WSN Visioning Internal Assessment – Reflections from the Network

Introduction

In 2022, Water Solutions Network leaders engaged Network members via multiple avenues to envision the Network's future. WSN and a third-party consultant conducted a Network-wide survey; Network and Advisory Council members shared their perspectives at various meetings; Network leaders dialogued with members in one-to-one conversations, and the consultant offered and sought out confidential interviews to gather missing perspectives and offer Network members a channel to frankly share their views. The survey sought perspectives on WSN's niche, values and vision, recommendations on what activities WSN should maintain or add in order to achieve its objectives, thoughts on improving the network, and usage of WSN tools. Interviewees were asked about their experience with and assessment of WSN, their ideas for its future, and their thoughts about how it could achieve its objectives of sustainable and equitable California land and water stewardship.

This document summarizes the key themes and ideas offered on which WSN aspects and activities to preserve, and those areas that could be improved upon, or that might offer opportunities in the future to accomplish WSN objectives.

What to Preserve

In helping to define WSN's niche, survey respondents and interviewees identified certain areas where WSN offers something, through its **curriculum** and/or its **objectives and areas of focus**, not available elsewhere in the water and land sectors in California. Those unique areas of WSN strength include:

- Training and developing skills in building trust, relationships and networks; effective communication and listening; and collaborative multi-interest solution-building
- Seeking to bridge across jurisdictional, sectoral, disciplinary and geographic silos
- A focus on prioritizing equity in the land and water sectors and engaging diverse, underrepresented voices
- Embracing innovation and interdisciplinary and systems thinking
- Supporting dialogue around real and difficult, crisis-level issues
- Challenging the status quo and supporting transformational change

Other WSN strengths that would be valuable to preserve include:

- **Work to sustain the Network**
    - Strengthening and sustaining the Network by offering relationship-building and collaboration opportunities
    - Visiting sites as a group to share best practices and lessons learned to inform practice
    - Joint Network learning and collaborative projects, such as the Watershed Framework development process
- **Priorities, activities and organizational culture**

- Bringing together high-level leaders nearing retirement and those rising in their field for cross-sector and cross-generation learning and mentorship
- A culture of learning, responsiveness and adaptation
- Watershed-based gatherings or trainings that bring people together across silos and build regional networks and collaborative capacity
- Collaborative hands-on activities such as restoration work that can assist in team-building and result in concrete actions and outcomes
- Opportunities in collaboratively clarifying core values
- Teaching the value of taking a step back to look at the big picture, including values, purpose and goals, before moving to action

Where WSN Can Improve into the Vision

Network members identified certain areas where WSN could increase its effectiveness and impact, including ways to advance equity and expand inclusive Network participation, options for enhancing training curriculum and delivery, and ways to support and extend the functioning of the Network.

A. Ways to advance equity and expand inclusive participation

A major theme for Network members was identifying ways to improve how equity is addressed in WSN trainings and projects, and how to improve equity and inclusivity within the Network. (Ways to work externally to improve equity in the land and water sectors are listed on Page 5, Section B within a separate section focusing on advice and future opportunities for WSN.)

Internal equity training

- There is interest in the Network in more enrichment and training on DEI.
- It can be challenging to find a DEI training and discussion approach that works for all participants in a group that ranges from those with extensive experience in DEIJB and thinking about equity to those encountering this content and its demands for self-examination for the first time, and to conduct those experiences in a way that challenges individuals to grow and gain understanding of others while protecting members of the group who might feel harm or hurt. It was recommended that experiences be carefully designed, planned, and facilitated to increase rather than decrease trust and mutual understanding; best support learning, growth and equitable relations; and ensure that resources, support, and interventions are available to help each participant feel valued and safe. DEI sessions have the potential to not only expand equity but also to spark group energy and to produce change and individual transformation.
- For future trainings, conduct baseline or onboarding DEI training for White people or others who may not have been exposed to the ideas and concepts or engaged in self-reflection on these issues, so they can get up to speed without people of color needing to witness
- Reserve sensitive DEI discussion for in-person sessions

- Bring in experienced outside faculty/facilitators with a record of achieving change in a way that works for widely diverse groups
- Provide opportunities for training participants to get to know others' challenges, opportunities, day-to-day experiences

Inclusivity and belonging in the Network
- Proactively seek to fill gaps in diversity in the Network, including Blacks and Native Americans and representatives from agriculture, the private sector, and underrepresented geographic areas of California, who may have different views on the vision
- Seek to engage those in the public health field, an important perspective for both water management and equity issues
- Schedule trainings to accommodate those with less capacity to get time off work or employer compensation for attending
- Seek feedback from the Network to identify blind spots or areas where BIPOC people may experience that white fragility is being centered
- Generate buzz around trainings via outreach and hosting informal gatherings for prospective participants to meet Network members
- Ensure any future cohorts are composed of a diversity of geographies, perspectives, classes, ethnicities, gender, those working in the private sector as well as government and civil society, and people from urban, suburban and rural areas
- Acknowledge inequitable dynamics in the state's water and land sectors

