

# URBANWATERS

## FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP

*Restoring Urban Waters, Revitalizing Communities*



## Urban Waters Federal Partnership 2021 Partner Recommitment



AmeriCorps



US Army Corps  
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# Partnership Recommitment

The Urban Waters Federal Partnership has the distinction of being the nation's first multi-agency partnership that facilitates an increased connection between communities and their waterways. This document represents the recommitment of the 15 federal agency partners to uphold the original Vision, Mission and Principles of the Urban Waters Federal Partnership, and to undertake the actions described in the Framework for the Future to strengthen and expand the impact of the UWFP.



## Vision, Mission and Principles

### OUR VISION



**Through our partnership, we will revitalize urban waters and the communities that surround them, transforming overlooked assets into treasured centerpieces and drivers of urban revival.**

### THE NEED IS CLEAR



Many of our nation's urban rivers, streams, lakes, forests and wetlands are polluted, degraded or inaccessible. The surrounding communities often are not reaping the environmental, economic and social benefits that living near a water body can provide.

Research demonstrates that a clean, safe, accessible, urban environment – including urban forests, gardens, parks, lakes, aquifers, and rivers – is directly linked to improved public health, stronger local economies, and lower crime rates.

We believe a deeper connection to local water bodies can bring a new cycle of community hope and energy that will lead to healthier urban waters, improved public health, strengthened local businesses, and new jobs, as well as expanded educational, recreational, housing, and social opportunities.

### OUR MISSION



The "Urban Waters Federal Partnership" will help urban and metropolitan areas, particularly those that are under-served or economically distressed, connect with their waterways and work to improve them. This federal partnership will put communities first. We will work to break down government program silos and to ensure that our collective efforts will reverse past neglect, energize existing programs, and engage new partners. We will listen to, engage and serve the communities where we work, ensuring they are full partners in restoring and protecting the water that surrounds them. We will establish strong partnerships with effective community-based organizations and local government officials to make the most effective use of economic incentives and other beneficial actions. With the right set of federal, state, tribal, and local tools and the local commitment of political will, the Federal Partnership will leverage existing neighborhood assets. These actions will be geared to promote early and visible victories to fuel long-term action. Success will advance the missions of our partnership, our agencies, and the federal government as a whole.

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES

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## To guide our work, we will:

- **Promote clean urban waters.** We must enhance the value and health of urban waters, recognizing their rich history, spiritual value, natural beauty, and economic and recreational potential, as well as their role in basic services, such as water supplies. We know clean water is a foundation for sustainable communities and healthy ecosystems, and that the watershed is the fundamental planning unit for water quality protection. That means the Federal Partnership will work with urban communities to connect them to upstream areas including rural parts of the watersheds, where the large majority of our country's water originates. In addition to addressing the direct challenges presented by physically, chemically and biologically degraded urban waters, we will engage these communities in the broader process of enhancing the value and quality of water resources supplying urban areas using approaches to protect, manage and restore the lands that surround those waters.
- **Reconnect people to their waterways.** Many communities do not have access to their urban waterways. This cuts them off from a valuable community asset. These assets can be used to spur commercial, recreational (such as parks, green spaces and cultural centers) and educational opportunities. Indeed, the reconnection of distressed communities to their waterways can act as a catalyst for greater economic revitalization and growth as well as improvement in resident well-being.
- **Water conservation.** We shall strive to meet urban water needs in a sustainable manner by increasing the efficiency of water use. The Federal Partnership therefore will strive to educate and work with urban communities to conserve this precious resource. We will increase efforts to address infrastructure needs, especially in underserved urban areas where modernization of aging and inefficient infrastructure can lead to significant water savings. We believe conserving water and using it wisely will be fundamental to our success.
- **Use urban water systems as a way to promote economic revitalization and prosperity.** Healthy and accessible urban waters enhance any area's economic competitiveness. In urban communities, water-related environmental improvements will be integrated with other community priorities, such as revitalizing local businesses, creating jobs, and improving access to job training. Community revitalization through the promotion of clean urban waters must minimize displacement of existing residents, expand opportunities for current and new residents, and fully tap into the potential of the local and regional communities. To achieve these objectives when working locally, the Federal Partnership will particularly focus on revitalizing communities that are, or have been, disproportionately impacted by pollution or economic burdens.
- **Encourage community improvements through active partnerships.** Strong multi-agency partnerships at the federal, state, local levels, and with the tribes, will integrate many of the services needed for community revitalization. Aligning federal policies and funding will break down traditional silos, remove barriers to collaboration, and increase the accountability and effectiveness to plan and act for future growth. These goals will also be achieved through innovative regional collaboration and approaches that connect policies and programs at every level of government and across multiple sectors.
- **Be open and honest, and listening to the communities is the best way to engage them.** We will work with urban populations, not act for them. This means, among other things, to recognize their values and seek to understand environmental issues through their eyes. We will work from the bottom up rather than taking a top down, one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Encourage community improvements through active partnerships.** We need short-term improvements, but also an analytical view toward sustainable and systemic improvements we can measure using meaningful outcome measures. We will invest and focus our resources on what is working in targeted places and draw on the compounding effect of well-coordinated action. By evaluating conditions to design better solutions and monitoring progress to respond quickly when change is needed, we will learn what works to develop best practices.



