

# STORYTELLING TO SUPPORT WATERSHED RESEARCH ON EMERGING ISSUES

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Projections of budget deficits by the Congressional Budget Office imply ever-increasing pressure on federal spending for all purposes, including long-term watershed research. This presentation will argue that, since federal funding is ultimately a political decision, those responsible for maintaining long-term watershed research programs should not try to provide rigorous economic justification. Rather, the effort should recognize the natural human tendency to relate to the world through stories, and develop stories so that stakeholders can see their “stake” in supporting both ongoing and emerging watershed research.

The essential elements of storytelling are different than scientific communication and require a different skillset. Effective storytelling is concrete, requires a source of conflict, provides an emotional connection, and focuses on the novel and memorable. In many respects, a compelling story for additional watershed research funding will resemble the “dog and pony show” entrepreneurs tell venture capitalists when asking for the funds to develop a new technology.

Rigor is required in that an experimental watershed seeking expanded funding has to be able to provide new insights related to an emerging issue, the issue has to appeal to stakeholders enough to motivate lobbying, the lobbying efforts have to be persuasive enough to motivate action from a member of Congress, and finally the member has to be capable of providing new funding. If a weak link in that chain makes new funding to address an emerging issue unlikely, perhaps a broader organization could be persuaded to lobby for an emerging issue that could be addressed by a network of research watersheds. Another fallback position could be to remind stakeholders that are dependent on existing products so they lobby to maintain current funding levels, if cuts are threatened. An example story to address emerging issues related to climate resilience in infrastructure and new sources of manageable water for southeastern Arizona using data from the Walnut Gulch Experimental Watershed will illustrate the differences between scientific communication and storytelling.

Scientists would prefer a world in which new funding could be justified on scientific grounds. In this world, we will have to address the need to find new funding by working within the political system, using the language of politics - storytelling, and ensuring that we provide as much tangible value to stakeholders as possible.

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