

National voter poll on water

June 2022

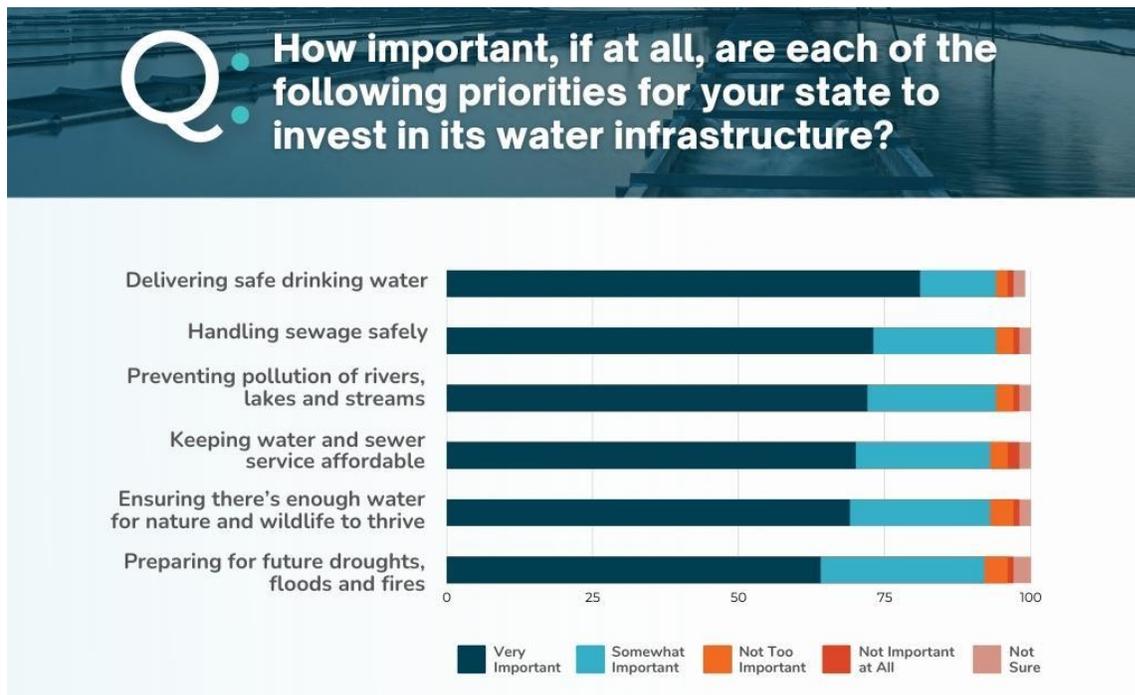


This year is shaping up to be a seminal one on water. State and federal officials are working to implement the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act that included \$55 billion for drinking and wastewater infrastructure, the single largest investment in history. It also marks the 50th anniversary of the Clean Water Act, and a key opportunity to curb water pollution, as lawmakers negotiate priorities for the five-year Farm Bill that will be reauthorized in 2023. To understand the concerns that are top of mind for voters, the [Water Hub at Climate Nexus](#) partnered with Climate Nexus Polling, the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication on a national poll. We included questions about infrastructure spending, the Clean Water Act, the Farm Bill, drought response, water bill assistance, and more. Below, we share key takeaways.

- Nearly 9 in 10 voters (89%) agree that access to safe, affordable water is a human right
- Three-quarters (75%) of voters support creating a permanent federal program to help low-income families pay their water bills
- By more than a four-to-one margin, voters would prefer their drinking water system be owned by a public utility (58%) rather than a private company (13%)
- 81% of voters say it is very important that infrastructure investments deliver safe drinking water
- 59% of voters say the government should prioritize communities with the greatest need for infrastructure spending, rather than distributing funds equally (41%)
- While only about a third (36%) of voters know much about the Clean Water Act, 96% say it's important that rivers, lakes and streams be safe for fish and wildlife, and 89% for drinking
- Voters say the most important goals of US farming policy are public health, environmental health, and keeping store shelves stocked
- 84% of voters across the country are somewhat or very concerned about drought in the Western U.S.
 - More than half say drought will have a large effect on wildfires (68%), food prices (58%) and fish and wildlife (54%)
 - When asked about drought responses, water efficiency (76%) and reuse and recycling (59%) received far more support than desalinating seawater (22%) or building new dams and reservoirs (16%)

Voters support targeted infrastructure spending

We know from [past polling](#) that safe drinking water and healthy waterways are a priority for voters across the country. This survey again demonstrates that these are bipartisan priorities. Strong majorities of voters say it's very important that infrastructure investments:



With \$55 billion earmarked for water and sewer projects in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and a [history of federal infrastructure dollars flowing to white and wealthy](#) areas, we wanted to test support for a spending plan that prioritizes disinvested communities, while also testing terms like “frontline,” “vulnerable” and “disadvantaged.”

