

Santa Rosa, CA

Spanish Language Water Use Efficiency Program Enhancements

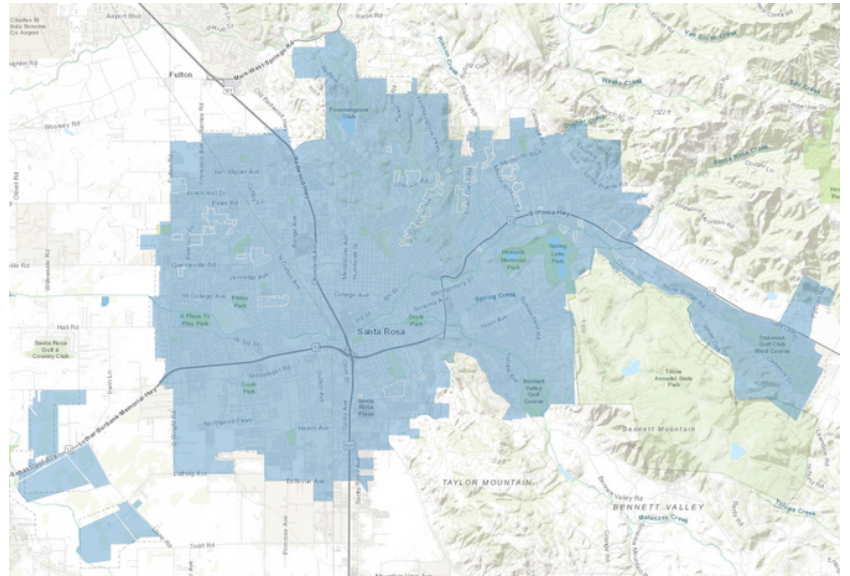


Project at-a-Glance

Community Overview

- Utility/Community: Santa Rosa Water
- Location: City of Santa Rosa, California
- Population served: 173,628
- Service area: 24,594 acres

Project Partners



Project Benefits

- Builds resilience to climate change.
- Ensures all customers are aware of opportunities for water bill savings from increased water use efficiency.
- Helps meet state water conservation standards.

A note on language: This report uses the term *Latinx* when discussing Latin American or Hispanic identifying community members, to be inclusive of all genders, with the understanding that this label may not best fit all community members in this group. An exception to this is in the use of Census data, with the terms "Hispanic / Latin American by race" or "by origin". We have retained the original Census terms when discussing Census data.

Project Challenges



Climate change



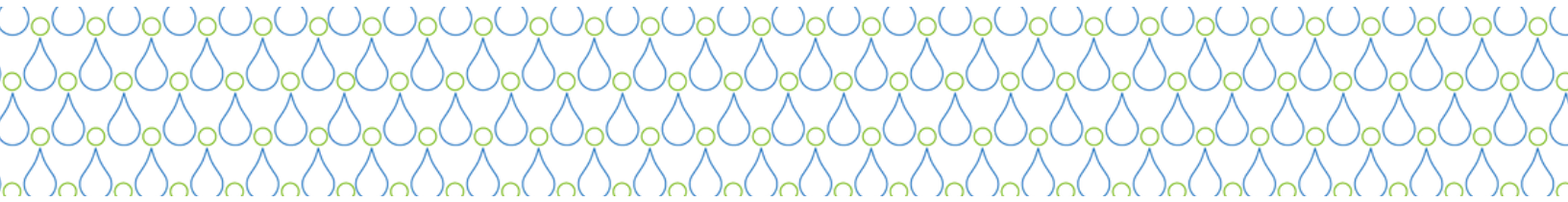
Drought



Equity and affordability

Strategies for Success

WaterNow Alliance partnered with the City of Santa Rosa to research the extent to which Latinx communities participate in water use efficiency programs, and to identify best practices to enhance outreach and increase these communities' participation in these programs.



