

# 2020 TRENDS REPORT

State of River and Watershed Protection

# OUR WATER OUR FUTURE





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

River Network's 2020 Trends Report—*Our Water, Our Future: State of River and Watershed Protection*—provides valuable insight to the perceptions and impressions held by our nation's water protectors and river advocates regarding (1) current conditions, (2) threats to our rivers and watersheds, and (3) diversity within our community and workforce. We also compare the results of this analysis with those from our [2016 Trends Report](#).

## Our major findings include:

**50%**

of respondents believe that conditions are improving for their local waters (up from 36% in 2016).

**90% + 85%**

of respondents worry about water quality and water quality threats to their local waters, respectively (approximately the same as 2016).

**56% + 33%**

of our workforce overall and leadership positions, respectively, are held by women (modest increase from 2016).

**Under 10%**

of positions in our workforce are held by Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color (largely stagnant from 2016).

Data for this report was collected through a survey administered by River Network during a six week period. Survey respondents included nearly 800 people from across the United States, and the majority (67%) of these were staff from nonprofit entities. Additional respondents included tribal representatives; academics; staff in the for-profit business community and at government agencies responsible for water management and environmental protection; retired individuals who formerly worked in the water sector; and journalists, students, and other concerned citizens who care about water issues. River Network conducted this outreach through existing contacts, online communities related to water on LinkedIn, and other social media platforms.

River Network will track community-wide trends every three to five years. We encourage anyone seeking to contribute to a more sustainable water future to better understand these trends, look for models and solutions that inspire you to do more, and become an active participant in leading change toward a future where everyone has access to clean water and healthy rivers.

# INTRODUCTION

Rivers and the systems they are part of need our attention to remain healthy. These systems deliver economic, environmental, recreational and other benefits to our cities, rural landscapes, and forests. Rivers and lakes supply 75% of the water we need for our daily consumption, to grow our food, to generate electricity, and to produce the goods and services we rely upon in the United States. They also deliver water to replenish and sustain subsurface storage, another crucial reservoir for homes and businesses.

Taking care of these resources, and understanding and supporting what they need to remain healthy, is essential to a future where everyone has access to clean, safe, affordable water to drink and

healthy rivers. To be successful, our efforts to protect and restore our nation’s waters demands that we engage all sectors of society in this work. Yet, the ‘movement’ for clean water and healthy rivers has not yet fully shifted to reflect the demographics of our nation. By shining a light on where we are today and tracking trends over time, we seek to ignite more engagement for our rivers and empower a new generation of change agents.

We hope that the trends portrayed in this report inspire us to ponder what more can we do, individually and collectively, to protect these precious resources, grow a movement for a more equitable water future, and overcome challenges to forward progress.

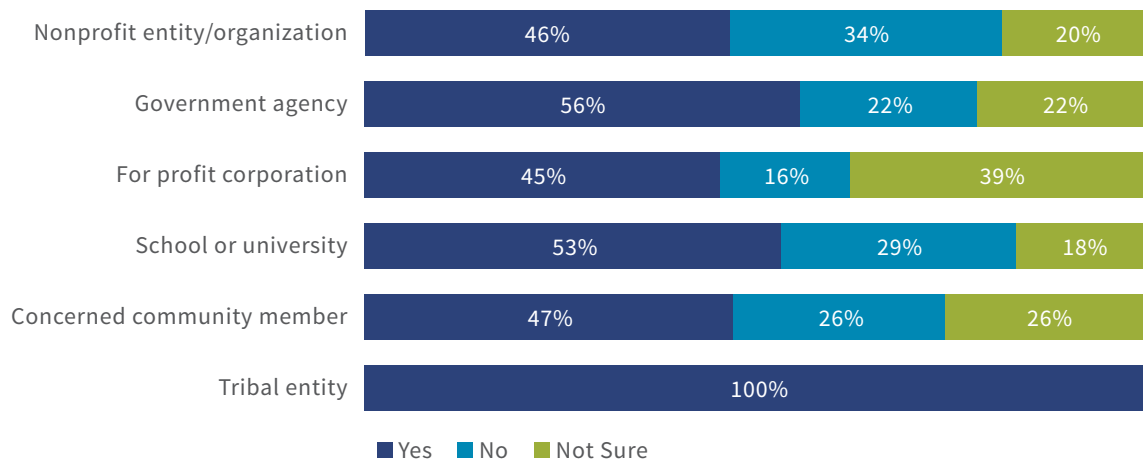
# DATA AND ANALYSIS

## CURRENT CONDITIONS

A majority of stakeholders say conditions are improving for our nation’s waters. This is a shift toward greater optimism as compared to 2016 when only 36% indicated that conditions were improving.

Nearly **50%** of respondents indicate that conditions are improving for their local waters.