Suggestions for encouraging and sustaining participation by those in the land sector
- Craft language in outreach materials to include more land sector-specific information about who might want to take trainings and what they will gain
- Recruit proactively through irrigation districts, farm bureaus, at land-related conferences, and by engaging leadership at land management agencies to gain approval for involving mid-level employees
- Use snowball sampling through the Network to seek contacts
- Ensure land-management as well as water content is incorporated into curriculum, such as how wildfire affects water supply

B. Program curriculum, design, and delivery
- Craft curriculum for a wide range of learning styles and orientations, including those with more linear, practical approaches, for introverts and well as extroverts, and ensure the participants understand in what contexts various tools could be used
- Ensure that the abstract, philosophical components of the training are grounded in the context of land and water stewardship, so trainees are learning about those sectors as well as the leadership concepts, and understand how to use the tools to take action
- For remote or hybrid sessions, consider using interactive platforms such as Teams or Slack to support group communication and collaboration

- Consider providing more guidance for group projects or convey the pedagogic and experiential goals of giving minimal direction
- Ensure participants enter a training understanding potential time demands
- Be prepared to intervene proactively if a lesson goes off-course, participants are unable to determine how to collaborate with each other, participants fall back into non-collaborative ways of working with each other, or if conflict resolution support is needed
- If an objective of a training or project is to builds trust and allow for differences, facilitate and intervene in a way that values all individuals and viewpoints, even if the views expressed differ from the WSN philosophical approach
- Enforce guidelines consistently and transparently
- Facilitate and intervene actively and promptly in a nonjudgmental way to support participants in practicing and embodying collaborative skills and to introduce new tools if tools in use aren't working, with the goal of ensuring that training achieves the goals of advancing collaborative culture and supporting participants in building trust and relationships and embodying collaborative values
- Use experiences in the session as learning opportunities and discuss lessons learned in a way that is sensitive to the range of feelings in the room

C. Ways to sustain and strengthen the functioning of the Network
- Organize informal regional social or informational get-togethers (implemented in 2022), and retreats to nurture cross-Network and cross-cohort relationships
- Coordinate Network-wide collaborative projects such as the watershed framework planning
- Host more in-person experiences and site visits, such as to cutting-edge projects, major facilities, areas severely impacted by drought, deferred maintenance, etc., to learn about challenges, best practices, and proof-of-concept solutions
- Ensure that Network activities incorporate opportunities to learn and gain insights as well as to network and socialize
- Ask for Network members to help as WSN salespeople in the field, offering testimonials, to help fundraise, find sites for events, etc.
- Reach out to uninvolved former cohort members to make sure they are aware of the ways in which WSN has evolved that might better address their interests or entice their getting involved again
- Offer brush-up skills sessions and behavioral nudges to practice skills

Advice for the Future and Areas of Potential Opportunity
Network members shared advice and ideas for a future WSN and, given that it may not be feasible to offer the intensive cohort experience moving forward, identified needs in the water and sector fields that might be opportunities for WSN to fill with trainings, technical support or projects.

A. Advice for WSN as it moves forward in its new incarnation
- Put resources into effective marketing and strategic communications to clearly convey WSN's unique niche and strengths, what it is and its purpose
- Consider collaborating with other organizations that offer leadership training programs or networking with other networks in the land, water, or agriculture fields

B. Potential opportunities/niche is to fill

Gaps and needs:
- Help on-the-ground organizations, including federal land management agencies and local partnerships, identify and link with resources, potential funding opportunities, and partners
- Offer fee-for-service grant writing, a huge need
- Offer cross-sector and -discipline communications training on how to convey complex topics in a way that resonates – no one else is doing this

Advancing equity in the land and water fields:
- Provide DEIJB training, skill-building and tools, including training on how to sensitively discuss and share around inequities; the role of culture and power in meetings, and the physical and psychological impacts of racism
    - As fee-for-service DEIJB courses
    - Offer training, power-building to communities who lack resources
    - Offer training on how to engage effectively with marginalized communities
- Taking on projects to reduce inequities in the land and water sectors. An example might be a WSN project to develop ideas for successfully implementing the Governor's Executive Order on equity and eliminating discrimination

Ways WSN could add value to the fields:
- Provide well-facilitated, meaningful enrichment opportunities in strengthening engagement skills
- Help external parties dialogue and develop a range of alternatives to challenging problems
- Host issues forums, spaces for dialogue or work to bridge community divides around challenging water/land issues
- Develop a DC exchange program, to share case studies and best practices with those from federal agencies and Congressional staffers, as California is an exemplar internationally

C. Ways to strengthen WSN's impact and take action toward sustainable and equitable land and water stewardship
- As part of mentorship, support members to pursue positions of influence, for example, joining boards of NGOs and local districts where it's possible to make a difference
- Create professional products that affect change

- Provide leadership and highlight visible examples on what the vision looks like, such as the Watershed Framework work, to help build a movement
- Find more opportunities to break down institutional barriers
- Develop action plans that have clarity around where resources will come from, what roles people will play, and what the metrics will be used to assess impact
- Offer train the trainer sessions to Network members to support the spread of collaborative skills
- Consider, as an organization, or as members of the Network, taking public policy positions or endorsing projects
  - Ensure WSN has a clear process for gathering information from a wide range of perspectives within the Network, for member involvement in the decision, and for ways the position would be framed to ensure clarity