A strong majority of voters say the government should prioritize communities with the greatest need (59%) when considering how to allocate infrastructure funding rather than distributing it equally (41%). In subsequent questions, we found that describing the risks or impacts communities are experiencing makes voters more likely to say they should be prioritized than focusing on race or relying on terms like “frontline” or “disadvantaged.”

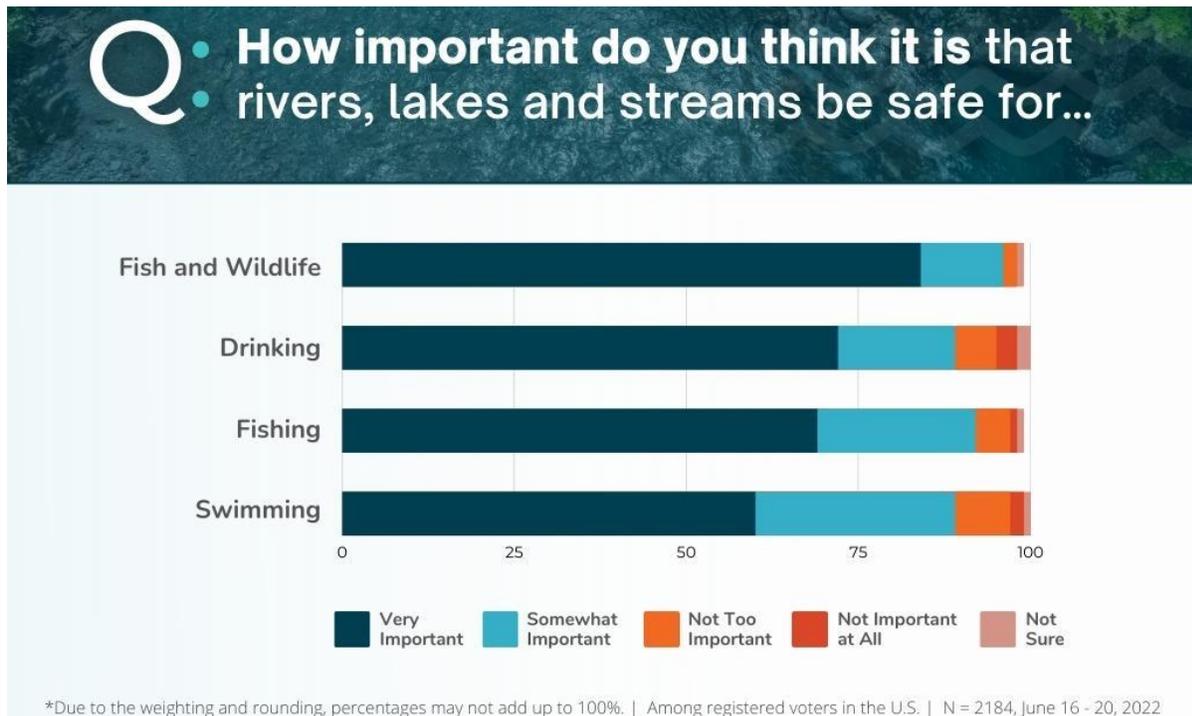
- 76% say communities at high risk of fires, floods and other disasters should be prioritized
- 73% say communities with high levels of air and water pollution should be prioritized
- 71% say communities that need federal help to pay for critical infrastructure updates should be prioritized
- 71% say vulnerable communities should be prioritized

- 67% say disadvantaged communities should be prioritized
- 63% say communities with high rates of asthma, heart disease and other health problems should be prioritized
- 50% say frontline communities should be prioritized

When we asked the question a slightly different way, 80% of voters somewhat or strongly agreed that communities with the most air and water pollution, or communities vulnerable to climate change impacts like fires and flooding should be prioritized. Just 51% agree that communities of color should be prioritized.

