5 takeaways from the Society of Environmental Journalists conference at ASU

Hundreds of attendees learned about the work the university is doing to improve our planet, livelihoods

By Lisa Robbins, ASU News
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Last week, Arizona State University welcomed academics, experts and journalists who focus on environmental and climate issues for the Society of Environmental Journalists' 34th annual conference.

Nearly 800 attendees gathered at the Omni Hotel at ASU in downtown Tempe to discuss the challenges facing Arizona — from water scarcity to wildfire management — which also have implications across the nation and globe.

Here are the top 5 takeaways from the conference.

1. We need to address agriculture's use of groundwater

Groundwater plays a crucial role in supporting significant food producers and enhancing agricultural productivity in the Western and Southwestern regions of the country. However, this vital resource is facing rapid depletion.

In fact, agriculture accounts for more than 40% of all freshwater and groundwater withdrawals in the United States, and that means there are some tough choices ahead for all of us, according to one ASU water expert.

“We not only want to be able to eat but we want to eat for generations and generations and generations, not just for this generation,” said Jay Famiglietti, a Global Futures professor in ASU’s School of Sustainability, where he serves as the director of science for the Arizona Water Innovation Initiative. “As the surface water disappears because of the Colorado River stream flow, we’re going to be putting more pressure on our groundwater.

“So, what’s it going to be for agriculture? I don’t know the answer. I just think we need to be talking about it in much greater detail than we have.”

2. We need to rethink our approach to wildfires

Climate change has transformed humanity’s connection with fire, and it is the responsibility of researchers and decision-makers to explore ways in which we can harmoniously coexist with contemporary advancements.

“These outbreaks are a pathology of the developed world. We might even call it a malady of modernity,” said Stephen Pyne, an emeritus professor of the Center for Biology and Society who specializes in environmental history, exploration and fire. “We have too much bad fire, too little good fire and way too much combustion.”

And fires will only be successfully addressed at the local level, he said.

“It’s hard to see how simply doing more of the same, particularly with climate change adding to it, is going to solve it. We need to redefine the problem.”

3. Ocean mining presents possibilities, concerns

The ocean floor is rich with cobalt, nickel and other minerals that are needed to develop green energy, like electric vehicles and wind turbines. So far, no mining has occurred, but on Thursday, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to advance mining of the seafloor.

“The deep sea is an ecosystem that is incredibly slow moving,” said Sheryl Murdock, a postdoctoral deep-sea researcher in the School of Ocean Futures.

“Scientists are saying, ‘Give us time to understand what’s going on down here. Once we start this (mining), there’s no doing back.’”

Murdock said possible ecosystem-disruption concerns are for the microorganisms that live on the clumps of minerals, as well as sediment displacement and the possible release of carbon stored in the ocean.

Seabed mining could be less environmentally and socially destructive than terrestrial mining, according to Erica Ocampo, chief sustainability officer for The Metals Company, a mining corporation. She said the company has been collecting data on the effects of mining on the ocean ecosystem for years, only to be rebuffed by environmental activists who see no compromise.

“We have been doing this for 10 years. We’re not rushing,” she said.

4. Phoenix can be sustainable

Despite alarming heat-related headlines dooming Phoenix to an ill-fated future, Kathryn Sorensen, director of research for ASU's Kyl Center for Water Policy, believes that the city is sustainable.

“We have challenges, but we have ways to meet those challenges and overcome them,” Sorenson said. “Some of those challenges are very hard, but we are managing our ground water and water resources very soundly.”

Willa Altman-Kaough, chief of staff for the city of Phoenix, shared how the city has 24-hour cooling areas for residents to help combat the hot summers.

“Heat kills more people than any other natural disaster,” she said.

Tom Zoellner, a former ASU PhD student and current professor at Chapman University and author, pushed back on the narrative of Phoenix being inhabitable, comparing it to Chicago.

“We just have a different kind of snowstorm,” he said. “But yes, Phoenix is absolutely sustainable — but some of the problems here are extreme and real.”

He suggested “putting the squeeze” on agriculture which, according to the Arizona Department of Water Resources, uses 74% of the state’s available water supply.

“There is not going to be one thing that is going to make the difference,” he said. “Embrace the small things. Don’t be pessimistic and don’t give up.”

5. A climate-focused community is needed for adaptation

Patricia Solís, executive director of Knowledge Exchange for Resilience at ASU, shared how her team got a law passed to help prevent heat deaths among people who live in manufactured home communities by working very closely with residents.

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But she said that the policy-level, systemwide change that’s needed is still out of reach.

“My personal opinion is that a lot of solutions to heat are pushed to the individual.”

Nabig Chaudhry, director of climate adaptation strategy for Probable Futures, a climate literacy initiative, said that the concept of adaptation can feel like “giving up on preventing climate change.”

“Adaptation is based on the counter-factual, preventing something that could happen. The idea of avoided losses makes it a difficult investment because it’s all hypothetical,” he said.

“Every city should be investing in community and social gatherings. Cities automatically go for infrastructure, but in reality, just having a community is the first response when disaster hits.”

This story was written with reporting from Mary Beth Faller, Marshall Terrill and Dolores Tropiano.

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Main image



Marlene Velazco-Medel (center), a postdoctoral researcher with the Center for Negative Carbon Emissions at ASU, talks about her program's work with carbon capture at the opening reception of the 2025 Society of Environmental Journalists conference, held April 23 at the Walton Center for Planetary Health on the Tempe campus. Reception attendees watched Indigenous dancers, listened to speakers and learned about several of ASU's sustainability programs. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



More than 60 environmental journalists listen to ASU water experts Rhett Larson, from the Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law; Susan Craig, from the Global Institute of Sustainability and Innovation; Jay Famiglietti, from the School of Sustainability and the Arizona Water Innovation Initiative; Dave White, from the Global Institute of Sustainability and Innovation; and Cora Tso, from the Kyl Center for Water Policy, during a panel about agriculture and water scarcity Wednesday at the Omni Hotel at ASU. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News