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Community Listening Sessions throughout the Santa Ana Watershed

The Newkirk Center for Science and Society

University of California, Irvine

March 2019-September 2019

## **Acknowledgements:**

This project was supported by Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority's (SAWPA) Disadvantaged Communities Involvement (DCI) Program and Proposition 1 funding from the California Department of Water Resources (DWR).

I would like to thank my supervisors, Connie McGuire and Victoria Lowerson Bredow, for guiding me throughout my internship, especially in times of learning, creating and applying our process to this internship. I would also like to thank the following people, including my family members and loved ones who introduced me and/or supported me throughout my internship.

The following people are:

Teresa Guerrero

Erica Hua Fletcher

Kyla Foreman

Brian Keener

Riju Mondal

Simone Popperl

Marisa Perez-Reyes

Briana Villaverde

Valerie Olson

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## **Executive Summary:**

From March of 2019 through September of 2019, as a Water Resource Policy Intern (WRPI) working with the [Newkirk Center for Science & Society](#) at the University of California, Irvine, I supported the planning and implementing of community listening sessions (CLS) throughout the Santa Ana Watershed. The listening sessions were a part of a larger project that the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA) contracted the Newkirk Center to implement under the [Disadvantaged Communities Involvement Program \(DCI\)](#). [The DCI program](#) aims to ensure the representation of disadvantaged communities and economically distressed areas in interregional water planning and decision-making. As a part of the Newkirk team, I helped to conduct 12 community listening sessions to hear directly from the communities themselves about the communities' strengths and needs regarding water.

During my internship, I learned how to engage local communities that live in economically distressed areas. I learned about the relationships between local water districts, utility agencies, SAWPA, and local governments. Lastly, I learned that it can be difficult for community members to navigate this system of public agencies as they look for information and resources. Through my time working with the Newkirk Center and SAWPA, I have gained a better understanding of the importance in creating spaces for local community members to seek input of their first-hand experiential expertise in their community.

## **Introduction**

In this report, I will go in depth about the DCI Program and how I supported with the listening sessions processes. During my internship for the DCI program with the Newkirk Center, I took on many roles in the project. Firstly, I supported with the listening session process. This process looked like conducting outreach efforts and building relationships with local communities in the watershed, assisting with tracking and monitoring the outreach process to groups, organizations and/or government agencies, and supporting with note-taking and flipcharting throughout CLSs. Secondly, I assisted with the administrative side of the project and created documents such as sign-in sheets, outreach materials, excel sheets, and analyzed updated notes from conversations with potential community partners. Lastly, the Newkirk Center team comprised of two WRPI interns (including myself) that assisted with the support of the project and two supervisors who were essential in providing updates about the project to SAWPA and facilitating the listening sessions.

## **Community Listening Sessions within the Santa Ana Watershed:**

As a part of SAWPA's DCI Program, a team of researchers from the Newkirk Center for Science & Society at the University of California, Irvine conducted 12 community listening sessions (CLS) between April and July 2019 in Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties [see Appendix D, page 12.] The Newkirk Center team conducted 6 of the listening sessions in Spanish as a way to hear from monolingual Spanish speakers who are overrepresented in disadvantaged communities. The CLSs served both to support community engagement in the watershed, and to provide data about strengths and needs in the watershed to be included in the Community Water Ethnography Report. The Community Water Ethnography Report, prepared by Valerie Olson of the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Irvine, is a summative report of the strengths and needs of the designated disadvantaged communities in the Santa Ana Watershed from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders including elected officials, water managers, and disadvantaged community members.

During each listening session, the Newkirk Center team facilitated an open-ended conversation focused on a series of questions developed by the Olson team about the strengths and needs in their communities. In the conversations, participants shared stories about their everyday lives. They shared their experiences with water, housing, food insecurity, education, politics, jobs, and money, all of which were synthesized into the Community Water Ethnography Report.

Implementing the CLSs required the Newkirk Center team to reach out to multiple local groups, organizations, agencies and governments. Once the Newkirk Center team identified a community partner host for the listening session, we managed multiple levels of coordination. We also applied this system to water districts and local governments that we reached out to in an effort to collaborate on the project. We created a planning system that required help from community partners, water agencies and local governments to achieve a successful CLS.

## **Project Approach:**

### Planning Community Listening Sessions across the Watershed:

- **Step One: Cold and Warm Outreach**

The Newkirk Center team began its efforts to connect with local organizations and water agencies. We reached out to potential community partner organizations and water agencies in the watershed. The Newkirk team developed email templates to potential community partners that were familiar or unfamiliar with the project. In addition, as deadlines grew closer, our team made phone calls to SAWPA partner agencies to connect our team with groups that might help us in the listening session process. Some groups responded positively to our outreach efforts while others did not reply.

Our team provided information about the DCI project to many diverse groups across the watershed. We developed guidelines on how to approach CLSs according to each group's needs. This process looked at finding groups who have set schedules for community meetings, a location that could be easily accessible for community members to attend, and identifying the main spoken language of the groups. These groups ranged from community organizations, non-profits or advocate groups representing different populations. Therefore, our team had to strategize what type of listening session we were going to have for each group of individuals that came from different backgrounds.

