



**West**

THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

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## State Leaders Discuss Western Water Needs and Tribal Engagement

“We have a saying out West about water,” said New Mexico Senate President Pro Tempore Mimi Stewart during a 2021 CSG National Conference session, “Whiskey is for drinking; water is for fighting.”

Hosted by CSG West, the session explored how to meet today’s water needs while fostering effective tribal engagement. In her introduction, Stewart welcomed guests to Santa Fe and offered context for the issue of water usage in Western states. Forty million people in seven U.S. states and in Mexico depend on water from the Colorado River, Stewart said. In the Colorado River Basin, 29 federally recognized tribes depend on the river for a variety of purposes, including domestic, commercial, recreation, wildlife, habitat, religious and cultural uses. In this context, how can states foster collaboration to address challenges?

Session panelists included New Mexico Senator Benny Shendo; Phoebe Suina, an environmental consultant; Idaho Senator Dan Johnson; and Terry Sloan, who serves as intergovernmental tribal liaison for the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Shendo described an issue of water usage and how relationships guided decision-making. It dealt with potential cuts to water users along a river and how native and non-native stakeholders came together to settle a dispute.

“It was very difficult, and I think the attorneys didn’t help,” he said. “At one point, they threw out all the attorneys, and folks come together, the Hispanic



communities, the non-Indians, the Pueblos, and said we are all brothers and sisters. We know each other. Water is important to all of us. And they figured out a water-sharing plan that they could all live with.”

Suina described how traditional practices in indigenous communities long predate Western science and provide a model for sustainability.

“We all are on this planet together, and we have to work together,” she said. “The cycle is much bigger. The water picture is much bigger. That is why I think it’s very important to have this experience, knowledge and wisdom at the table when we look at making decisions and discussing policy and coming up with ways to address water issues.”

Idaho state Senator Dan Johnson laid out the context of water usage in his state, including rapid growth in Boise that is outpacing water infrastructure.

“We have some water, but we want more,” he said. “Everybody needs more, and will need more in the future, and how do we get it? We’re going to have to be very creative about it.”

Sloan reiterated the centrality of sustainability for indigenous communities, and the lessons others can draw from that stock of knowledge.

“Sustainability, as a community and a way of life, has been on mother earth for thousands of years as practiced by indigenous peoples,” he said. “We were probably the first sustainable communities on the planet. We are beginning to realize that the way we have survived is beginning to take the forefront on sustainability.”



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The session provided an opportunity for CSG West to highlight key issues in the West and of the important relationships with tribal governments to an audience of policymakers from across the country. Many thanks to New Mexico Senate President Pro Tempore Stewart for her leadership and guidance to organize this session.