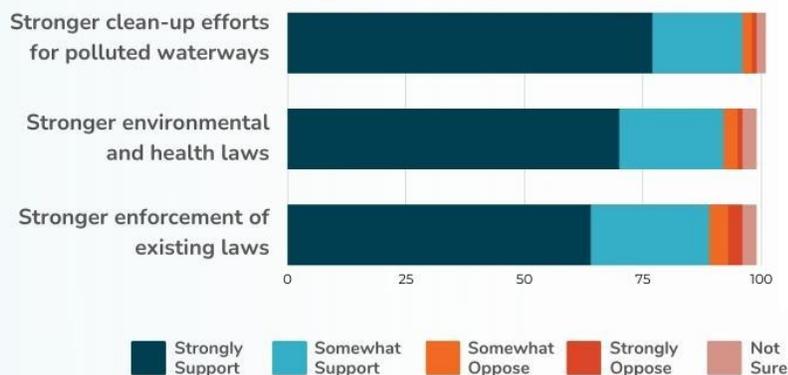
Clean water is a top priority

While advocates mark the Clean Water Act's 50th anniversary this year, amid ongoing debate—and a high profile Supreme Court case—over its reach, voters still know relatively little about this landmark law. Just over a third (36%) have heard a lot or some about the Clean Water Act. **Nonetheless, clean water is a nearly universal concern.** Ninety six percent of voters across the country say it's important that rivers, lakes and streams be safe for fish and wildlife, and 89% for drinking.



After hearing that half of U.S. rivers and lakes surveyed by the EPA are too polluted for swimming, drinking or fishing, voters expressed strong support for stronger clean up efforts, environmental laws, and enforcement of existing clean water laws.

Voters overwhelmingly support strengthening and enforcing the Clean Water Act.



When asked about pollution sources, voters tend to express the most concern about sources they can see, like industrial waste (63% very concerned) and plastics (59%). About half are also very concerned about agricultural and urban/suburban runoff, oil and gas leaks and chemicals, and sewage backups.

- 89% are concerned about industrial waste, including heavy metals and toxic chemicals (63% very concerned)
- 89% are concerned about plastic bags, bottles and microplastics (59% very concerned)
- 88% are concerned about agricultural runoff, including pesticides, chemical fertilizer, and manure (56% very concerned)
- 86% are concerned about urban and suburban runoff, including road salt, motor oil, and lawn chemicals (48% very concerned)
- 85% are concerned about sewage backups and overflows (52% very concerned)
- 81% are concerned about oil and gas leaks and fracking chemicals (54% very concerned)

Water affordability is a political winner

Almost nine in 10 voters (89%) agree that access to safe, affordable water is a human right, including almost two in three (65%) who strongly agree.

During the pandemic, Congress created a temporary program to help low-income families pay their water bills. Despite substantial outreach around this and other state, local and utility water

bill assistance programs, 37% of voters have not heard anything about them. Nonetheless, three quarters (75%) of voters support the idea of a permanent federal program, with 40% strongly supporting.

We wanted to test different ways of describing programs to help people pay their water bills, so we read five different descriptions, and asked voters to rank them from the one they most supported, to the one they least supported. Voters indicated the strongest support for “water affordability.”

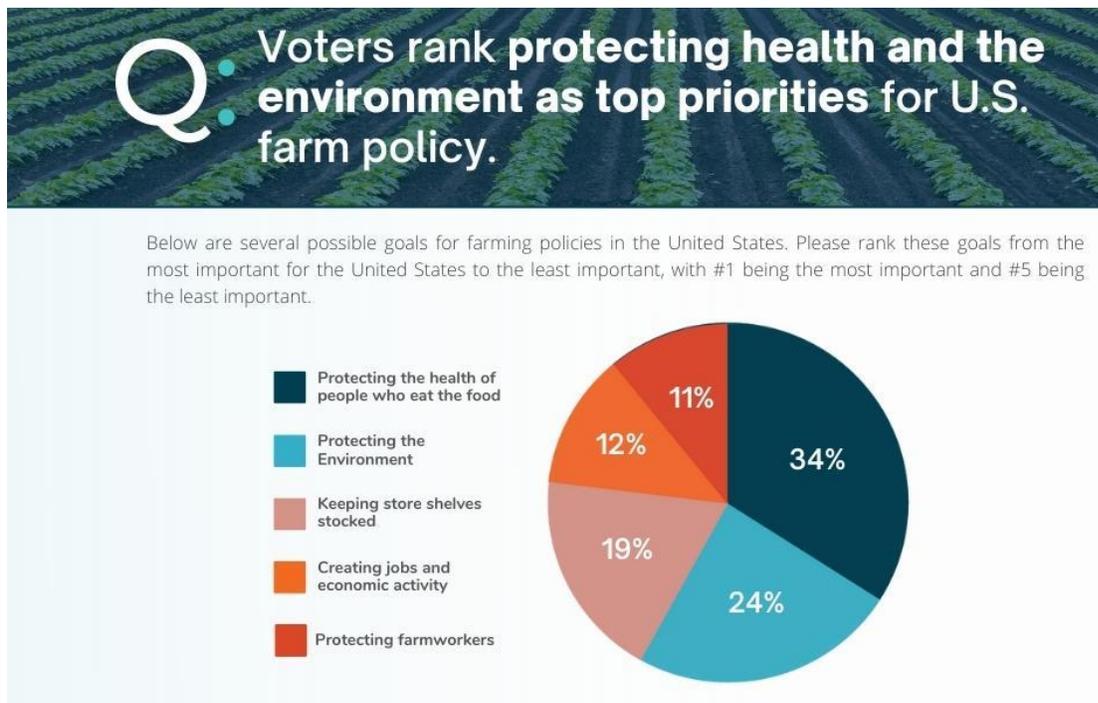
- 43% are most supportive of a “water affordability” program
- 27% are most supportive of a “low income water rate assistance” program
- 12% are most supportive of a “water bill assistance” program
- 9% are most supportive of a “water bill help” program
- 8% are most supportive of a “water debt relief” program

