

Effectively communicating headwaters solutions in dramatic times - A Discussion with Belinda Griswold



Belinda Griswold, a member of Carpe Diem West's Healthy Headwaters Leadership Team and Senior Program Director for Resource Media talks about key takeaways from our fifteenth team Meeting in Oakland with a communications perspective.

The Healthy Headwaters leadership team and our friends from Resource Media explored three approaches that will help utilities and community leaders be prepared to forward their solutions in the midst of, or right after, a crisis like a catastrophic fire. Amid many concerns about an appropriate mourning period for loss of lives, we returned to how critical it is to share these life-saving solutions in a timely and smart way, so that policy shifts can be animated by the freshness of catastrophic events.

(Speaking of solutions: if you haven't had a chance to read our Climate Chaos & Resilient Communities [10th anniversary report](#), please do!)

One basic premise is that news cycles, even big catastrophe stories, eventually peak and dissipate if the media is left to their own devices and time pressures. On the other hand, usually, it is in the interest of social change to keep these stories in the public mind. This requires an intentional effort, one where those seeking to extend the news cycle will have to do more of the reporters' legwork to keep stories coming. But, in the case of disasters that have large public policy ramifications, it is incredibly important to extend that window.

In that light, here are three best practices:

1. Be prepared, with your solutions and your ability to communicate them. Disasters will continue, and, as this year has shown, they will become more frequent. Watershed investment advocates know the risk factors as well or better than anyone. Have your core

message about why watershed investment is an incredibly worthwhile prevention tactic ready. Be prepared to talk about how your solutions will help prevent the next one of these disasters. Be sensitive to the losses of life, but don't be shy about talking about watershed investment as a life-saving strategy that's needed now more than ever as the climate warms and dries and weather events become even more unpredictable.

2. Use disasters to build community support for a longer-term narrative that will continue after every disaster, for example, when floods follow the fire. After the noise of disaster coverage, it's time to reach out to key community members and groups who have the most to gain by seeing that solutions are protective and possible. Who are these folks in your community? Public health workers like doctors and nurses? Recreation groups? Other utilities who haven't been plugged in, like local fire responders? Insurance companies? The constituencies are out there, but the water/fire linkage is not well understood, and this is a long-run educational effort. Every disaster is a teachable moment and an outreach moment. Make use of it.
3. Our colleagues at Resource Media has also urged all of us to strongly consider investing in content creation after disasters to extend the news cycle and keep the focus on solutions. This [story is an excellent example](#) of doing just that. How does it work? One example: Hire an independent journalist to document places where solutions were put in place and those places remained safe. Profile people who lost property or loved ones in fire and now support watershed investment/care solutions. Reach out to local papers about the floods that will likely follow, and why this has a terrible effect on water quality, and how that can be prevented next time. What really helps, of course, is to have a *policy* strategy ready to roll in the event of a disaster, and afterwards, when everyone is searching for solutions.

Belinda started out as a cub reporter, and moved on to become a city editor, campaign communications director for progressive candidates and ballot measures, and a lawyer and mediator along the way. Her work today is heavily focused on water and climate change, with a special focus on water justice and water scarcity in the West. She loves the deep dive communications and [cognitive research](#), and delights in bringing smart campaigning approaches to our partners through trainings and one-on-one support.

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