Project Spotlight

Situated in a drought-prone area, the City of Santa Rosa, California faces water uncertainty and scarcity. To meet these challenges, Santa Rosa Water, the City's water and wastewater utility, has taken a comprehensive approach to enhancing water efficiency, providing technical support, education, information, rebates, and incentives across all customer types, for over 25 years. Its "WaterSmart" branded offerings are wide-ranging and include WaterSmart Checkups (in-home and business water use efficiency indoor and outdoor audits) as well as rebates that further incentivize a customer's long-term investment in water use efficiency. These strategies have helped reduce demand by 44 percent between 1990 and 2020 and enabled the City to achieve an annual water savings of approximately 7,100 acre-feet per year. The City's plumbing codes and ordinances, such as the Water Efficient Landscape Ordinance and Waste Water Ordinance, have achieved additional water savings of 7,900 acre-feet annually.¹

Approximately 32 percent of Santa Rosa residents identify as having Latinx heritage, and many speak Spanish as their primary language in the home. While Santa Rosa has undertaken efforts to promote water use efficiency (WUE) programs among Latinx and Spanish-speaking populations, it was unclear whether these programs had been effectively marketed to and utilized by these communities. Santa Rosa Water partnered with WaterNow Alliance through the Project Accelerator initiative, to better understand if these populations were participating in these programs at rates similar to other customers; identify drivers and obstacles to participation; and gather best practices to enhance engagement and outreach.

¹City of Santa Rosa. 2020 Urban Water Management Plan (Draft). Chapter 9: Demand Management Measures.

The project team combined qualitative and quantitative approaches to address these questions. To lay the groundwork for the project, WaterNow conducted interviews with Santa Rosa Water conservation and outreach staff, to understand current programs and outreach practices, and identify current challenges, best practices, and suggestions and goals. Next, the program combined data on water use efficiency program participation with US Census demographic data, including language(s) spoken, median income, renter and homeownership status, and identification as being of Hispanic or Latino origin. This analysis quantified the gap in water use efficiency program participation among Latinx and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, and identified additional trends in participation across the City.

A bilingual customer survey, available in English and Spanish, contextualized these findings, shedding light on some of the drivers behind patterns in water use efficiency program participation. The survey gathered insights from nearly 800 respondents, who shared information about their awareness, experiences with, and suggestions for water use efficiency programs and outreach. Informational interviews, with both local community organizations and utilities engaging Latinx and Spanish-speaking community members, highlighted best practices and specific strategies around outreach and communication.



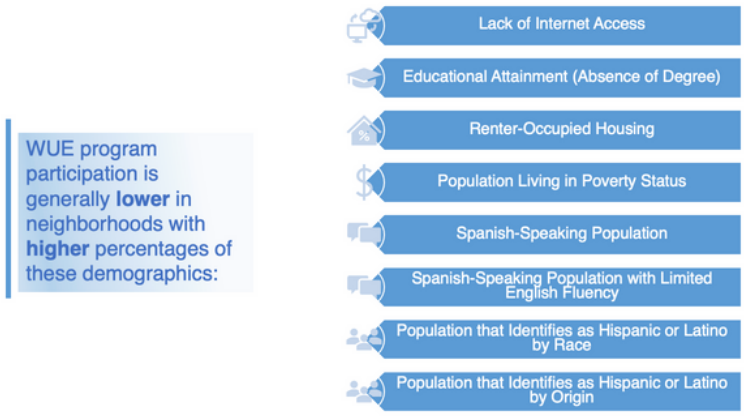
Project Impacts

The project's impacts included a deeper understanding the current state of participation in Santa Rosa Water's water use efficiency programs, and the ways Latinx and Spanish-Speaking community members learn about and interact with these activities. The project also collected a wide variety of best practices, tools, and strategies for increasing program awareness, building community trust, and overcoming obstacles to participation, to ensure great cost savings for customers and greater water savings for the City.

