

**Job Number 592-60-20-12, Task 1**

**2021 Rising Waters Report**

Sonoma State University, Center for Environmental Inquiry

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**Introduction**

Rising Waters is an academic-agency partnership created to develop viable solutions to emerging complex water issues. Sonoma State University's Center for Environmental Inquiry (CEI) creates a framework for the effort, hosting workshops, meetings, and symposia to assist decision-makers and academics find and implement new solutions. Rising Waters goals are:

- Viable solutions on emerging complex water issues that cross jurisdictional boundaries
- Facilitated cross-disciplinary discussion
- Enhanced public awareness of complex issues
- Trained workforce with real-world experience on important issues

In 2020-21, the water challenge chosen for exploration by board members of the Russian River Watershed Association (RRWA), North Coast Water Quality Control Board (NCWQCB), and Sonoma Water was "The Nexus of Water Quality and Community Members Experiencing Homelessness." In the U.S., California has the highest rate and rate of increase in community members experiencing homelessness. Many seek shelter along the State's waterways. A lack of sanitation services has resulted in increases in trash and pathogens in water supplies even as the State strengthens water quality regulations. People experiencing homelessness are only one of many sources of contaminants in our waterways but an important one to address. What is current extent of the problem? Who is affected within the watershed? Who is spending resources to address the crisis and are there better efficiencies and approaches? Rising Waters is an opportunity to use the power of inter-disciplinary study to understand these complex issues, to develop viable solutions, and to enhance public awareness of the complexity of these challenges.

**Collaborative Project Elements**

Rising Waters is a highly collaborative undertaking funded jointly by Russian River Watershed Association, Sonoma Water, and private donor Alexander Leff. While all of the funding is needed to undertake the project in its entirety, RRWA funding was allocated to support the faculty and student research portion of the project. Here we provide a brief description of portions of the project funded by others leading up to the research projects. Any deliverable mentioned here is available to RRWA upon request.

- **Rising Waters Design Meetings:** These meetings were hosted by CEI to develop the format and design for the Rising Waters initiative with RRWA, Sonoma Water, City of Santa Rosa and the North Bay Water Quality Control District. Meeting topics included

information needs, workshop formats, and project schedules. Deliverables: meeting minutes in 2020 (Jun 4, Jun 11, Jun 18, Jun 25, Jul 2, Jul 23, Jul 30, Aug 13, Aug 20, Aug 27, Sep 11, Sep 24).

- **Workshops:** CEI hosted two workshops with 34 leaders from water, health, social service and environment sectors to identify key challenges and barriers to their solutions. Deliverables: agendas, workshop reports.
  - Planning Workshop: Kickoff - July 16, 2020: The goals of the first stakeholder workshop was to: (1) seek input from experts and community leaders on framing the study questions, (2) plan to engage experts in the second workshop, and (3) help develop a larger follow-on workshop in the fall.
  - Planning Workshop: Detailed Investigation of Questions - September 9, 2020: This three-hour workshop was designed to solicit input from community leaders and experts in water quality and homelessness. The workshop was split into three “brainstorming activities”, after which participants were asked to join one of three breakout rooms organized around three questions:
    - What features/factors make a waterway attractive to people experiencing homelessness, e.g., access to social services, cover, toilets?
    - How can we help people experiencing homelessness to adopt low impact behaviors in waterways?
    - Which stakeholders are spending time or money to manage homelessness in waterways?The workshop resulted in a detailed list of issues for investigation, including identification of interested and suitable participants for the Rising Waters Steering Committee. In addition, a detailed list of potential barriers to providing services was identified, with the hope that student-faculty teams could investigate some of these barriers and generate recommendations to more effectively coordinate efforts in the County.
- **Steering Committee Planning Meetings:** Following the public workshops, CEI staff Dr. Chris Halle and Kerry Wininger led the Rising Water Steering Committee in a series of discussions to refine the research questions. The following Steering Committee members met on Oct 9, Oct 23, Oct 30, Nov 6, and Nov 13:
  - Michael Thompson, Assistant General Manager, Sonoma Water
  - Andy Rodgers, Executive Director, Russian River Watershed Association
  - Jenna Garcia, Housing Administrator, City of Rohnert Park
  - Lynea Seiberlich-Wheeler, Associate Director of Behavioral Health, West County Health Centers
  - Matt St. John, Executive Officer, North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board
  - Sean McNeil, Deputy Director of Environmental Services, City of Santa Rosa
  - Chris Halle, Program Developer, Center for Environmental Inquiry

- Kerry Winger, Outreach and Communications Lead, Center for Environmental Inquiry
- Claudia Luke, Director, Center for Environmental Inquiry

## Research Projects Funded by RRWA

- **Faculty Recruitment and Information Sessions** - CEI advertised the availability of research funding (three \$10K grants funded by RRWA) for faculty-student teams to address the top three priority questions identified at workshops and refined by the Steering Committee. Grant availability was discussed at two Information sessions hosted on Dec 9 and Dec 10, 2020 at which Chris Halle and Kerry Winger answered faculty questions about research questions and the application process. CEI received five proposals from faculty-student teams to address the three research questions and recommended the top three teams for Steering Committee approval.
  - [Flyer Advertising Grants and Faculty Information Sessions](#)
- **Research Proposal Development** - With approval of the Steering Committee, CEI provided funding to the three research teams and hosted meetings on Feb 4, Feb 11 2021 between the faculty and the Steering Committee to ensure research teams understood informational needs. The three research teams submitted final proposals (below) based on these discussions.
  - [Rising Waters Final Proposals](#)
- **Research and Results** – The three \$10K research grants from RRWA supported the salary of students and faculty to undertake the three research projects. After grants were issued, two research team meetings were hosted on Mar 18 and Apr 15 2021 between the Steering Committee and research teams to ensure research remained on-track. In May, students from each of the three teams made presentations on initial research results and provided the students with an important opportunity to practice research presentation skills and reflect on their experiences conducting the research. The following are video links to student presentations:
  - [Research Team 1 Report to Steering Committee](#)
  - [Research Team 2 Report to Steering Committee](#)
  - [Research Team 3 Report to Steering Committee](#)
  - [Water & Homelessness Research Results May 8 2021 Public Event](#)
- **Other Presentations and Outreach** – The CEI project team provided the following presentations and news articles about the project:
  - [Russian River Watershed Association Board Presentation 12-17-20](#)
  - [California Stormwater Quality Association Presentation 09-15-20](#)
  - [North Coast Water Quality Control Board Presentation 02-06-20](#)
  - [Innovative partnership tackles homelessness while also protecting waterways](#)

- [SSU students turn education into action by researching the nexus of homelessness and water quality](#)
- [Intersection Project Interview](#)

### **Year 1 Project Completion**

Due to Covid-19 related slowdowns, two of the research teams are continuing to work this summer to finalize their projects. Results of all three studies will be summarized in a final written report and presented at a September Workshop that includes a cross-sector discussion on ways to implement the results of the research. An RRWA Board presentation and presentations to NCWQCB and Sonoma Water will be provided by CEI staff after the workshop. This final stage of the work is supported with funding from Sonoma Water as part of the 3-year WATERS Collaborative contract between SSU and Sonoma Water.