



Is Integrated Regional Water Management (IRWM) Just a Grant Program?

Taking Stock of IRWM in 2016

Executive Summary

Integrated Regional Water Management (IRWM) is a paradigm for managing water resources. This approach integrates at a regional level the many facets of water resources management, including water supply, water quality, flood management, ecosystem health, and recreation through enhanced collaboration across geographic and political boundaries with diverse stakeholder groups. IRWM regions formed across California to develop plans that identify water management challenges, resolve conflicts over the best use of resources, bridge gaps in data, find common ground, and seek innovative solutions among stakeholders. A primary goal is implementation of projects and programs that effectively address water management priorities.

The IRWM Roundtable of Regions (Roundtable) is an all-volunteer forum for IRWM “regions” engaged in preparing and implementing Integrated Regional Water Management Plans to network, share ideas, and provide feedback to the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) on the IRWM program. In 2016, Roundtable members completed a survey regarding how well the California IRWM Program is working for them, and whether or not it is living up to its promise of increasing local water supply reliability, improving management of water resources on a regional level, enhancing watershed health, and increasing collaboration and regional self-reliance. The purpose of the survey was to gather quantitative and qualitative feedback about IRWM experiences and to ascertain whether the IRWM program is considered a sustainable long-term approach to water management for California.

This Executive Summary highlights of the results of the survey, which was completed by 22 of the state’s 48 IRWM Regions, representing 34 million people represented by those regions.

Findings and Conclusions

The survey results clearly indicate that the IRWM Program has modelled a new paradigm

for regional management of water resources and is a success by all measures. The benefits of IRWM are realized at the state level as well as the local level. Improved local water supply reliability reduces the burden on state water management.

The ongoing value of IRWM will lie in regions incorporating these concepts into all aspects of how water is managed, whether it is called "IRWM" or simply the embodiment of the principles of IRWM. Communities (the public, elected officials, public institutions, private sector) within each region need to be more engaged and aware of IRWM. IRWM should be considered as synonymous with regional water management and not as a parallel process focused on funding. We need to elevate IRWM to a higher level – where policy issues are addressed more directly and collaboration among entities goes beyond project development and grant funding.

Benefits of IRWM:

- ◆ IRWM has been successful across the state in delivering much-needed financial resources to local regions to improve local water supply reliability, help resolve conflicts and bring diverse interests together to collaborate on novel water management solutions, and ultimately benefiting all residents of California
- ◆ Integrated water management approaches and the IRWM Program have created or enhanced collaboration around addressing regional water challenges
- ◆ The IRWM Program has helped regions reduce water-related conflicts, improve water supply reliability, and enhance habitat (environmental resources)
- ◆ The model of integrated planning and implementation of multi-benefit projects has resulted in more cost effective and efficient use of resources, as well as more comprehensive and permanent solutions
- ◆ IRWM brings people together – building bridges, trust, and relationships
- ◆ Members of disadvantaged communities benefit from the program through development of drinking water enhancement, water quality improvement, flood management, community and individual capacity building, and access to nature

Sustainability of IRWM:

- ◆ There is clearly strong support among most regions to continue IRWM into the future.
- ◆ IRWM was started as part of a state-run grant program made possible by voter-approved water bonds. Most regions have embraced it and benefitted from it beyond grant-funded planning and project implementation. The paradigm of integrated regional water management is becoming more a part of how regions manage water.
- ◆ Grant funding has "unlocked" cost share, or match, from project sponsors, helping public funds to go farther and making federal and private funding more accessible.
- ◆ Because the core concept of IRWM is engagement of all stakeholders at regional

scales, the process functions best when appropriate investments are made in engagement and collective project development. These activities will require ongoing financial and technical support from the state in many of the rural or disadvantaged regions that cannot provide sufficient resources to be successful or sustainable.

- ◆ Less than half the survey respondents have secure funding to maintain an ongoing IRWM program.
- ◆ In light of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act's emphasis on groundwater management, and the impacts of the statewide drought, IRWM will continue to play a vital role in regional water management and active stakeholder engagement.

Recommendations from the Roundtable: Strengthening IRWM Sustainability in the Future

IRWM has proven to be a valuable tool in helping address the state's water challenges, through increasing regional self-reliance, as well as the capacity building that has complemented outreach, development, and collaboration efforts. We therefore make the following recommendations:

- a) DWR should release the findings and recommendations included in the Draft 2015 IRWM Strategic Plan which was never widely released, and immediately solicit feedback from a broad audience of stakeholders, rather than waiting for completion of the California Water Plan Update.
- b) Along with its partners, DWR should implement the recommendations contained in the 2015 IRWM Strategic Plan.
- c) DWR should integrate the recommendations from the IRWM Strategic Plan and recommendations from this survey into the California Water Plan Update 2018 and the California Water Action Plan.
- d) DWR should continue to support IRWM through technical assistance to regions.
- e) The Roundtable of Regions will seek opportunities to share the findings and conclusions of this survey to the appropriate committees in both chambers of the legislature and to the office of the Governor to emphasize the important role IRWM has played in sustaining regional water supplies in the face of an historic drought, and to encourage future water bonds - or other funding support – and legislation that will help sustain regional IRWM programs and project implementation.
- f) DWR and the State Water Resources Control Board (SCWRCB), as the agencies responsible for overseeing implementation of SGMA, should strongly encourage SGMA efforts to include IRWM as an integral component. In addition, IRWM should be recognized and included in other state planning and implementation processes that promote and enhance a collaborative watershed, or ecosystem, approach to natural resources planning and management.

- g) DWR, the State Water Resources Control Board, the legislature, and the governor should work together to address long-term funding support for integrated regional water management. The Draft IRWM Strategic Plan includes a recommendation for baseline funding for all regions. Some level of ongoing state support for IRWM that is separate from the bond process will provide an incentive to keep regions working together to address their own local challenges and take some of the burden off stressed state and federal resources.
- h) Baseline funding should be partially allocated based on the success of RWMGs' work on the disadvantaged community investment program, allowing these groups to continue engagement of disadvantaged communities and tribes in IRWM planning efforts, further enhancing the synergies that come with diverse and collaborative participation in planning and implementation efforts.
- i) State agencies responsible for managing climate change should support IRWM regions in their efforts to adapt to, and mitigate, climate change impacts through their IRWM plans.