# Urban Waters Federal Partnership Overview



## Watershed-revitalizing Grants

The Five Star and Urban Waters Restoration Grant Program is a public-private partnership that combines federal and private sector grant funding from: U.S. EPA, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, the U.S. Department of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, Southern Company and FedEx.

The grants help states leverage resources and build community capacity for restorative projects that address core Clean Water Act goals, including preventing stormwater runoff and improving water quality. The Partnership has leveraged over \$7.5 million in federal funding with almost \$30 million in private funding and local match through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Five Star and Urban Waters grant program to help underserved communities.

U.S. Geological Survey Cooperative Matching Funds are combined with local partner funds to support USGS water-quality related projects in UWFP locations. To date, combined support has exceeded \$6.8 million.

## Information Exchange through the Urban Waters Learning Network

The Urban Waters Learning Network (UWLN) provides support and opportunities for members to share successful strategies, challenges and resources from across the country to improve urban waterways and revitalize the neighborhoods around them.

The National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program is a partner in the UWLN, and manages all funding that goes to UWLN coordinators, Groundwork USA and River Network. Groundwork USA and River Network provide assistance and guidance to EPA Headquarters and Regional staff in identifying and reviewing tools for practitioners use and providing input on potential EPA-sponsored initiatives, conferences and training opportunities.

## Ambassadors and Watershed-level Workplans

Urban Waters Ambassadors lead each of the 20 locations. Ambassadors coordinate communities, federal and state agencies, and tribes, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and businesses to accelerate and prioritize on-the-ground projects to improve water quality, restore outdoor spaces and foster community stewardship in urban-related watersheds.

The Ambassador is at the heart of every Urban Waters Partnership, acting as the nexus of information sharing and project coordination. This includes developing a clear workplan that supports local priorities that advance the Urban Waters mission.

# Framework for the Future

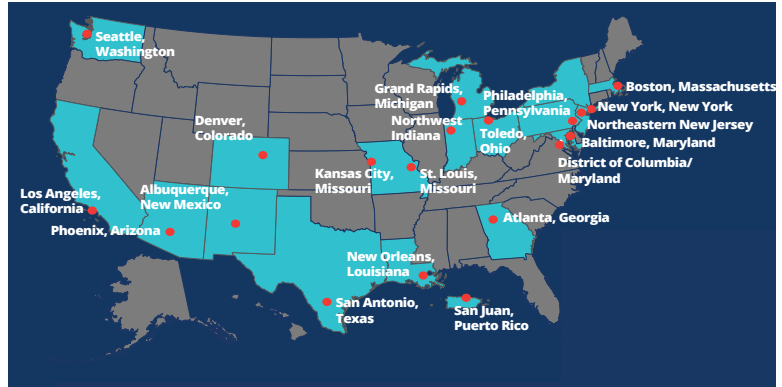
## Looking Forward to the Next Decade



### TEN YEARS OF ACCOMPLISHMENT PROVIDE A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR GROWTH

The [Urban Waters Federal Partnership's<sup>1</sup> \(UWFP\) Mission, Vision, and Principles](#) adopted a decade ago resonate today with the Biden-Harris Administration's and communities' emphasis on environmental justice, economic development, and climate resilience.

