

Why Water Belongs in Every Land Use Conversation

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07/01/2026



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By: Lindsey Romaniello, AICP, PhD Student at the University of Utah

As someone who's spent years working with rural communities on the edge of public lands, I've learned that water access shapes many of the planning decisions we make in the West. In my work as a PhD student and researcher with the GNAR team, I've spent the last few years trying to better understand how gateway communities can plan for a more resilient future. The deeper I dig into this work, the more I realize just how many pieces there are to the puzzle. Housing, recreation pressure, land conservation, economic development; all are important. But one issue keeps bubbling to the surface: water.

Before returning to academia, I worked as a county planner in Montana and then as a consultant serving rural communities across the West. These experiences showed me how water impacts everything communities do – from where and how they build housing, to how they manage growth and prepare for natural disasters. Water often gets taken for granted, especially in places where people assume water access will always be there. But the hard truth is that it's *not* always there – and the pressure is mounting.

A few "fun" (and sobering) facts:

- In the western U.S., demand for water is rising across all sectors, urban areas, agriculture, industry, and recreation, while supplies are becoming less reliable due to climate change (USDA, 2024).
- Many rural communities, especially in the Intermountain West, experience disproportionately high rates of limited access to safe, clean water (Mueller & Gasteyer, 2021).
- Meanwhile, more frequent drought and intense storms are placing huge stress on communities already struggling with limited capacity to manage water infrastructure, flooding and post-disaster recovery (Rugland, 2022).

Last year, all of this led me to apply to the [Lincoln Institute of Land Policy](#)'s Vibrant Communities Fellowship – specifically, their Land and Water Planning Cohort. This program brought together planners, engineers, policy experts, and researchers from across the country to build leadership skills in the space where water and land use intersect.

I was lucky enough to be selected, and the program kicked off in Chicago. I'll admit, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. It's a brand-new initiative, and there were a lot of question marks going in. But within the first hour of our opening panel, I learned more about practical water policy and management than I had in years of planning practice. The panelists, experts working in this field, shared real-world, practical and applicable lessons that challenged and energized me.

Some takeaways in particular that stuck with me:

- **Cost is one of the biggest hurdles to effective water management** – especially at the local level. Infrastructure upgrades, system maintenance, and building institutional capacity all take time, money, and people.
- **Development can help fund water solutions** – but only if the development process moves with speed, transparency, and consistency. If the process is unclear or unpredictable, there will be lawsuits.
- **Water management at different levels have historically operated in silos, and water management has been siloed from land use planning.** That disconnect has made both systems more fragile. We have to better integrate these two areas if we want better outcomes.

What was clear to me after the experience was how powerful it is to be part of a peer network like this. We learned from each other in real time; about how Chicago

manages stormwater with green infrastructure, how Florida communities are educating residents about hurricane flooding, and how Avondale, Arizona is confronting water rights issues head-on. I was there to make sure rural and gateway communities are part of these conversations, but I also was there to listen. Because even though the context may differ, everyone is grappling with water in some form, and we need to share what we're learning if we're going to make progress.

It might sound obvious, but sometimes the most powerful thing we can do is talk to each other. When the problems feel huge and overwhelming, exchanging knowledge across communities isn't just enlightening, it's hopeful. And in this moment, a little hope goes a long way.

Work Cited:

Mueller, J.T., Gasteyer, S. (2021). The widespread and unjust drinking water and clean water crisis in the United States. *Nat Commun* 12, 3544 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-23898-z>

Rugland, E. (2022, February). *Integrating land use and water management: Planning and practice* [Policy Focus Report]. Lincoln#Institute of Land Policy.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service. (2024, July). *Western water and working lands: A framework for conservation action*. https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/Western-Water-and-Working-Lands-Framework-for-Conservation-Action_0.pdf

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