




From nature to tap, from farms to food, from toilet back to river, there is just one water cycle.



While nature provides water, it takes pipes, pumps, reservoirs, treatment plants, and people working 24/7 to deliver clean water to homes and businesses, and to remove and treat wastewater so it can safely be reused or returned to the environment.

The One Water Approach

The One Water approach envisions managing all water in an integrated, inclusive, and sustainable manner to secure a bright, prosperous future for our children, our communities, and our country.

One Water approaches are progressing in multiple arenas: from using advanced technologies to recover nutrients and energy from wastewater; to using green stormwater techniques to mitigate flooding while beautifying neighborhoods; to undertaking watershed-level planning and collaboration to address water quality issues; to implementing innovative financing and partnership models. A One Water approach can take many different forms, but has some unifying characteristics.

The hallmarks of One Water are:

A mindset that all water has value. One Water starts with the recognition that all water has an intrinsic value—the water in our reservoirs, rivers, lakes, seas, streams, and aquifers; the water we drink; the water used for food or energy production or for industrial needs; the water we waste or turn into waste flow; and the water that runs off from our lands and farms. All water can and must be managed carefully to maximize its benefit.

A focus on achieving multiple benefits. One Water leaders design and implement projects and programs with a focus on achieving multiple benefits—economic, environmental, and social. The One Water approach recognizes that the resources we have do not match the level of investment needed to achieve a sustainable water future. One Water leaders therefore design and implement projects that seek an optimal balance among programmatic costs, benefits, and priorities—looking across economic, social, and ecosystem needs.

A systems approach. One Water embraces water's complexity and interdependence, the multiple actors that affect water resources, and the ecosystem's reliance on those resources. One Water recognizes that if we tackle problems based on the complete life cycle of water and larger infrastructure systems—rather than limiting ourselves to one piece of the equation—we can identify and advance more effective and lasting solutions.

Watershed-scale thinking and action. The One Water approach recognizes that water must be managed in ways that respect and respond to the natural flows of watersheds and the natural ecosystem, geology, and hydrology of an area. It is within the context of a watershed that communities either have too much water, too little water, or poor quality water. It is within the watershed context that communities must reconcile their water demands with the imperative to sustain the resource for future generations. Watershed-level management brings together regional partners from within and beyond the water sector in joint planning and collaborative action to protect the shared natural resource that is essential for health, agriculture, industry, aquatic species, forests, wildlife, recreation, and life itself.

Right-sized solutions. One Water solutions require a focus on the appropriate scale of intervention to achieve the desired outcome. For example, focusing green infrastructure projects in a few square blocks of an urban neighborhood may be the best investment for addressing flooding that affects that community. Or watershed-scale planning and action might be necessary to harness the natural geology and hydrology of an area to achieve water quality goals.


Partnerships for progress. One Water recognizes that all sectors are part of the solution to a water-secure future. No one stakeholder group—whether it's water utilities, agriculture, businesses, community organizations, environmental advocates, or policymakers—has the control, responsibility, expertise, political support, or legal authority to manage the sources of pollution, the impacts of climate activity, or even the consumption rates of water. Partnerships and collaboration are the cornerstone to progress.

Inclusion and engagement of all. One Water recognizes that when all people have a stake in ensuring a water-secure future, we achieve the best results. Low-income people and communities of color are often disproportionately impacted by environmental justice and equity issues, and that includes clean, safe, reliable water. One Water leaders are committed to robust community engagement in planning, decision making, and water stewardship. One Water strives to achieve equitable outcomes and leverages investments in water systems and water resources to build stronger communities, a clean environment, and thriving local economies for all.

One Water is a transformative approach to how we view, value, and manage water. In the following section, we describe how the guiding principles of One Water are being utilized to forge progress in communities across the country.

A photograph of three surfers in black wetsuits walking away from the camera on a sandy beach. They are carrying surfboards under their arms. The sun is low in the sky, creating long shadows and a shimmering reflection on the wet sand. The background shows a clear blue sky and a distant horizon line.

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An aerial photograph of a river winding through a rural landscape. The river is the central focus, flowing from the top left towards the bottom right. It is bordered by a thick, vibrant green line of trees. On either side of the river, there are large, flat fields. The fields on the left and right are a rich brown color, indicating they have been plowed. The fields at the top of the image are a bright, lush green. The overall scene is a mix of natural and agricultural elements.

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