- **Step Two: Collaboration and Planning**

Our team developed a routine that began with a conference call to discuss the purpose of the listening session process. We developed an agenda before each call that would assist in the flow of the call and ensure the purpose of the project was communicated to our potential community partner clearly. We introduced the purpose of the listening sessions, different stages of the grant, the DCI program and answered questions potential community partners had about the project. The potential community partner would then give us information about what they do as an organization and the populations they serve. Followed by a series of questions about the project, the Newkirk Center team would decide on a date, time and location that works best for the potential community partner. In most cases, groups met once or twice a month to discuss items or issues related to their organization and were open to allowing our team at most an hour and a half of their meeting time and space for the listening session. The Newkirk Center team would then follow-up with an email summarizing what was discussed in the call and the next steps of the listening session process.

Listening Sessions across the Watershed Implemented:

- **Step Three: Outreach Materials and Final Preparation**

A pre-meeting call is set-up to cover last details before the session and the outreach material is distributed to the community partner for feedback. Some general questions that our team asked during the listening session were mentioned on the outreach material to assist community members in understanding what topics might be addressed in the session. We planned to ask the four following questions below:

- What do you like about your community?
- What are some opportunities for improvement in your community?
- What issues would you like to see addressed?
- What water-related concerns do you have?

The Newkirk Center team asked general questions for the purpose of getting members of the community's real experiences and people were very receptive to this. There were documents and notebooks that interns we were expected to bring for the purpose of writing and documenting our own experiences in the session. Attending community listening sessions were

exciting to learn about different communities. The first Spanish CLS that I attended was in Orange County with a group of women at a local organization. Topics of homelessness, water quality, water rates, housing, authority and police, employment and agriculture were issues that concerned their community. We used recorders to document firsthand accounts from community members on all topics that ultimately narrowed down to their experiences with water.

## **Project Outcomes:**

The main project outcomes included the successful completion of the 12 CLSs and receiving community member's input about their experiences and input in the watershed. In addition, the project outcomes included evaluations and input cards that community members completed after each listening session. We collected all evaluation and input cards and recorded them in a Google sheet that we used in later phases of the project. On the evaluation and input cards, participants gave feedback about the CLS or other issues that impact their community. The evaluation and input cards provided our team with feedback on how to improve future listening sessions and for participants to share in written form community concerns, needs and priorities that they did not have a chance to share or did not feel comfortable to mention in the CLS. We will analyze, compile and share the evaluation and input cards with local water and resource managers for the next phase of the project. The Newkirk Center team successfully conducted 12 listening sessions across Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties with a total of 171 community members. These listening sessions hinged on partnership with the local hosts. These hosts provided space and local knowledge that as newcomers was critical to the success of the sessions. The Newkirk team was then able to listen and document community members experiences and issues that their community faces and share it back with local water and resource managers. I hope that this can be the start of bridging the gap of dialogue between water and resource managers and underrepresented communities.

## **Next Steps:**

We will conduct 3 community water conversations (CWC) for the next phase of the DCI project. In these sessions, the NewkirkCenter team will share back all the compiled data and information with local community members in watershed. The Newkirk team will invite local water and resource managers to answer questions and concerns that community members have about their community and water. We will complete the community dialogue and feedback sessions by mid-October.

Amidst the CWC sessions across the watershed, the Newkirk Center team will connect with local water and resource managers who would be interested in participating in the 'Train the Trainer' segment of the project. Water and resource managers will undergo training with the Newkirk Center team in learning the steps of conducting community listening and water

conversations with their local community members in disadvantaged communities. The purpose is to involve community members in economically distressed areas within the watershed to have consistent conversation and dialogue about interregional water management and planning in conjunction with their local water and resource agencies. The final phase of the, 'Train the Trainer' segment is set to conclude by the end of the year.

## **Conclusions:**

In conclusion, I learned and developed many skills over the course of the project. Through my many roles as an intern, I learned the importance of building relationships with local communities and how collaboration can be effective in future decision making. I also learned the importance of seeking input and gathering data from community members to forward on to potential decision makers who will have an impact on decisions that may benefit underrepresented communities. Lastly, I learned the importance of being a team player and how working collaboratively can make a difference in the project outcome.

I feel so fortunate to have been a part of this project. This internship has brought me satisfaction in knowing there are efforts to bridge dialogue among underserved communities and decision makers. I have learned much about interregional water management and planning that I have grown a strong desire to pursue a career in it. Being able to work with local communities and water and resource managers in collaborative decision making has taught me that there is more work to be done in the watershed and I want to take part in that effort. Having experience in working with underrepresented communities in parts of Los Angeles, this internship has taught me on how to navigate avenues not only within communities but also with public agencies as well. I hope that with the knowledge and experience that I have learned over the past few months, I can now apply it to a future career in water management and planning once I've completed my master's program in Public Policy at UCI. Having been renewed again on this project, I can't wait to see where this project takes me next.