Twenty Urban Water Federal Partnership locations across the country form a unique collaboration of public, private, non-profit, academic and community institutions. Fifteen federal agency partners, several of which provide funding<sup>2</sup> for UWFP Ambassadors (local partnership leaders) and local UWFP projects, serve as a catalyst for local investment. An active and robust network of non-governmental partners and hundreds of local entities provide long-term knowledge of local needs, challenges, and resources and are trusted by local communities. A vibrant Urban Waters Learning Network of hundreds of organizations working to conserve, restore, and revitalize America's urban waterways and surrounding lands—with information resources on key community issues like equity, homelessness, and climate—shares best practices and strategies that improve effectiveness and flatten learning curves.



The Partnership has leveraged over \$7.5 million in federal funding with almost \$30 million in private funding and local match through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's [Five Star and Urban Waters grant program](#) to help underserved communities across the country advance environmental restoration and community engagement priorities. Recent program accomplishments include the first [UWFP Program Progress Report](#), a [strategy document](#) that describes opportunities to support existing locations and a process to evaluate potential new locations, and [USGS Cooperative Matching Funds](#) that have generated nearly \$7M for on-the-ground water quality projects since 2017.

### AT THE MEETING ON AUGUST 5, 2021, SENIOR OFFICIALS FROM THE FIFTEEN FEDERAL PARTNER AGENCIES ENDORSED THREE THEMES TO ADVANCE THE UWFP IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS:

1. Strengthen and Formalize the Existing Program.
2. Increase the Number of Underserved Communities Benefitting from the UWFP.
3. Leverage the UWFP to address Administration and Community Priorities.

<sup>1</sup> Authority: EPA along with the other Federal Agencies enter into this partnership agreement pursuant to Sections 104(a) and (b) of the Clean Water Act, 33 U.S.C. 1254(a) and (b). These provisions authorize EPA in cooperation with other Federal State, and local agencies to encourage, cooperate with and render technical services to individuals, including the general public, as well as public and private sector entities to promote the coordination and acceleration of demonstrations, studies and training relating to the causes, effects, prevention and elimination of water pollution.

<sup>2</sup> As required by the Antideficiency Act, 31 U.S.C. 1341 and 1342, all commitments made by all agencies party to this Partnership agreement are subject to the availability of appropriated funds and budget priorities. Nothing in this agreement, in and of itself, obligates any agency to expend appropriations or to enter into any contract, assistance agreement, interagency agreement, or incur other financial obligations. Any transaction involving transfers of funds between the agencies will be handled in accordance with applicable laws, regulations, and procedures under separate written agreements. Furthermore, this agreement does not create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable by law or equity, by persons who are not party to this agreement, against any party to this agreement, its officers or employees, or any other person. Finally, this agreement does not impose legally binding requirements on any Federal agency, States or the regulated community, nor does it change or substitute for any existing legally binding requirements

# Framework for the Future

## THEME 1: STRENGTHEN AND FORMALIZE THE EXISTING PROGRAM

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### 1. **Establish a Steering Committee to Oversee the Program**

The current fifteen-agency UWFP is managed by a staff-level working group, which meets at least quarterly to hear updates on locations and explore coordination and leveraging opportunities. Currently, the senior leadership of the fifteen agencies do not meet regularly.