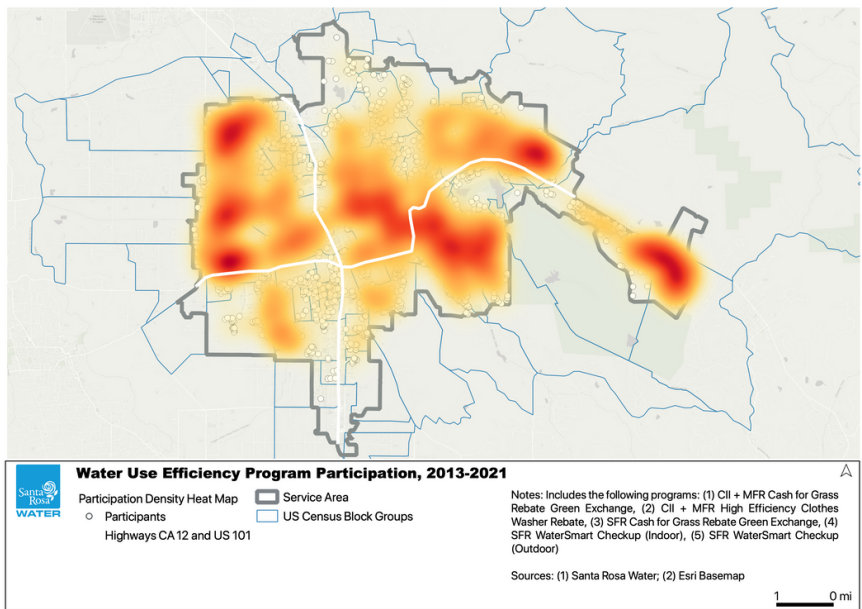
Santa Rosa Can Substantially Increase Water Savings with Increased WUE Participation

The project found that expanding water use efficiency participation in Latinx and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods to the city-wide median would have generated 90 additional WUE participants each year, saving an additional 10.9 acre-feet per year.

Most Latinx and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods had lower rates of participation, compared to the city as a whole. Specifically, Latinx and Spanish-speaking communities – defined in this analysis as US Census block groups where 50 percent or more of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino by origin – had a median of 17 water use efficiency participants per neighborhood, just about half of the citywide median of 31 participants per neighborhood.



A spatial analysis compared neighborhood's demographic data, drawn from the US Census, with participation in water use efficiency programs during 2013-2021



Density of participants in a selection of Santa Rosa Water's WUE programs from 2013-2021. The darker areas on the map indicate areas with a greater density of participants.

Participation in water use efficiency programs was also typically lower in neighborhoods with low levels of Internet access, higher percentages of residents in poverty status, and higher percentages of renter-occupied housing. Understanding the characteristics at play in each neighborhood can help the City tailor outreach to specific locations, to harness additional water and cost savings. For instance, in-person outreach and translation may be especially vital in neighborhoods with lower levels of Internet access and higher percentages of Spanish-speaking community members.

Choosing Your Messenger and Other Key Communications Strategies

WaterNow and Santa Rosa Water spoke with Latinx and Spanish-speaking customers, community-based organizations in Santa Rosa, and Santa Rosa community members. These conversations helped shed light on motivations and barriers to participation in WUE programs. Seven key strategies, synthesized from these discussions and described below, can encourage participation and increase outreach effectiveness.

1. The messenger matters, choose wisely.

- To find the best messenger, partner with local organizations (such as schools, faith-based institutions, community organizations, and local community representatives) and use these local organizations' publications and channels to share the utility message.
- Engage the target audience in outreach campaigns by including images and examples that reflect the communities.
- Harness a range of different types of outreach methods, in particular Spanish-speaking publications, newsletters, and radio stations. While the success of social media strategies was mixed, creating outreach kits that partners could share on their platforms may increase their impact in the community.
- Some communities have created [Community Ambassador Programs](#) to take a deeper dive into understanding and amplifying the perspectives of neighborhoods whose voices have historically not been heard.

2. Meet people where they are.

- Hold events and partner with organizations working in communities the organization is trying to reach (e.g., including informational flyers in backpack giveaways).
- Share information in spaces the community engages with in their day-to-day lives (e.g., going to grocery stores that serve Mexican, Central and South American style foods to set up informational tables, post flyers, or play pre-taped music or videos; sharing short, pre-taped videos at popular outdoor drive-in movie theaters).
- Use students and youth groups as an avenue to share information with families.

3. Be clear, creative, and data-driven.

- Focus on basic and clear information on water conservation and actions one can take to save water and money. Customer surveys can offer one way to better understand motivations and roadblocks to participation.
- Present this information in creative, fun, and culturally relevant ways (e.g., a radio message presented as though listeners were eavesdropping on a conversation, or [Telenovelas](#), replete with [numerous plot twists](#) and dramatic exchanges).
- Connect messaging strategies with data analysis, as described in the section above, to inform where to target communities with lower participation rates.

4. Make information accessible.

- Presenting information in different mediums ensures that customers will find a format that resonates with them. For example, having a hardcopy handout and in-person events are important for those that do not have access to the internet or cell phones.
- For mailings that contain Spanish or other translated content, indicate this on the outside of the envelope. Otherwise, the recipient may assume the content is in English and be unlikely to open it.