Next, we explored opinions regarding utility ownership. **By more than a four-to-one margin, voters would prefer their drinking water system be owned by a public utility (58%) rather than a private company (13%).** Voters say a public utility would be more likely to deliver cheaper bills (64%), more reliable service (57%), and safer (55%) and cleaner (55%) water.

Lastly, we asked voters what contaminants most concern them in water from their faucets. Lead was top of mind, with 60% very concerned, followed by arsenic (56%), PFAS (45%) and nitrates (42%).

Voters want farm policies that promote human and environmental health

This year, lawmakers are negotiating priorities for the next five-year Farm Bill, up for reauthorization in 2023. We asked voters what goals they think farm policy should focus on, and found that public and environmental health emerged as top priorities. The chart below reflects the percentage of voters that ranked each goal as the most important.



Next, we tested a series of statements about food and farming to see which aligned most closely with voters' views. Two thirds of voters (67%) strongly agree that people deserve nutritious food grown without synthetic chemicals, and half (54%) strongly agree that food should be grown in harmony with nature. Half (50%) strongly agree that healthy soils are essential for reducing climate change. On the question of farm size, voters see merits of small and large farms similarly. The same percentage (37%) strongly agree that small local farms can better meet community needs, and that large farms can produce more food at lower prices.

Just 27% of voters have heard “a lot” or “some” about the Farm Bill, but **80% support doubling the amount of conservation funding in the Farm Bill**, and more than 80% support programs that prevent pollution, save water, and create habitat.

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- 94% of voters support helping farmers grow food for people (72% strongly support)
 - 92% support protecting clean water by reducing runoff of fertilizer and pesticides (66% strongly)
 - 91% support helping farmers grow more crop per gallon of water during droughts (65% strongly)
 - 91% support helping farmers grow food for livestock (59% strongly)
 - 89% support helping farmers create habitat for fish and wildlife (59% strongly)
 - 86% support protecting clean air by reducing spraying of pesticides and manure (57% strongly)
 - 81% support slowing climate change by helping farmers reduce greenhouse gas emissions (54% strongly)
 - 66% support eliminating subsidies for factory farms (36% strongly)

We told voters that enriching and stabilizing soils on our nation's farmland is a key goal of the Farm Bill, and asked what they saw as the top reason to do this. Growing more crops with less fertilizer (38%), filtering out pollution before it reaches rivers and streams (24%), and retaining moisture to reduce the need for irrigation (19%) rose to the top. Just 14% of voters say absorbing carbon to slow climate change was the most important reason, and 4% say reducing dust storms and erosion.

Voters are worried about drought, want more water conservation and reuse

With dropping reservoirs and dry fields from California and the Colorado Basin making headlines across the country, it's no surprise **that 84% of voters nationwide are somewhat or very concerned about drought in the Western U.S.** Half (50%) say drought in the West is the result of human-caused climate change, compared to a third (33%) who say it's normal weather variations.