A key advantage of the UWFP is the fifteen agencies that have committed to this program. To strengthen federal engagement and help formalize the program, the UWFP will establish a Steering Committee comprising of political and senior career executives from the fifteen federal partners to help guide the program and identify opportunities for deeper federal engagement. The Steering Committee will meet semi-annually to ensure on-the-ground results in all UWFP locations. This committee will directly benefit communities by streamlining inter-agency collaboration, integrating the federal presence in each partnership location, reducing bureaucratic delay, and identifying cooperative funding mechanisms to support local recreation, restoration, and economic priorities. Each of the fifteen federal agencies will (1) identify consistent staff locally (if applicable) to support each UWFP location, and (2) ensure that community priorities are addressed where these agencies have equities.

### 2. **Build Sustainable Federal Funding for Ambassador Positions**

Ambassadors are the critical linchpin for a location's success—exploring where project opportunities exist, helping identify and implement new projects, and articulating the benefits of various projects to funders. Government, non-profits, academia, and the private sector have hosted and/or helped fund Ambassadors. Currently, several federal partners (the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Agriculture/Forest Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Department of the Interior) provide funding or staff time for Ambassadors, though not enough to cover all the needs of the twenty locations. Sustainable funding—particularly for Ambassadors—is critical to supporting the existing twenty UWFP locations and addressing the needs of overburdened and underserved communities. Identifying multiple funding mechanisms for this position is needed. The staff-level federal workgroup and the Steering Committee will identify how resources across the fifteen-agency partnership could be leveraged to support the vital role of the Ambassadors.

### 3. **Increase Funding for Projects in UWFP Locations**

While many federal, state, local, and private funding sources exist, community stakeholders—particularly in underserved communities—face multiple institutional and capacity-building barriers to secure funding for worthwhile local projects. The UWFP will develop a clearer articulation of the challenges being addressed and the Partnership's value in addressing those challenges in an effort to reach potential non-federal funders that might support Ambassadors and community projects. The Steering Committee, UWFP workgroup staff, Ambassadors, and other partners will work together to identify innovative resources and leverage opportunities, such as universities or other anchor institutions, foundations, or water utilities, that can provide collaboration and support for UWFP locations.

Effective communication is critical to reaching potential funders. The UWFP will benefit from an annually updated communication plan that details UWFP priorities, program promotion and marketing needs, and provides centralized and digitalized resources for partners seeking funding for operational support and projects. UWFP partners will work to develop and refine program metrics that show success and communicate the value of the UWFP.

# Framework for the Future

## 4. **Energize and Enhance the Contribution of NGO Partners and Academic Institutions**

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a key role in the ongoing success of the UWFP. They contribute local and technical knowledge, are independent and well-established partners, engage residents, coordinate volunteers, support youth development, support project implementation, and have a deeper understanding of community challenges. Academic institutions are key non-governmental or non-federal partners that support UWFP efforts in many locations by hosting Ambassadors, providing technical support and research, and facilitating community engagement. The EPA-funded Urban Waters Learning Network is coordinated by Groundwork USA and River Network and comprises hundreds of people and organizations, including but not limited to, former and current UWFP grantees. Fifty-nine national and local NGOs have signed letters of support for the Urban Waters Federal Partnership, including American Rivers, American Forests, The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and US Water Alliance. Roughly 150 local or regional NGOs also support individual Urban Waters Federal Partnership locations.

**In the future, the partnership with NGOs (especially the national organizations) will focus on three objectives:**

- 1) Identify forward-looking, mutually-shared goals and collaboration opportunities. For example, the current Biden-Harris Administration's priorities of environmental justice and climate resilience dovetails with many national and local NGO priorities;
- 2) Leverage national, regional, and local NGO resources and expertise for community-identified priorities including equity, resiliency, and economic development; and
- 3) Improve UWFP visibility, transparency, and effectiveness.

The UWFP will institute quarterly NGO meetings, create an informal NGO steering group comprising NGO representatives, hold small-group discussions to identify focal priorities, hold site visits with local as well as national NGOs to better understand projects and challenges, and consider establishing memoranda of understanding with NGOs to formalize resources and commitments toward significant efforts. Additionally, the UWFP will collaborate with the academic community to develop a strategy to enhance engagement and leveraging across federal and academic sectors in UWFP locations.

