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THE GUIDE

The Tomorrow's Water Community Engagement Guide was developed based on experiences working with individuals and communities in the western Great Plains who have found success incorporating this model.

You may find this useful if you live in a community interested in groundwater management, if you are a landowner or producer interested in participating in conservation efforts such as playa restoration, or an organization partnering with communities interested in water management.

THE COLLABORATIVE

The Tomorrow's Water Collaborative was instrumental in the original drafting of the guide and model. The Collaborative members represent the Department of Conservation at the Kansas Department of Agriculture, Ducks Unlimited, Greeley County Republican, Kansas Association of Conservation Districts, Kansas Department of Health and Environment, Kansas Natural Resources Conservation Service, Kansas Water Authority, Kansas Water Office, and Playa Lakes Joint Venture.

RESOURCES

- PLJV.org/Tomorrows-Water
- PlayasWorkForKansas.com
- PlayasWorkForNewMexico.com
- PlayasWorkForTexans.com

PLAYA LAKES JOINT VENTURE

Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV) is a regional partnership of federal and state wildlife agencies, conservation groups and private industry dedicated to conserving bird habitat throughout the western Great Plains — including portions of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas.

PLJV's role is to facilitate communication and coordination among the partners, provide science-based information and tools, and remove roadblocks to conservation — with the goal of helping everyone be more efficient and effective at delivering on-the-ground conservation that benefits the people and wildlife of the Great Plains.

PLJV.org/Contact-Us

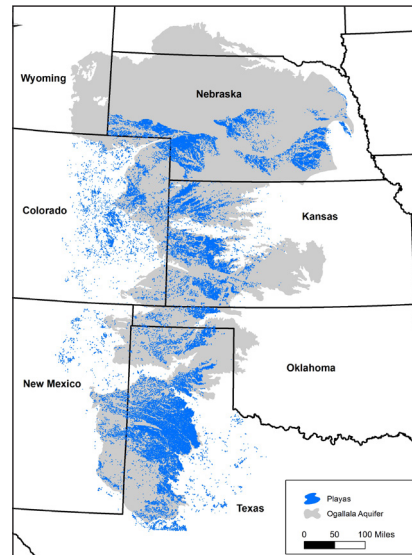


COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT GUIDE

Developing adaptable solutions to enhance groundwater recharge and water management for your community



CONNECTING PEOPLE, PLAYAS AND THE OGALLALA ACROSS GENERATIONS



People throughout the western Great Plains depend on the Ogallala aquifer for their water. However, as aquifer levels decline, many towns and communities are searching for solutions to continue providing abundant, clean water for future generations.

The Tomorrow's Water model helps communities explore ways to provide future water by reducing the impacts from aquifer overuse and increasing groundwater recharge through playas.

Tomorrow's Water is an adaptive, collaborative process in which local communities partner with conservation organizations to create an actionable plan to stabilize their water supply — with a

focus on incorporating playa conservation as part of broader water quantity and quality efforts.

Although playas are a primary source of recharge, irrigation greatly exceeds recharge from playas. The Tomorrow's Water model also includes strategies for reducing aquifer overuse and managing runoff within playa watersheds.

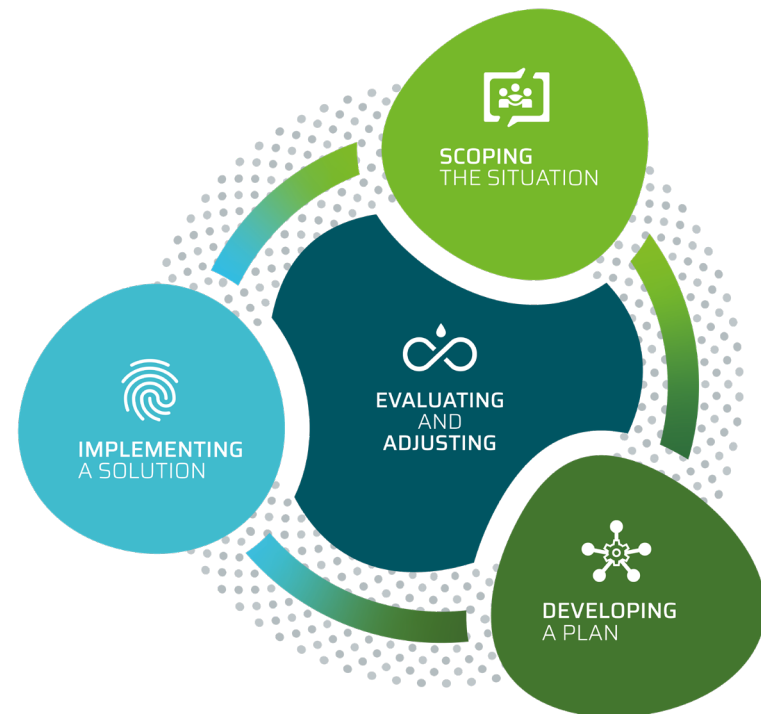
The model is designed to help communities create a water management plan that includes reducing aquifer overuse — through irrigation efficiency, well retirement and other methods — as well as restoring playas, and managing runoff within playa watersheds.