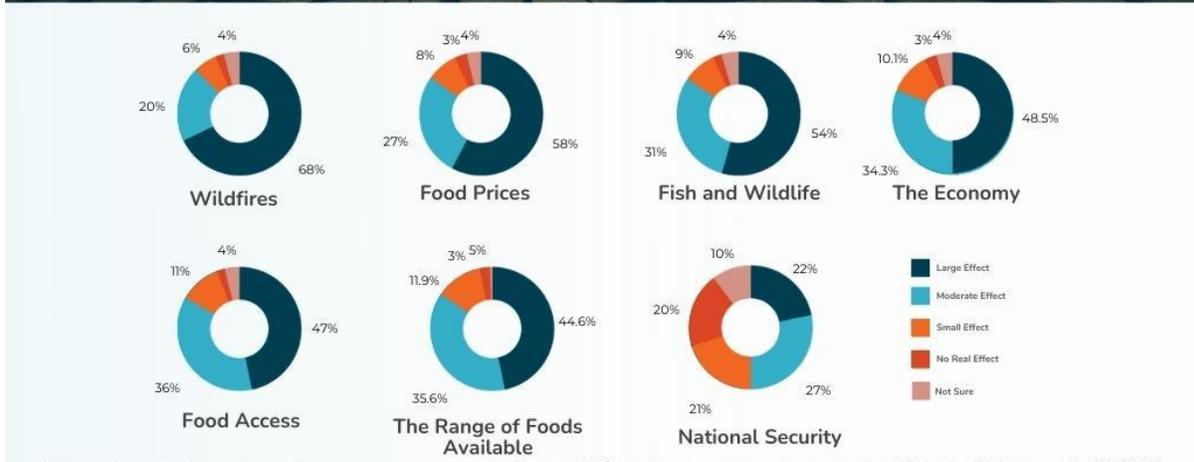
When asked what is driving the West's water supply challenges, voters are almost twice as likely to blame the growth of cities and suburbs as the overplanting of crops in dry areas, despite the fact that agriculture uses the vast majority of Western water.

- 53% say growth of cities and suburbs impacts western water challenges a lot
- 48% say using more water than rain and snow replace
- 39% say outdated or inadequate dams, canals and reservoirs
- 36% say water wasted through leaks and inefficiencies
- 29% say overplanting of crops in dry areas

- 23% say overly strict environmental laws

We wanted to know what drought impacts voters are most worried about, so asked them what effect they believe the drought is having on a range of things, from fires to fish to food. More than two thirds of voters said the drought is having a large impact on wildfires, while about half said the same of food prices and access, fish and wildlife, and the economy.

Q Do you think drought in the Western United States is having a large effect, a moderate effect, a small effect, or no real effect on each of the following in the United States:



Since dry fields and dying orchards have been in the news a lot recently, we asked voters what concerns them most about farmers and ranchers having less water for irrigation. By far the top concern was the availability of fruits, vegetables, meat, and dairy. More than half of voters (56%) chose that as their top concern, compared with about one in 10 voters that were most concerned about loss of work for farmworkers, loss of income for other local businesses, decline of rural communities, and dust storms from unplanted fields.

Next, we asked voters to select what they see as the top three most important drought responses. **Notably, water efficiency and reuse received far more support than desalination or new dams and reservoirs.**

- 76% selected using water more efficiently
- 59% selected reusing and recycling water

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- 37% selected using less water
 - 33% selected protecting groundwater
 - 33% selected capturing stormwater
 - 24% selected keeping water flowing for fish and wildlife
 - 22% selected desalinating seawater
 - 16% selected building new dams and reservoirs

We have seen elected officials calling for an “all of the above” water strategy, and wanted to know if voters like this idea, or want to prioritize sources that are more cost-effective and climate-friendly. **Respondents signaled a slight preference (54%) for water sources that are “both cost effective and good for the climate” over an “all-of-the-above” water strategy (46%).**

Conservation is the most cost-effective and climate-friendly water source of all, and we wanted to know what approaches voters support to promote water savings. More than nine in 10 voters support voluntary water saving programs (91% support, 54% strongly support), and over half support laws that limit water use (55% support, 23% strongly support), or water rates that encourage water savings (55% support, 23% strongly support).

Lastly, we asked voters how much they had heard about One Water, and tested different reasons to move towards more integrated water management. Just 23% had heard some or a lot about One Water, while 58% had not heard anything at all. After sharing a brief explanation of One Water, we asked voters to rank reasons to adopt this approach. More than a third (36%) chose drought preparedness as the top reason, while 28% chose water equity, 14% chose preventing pollution, and 8% said flood prevention.

Full topline available [here](#). To access the crosstabs, please contact Nicole Lampe at nlampe@climatenexus.org.

Methodology: Climate Nexus Polling, in partnership with the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, conducted a representative survey for the Water Hub at Climate Nexus June 16-20, 2022, of 2,184 registered voters in the United States. The margin of error for this survey is +/- 2.1% at the 95% confidence level.