

URBANWATERS

FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP

Restoring Urban Waters, Revitalizing Communities

Los Angeles River Watershed (Los Angeles, California)



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Overall Assessment of the Partnership since the Beginning

In 2011, John Kemmerer of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Los Angeles convened a core group of Los Angeles River and Watershed leaders to explore how the federal government could better coordinate and expedite local projects aligned with the vision of restoring natural function to the River and increasing green infrastructure benefits throughout its watershed. What began as a conversation among a dozen participants has evolved into a forum for coordination, integration, and exchange of ideas among a diverse set of stakeholders.

As a reflection of how LA River revitalization impacts not only the natural environment but patterns of land use, intersections of public space with infrastructure, transportation corridors, and community economics, the Partnership has grown to over 45 organizations and agencies that represent a diversity of interests.

The partnership is over 5 years old, and yet membership continues to remain consistent and even adding new participants. Members have expressed that the partnership is the “big tent” that establishes a common narrative that diverse organizations embrace and work within- an endeavor that is often difficult to achieve among stakeholders that represent physical and

cultural geographies across a vast landscape. The term “safe harbor” has also been attributed to the partnership as recognition that under its banner; partners can focus on collaborating, not competing.

While there is a focus on the local agencies and organizations responsible for the implementation of revitalization work, the Urban Waters Los Angeles River Partnership has created a surprising benefit to its federal partners as well. Rather than serving the stakeholders, the over 9 agencies and sub-agencies locally involved are seen as peer stakeholders, and have noted they benefitted from regularly coordinating agency priorities and activities directly with local members. Likewise, local agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) develop working relationships and become better acquainted with an otherwise opaque federal processes and culture. Conversely, federal agencies have become more familiar with the perspectives of NGOs and their constituencies.

Due to the successes of the Los Angeles River pilot site, the local partners wanted to maintain the Urban Waters Federal Partnership and the funding of an Ambassador. The Department of the Interior (DOI) National Park Service and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service, with funding support by The Nature Conservancy, currently fund the Ambassador position.

Nature of the Partnership

Los Angeles River stakeholders function much like a family, in which relationships are functional and frequent, informal communication creates opportunities for business. This is a prolific time for projects along the river, as well as throughout the watershed. Stakeholders often see each other weekly at meetings, city hearings, or at gathering places where partners have offices.

The partnership serves to give some structure to this interaction, without stifling it and, notably, without adding to meeting fatigue. Quarterly partnership meetings take the form of mini-retreats during which partners report out, share information about resources, tools or new initiatives, and solidify action items among collaborators. This is also a time to confirm priorities for the group, as well as to identify knowledge or resource gaps that the Ambassador and leadership team can work on addressing.

The Urban Waters Los Angeles River Work Plan also acts as a reminder of the common narrative across the partnership. In the time between partnership meetings, the Ambassador actively engages partners in “shuttle diplomacy” to facilitate the group’s priorities and projects. Also, the Ambassador forms loose working groups that can showcase work, thus increasing

capacity for the entire group. Examples include: developing mapping systems or data management, native plant resources, relationship building with potential funders.

Members of the Partnership

41 total participating agencies/organizations

Federal Partners

- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Department of the Interior (DOI)
- Department of Transportation (DOT)
- Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- National Park Service (NPS)
- NPS-DOI Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance
- National Weather Service
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)
- U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
- USDA Forest Service
- U.S. Geological Survey
- Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco

Non-Federal entities

- Ascencia
- Amigos de Los Rios
- Arroyo Seco Foundation
- California State Parks
- City of Glendale
- City of Long Beach
- City of Los Angeles
- City Plants
- Council for Watershed Health
- County of Los Angeles
- East Yard Communities for Justice
- ELP Advisors
- Environment Now
- Friends of the LA River

- Geosyntec
- Heal the Bay
- California High Speed Rail Authority
- LA Conservation Corps
- LA Waterkeeper
- Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board
- LMU Center of Urban Resilience
- Mia Lehrer & Associates
- Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority
- Neighborhood Housing Services of LA County
- North East Trees
- Public Counsel
- Rivers and Mountains Conservancy
- Southeast Asian Community Alliance
- The Nature Conservancy
- The River Project
- TreePeople
- Trust for Public Land
- UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability
- UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs

The primary forms of engagement are:

- Partnership meetings (including subgroup meetings)
- Email distribution list
- 'Shuttle diplomacy'

Organizations for Planning and Action; Plans Developed and Timing, Consensus Process

Each version of the Work Plan has a life cycle of approximately 2 years, with the third version currently in development. From the earliest days of the partnership, local federal leadership felt it vital to populate the Work Plan in a thoughtful and democratic way so the projects included truly reflected the consensus of the group. In turn, Work Plan projects also carried the benefit of being designated through this consensus project. A contracted facilitator assisted the federal lead and the Ambassador with a full-day retreat in which criteria for inclusion was developed and projects were nominated, debated, and ultimately selected as Work Plan priorities. Among the criteria, projects were required to: a) be fully developed and embraced by the responsible jurisdiction, b) have specific and measurable action steps, and c) have a clear role for federal engagement.