5. Translate meaning, not just words.

- Google Translate and other automated translation tools can often mistranslate technical language or gloss over important cultural nuances.
- Have a fluent speaker review translated content to ensure it captures the intended meaning and resonates with audiences is a critical step.

6. Keep messages and strategies fresh.

- Messaging and outreach strategies should be continually evaluated for effectiveness in reaching customers.
- This can be done through customer surveys and/or by employing focus groups with diverse groups of participants.
- These avenues can test messaging for specific campaigns, gauge the ease of participating in conservation programs, and elicit responses on how to improve conservation programs.

7. Dedicate consistent funds.

- Success depends on allocating a consistent and dedicated outreach budget.
- Allocate funds dedicated to reaching Latinx and Spanish-speaking community members (and/or other key demographics that reflect the population of a water provider's service area).



An example from the Los Angeles Department of Water's outreach campaign for its Customer Assistance Program, which includes outreach materials tailored to the local community, in both English and Spanish.

Implementing Best Practices

Based on these insights and suggestions, Santa Rosa Water has identified some immediate next steps, and outlined longer-term goals. The water use efficiency team has continued to build on its already strong and multi-pronged outreach approach, by adding new avenues including local grocery stores and community libraries. While the team advertises in Spanish through print, digital, and video ads, it has identified a long-term goal of adding more bicultural and bilingual staff to ensure that they are able to easily support people in-person and in phone conversations.

Santa Rosa Water has also continued to strengthen partnerships with community organizations. For instance, a local community group helped encourage residents to participate in this project's customer survey. Along with Sonoma Water, Santa Rosa Water was invited to be a guest in a Spanish-language radio program, Nuestra. Over the longer-term, Santa Rosa Water is committed to providing culturally relevant workshops in Spanish, and to continue a long-term effort of building and maintaining its relationships with community partners.

In addition to many comments sharing their appreciation for or interest in water use efficiency programs, the customer survey revealed that many customers were missing or asking for resources already available on Santa Rosa Water's website, such as a list of licensed vendors/contractors that could implement projects like greywater systems, and landscape conversion, or the best way to contact staff to ask questions. Common barriers to participation included concerns about the expense of participating, the physical labor that may be involved, questions about vendor and contractor qualifications, and some hesitation about the attractiveness of drought tolerant landscaping.

In response, Santa Rosa Water has updated its website to [highlight existing information and resources](#). A "Contact Us" section is prominently displayed at the bottom of all [WaterSmart Center web pages](#). English and Spanish application forms and resources are now available on the [main program page](#), avoiding the need to click an additional link to access this information, and highlighting that fact that these resources are available. Subtle updates in vocabulary – such as swapping out more technical descriptions of "indoor" and "outdoor" for program headings like "yard", "home", and "rebates" reflect a broader overall effort to redesign the site with customers' perspectives in mind. Santa Rosa is brainstorming ways to continue to highlight climate appropriate landscaping, through avenues such as increasing the number of garden hosts who speak Spanish in their annual Eco-Friendly Garden tour.

Feedback from the community survey also highlighted some barriers to participation that require longer-term strategies to address. For instance, it can be challenging for renters to participate in some programs because of policies/restrictions put in place by landlords, or for low-income residents to afford the up-front costs of rebates. The City is investigating longer-term strategies, such as grant funding for [direct install programs](#) for income-qualified customers, to address these issues and further expand participation.



Lessons Learned

The project, and Santa Rosa Water’s response to its findings, reveal a number of cross-cutting strategies for utilities seeking to better understand and engage all customers within their service areas. Santa Rosa Water’s participation in this project marks one step in a much broader effort and longer history of building relationships with the communities in its service area. This commitment to community outreach as an ongoing relationship, rather than a one-time effort or project, is a vital part of successful community engagement. Meeting customers where they are—in terms of content creation, outreach strategies, and program design and development—also forms a key organizing principle of outreach and engagement efforts. Finally, approaching outreach and engagement from a customer’s perspective—what do they care most about, what formats work best for them, where would they like to go to get resources, and what barriers may be preventing them from doing so—has enabled Santa Rosa to hone its outreach and communication to ensure they resonate with all of the customers they serve.



Image source: California Department of Water Resources