Transparent Water Data Act of 2016 (AB 1755).¹ The law, which charges state agencies with integrating water and environmental data, has presented a major opportunity for changing the way we think about, use, and improve our currently fragmented trove of water data. The nonprofit California Water Data Consortium recently launched, with the aim of fostering collaboration among experts and stakeholders during the implementation of AB 1755.² A primary focus of these initiatives is on increasing the usability of data for water-related decision making. However, whether and how California can improve data systems in a way that informs decision making may hinge upon civic engagement of water data users.

In this issue brief, we build upon the premise that civic engagement in water data—which we define here as participation of public, private, nonprofit, and community water data users and decision makers in issues around water data availability and data system design—is an important part of ensuring that data are useful and used to inform water decisions.³ This issue brief is motivated by two key questions:

- What is the ideal role for civic engagement in the production of California's water data systems?
- How can we concretely enable civic engagement to inform investments in water data?

To address these questions, we interviewed water data experts from California and elsewhere.⁴ Based on these interviews, we argue that civic engagement is crucial, but greater