The number of important projects related to the River or Watershed exceed the 25+ designated as Work Plan priorities, but are nonetheless encompassed within the context of the Urban Waters work. This recognizes that even the Urban Waters work occurs within a mosaic of diverse and significant work, both big and small, that supports the revitalization vision.

Major Actions Taken since the Beginning of the Partnership

In 2015, the Partnership joined the City of Los Angeles and Mayor Eric Garcetti in celebrating the U.S. Army Corp of Engineering Civil Works Review Board finding support for the restoration alternative that represented the most comprehensive plan supported by communities and stakeholders. The partnership's "big tent" was instrumental in assisting stakeholders to maintain a coalition of supporters and enabled participating federal agencies to stay informed and contribute comments in the review process.

The portion of the Los Angeles River within the City of Los Angeles was designated a National Historic Trail in 2016 and the partnership coordinated efforts between the City and the National Parks Service to fulfill this priority. This was a great accomplishment for partners in the larger quest to bring attention to the Los Angeles River as a natural resource and not just a blighted stretch of flood infrastructure. The pronouncement of an "official place" also has paved the way for stakeholders to seek a variety of recreation and transportation funding to establish trails and greenway along the river's banks.

Many park and open space projects are underway partly due to the collaboration generated from the Partnership. For instance, The Trust for Public Land constructed a riverside park in the San Fernando Valley using multiple funding sources, including Community Development Block Grant through the City of Los Angeles and HUD. Ongoing phases of the project are utilizing EPA Brownfields Assistance grants to build a bike path and greenway to increase connections to the river park, filter stormwater, and create habitat.

Major Impacts of the Partnership

The public acceptance and celebration of a new vision and actualized projects along the Los Angeles River has also led to unintended consequences.

While the inflation of property values and development pressures were anticipated, few stakeholders were prepared for the speed at which displacement and community gentrification impacts reached critical levels. What started as a community-led vision with public dollar investment, transformed into competition with private interests. Moreover, less-than-transparent transactions threatened public (and Urban Waters) goals for social equity and the accrual of revitalization benefits to disadvantaged and historic neighborhoods that have endured the divisive and sometimes blighting influence of the channelized River.

The Urban Waters Partnership, as a representative of community equity in publicly-funded projects, was a vocal proponent of a return to the transparent, community-led roll-out of the revitalization. This empowered community advocates and many partners to speak out on behalf of impacted communities and in favor of a public process. One notable outcome of this pushback was the work of California Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon in the legislation he crafted (AB 530) to create mechanisms for transparent planning and coordination, including a Master Plan Working Group for the Lower LA River that will conclude 29 months of work in the summer of 2018.

Major Actions Planned in the Future

The partnership will work to revise the work plan to be relevant to present-day, evolving revitalization efforts in the Los Angeles River Watershed. The updated work plan will represent changing priorities by LARW partners and will empower the Ambassador to provide support for certain projects. The partnership will continually support the Lower LA River Working Group in the development of a Revitalization Master Plan. Many partners have expressed interest in providing locally-sourced native plants for ecosystem restoration as authorized by U.S. Army

Corps of Engineers and the LA River Revitalization Master Plan. The Ambassador has convened a working group that would develop standard operating procedures on seed collection and plant propagation and help implement pilot nurseries to increase the supply of native plant material for ecosystem restoration and landscaping work. In addition, the working group is planning to create a native seed bank to supply plant material for watershed restoration, to educate the public about native seed resources, and create jobs in green infrastructure. Another potential focus is to integrate urban forestry and watershed research from the USFS Los Angeles Center for Urban Natural Resources Sustainability.

Major Challenges in the Future

There is no funding to offer partners and limited incentives to participate for organizations whose projects are not included on the Work Plan. Communicating to partners that consistency of participation is crucial, even if they do not have a current project on the burner. The Ambassador has limited capacity to provide project/program assistance. Public affairs and communications requires greater Ambassador capacity, which may be resolved through a hiring of an intern. Also, quantitative metrics for the UWFP impact (outputs, desired outcomes, impacts, context) are difficult to produce. Therefore, the projects on the Work Plan must represent the shared narrative.