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WESTERN WATER & CLIMATE CHANGE
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AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAH BATES

Back to First Principles



"We need to be more explicit about the fact that land management *is* water management."

Q: In the Carpe Diem Project Headwaters policy brief that you wrote last summer you said we have a window of opportunity now to make progress toward water and public land resource management policies that integrate the best available science and acknowledge the new challenges posed by climate change and other pressures on public lands and water resources. Do you still feel we have that opportunity?

SB: Absolutely. It's actually very timely. Here in the Rockies there is lots of public interest in the changing forest conditions, especially related to pine beetles, drought, and fires. Over half of our water comes from national forest land, more in some areas. Public awareness is key, and so is the present willingness of the Forest Service to address climate change. It's important to remember that the Forest Service was originally founded to serve two main purposes: one, to provide sustainable timber supplies, and two, to protect our nation's watershed. We're really going back to first principles.

Q: Where do you see progress being made?

SB: Public awareness at this point is about the change in the landscape — dying trees, especially. More has to be done about making the connection to water supply and quality. More frequent and hotter fires will affect how water is retained, with more erosion, silted streambeds, fewer fish. It's all piled on top of the effects of climate change — changes in timing and type of precipitation — and it adds up in a bad way for our streamflows and water quality.

Even so, I'm encouraged by the broader public awareness of changes in the landscape, and by the statements and actions of public officials. Both the Secretary of Agriculture and the Chief of the Forest Service have said that addressing climate change impacts on national forests with respect to water is a priority issue.

I'm also encouraged by some initiatives among downstream water users and communities. The City of Santa Fe is the first to impose a user fee, an ecosystems services fee, on water customers to pay for restoration work in its headwaters. This was facilitated by The Nature Conservancy. Water customers have long paid for the dams and pipelines and other infrastructure, but not for the intact meadow that holds the water after snowmelt, or the intact forest that holds the snow and anchors the soil.

At the national level, there are proposals to set up pilot projects with Congressional funding for restoration projects. The Wilderness Society has proposed a Healthy Headwaters Restoration Program, which would fund restoration projects aimed at making ecosystems more resilient in the face of climate change. The connection has been made between climate change, ecosystem health, and the water supply. Now we have to figure out the best way to incorporate these concerns into regular management activities.

Q: What do you think it would take for planners at all levels to address water issues from source to final use? How do you think the Carpe Diem Project is contributing or can contribute to this process?

SB: We need to be more explicit about the fact that land management is water management. Especially in the national forests we need to say we're managing for good quality water that's coming out of the high country in a sustainable way. That mission needs to be refreshed, maybe through better incentives or other policy actions.

One thing the Carpe Diem Project can do is facilitate dialogue among many people who are exploring these ideas. They can say, "Let's look at Santa Fe. What is working here that can be applied elsewhere?" And from that we develop best practices. Carpe Diem can conduct and encourage research into what needs to be changed in laws and policies to make it possible to manage more effectively for water on the public lands.

Carpe Diem also helps ideas that have grown in one place take root in another. I like that it's a place where folks who might not know each other, or who might not even have heard about each other, get a chance to talk and share ideas. Stories get told, lessons are highlighted, and we learn from each other.

SARAH BATES is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy at the University of Montana and maintains an active legal consulting practice. She previously served as the Deputy Director of Policy and Outreach at Western Progress and is a member of the Carpe Diem Project Team. Her most recent book, co-edited with Larry MacDonnell, is The Evolution of Natural Resources Law and Policy, published by the American Bar Association in 2009.

The [Carpe Diem - Western Water & Climate Change Project](#) is a network of over 600 experts and decision makers dedicated to addressing the unprecedented challenge that the impacts of climate change on water resources pose for the western United States. The Project is housed at [Exloco](#), a nonprofit organization with expertise in spotlighting critical issues and facilitating strategic thinking.

[back to page one](#)