**Appendix A:**



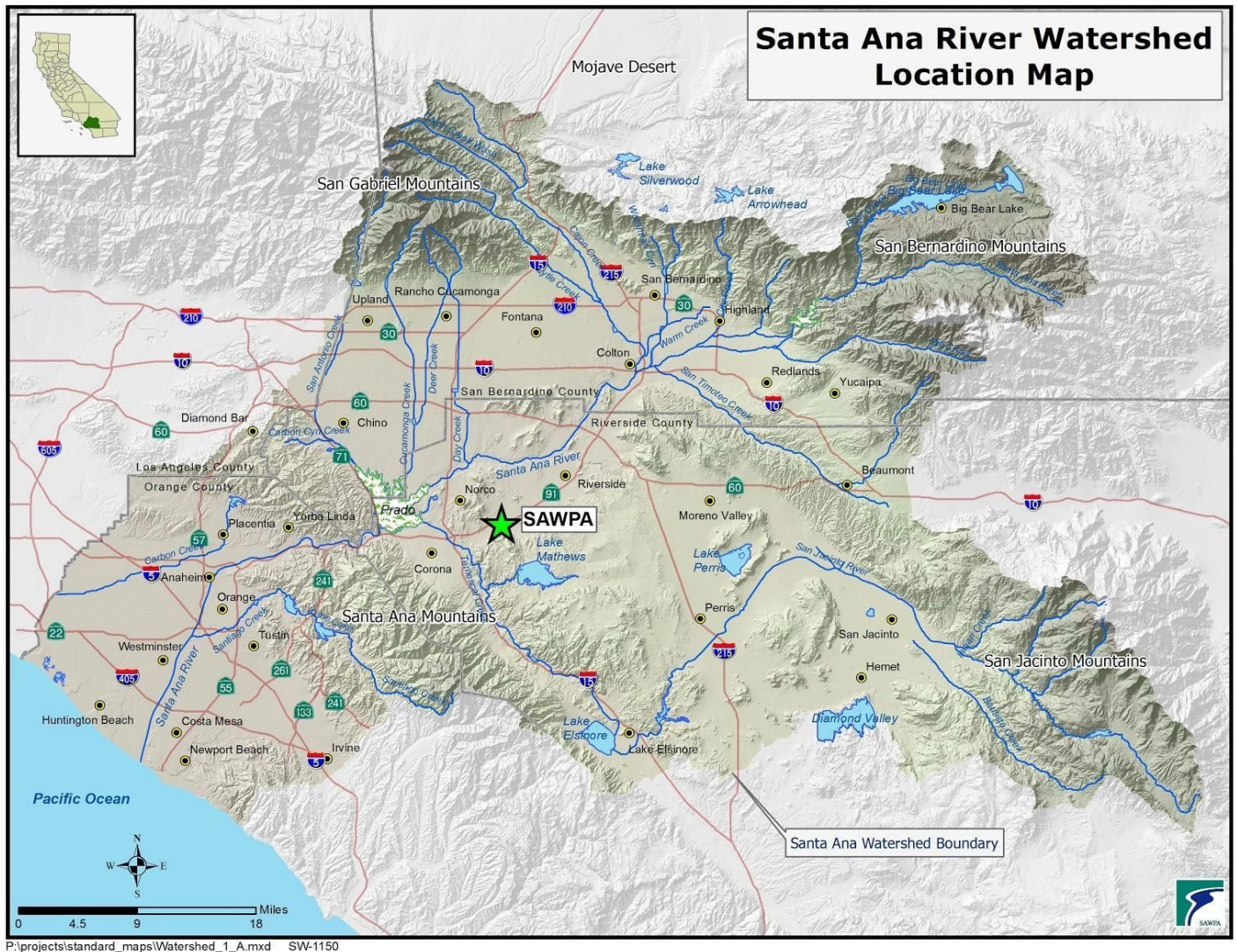
**Source:** “Community Listening Sessions held in Ontario, California,” Arthur Levine, Huerta del Valle (July 2019).

**Appendix B:**



**Source:** “Community Listening Sessions held in Ontario, California,” Arthur Levine, Huerta del Valle (July 2019).

Appendix C:



Source: "Santa Ana Watershed Location Map," Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA) <http://oldweb.sawpa.org/collaboration/maps/>

## Appendix D:

Listening Session County	Number of Listening Sessions	Number in English	Number in Spanish	Number in Dari	Total Attendees
<b>San Bernardino County:</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>61</b>
<i>Big Bear</i>	3	2	1	0	29
<i>Ontario</i>	2	0	2	0	32
<b>Orange County:</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>54</b>
<i>Garden Grove</i>	1	1	0	0	6
<i>Anaheim</i>	1	1	0	0	13
<i>Lake Forest</i>	1	0	1	0	11
<i>Santa Ana</i>	1	0	1	0	22
<i>Newport Beach</i>	1	1	0	0	2
<b>Riverside County:</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>56</b>
<i>Riverside</i>	1	0	0	1	12
<i>Quail Valley</i>	1	1	0	0	44
<b>TOTAL</b>					<b>171</b>

**Source:** “Community Listening Sessions held in the Santa Ana Watershed,” Newkirk Center for Science and Society at the University of California, Irvine (September 2019).