Using the Guide

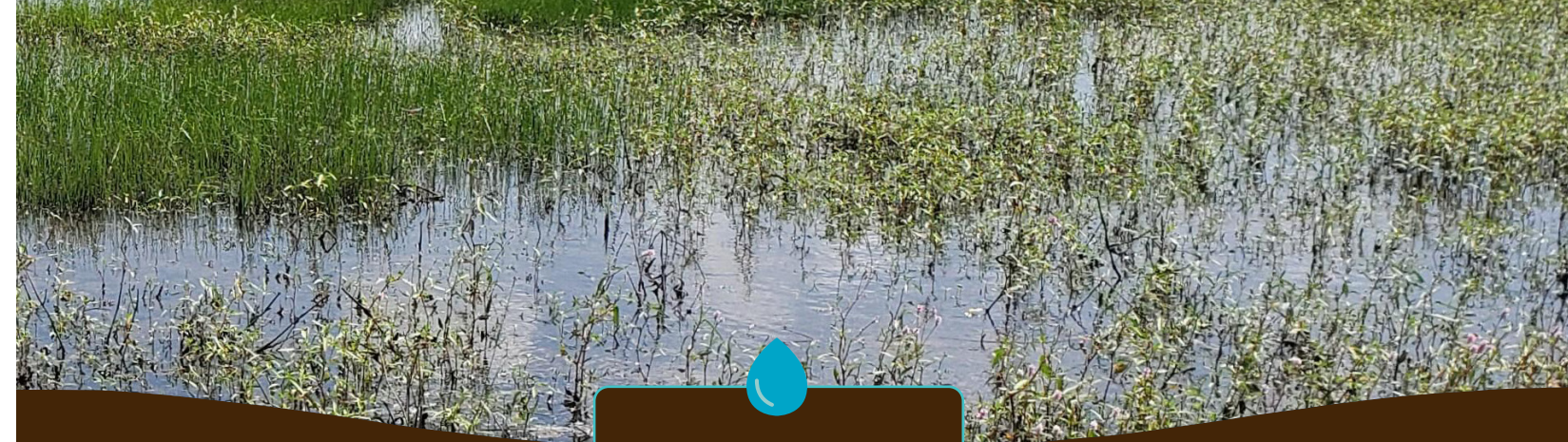
Each community is different and, as such, each water management plan will be different, too. This guide was designed to provide an outline for a model for developing a community-based, collaborative conservation partnership while allowing room for each community to tailor it to their specific needs.

Included are suggested activities and questions to explore when engaging community members, potential avenues to pursue for building partnerships and securing funding, and strategies other partners have found helpful in doing this work. To get the most out of this guide, refer back to it, visiting and revisiting sections as they apply.

The guide is broken up into three main sections: Scoping the situation, developing a plan, and implementing a solution. The strategies involved often rely on each other and may require a fluidity between them, as well as continued evaluation and adjustment.



The Tomorrow's Water model helps communities explore ways to provide future water by reducing the impacts from aquifer overuse and increasing groundwater recharge through playas.



WHY PLAYAS?

Because playas are a primary source of groundwater recharge, they are an important part of a water management plan. Once water use has been reduced, healthy playas can provide future water to support towns and rain-fed operations.

