

Growing Arizona's next generation of water leaders

Advocates, professionals, nonprofit leaders, researchers and more working to strengthen water resilience across the state as part of the Water Leadership Institute

By Faith Kearns, ASU News
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As Arizona faces increasingly complex water challenges, the state needs more than innovative technologies and new policies. It needs leaders who can work across sectors, communities and borders to build lasting solutions.

That's the goal of the [Water Leadership Institute](#), a program supported by [Arizona Water for All](#), a pillar of the [Arizona Water Innovation Initiative](#), a statewide project located in ASU's Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory in collaboration with the Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering.

The Arizona chapter of the institute, led by the Environmental Defense Fund in partnership with ASU, Water For People, Reconciliación en el Río Santa Cruz and Northern Arizona University's Water, Society and Policy Lab, is helping cultivate a statewide network of emerging water leaders.

Participants include community advocates, utility professionals, nonprofit leaders, researchers, students and others working to strengthen water resilience across Arizona.

"Arizona's water future depends on leaders who can work across many different contexts and who can bridge multiple stakeholders to create productive and respectful dialogues," said [Carolina Jordão](#), director of the [Arizona Water for All Network](#). "It also depends on ensuring those leaders reflect the diversity of Arizona itself and bring a wide range of experiences and perspectives to water decision-making."

Building connections across borders

Building on its first [southern Arizona cohort](#) in 2024, the institute's second cohort brought together 38 participants along the Santa Cruz River, which crosses the U.S.-Mexico border twice. Six participants traveled from Mexico, creating opportunities to explore the shared challenges and opportunities facing communities connected by the same watershed.

The bilingual program encouraged participants to examine their relationship to water while learning about regional water history, transboundary resilience and water, sanitation and hygiene — or WASH.

"Water doesn't follow borders, so building relationships across those borders is essential," said [Nieves Vázquez](#), Arizona WASH program specialist of Water For People. "In this region, water challenges are shared, and solutions have to be shared as well."

For participant Leticia Daniela Haro González of Sonora, Mexico, the program provided new insights into water governance and environmental justice issues affecting border communities.

"I wanted to learn more about water, and here in my university, there's a lack of information," she said. "This program gives us the knowledge about the recent problems we have at the border."

For Ally Alvarez of Rio Rico, Arizona, the experience led to action. After participating in the institute, she became involved with Friends of the Santa Cruz River, contributing to citizen science and community outreach efforts in her community.

"The collaboration and the binational aspect of (the institute) brought so much more conversation to the table," Alvarez said. "It highlighted the importance of working together."

A place-based approach in northern Arizona

This year, the program expanded northward with a new cohort tailored to the Colorado Plateau.

The northern Arizona program was developed through a collaboration with Northern Arizona University's Water, Society and Policy Lab, led by [Lucero Radonic](#). The team conducted interviews with more than 30 water practitioners and worked with an advisory board to better understand the region's leadership needs.

"In a region as ecologically and culturally diverse as the Colorado Plateau, water leadership depends on the ability to build relationships and work across different perspectives," said Miriam Nelson, former program coordinator for Arizona Water for All Network in northern Arizona. "What we heard again and again was that leadership is not just technical, it's also relational and grounded in place."

The northern Arizona cohort combines virtual learning, field experiences and networking opportunities focused on the region's water challenges.

From learning to leadership

The impact of the Water Leadership Institute extends beyond individual cohorts.

In April, alumni from across Arizona visited the Arizona State Capitol to learn about the legislative process, meet with legislators and policymakers, and share their own water leadership experiences. The visit reflected one of the institute's goals: helping participants become engaged leaders who contribute to water conversations in their communities and across the state.

“Getting to see the legislative session in action is a valuable experience,” said Kait Bieber, a senior specialist with the Environmental Defense Fund. “Participants got a deeper look into how decision-making works at the state level and were able to share their water leadership stories, crafted during their cohort, with Arizona senators and representatives.”

Other alumni have continued their work through environmental education, community engagement and storytelling.

The Water Leadership Institute is part of a broader effort by the Arizona Water Innovation Initiative to strengthen Arizona's water leadership pipeline. Alongside programs such as ASU's [Water Management Certificate](#), which helps professionals develop technical expertise, WLI focuses on leadership and relationship-building skills.

Investing in Arizona's water future

As Arizona confronts drought and changing water supplies, those skills are increasingly important.

"Arizona's water future depends on people," said [Amber Wutich](#), director of Arizona Water for All and Regents Professor and President's Professor in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change. "We need leaders from diverse backgrounds and perspectives involved in developing water solutions. Programs like the Water Leadership Institute help build the relationships and capacity that make long-term water resilience possible."

Want to learn more?

Explore [Water Leadership Institute: A Story Map Through Arizona](#), created by ASU student Arianna Ruvalcaba.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Water Leadership Institute participants from southern Arizona learning about river monitoring with the Arizona Water Watch Program from Arizona Department of Environmental Quality and Friends of the Santa Cruz River. Photo by Carolina Jordão

Text image(s)



Water Leadership Institute participants engaged in learning activities and field visits in Patagonia and Nogales. Photos by Carolina Jordão



Water Leadership Institute participants taking notes as they learn about water sustainability initiatives in the region they live in. Photos by Carolina Jordão



Advisory board members participating in planning for the Water Leadership Institute on the Colorado Plateau. Photo by Lucero Radonic



Water Leadership Institute alumni visited the Arizona State Capitol to learn about legislative processes, meeting with both legislators and policymakers to share their water leadership stories. Photo courtesy of Arizona Water for All