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It's a problem for everyone when the well runs dry

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Benjamin Franklin probably was not being literal when he wrote, "When the well is dry, we know the worth of water." But the literal interpretation certainly applies to the approximately 25 million Americans who live in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.

People in these states don't need April's Earth Day or Water Awareness Month celebrations to remind them of the worth of their water. They know that their "well" — the Colorado River — is running dry.

In polling conducted by Harstad Research last year in six Basin states: Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, voters recognized that the Colorado River and its tributaries are in trouble. Three in four voters in the six states said that the Colorado River is "in greater need of protection," and fully two-thirds viewed the Colorado River as "threatened." The electorate also recognized the impact this will have on their state and them personally. A majority of voters in this same poll said that their state will not have enough water within a decade.

Other research conducted in the Interior West underscores this concern: Water supply was one of the three most frequently volunteered environmental problems named by Western voters in a survey conducted in February by Public Opinion Strategies and FM3 and released by Colorado College. Likewise, three-quarters of the electorate viewed "inadequate water supplies" as a serious problem.

As Democratic and Republican pollsters, we can speak to the fact that the West is politically divided on many issues, but water isn't one of them. Voters of all political stripes have witnessed the rapid growth in states like Colorado, Arizona and Nevada where urban populations have grown by 20 to 30 percent or more over the last decade. They know demand has increased.

On the supply side, Republicans and Democrats may disagree somewhat on the reasons why there is less water, but at a certain point it doesn't matter whether the reduced water flows in the Basin are due to higher temperatures from climate change or the result of a 12-year drought. It is simply a harsh reality for everyone.

The effects have been felt by some in the West more than others, but most everyone recognizes that future water shortages will affect everyone. Farmers and ranchers have been dealing in a high stakes game with cities over water rights, affecting our food supply and city budgets. Outfitters, hunters, fishermen and recreationists such as paddlers can speak to the already profound effects that reduced water flows are having on lakes, rivers and wildlife in the West's great outdoors — risking the environment and outdoor recreation-dependent economies. People are beginning to experience the effects of less water in



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their own households. A year ago, nearly half of all voters in six Basin states said that their water bill had gone up. And a third said there are limits on the amount of water they can use.

There is another quote that we believe is apt, "If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging." Voters in these Basin states recognize the problem and they are looking for a solution through cooperation and compromise. Nine in 10 of Basin voters said that state governments, the federal government, conservation and tourism groups and industry need to work together to address the problems of reduced water in the Colorado. Most voters recognize that everyone has a stake, believing that inadequate water will hurt agriculture, wildlife habitat and the environment, outdoor recreation, fishing, tourism, as well as industry and jobs.

Voters reject so-called "solutions" that cause some stakeholders to clearly win and others to definitively lose. They know how these play out. Nearly two-thirds of voters said that they were highly concerned that scarce water would lead to competition and expensive legal battles over water rights. Voters would much prefer a compromise between stakeholders, where everyone is asked to conserve.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar told the recent meeting of the Colorado River Water Users Association, "We must build a water policy that is inclusive of all interests." Well, voters would tend to agree.

There are plenty of political fights ahead in the West, but figuring out what to do about water shouldn't be one of them.

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