Recharge rates in playas are 10 to 1,000 times higher than under upland areas. While individual playa rates vary, the average recharge rate across the region is about three inches per year.

In addition, water reaching the aquifer through playas is of higher quality because they act as water filtration systems by keeping contaminants out of the groundwater.

Over time, many playas have been modified and are no longer functioning as healthy playas.

Playa restoration is an important component of the Tomorrow's Water model. In order to provide clean water for future generations, playas need to have an intact basin, a protective grass buffer, and no excess sediment.

Although playas are a primary source of recharge, irrigation greatly exceeds recharge from playas. So the Tomorrow's Water model also includes strategies for reducing aquifer overuse and managing runoff within playa watersheds.

What is a Healthy Playa?

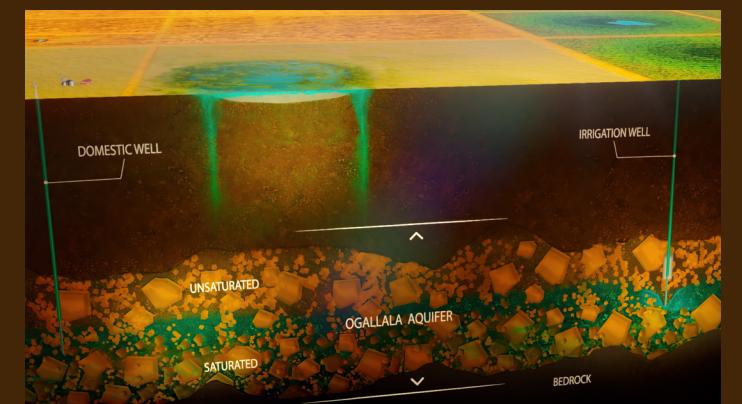
A healthy playa has an intact clay basin — without excavated pits or ditches — that is not buried by sediment from nearby fields. Water from the surrounding watershed freely enters the basin through a native vegetative buffer without being diverted from the playa by roads, terraces or other impediments.

Playas — also called mud holes, buffalo wallows, and lagoons — are round, shallow depressions at the lowest point of a watershed. They fill with water from rainstorms and runoff, which then slowly moves toward the Ogallala aquifer or evaporates. These temporary wetlands recharge the aquifer and support many kinds of wildlife.

Playas Benefit People and Wildlife

While playas provide critical habitat for wildlife, they also provide important benefits for the people who live in this region. When healthy, playas provide a sustainable water source for communities and rain-fed operations, water filtration, flood control, livestock forage, and recreation.

Playas are a primary source of groundwater recharge, contributing up to 95 percent of water flowing to the aquifer. Recharge rates in playas are 10 to 1,000 times higher than under other areas. The average rate across the region is about three inches per year* — that's three inches of water the size of



the playa moving toward the aquifer each year. Since this is a continuous process, the water recharging through playas today will be available for use by the next generation.

Towns are also facing water quality challenges, with nutrients entering their water supply. Healthy playas are water filtration systems — keeping fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides out of the groundwater. Water reaching the aquifer through playas is of higher quality than that going through other pathways. Playa restoration near city wells will improve the quality of water entering the aquifer.

*Gurdak and Roe, 2009. This report provides a review of all the playa studies with calculated recharge rates up to 2009. Three inches is an approximate average. Recharge rates beneath individual playas vary considerably — up to 10 inches per year — based on a number of factors including depth to aquifer, soil type, amount of soil saturation, evaporation and transpiration, and amount of rainfall. Recharge rates also vary during the playa wet/dry cycle.

SCOPING THE SITUATION

To help determine which conservation efforts will be most effective, it is important to understand the community, as well as challenges related to groundwater depletion and water quality.

- Saturated thickness of the Ogallala aquifer
- Number of irrigation wells in proximity to the towns water supply
- Number of playas (and acres) within the county
- Number of playas (and acres) in proximity to town wells
- Water quality impairments (such as nitrates)



COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

A key aspect to any successful conservation effort is listening to the needs of the people involved and shaping strategy around those needs. It is important to have a good understanding of the existing conservation practices being used and community attitudes and beliefs toward conservation.

