

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Robert Wendelgass, President & CEO, Clean Water Action

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

A Precious Resource

In some parts of the country, water is exceedingly valuable and undervalued in many ways; our office in Texas has worked extensively on water conservation issues in light of the extreme drought conditions that central Texas has had for a couple of years now. Same way in California; in the Bay area our office in San Francisco has worked for a number of years around water conservation issues because the state of California, particularly the Bay area, uses water that comes from the snow pack in the Sierras. And this year they've been getting a little more snow, although in the recent past they have not gotten a lot of snow and snow melt has been low, and what's come out of the mountains hasn't been sufficient to support the city of San Francisco, and the city of LA, and the farmers in between. So diminishing resources has been a problem, and I think all of the science that's out there in terms of the impact of climate change suggests that in some parts of the country, particularly the south and the southwest, droughts are going to be a more frequent problem in the future as the climate changes and competition for scarce water resources is only going to grow.

Water Infrastructure

I live in Philadelphia and some of the water pipes under the streets in Philadelphia are well past the age at which we should have replaced them. And the city and the city's water department is doing that as best they can, but like most big cities and most water systems around the country, they don't always have the resources that they need to be able to meet the demand. And so in the winter we see old pipes crack from the cold and see big leaks that wouldn't necessarily have happened if we had the resources to do what needs to be done in terms of replacing pipes and infrastructure that's old and past its useful age.

Citizens Do Care

If you talk to people about infrastructure, fairly quickly their eyes start to glaze over. But if you talk to people about protecting their drinking water and needing to maintain safe drinking water for themselves and their families and their kids, people can react to that. And so that's the conversation we try to have with people. One of the places people actually will support additional expenses is often around drinking water because people do value their drinking water and do think spending money to ensure safe drinking water is a wise investment. And talk about the importance of keeping sources of pollution out of our water in the first places but then secondarily spending the money that we need to spend to

ensure that the treatment systems are top notch and up-to-date and the systems are able to get pollutants out of our water. And what we're drinking is safe and healthy for us and for our families.

Clean Water

The built environment draws directly from the natural environment in terms of the supplies of water that we end up drinking. And it's both cheaper and safer frankly to keep pollutants out of that water in the first place. So preserving the quality of the natural environment, keeping pollution out of our rivers and streams, particularly rivers and streams that are sources of drinking water, is the initial strategy and the best strategy. But then once that happens, then obviously we need systems in place and the infrastructure in place to treat the water and take out the contaminants and produce a healthy product for us to drink. So it's got to be both. You can't really do one *or* the other approach to protecting our water: it needs to be both; you know, protecting the natural environment and then protecting the infrastructure and the built environment

About Clean Water Action

We're a national organization with a million members and work in about 15 states. A couple of major goals: one is promoting and protecting safe and affordable water for all Americans, second is preventing health threatening pollution, and third is creating environmentally safe jobs and businesses. What that means this year in terms of focus is continued work on protecting the rivers, lakes, and streams from which we get our drinking water. It means stopping pollution from some of the extractive industries, the two that we're focused on at the moment deal with oil and gas drilling and coal ash disposal. It means working to change the way we regulate toxic chemicals to reduce our exposure to those chemicals and looking to promote renewable energy strategies in order to deal with climate change.

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