### A majority of stakeholders say conditions are improving for their waters

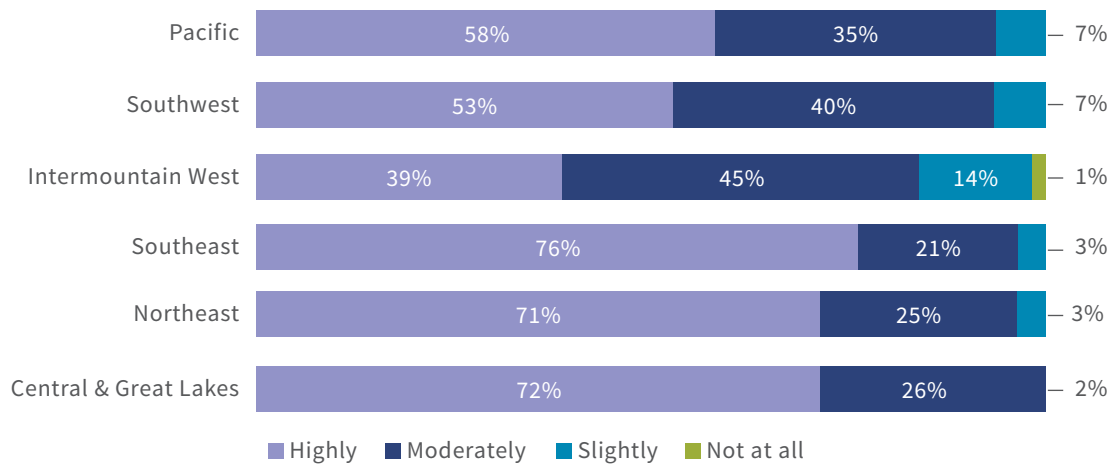


## THREATS

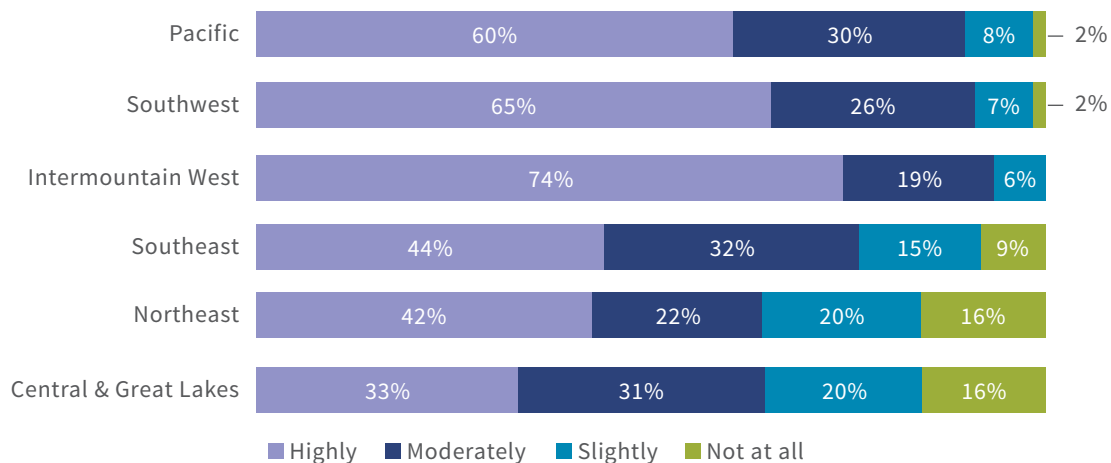
Stakeholders indicate continued concern about water quantity and water quality, with greater concern about water quality in water-rich areas of the country or places prone to flooding, and greater concern about water quantity in areas of our country that are prone to drought. Though the percentages vary slightly, this regional split in quantity and quality threat concerns tracks closely with the 2016 report.

Over **90%** of all respondents nationwide are concerned about water quality and over **85%** have concerns about water quantity.

### Most stakeholders are concerned about water quality



### Most stakeholders are concerned about water quantity



## DIVERSITY

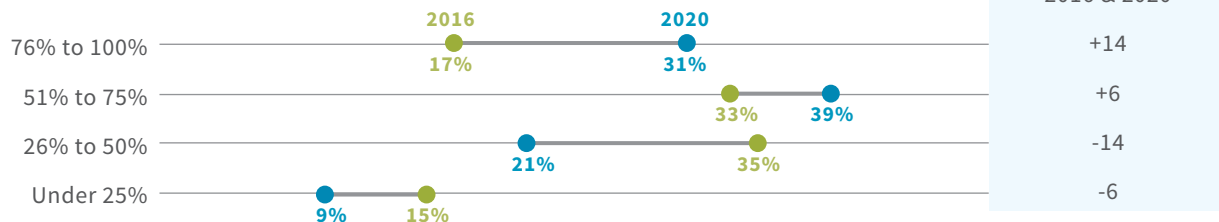
Our workplaces and workforce are changing. This section of our report includes information about the gender, racial, and ethnic diversity in the water sector. We are intentionally tracking this information because we believe that our sector as a whole can be more socially relevant and effective in identifying and implementing innovative solutions if our teams are more diverse, as well as more inclusive.