Social Science, the study of human behavior in its social and cultural aspects, can help to do this. Using social science principles in one-on-one or small group scoping meetings with a diversity of residents, especially well-respected community members and leaders, as well as underrepresented groups, can help partners identify a relevant water conservation strategy that benefits both people and natural resources.

Where to Start

Make it a priority to listen to a variety of people, including community members in various roles and industries, historically marginalized populations, and landowners and producers.

These conversations should provide an understanding of the water situation in the town, as well as individual and collective opinions about the situation.

Begin your conversations by discussing relevant water quality and quantity issues and the ways those issues impact their lives. Talking about the benefits of playas can also be a good entry point into the conversation since they are often relevant because of the recharge potential. Other potential topics and questions are provided below.

Opinions and Knowledge About Water

- What are the biggest water challenges for the town and broader community? What makes addressing these concerns difficult?
- What efforts have been made to address water concerns? When?
- What is the level of community awareness around water challenges?
- What are the attitudes toward conservation actions? Related to irrigation water management or well retirement?

Community Information

- What is your hope for the future of the community?
- How are issues typically addressed?
- What is the biggest industry? Is it a major water user?
- What are common land use practices?
- What are community attitudes toward irrigation, especially when done near city wells?

Community Engagement

- What are your goals for pursuing broad water conservation efforts?
- Who in the community is interested and engaged in water conservation? What are indicators of their interest?
- What is the local capacity (time, money, infrastructure) to implement solutions to water challenges?
- Who are potential partners? Can any provide financial and other support?

DEVELOPING A PLAN

The overall goal is to create a collaborative, synergistic water conservation effort, and having a broad-based partnership is key to success. A diverse group of partners brings a diverse set of knowledge, relationships, perspectives, and experience. Local partners are important in supporting on-the-ground efforts and sustaining the project.

Each partner has a piece of the puzzle when it comes to sustaining water availability, improving water and soil quality and conserving habitat. Often, partners will focus on a specific aspect of conservation within the overall project or may provide unique funding opportunities.

Where to Start Partnering

1. Identify potential partners.

- Who (agencies, organizations, people) can bring unique skills, perspectives or funding? What will they bring?
- Who are the community leaders in agriculture, government, business, health and human services and education? Are they interested?

2. Identify people who can be champions of the project.

- Do you have representation from a variety of sectors in the community?
- Who is crucial to the project's success? At what point do they need to be involved?
- Do champions understand the water quality and quantity challenges within the community? Do they understand the solutions being presented?

3. Invite key people to participate in the group leading the project.

- What is the goal or intended outcome? Are group members aligned?
- Is there an existing group that can lead?
- What stakeholder groups need to be represented (i.e. irrigators, agencies, wildlife groups, non-governmental organizations, landowners, etc)?
- Who can act as a representative for each of these stakeholders?

4. Identify roles and responsibilities.

- Who will lead the group? Who will set up meetings, track progress, assign roles, etc?
- What are the responsibilities of each member of the group?
- How often will you meet? Where and how?

Where to Start Strategizing

Start scoping funding opportunities.

- Is the group aware of any existing opportunities?
- Which partners can help with funding details?

Formulate a conservation strategy and design the project.

- What is the biggest conservation need and should that be addressed first?

- What conservation strategies will be evoked during this project? (i.e. playa conservation, well retirement, etc)
- Logistically, who will do the on-the-ground conservation work?

- Can playa restoration be incorporated into other existing water conservation models and partnerships?



Courtesy of Abe Lollar

CONSERVATION DESIGN

While conservation design happens throughout the process, this refers to the point when the partners develop a plan for how to implement the necessary conservation actions to meet the community's water sustainability goals.

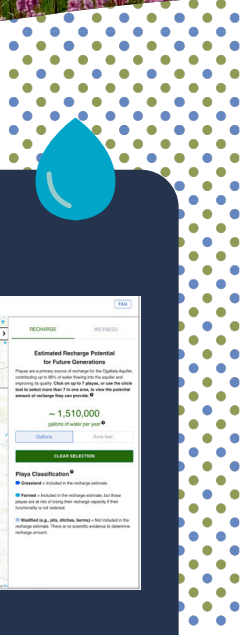
The plan will be determined by the nature of the project and funding sources; however, it should include solutions and programs that help landowners stabilize levels of water use through playa restoration and other activities.