## **THEME 2: INCREASE THE NUMBER OF UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES BENEFITTING FROM THE UWFP**

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### 1. **Expand the Number of Urban Waters Federal Partnership Locations**

This past decade, the UWFP has grown from an initial seven locations to today's twenty communities. As described in the recent [UW Progress Report](#), these locations have used the program's unique equity-oriented environmental mission and Ambassador-driven approach to community engagement to achieve significant accomplishments on the ground.

The UWFP is uniquely situated to be a catalyst for beneficial, equitable change in many more underserved communities. The UWFP will establish an ambitious and aspirational goal of doubling the number of locations over the next decade, as federal resources allow, and also commit to ensuring that new UWFP locations have the necessary resources to advance environmental justice, using the UWFP mission and approach as a blueprint for success.



# Framework for the Future

## **2. Implement Modified UWFP Approaches to Equity and Engagement in Communities Beyond the Official Partnership Locations**

The UWFP has a track record of success in the communities at the twenty designated locations. In addition, the Urban Waters Learning Network and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant program enable the UWFP to reach many more communities and provide resources, tools, best practices, and information sharing. However, there are hundreds if not thousands of underserved communities that could benefit from an UWFP approach to address restoration, recreation, youth engagement, and economic development needs.

The UWFP will implement a modified “Urban Waters” model in additional communities that is scalable at different resource levels and adaptable to local needs. For example, a modified UWFP approach could mean providing partner agencies already working informally with underserved communities with additional program resources (e.g., the Ambassador Toolkit, innovative project information, technical expertise, etc.). The existing twenty UWFP locations could also serve as models for other nearby underserved communities, as evidenced in the Puerto Rico UWFP location in response to Hurricane Maria where the Ambassador secured funding to build local resiliency for additional communities. The UWFP will also explore how to better connect and partner with existing federal programs that also address Urban Waters goals and objectives (e.g., EPA’s Water Infrastructure Finance & Innovation Act (WIFIA) program and DOI’s WaterSmart program) to help many more communities achieve revitalization and equity goals. Additionally, the UWFP will explore new and flexible approaches to help the current twenty locations serve as models and mentors for other communities in their region.

## **3. Expand the Urban Waters Learning Network to Provide New Resources, Tools, and Expert Dialogue for More Urban Communities**

Groundwork USA and River Network, with funding from EPA, coordinate the Urban Waters Learning Network (UWLN)—a nationwide peer-to-peer network of over 450 people and organizations (non-profits, government, utilities, academia, and businesses) working to conserve, restore, and revitalize America’s urban waterways. UWLN staff deliver tools, training, mentoring, and financial assistance to support the work of UWLN members as they collaborate, develop solutions, and elevate community priorities. The ultimate goals are to foster solutions that advance water equity and environmental justice (EJ), build healthy ecosystems and resilient communities, and address the disparate impacts of environmental degradation and climate change.

Beginning in 2022, the UWFP will expand and empower the UWLN to bring essential information to hundreds more U.S. communities on critical priorities like water equity and access, displacement/housing, community and economic development, water treatment infrastructure, climate adaptation, and resiliency. By continuing to develop innovative tools and best practices, the UWLN will provide more direct, hands-on assistance to build the financial and institutional capacity of the twenty partnership locations through training, interpersonal consultation, and education. This more consultative form of assistance will include identifying funding sources or project opportunities and strengthening local capacity to pursue project funding.

An expanded UWLN also will serve as a convener of experts and other stakeholders to share information and perspectives through the establishment of Communities of Practice, networks of urban practitioners focused on specific issues. The UWLN is already creating Communities of Practice for climate/flood resiliency in underserved communities, environmental justice, and equitable development and anti-displacement. The framework exists to create other dialogue venues to address issues of interest to UW constituencies and federal partners, including water equity, infrastructure challenges, community and economic development, climate change impacts, and transportation and housing issues affecting communities’ connections with their waterways.

