

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Jenny Hoffner, Senior Director and Co-Lead, Clean Water Supply Program,  
American Rivers**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

### **Water Infrastructure Is Critical**

When we talk about water infrastructure we're talking about the natural water infrastructure that we have in our country. The vast network of rivers, lakes, streams, flood planes, aquifers, watersheds—as well as the traditional pipe, pump, and treatment systems that provide clean drinking water, that treat waste water, that address polluted storm water, minimize flooding, and then also the additional piece of public health where they protect us from waterborne diseases and et cetera. So our water infrastructure is vast, both in its grey and its green components, and all of that is a critical part of our economic health for our country. The American Society of Civil Engineers gave American water infrastructure very low marks in 2013. In their *Infrastructure Report Card*, drinking water, wastewater, and dams all got Ds, and that's attributable to the age of our system. It does come with a price tag. The recent estimates by EPA suggest that there is a gap of approximately \$635 billion dollars between water infrastructure investment needs and the current funding levels. That's a huge number, and the cost for that infrastructure renewal is not going to lay at the feet of the federal government singly. It really needs to be spread across both the public and private sectors. They need to come together in order to address these needs.

### **Frequent Failures Make Water Infra More Visible**

I think we're starting to see an increased frequency of these types of crises in our water infrastructure, certainly when there's an increase in the frequency and the severity of droughts. When we're starting to see drought in eastern states like Georgia, where historically water has sort of been a birthright, then water becomes a little bit more front-burner and starts to get some of the attention from the policy perspective, but also from the funding perspective. When we see flooding in our cities and in communities across the country, that also calls attention to it. But it is a slow burn; drought is not something that just suddenly happens. And as in California right now, they're certainly feeling the effects of a prolonged drought. That's something that we anticipate seeing a whole lot more of. It's predicted that we'll have more frequent and extreme droughts with climate change, and we, as a country, need to start to appreciate the need to really adapt to these changes and start to have our policies and practices and funding come in line with that.

## **Innovative Solutions from Seattle and Philadelphia**

We are still a country that is just starting to grapple with our 19<sup>th</sup>-century water infrastructure and haven't quite made the transition in any one place to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century look ahead. I think we can point to particular examples of success in particular practices, or particular policies. I would say that the city of Seattle has a robust water efficiency program and they have advanced water efficiency first, before any other water supply solutions, because it's the cheapest, fastest, and most reliable source of supply that there is. And they did that because they evaluated all the options, including dams, and decided that, especially in the context of climate change and increased population, this made the most sense for their bottom line. I could point to Philadelphia, which just evaluated grey infrastructure options for addressing their localized flooding and combined sewer overflow problems. When they did that they determined that doing both green infrastructure and grey infrastructure was the most effective, cost effective way to achieve their goal of reducing storm water sewer overflows into their rivers and streams. So those are some examples, I don't think any one community is doing it all yet. I think they're all still struggling with how best to come up with the right combination of solutions. But it's a conversation that we all need to start engaging in.

## **American Rivers: Managing Our Finite Water Supplies**

Water is life. We take it for granted in our country but it's absolutely essential that we pay attention to this most precious and finite of resources, and as we look ahead with increased demands on the finite resource, we need to be looking for ways to fund sustainable water management practices. American Rivers, being a national nonprofit focused on the protection and restoration of our nation's rivers, has a unique perspective on water infrastructure. I would say that the infrastructure conversation in our country typically leans towards transportation. I think we get a lot of attention on that. It's something that we see. It's something that's visible. The challenge with our nation's water infrastructure, which is in crisis, is that it's too often invisible, ignored. It's outdated and it's underfunded, and we are at a critical juncture in the development of our nation's water infrastructure insofar as sort of a perfect storm of things mounting, where we have the pressures of climate change bringing more extreme flooding, we have population growth, we have increased development pressures on our natural water infrastructure. And we have increased demands across the board on our finite water supplies.

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