Where to Start

Set goals and determine outcomes.

- What are the desired outcomes from the partnership? Are they realistic or do they need to be adjusted? Are there priority areas where focus is needed?
- What kind of actions are needed to meet the conservation outcomes? (restoration practices, long term protection or technical assistance)
- How will you target conservation efforts or programs? How will potential projects be evaluated or prioritized?
- What is the capacity and desire of each partner to contribute to this project? What is each partner's role? What financial resources can each bring?
- What are the capacity gaps within the partnership? How will those gaps be filled? Are there other gaps identified?

Include solutions and programs that help landowners stabilize levels of water use through playa restoration and other activities.

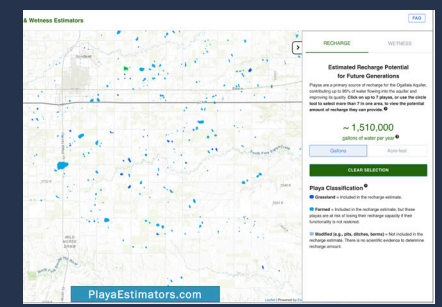


PLAYA RESOURCES AND TOOLS

Playa Lakes Joint Venture has developed a set of online resources and tools to help bring playas and their connection to the Ogallala aquifer to life for farmers, ranchers, resource managers, and others throughout the region.

Utilize an interactive playa map, playa maps by county, playa land use calculator and playa recharge and wetness estimators.

Visit PLJV.org/Playa-Tools



FUNDING STRATEGY

Collaboration and transparency are key for the funding development process to be successful. The project scope and capacity needs will inform which funding sources to pursue. Other factors such as partnership diversity and the ability to leverage existing or anticipated funding will also inform funding strategies.

The variety of funding available varies greatly. Some funding streams are yearly and some are multi-year. Grants and other programs can work in tandem and be used as match or leverage to bring in additional funding. Look for opportunities to leverage existing efforts and existing water funding sources.

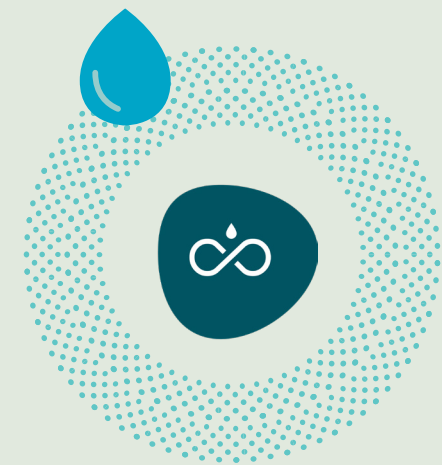
Where to Start Developing a Concept

Develop a project concept, talk to the funder to see if the project is a fit, then develop a proposal.

Depending on the funding opportunity, the application process will vary. Resources and partners are available to help navigate this process.

Some important things to consider:

- Who will manage and write the proposal? Who will submit it?
- What is the review process with partners and the community? How will they be kept informed?



Continue to keep an eye out for additional opportunities that may arise throughout the course of the project — It is important to continuously source additional funding over the years to sustain the project.

Where to Start Researching & Planning

Research funding opportunities through various entities, such as the ones below. (This is not an exhaustive list)

- **Local city and county government organizations**
County Commission, Chamber of Commerce, tourism offices, water district, legislators or other local government officials
- **State agencies**
State environmental agency, state agricultural agency, state game agency, conservation districts, state water office/authority, state legislation
- **Federal agencies**
USDA Farm Bill programs (Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency), US Fish & Wildlife Service (Partners for Wildlife, North American Wetlands Conservation Act Grants), US Environmental Protection Agency
- **Private entities**
Non-profit organizations (i.e. human health, wildlife, sustainable agriculture), philanthropic programs (i.e. foundations, corporations, private individuals), industry at the local, state and national level

Before pursuing funding, determine the amount needed and a realistic timeline for implementing the project.

- What is the overall budget for the project?
- Is funding needed for capacity to manage and implement the project?
- How much funding is needed for communications and outreach to stakeholders?
- How much funding is needed for playa restoration and other conservation activities?
- Are there any additional projected costs?
- What is the project timeline? (May vary depending on objectives, funding sources, etc.)