# Framework for the Future

## THEME 3: LEVERAGE THE UWFP TO ADDRESS ADMINISTRATION AND COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

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### 1. **Environmental Justice (including Justice40)**

Environmental justice is the foundational element of the UWFP, and the program will continue to work with disadvantaged, vulnerable, and underserved communities. The UWFP can amplify the impact of water equity efforts and serve as a vehicle for collaboration on overlapping concerns, such as public health and water quality, failing storm sewers and sanitary sewer infrastructure, access to clean water and waterways, improving relations with municipal water utilities, waterfront redevelopment, source water and habitat protection and restoration, stormwater, and flood management, and more. However, each UWFP location has varying levels of existing collaboration with water utilities, and each location has very different water equity concerns and infrastructure needs.

The newly established UWFP Steering Committee will create a subcommittee to explore how agencies can work more collaboratively and effectively to directly address environmental justice issues in these communities. The subcommittee will focus specifically on enhancing opportunities for UWFP locations to address the mandates of Executive Orders 13985 ([Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government](#)) and 14008 ([Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad](#)), and the requirements of Justice40 (an effort to advance the goal that at least forty percent of the overall benefits from certain federal investments flow to disadvantaged communities). The scope of this subcommittee will be informed by the UWFP location assessments being conducted and then work to align federal programs and resources to support community priorities.

### 2. **Climate Resilience and Justice**

The UWFP is already working with all twenty locations to prepare for different types of natural hazards and adapt to climate change. To date, assistance has been provided for responding to hurricanes, wildfires, extreme heat, drought, and flooding events. The UWFP supports resilience and climate justice activities in the following ways:

- Through multi-jurisdictional mitigation, restoration, and recovery planning;
- By providing a monthly forum for stakeholders to raise and address complex resilience challenges;
- Through working with Groundwork USA and River Network to establish an equity and resilience community of practice; and
- By working to capture best practices from all twenty partnership locations.

Urban Waters Ambassadors will work with their federal contacts to identify funding for on-the-ground risk reduction and management activities and inclusive community-based projects that protect water resources, address climate priorities of the locations, and offer community improvements to improve resilience.

Building upon this community-grounded work, the UWFP will identify funding for equitable resilience planning pilot projects that will provide support to locations that demonstrate the benefits of engaging deeply with community organizations on hazard mitigation and adaptation planning and actions (for example, HUD's Community Development Block Grants –Mitigation and Disaster Recovery can be used for these types of projects). These initial pilots will inform greater federal investments in all twenty UWFP locations and other vulnerable communities. The Steering Committee will also help identify federal resources and appropriated funding for this climate- and resilience-related work.



# Framework for the Future

## 3. **Other Actions (Infrastructure, 30x30)**

Many of the Administration's priorities dovetail well with the existing UWFP Mission, Vision, and Principles, as well as the priorities identified at the local level by Ambassadors and community leaders. Local UWFP workplans developed by Ambassadors at the twenty locations identify a range of community-specific issues. The Steering Committee will consider what other federal resources might be leveraged to support local programs, particularly as the UWFP grows in size and influence. For example, the Steering Committee could provide direction to the administrators of other core federal programs to work with the UWFP to identify the most relevant federal funding opportunities for locations (e.g., the 30X30 initiative investment areas, infrastructure funding, etc.).

## **Summary**

This Framework for the Future lays out a bold approach for advancing the original *Vision, Mission and Principles* of the Urban Waters Federal Partnership in new and exciting ways. With the Biden-Harris Administration's environmental justice priorities, the time is ideal to strengthen the UWFP and expand its reach by engaging even more underserved communities across the country. Specifically, the federal partners under this Framework will:

- Establish a Steering Committee
- Establish a Steering Committee subgroup to meet Administration priorities
- Identify points of contact at all twenty locations from all fifteen federal agencies
- Identify funding for projects and Ambassador positions
- Develop an annual communications strategy
- Establish an aspirational goal of doubling the number of UWFP locations in the next decade
- Establish equitable climate resilience pilot projects
- Create an NGO steering group that includes academia

The federal agency signatories to this document will work together and with NGOs, the private sector, academia, and state, local, tribal, and municipal government partners to realize the vision of the UWFP: the revitalization of urban waterways and the communities that surround them.

# Signatures



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