



Turning Questions Into Answers.

MEMORANDUM

TO: COLORADO RIVER WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

FROM: LORI WEIGEL, PARTNER

RE: KEY FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY OF DISTRICT VOTERS REGARDING WESTERN SLOPE WATER AND RELATED ISSUES

DATE: JUNE 12, 2009

Public Opinion Strategies is pleased to present the key findings of a survey of 500 voters throughout the fifteen county Colorado River Water Conservation District. The margin of error associated with a sample of this type is + 4.38%. Interviews were collected May 31-June 2, 2009. They were distributed proportionally throughout the Colorado River District and are demographically representative of the electorate.

KEY FINDINGS

General Perceptions of Water

- ***Issues other than water are at the forefront of regional concerns today.*** Just 37% in the Colorado River Water district describe “inadequate water supplies” as an extremely or very serious problem in the Western Slope. Concern about water supplies rates well behind issues such as the economy (75% extremely/very serious), loss of farmlands, ranches and orchards (55%) and taxes (46%).
 - There are few differences among sub-groups, although rural residents (43% extremely/very serious) and those very dependent on agriculture (50%) do rank water as a more pressing concern for the region.
 - ***A majority of district residents say the state is not in a drought today; however, looking ahead ten years, most find Colorado water lacking.*** Over half (55%) of voters say we are not in a drought today and nearly two-thirds (64%) believe Colorado has an adequate amount water to meet current needs. Yet, when asked to contemplate future water needs, just one-in-three (31%) voters believe that there is an adequate supply of water in Colorado, while 57% say that there is an inadequate amount.
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- In particular, seniors (67% inadequate), voters in the northern part of the district (65%), Democrats (65%) and college-educated respondents (62%) are most likely to say there will be an inadequate water supply in the next decade.

Perceptions of the Colorado River and its Tributaries

- ***Residents very much recognize the value of the Colorado River and its tributaries to the economy and them personally.*** Fully three-quarters (76%) of voters say that the phrase “important to the economy on the Western Slope” describes the Colorado River and the rivers and stream that flow into it very well. Similarly, seven-in-ten say that the river is “important to me personally” (69% describes the Colorado River and its tributaries very well).
- ***An overwhelming majority of district residents see the Colorado River as a “treasure.”*** More than two-thirds (68%) say that the phrase “a state treasure” describes the river very well and an identical number agree that it is also “a national treasure.”
- ***Western Slope voters also believe that the River and its tributaries need greater protection.*** More than half (55%) agree that the phrase “in greater need of protection” describes the Colorado River and its tributaries very well (with 84% of voters saying it describes the river either very well or fairly well).
 - There are some differences by partisan affiliation, with 75% of Democrats saying the phrase describes the river very well, compared to 59% of Independents and just 38% of Republicans.

Knowledge and Awareness of Water Issues

- ***Little has changed in the last six years in awareness of residents’ source of water.*** Eight-in-ten (82%) say they know the source of their home water supply, while 15% can not even guess the source. These figures are very similar to the data in 2003 (85% could name the source / 10% could not name the source).
- ***Less than half in this area recognize that Colorado is obligated to meet certain water obligations to down river states.*** Forty-eight percent (48%) of residents are aware that a certain amount of water much flow to other states, while nearly one-in-five (19%) believe that the state can keep all water from the Colorado River. One-third (32%) do not know one way or the other.
 - College-educated men (69%), college educated voters overall (59%), voters age 55+ (57%), Independents (55%) and men (54%) are most likely to be aware of the water obligations the state must meet.

- ***Residents perceive out of state interests as the greatest threat to Western Colorado water.*** Over half (57%) of district voters say that out of state water interests are very threatening to the amount of water available in Western Colorado. Concern has dipped a few points since the height of the drought in 2003 (64% very threatening), but it still remains the top threat perceived by district voters.
 - Significant numbers of residents also believe other regions of Colorado (46% very threatening) and population growth (43%) are threats to water supplies on the Slope.
 - Democratic voters are also very worried about the threats posed by climate change, ranking it as their number two concern (85% total threatening). However, this issue does not resonate as strongly with Independents (58% total threatening) or Republicans (33%).

The Colorado River District

- ***Familiarity with the district has remained constant over time.*** Just over one-in-three residents (37%) say they are familiar with the Colorado River District, a level consistent with data from surveys in 2005 (37% familiar) and 2003 (43%).
 - College-educated men (47% familiar), rural voters (46%), voters age 55+ (45%), agriculture-dependent residents (44%) and those who have lived in the area for 15+ years/natives (44%) are more familiar with the Colorado River District.
 - In addition, sixty-nine percent (69%) of voters who are familiar with the district have a favorable impression of the organization.
- ***When voters hear about the Colorado River District, they have an overwhelmingly favorable impression of the organization.*** Respondents were told that “The Colorado River District was created in 1937 and is the principal water policy and planning agency for the Colorado River and the rivers and streams that flow into it in Colorado. It is composed of fifteen counties on the Western Slope, and is funded through a small property tax. In part, the district seeks to safeguard all waters of the Colorado River to which Colorado is entitled.” Fully 80% indicate that have a positive impression of the Colorado River District, with 37% having a very favorable impression of it. A mere 10% have an unfavorable impression after having heard this information.
- ***Voters see protecting the state’s agricultural heritage (85% total important) and fighting to keep water for use on the Western Slope (81% total important) as the two most important aspects of the River District’s mission.*** Other top rated aspects of the district’s mission include protecting fish and wildlife habitat (69% important), creating reservoirs (62%) and generating electricity (62%).

- ***District voters are fairly mixed in their views of a potential property tax increase to fund Colorado River District programs.*** Just over half (56%) of voters say they would support a small increase in property taxes to help protect and safeguard water, while 39% would oppose it. Intensity is even on both sides of the issue, with 22% of residents strongly supporting the increase and 24% strongly opposing it.
 - Party is the greatest predictor of attitudes toward a tax increase. While Republicans are divided on the issue (46% support – 48% oppose), Independents and Democrats are much more supportive (59% - 38%, and 68% - 28%, respectively).
 - Voters who are more familiar with the district are also more supportive of a small tax increase. Sixty-two percent (62%) of voters who are very familiar with the district support the tax, compared to 58% of those who are somewhat familiar and 54% of those who are not familiar.
 - Those who are most concerned about water supplies are a bit more willing to support the district. Nearly two-thirds (63%) who believe the water supply is an extremely serious or very serious problem support the tax increase, compared to 52% of those who believe the water supply is not a serious problem.

SUMMARY

- Residents generally rank water as a fairly low concern these days, do not perceive their area as being in a drought today, nor worry that supplies are not adequate to meet current needs.
- However, residents do think supplies may be lacking in the near future, perceiving out of state interests, the Front Range and population growth as major threats to Western Slope water.
- They also register alarm when provided with a number of facts, particularly those that focus on the future impact on farms and ranches, and that their use might have to be curtailed rather than those down river.
- The Colorado River District’s awareness has remained steady over time, and once voters hear more about it are quite positive about the agency’s background and goals. In particular, legally fighting to keep water in Western Colorado and preserving the region’s agriculture resonate very strongly.
- The concept of a property tax increase receives mixed reviews among district voters, who label taxes as a more serious problem than water from the outset.
- While covering a wide and diverse region, it is interesting that there is much more in common between demographic and geographic sub-groups than differentiating. In fact, partisan registration is often more determinate of views than any other factor.