Courtesy of Abe Lollar

Restoring & Maintaining Healthy Playas



PLAYA RESTORATION GUIDE

Playa restoration reverses past modifications to playas by removing accumulated sediment, filling drainage features, redirecting water back into the playa, and protecting the playa with a buffer composed of native vegetation.

The Playa Restoration Guide provides information on restoring and maintaining healthy playas and what to expect as you work with conservation delivery staff to plan and implement a playa restoration project, as well as how to get financial and technical assistance for your playa restoration project.

Find the guide at: [PLJV.org/Docs/Playa-Restoration-Guide.pdf](https://pljv.org/Docs/Playa-Restoration-Guide.pdf)

ALIGNING PROJECT OUTCOMES WITH PROGRAM ATTRIBUTES

A variety of state, federal and non-governmental organization programs offer funding for implementing practices, with several providing funding for additional capacity. Choosing the right funding source depends on the project's outcomes, participant needs, and the partnership's ability to contribute to the project. When aligning project goals with programs, considerations should be made around the following program attributes:

- Is cost share needed for restoration practices (filling pits, ditches, and diversions, installing native vegetation buffers, and managing surface water runoff to flow into playas)?
- Is cost share needed to implement management practices? Or for upgrades in technology?
- Does the project need long term protection of critical areas with conveyance of an easement?
- Will providing forgone income be needed to incentivize removing cropland from production agriculture?
- Can partners leverage funding sources to achieve greater outcomes?
- Are funds needed for additional technical assistance and capacity for implementation?

Consider participation levels based on the complexity of the program. State and non-governmental organization programs are often much more simple and streamlined. Also consider partner knowledge and understanding of program rules and policy, to ensure programs fit with project goals.



Courtesy of Andy Hineman



COMMON PROGRAM CONSIDERATIONS

Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)

Provides cost share for restoration and management practices. Highly competitive ranking process. Limited opportunity to target funding or for partnerships.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

Partner led and developed. Can leverage partner resources for increased levels of funding. Offers several funding opportunities for restoration practices, annual rental payments to supplement foregone income and payments for permanent easements.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

A component within CRP, the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) program offers a partner developed and targeted CRP practice. Visit [PLJV.org/Playas/Playa-Goals/#SAFE](https://pljv.org/Playas/Playa-Goals/#SAFE) to learn about the Migratory Bird and Pollinator SAFE program.

Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE)

Long term or permanent protection of high value wetlands. Highly competitive ranking process. Limited opportunity to target funding or for partnerships.

State and Non-Governmental Organization programs

More streamlined and often simple process for participation. Funding primarily in the form State-specific funding programs for water conservation that can support playa conservation may be available. More streamlined and often a simple process for participation, but funding is often limited. Funding primarily in the form of cost share for restoration and management practices. Can usually be stacked with other programs. Consider exploring your state's agriculture, health and environment departments for additional programs.

IMPLEMENTING A SOLUTION

Finally, it is time to implement the solutions you've identified and start seeing action on the ground. What this looks like will evolve and change over time, depending on the capacity of the partnership, roles and responsibilities of partners, timelines, and progress made.

Where to Start

Define the roles and responsibilities for all partners involved.

- Who will lead the project? Is it through an individual, a steering committee, etc?
- Who will execute the day-to-day work?
- Who makes big-picture decisions, who approves changes, and who will hold the team accountable?

Determine what is needed to meet conservation goals (i.e. acres protected or restored, etc) and what assistance will be needed to do so (i.e. connecting people to programs or providing direct assistance on restoration needs.)

- Do people have the knowledge and resources necessary to complete a project?
- If not, are there people who are able to help with planning or implementation of projects?
- What kind of training is needed? When and for whom?

Build a timeline for the work.

- Set realistic goals and deadlines.
- Determine your desired outcomes using SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely).
- Create a communications and outreach plan.
- What will be the process for communicating about projects with the various partners and the community?
- Create checkpoints within the timeline to evaluate and adjust.

Implementing water management solutions will likely evolve and change over time and require evaluating and adjusting throughout the life of the project.

COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH

Developing relevant messages, communications products, and outreach materials is an important part of implementing the project. The stakeholder information gathered earlier in the process will help with identifying primary audiences and creating messages for those audiences. Understanding which messages are relevant to your audiences is key to creating a successful communications campaign and implementing the project.

Where to Start

Communications Timeline

Timing is important — start to advertise and share information as early as possible.

Partners, landowners, and community members all have different schedules and it is important to understand where those schedules line up or differ.

With this in mind, it can be helpful to create a communications timeline. Spread out information across time and various formats.

Keep the information simple and easy to digest so as not to overwhelm your audience.

Be clear in the purpose of the communications, whether it's a meeting, handout, website, or something else.

Personalize when you can and when it makes sense — help people to feel invited into the conversation for the right reasons.

Consistent Messaging

Keep messaging simple and easy to understand. There is value in everyone knowing what you are talking about.

Introducing the community to the project throughout each step, communicating with them over the course of the project, and keeping them up to date is helpful when it comes to

implementing and having an engaged community. The community should feel ownership over the project, too.

It is very important to vet information thoroughly before communicating it to make sure everything is correct and accurate. Once information is out into the community, it is hard to change what was said.

Storytelling

Learning about the experiences of others through videos, photos and written materials can have a powerful impact on helping new audiences understand potential benefits, ways of overcoming challenges and a variety of opinions.

This can be key in helping people understanding your mission and goals.



COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH RESOURCES

Communications and outreach resources, including articles, videos, and printed materials, are available for use at PLJV.org/Tomorrows-Water

PERSONALIZED COMMUNICATIONS

Personalized communications, such as mailing postcards or letters, is another effective way to reach landowners since these mailings go direct to their homes.

- Are direct mailings to landowners and producers possible? If so, can you get address or email lists? Conservation districts or other local groups may be able to help with this.
- Do you want to include mailings to community members, too? If so, is there an existing organization that can help with a mailing list?
- Are there other personalized communications that are shared with the community that you can participate in? (i.e. town or county-wide newsletters or mailings, etc)
- Is there someone who can call landowners, community members or key stakeholders to introduce the project, invite them to meetings, etc?

COMMUNICATIONS FROM LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

Local organizations, like water districts, conservation district offices, economic development groups, and community development organizations often have successful ways of reaching the community. Partnering with them to share messaging can be extremely effective and does not require you to reinvent the wheel.

- Are there newsletters that are sent to landowners and producers from local offices (USDA/NRCS/Conservation District offices, etc) and are those offices willing to share information on your conservation efforts?
- Can you partner with local organizations, groundwater management or Conservation District offices, to send mailings to landowners and producers?
- Are there local organizations that are popular among the community that can help spread the word by handing out flyers at an event, keeping flyers on an entry table, sponsoring an event, etc?



PUBLIC MEETINGS AND WORKSHOPS

Holding public meetings and workshops is a good way to engage community members, landowners and producers, and to offer a space to learn more and answer questions, especially as the project is getting started.

- When will the event be held? Think about your audience and take into account planting and harvest schedules as well as other events that may prevent people from attending.
- When will you announce the event or invite people? Start early to give people plenty of time to plan to attend. How many reminders will you give? Will you focus on personal invites as well as a general invite?
- Where will the event be held? Is there a local partner you can work with to find a space?
- Will there need to be snacks, water or coffee provided? Who will pay for those?
- Create an agenda for the meeting. What is the main goal or desired outcome? Who will lead the event? Who will speak? How will attendees be engaged?

LOCAL NEWS

Local news outlets are a great way to reach your audience where they already are — likely reading the local news outlets. Contact the outlets and find out how to submit articles or press releases and the process and deadlines for submitting press releases.

Gain an understanding of the types of stories each outlet publishes, as well as their audience and publication schedule. Build a relationship with a contact person and regularly share press releases and articles about the project.

BRANDING

Branding the project can help with sharing accurate and consistent messaging from the beginning. Branding can make a memorable

impression on partners and community members and helps them to know what to expect. The Tomorrow's Water name, tagline (Connecting

People, Playas & the Ogallala Across Generations) and logo are available for partner use when talking about the project.