**56%** of our workforce is female and **33%** of senior management and leadership positions are held by women.

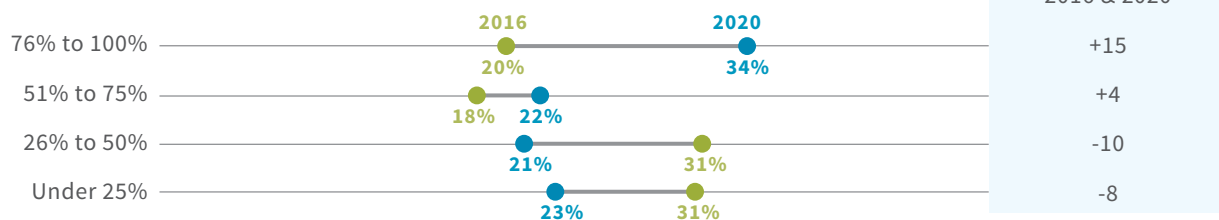
The number of women in our workplaces is on the rise, including at senior staff and leadership levels. Overall, women occupy about a third of senior management and leadership positions. This is particularly strong among nonprofit organizations and continues a general trend since 2016. Since 2016, there has been a marked increase of women across our workforce.

### Compared to 2016, respondents in 2020 report women occupy a higher percentage of staff positions

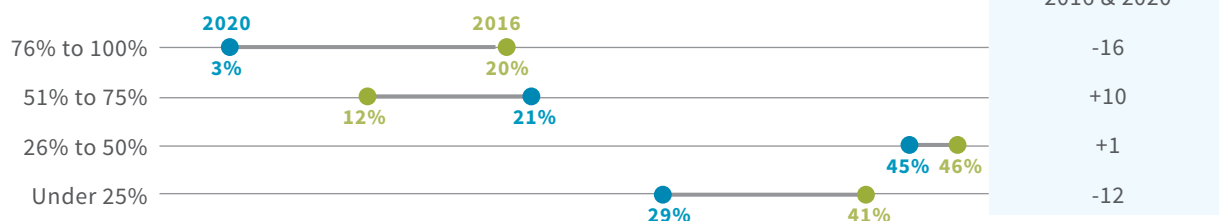
#### What percentage of the staff where you work are women?



#### Among your senior staff, what percentage are women?



#### What percentage of your board of directors women?



While women are continuing to make gains across our workforce, Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color (BIPOC) continue to be severely underrepresented in water work. In 2020, BIPOC representation across our workforce, including in leadership roles, appears to be largely stagnant or perhaps slightly positive as demonstrated by the graphs in this section. This continues to be an area for continued investment and focus across our organizations and institutions.

Under **10%** of our workforce is BIPOC.

### Respondents in 2020 report low racial and ethnic diversity, indicating little change since 2016

#### What percentage of the staff where you work are racially or ethnically diverse?



#### Among your senior staff, what percentage are racially or ethnically diverse?



#### What percentage of your board of directors are racially or ethnically diverse?



# OPPORTUNITIES AND CONCLUSION

History and experience teach us that solving water problems requires working together across lines of power and authority, profession, expertise, and social standing. Water is essential to everyone, and because of this, there are immense opportunities for diverse engagement. Although current attempts to protect water are often divided into seemingly disparate camps (urban versus rural, water supply versus water quality, drinking water versus recreation, etc.), the reality is that water—and the issues that come with it—is an interconnected and interconnecting resource. To be able to address issues of water quality or quantity with as cohesive and detailed an approach as possible, we must work across these boundaries. To ideate solutions that benefit everyone, we must expand the diversity of our teams and our processes for making decisions.

As stated in 2016, to move forward, we must break down the barriers that have prevented people from having a personal relationship to our rivers and with other people who have different values, perspectives, and interests related to water. By listening, learning, and building trust, there is much we can do together and as a social movement toward a more sustainable water future.

Workspaces that are inclusive and diverse will help our sector build solutions that leave no one behind, expand our exposure to challenges at the intersection of water and equity, and strengthen our efforts overall. To increase diversity within our organizations, we need mentorship and retention strategies as well as goals, metrics, and indicators that help us hold ourselves accountable. While the funding community can push many organizations to take the first step, sustained progress requires leadership from within. ***This work is organizational, but also begins with each individual. Where will you begin?***

River Network encourages anyone seeking to contribute to a more sustainable water future to better understand these trends, look for models and solutions that inspire you to do more, and become an active participant in leading change toward a future where everyone has access to clean water and healthy rivers.

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May your  
choices reflect  
your hopes,  
not your fears.  
—Nelson Mandela



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River Network believes in a future where everyone has access to clean water and healthy rivers. We provide tools, training, and resources for those working toward this future at the local level, deliver opportunities to align on key issues for greater impact, and connect and strengthen the nationwide network of water protectors.

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