

ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation envisions a California that manages, stewards, and conserves its water and land to support a resilient environment and healthy communities. This snapshot, prepared as the Foundation nears conclusion in 2020, documents essential aspects of an Environment Program initiative.



Community Foundation Water Initiative

 S. D. BECHTEL, JR.
FOUNDATION
STEPHEN BECHTEL FUND

The Environment Program's water portfolio supports California's transition to a sustainable water system that meets the needs of people and nature. Achieving this transition will depend on effective networks of local, regional, and statewide organizations able to demonstrate solutions and build constituencies of support. Learn [more](#) about the water portfolio.

Initiative Overview

In response to an historic statewide drought, the Foundation launched the Community Foundation Water Initiative in 2015 to address the effects of severe weather in five distinct regions and build philanthropic expertise to advance water solutions in these places. Initiative participants were, from north to south, the San Francisco Foundation, Silicon Valley Community Foundation, Central Valley Community Foundation, California Community Foundation (Los Angeles), and The San Diego Foundation.



Approach

The Initiative featured three elements of Foundation support for community foundation impact.

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| A Direct grantmaking | ▶ | Community foundations re-granted these funds to build the capacity of local nonprofits to address water issues, grow and share knowledge about regional water topics, and enhance leadership from public agencies and other entities vital to water solutions. Foundation grant funds also offset the costs of community foundation participation in the Initiative. |
| B Peer learning and collective action | ▶ | Community foundations chose Smart Growth California, a respected funder network, to support their efforts to identify and implement high-value collective activity. Smart Growth California facilitated quarterly in-person meetings featuring interaction with experts, peer exchange, group decision-making, site visits, and unstructured social time. These half-day sessions rotated among community foundation hosts. |
| C Pooled fund | ▶ | Community foundations accessed this resource to pursue shared learning and explore opportunities for aligned and collaborative efforts. Pooled fund allocation decisions were governed by a memorandum of understanding developed by participants and administered by Smart Growth California. |



Progress and Impact

- ✓ **Developing and sharing regional water knowledge.** Community foundations increased their understanding of challenges and opportunities associated with addressing water within their regions, gaining deeper knowledge of nonprofit capacity, public perception, research and data, policy, and approaches to integrating water within their institutional priorities.
- ✓ **Supporting frontline organizations to advance equitable and sustainable regional water management.** Community foundations re-granted Foundation funds to local organizations, creating impacts including increased community representation in planning water infrastructure projects, integrating water in regional climate change plans, and improving access to water-focused green jobs.
- ✓ **Connecting regional work to statewide policy goals.** Through the pooled fund, the community foundations commissioned a statewide report on the intersection of land use, water, and equity. The report, titled *Bringing Water and Land Use Together*, and included in the Resources section below, provided recommendations for integrating water and land use tailored to the specific needs and priorities of different regions and at different scales. In a second phase, five local organizations partnered with the community foundations to develop action plans based on these recommendations.

Lessons Learned

▶ **Flexibility allowed community foundations to integrate water into their existing work.** At the Initiative's outset, none of the community foundations had existing programs explicitly devoted to water issues. The Foundation recognized that offering flexibility and enabling each to approach water through its own lens was important to address unique regional needs and extend the lifetime of the Initiative's impact. Rather than start new programs, the Initiative helped community foundations integrate understanding of water into their respective priority areas – i.e., weaving water into their efforts to support equity, agriculture, land use, housing, workforce development, and more.

▶ **Dedicated funding for collaboration and network infrastructure was crucial to the Initiative's success.** Coordination and facilitation support from Smart Growth California was essential to enabling group learning and pursuit of collaborative activities. Relatedly, it was important for community foundation staff to have time to participate in quarterly Initiative events. Foundation funds offset the cost of staff time and travel expenses. Each community foundation had two representatives in the Initiative; this approach helped ensure that collaborative work continued even with staff turnover.

▶ **Initiative connections expanded the reach of participants.** Through knowledge sharing and collaborative action, community foundations were able to extend their influence and visibility across the state. At the same time, the Foundation's work benefited from the local knowledge, networks, and other assets of these place-based funders.

▶ **The Foundation's multi-year investment provided time for the Initiative to reach its full potential.** Individual community foundations and their grantees faced significant learning curves to understand water issues in the context of their regions and their institutional priorities. Community foundation re-granting initially focused on research and relationship development before shifting to planning and then implementation. Similarly, community foundation collaboration required investment in relationship building and learning about the water circumstances and dynamics for all regions involved.

"At its core, climate change is an issue of equity. Because climate change disproportionately hurts underserved communities, it makes sense for community foundations to invest in water sustainability opportunities with the frontline organizations already working on issues of advancing equity."

– REMY GOLDSMITH, SILICON VALLEY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Resources

- ["Community Foundations are Working for Water Sustainability,"](#) S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation
- ["Bringing Water and Land Use Together,"](#) Local Government Commission, commissioned by Initiative participants
- ["Community Foundations are Local Change Agents for Water Sustainability,"](#) Smart Growth California
- ["How a California Water Funder Turned to Community Foundations to Get Local,"](#) Inside Philanthropy (paywall)

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation invests in a productive, vibrant, and sustainable California through two program areas – Education and Environment. Learn more and access the series of program snapshots and reflections: sdbjrfoundation.org.