



2016

TRENDS REPORT



OUR WATER *OUR FUTURE*

State of River and
Watershed Protection



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

River Network's 2016 Trends Report on Our Water Our Future (2016 Trends Report) will help anyone interested in our rivers and the waters that flow through them understand current perceptions about threats, diversity within our community, and opportunities to make a difference. With over 75% of the water that we need every day flowing through our rivers and lakes, attending to the health of these systems is critically important for everyone. Yet, only 36% of respondents believe that conditions are improving for our waters and a significant percentage of people don't seem to have enough knowledge to make a determination, including those responsible for regulatory enforcement. 85% of respondents are concerned about both water quality and quantity threats and concurred that we need more resources, opportunities to unite people together to solve water problems, and greater enforcement of environmental regulations. To be credible and trusted, we also need to reflect the interests and the diversity of the communities we seek to serve. Today, over 85% of our workforce is under 25% ethnically and racially diverse.

Data for this report was collected by survey administered by River Network during a three-week period, augmented by research using Guidestar and review of other publicly available websites. Survey participants included nearly 700 people from across the United States. These participants were tribal representatives; academics; staff working for local to national river and watershed conservation organizations and government agencies responsible for water management and environmental protection; and concerned citizens. River Network conducted this outreach through existing contacts and others affiliated with online communities related to water in LinkedIn and elsewhere.

River Network will examine trends in perceptions about threats, diversity within our community, and opportunities to make a difference, on an annual basis moving forward. We encourage anyone seeking to contribute to a more sustainable water future to better understand these trends and become an active participant in how they change over time.

INTRODUCTION

Rivers and lakes supply over 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 give us places we turn to for recreation and reflection. They capture and carry away the pollutants that flow from or are directly released by cities, farms, factories, and other industry. And they connect us and our communities to each other as they flow downstream.

Rivers and lakes supply over 75% of the water we need every day.

The rivers and the systems they are part of need our attention to remain healthy and to deliver the promise of clean and ample water for all. Yet, not everyone has equal access to this water nor benefits equally from our environmental regulations. Further, there are significant barriers that prevent many people from developing a personal relationship to the rivers that flow through our communities—whether due to lack of river access, lack of exposure and understanding of water systems, or well-grounded concerns about personal safety.

We need a new generation of change agents.

We need a new movement for our water that recognizes the importance of a river's natural chemical and hydrologic regime, what it takes to keep these systems healthy, and unifies people to solve water problems for people and nature. 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. The **2016 Trends Report** provides new insights into the social movement for clean and ample water and the importance of solutions that mirror the diversity of society today.

The **2016 Trends Report** explains what is threatening the health of our rivers and standing in the way of progress toward more equitable sharing of water and application of environmental protection, and explores the extent to which our community of river champions itself mirrors the diversity of our society and is inclusive of the leaders of tomorrow. The **2016 Trends Report** is divided into two primary sections in recognition of the distinct threads that we seek to bring together: (1) Current condition of our rivers, threats, and opportunities and (2) Current diversity within our community, threats, and opportunities.

CURRENT CONDITION OF OUR RIVERS, THREATS, AND OPPORTUNITIES¹

CONDITIONS TODAY

Perception matters when it comes to our rivers and the waters that flow through them. Today only 36% of respondents indicated that conditions were improving for their waters. This left a significant proportion of respondents concerned that their waters were not improving (46%) or unsure about the state of our waters (19%). Given that respondents included people who are engaged as professionals and concerned citizens in river and watershed conservation, these results are concerning. We strive for a future where a significant proportion of people—75% or more—believe that conditions are improving for our waters. See Figure 1 for more details.

Only 36% indicated that conditions are improving for our waters.

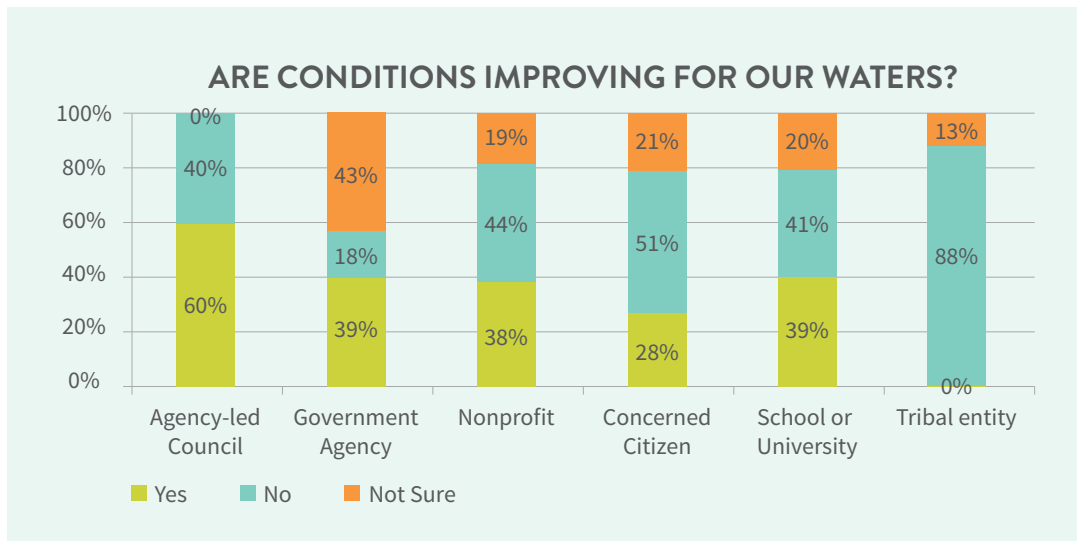


Figure 1

¹Data for this section of the **2016 Trends Report** includes responses from all participants.

Digging deeper into the data, variations among types of respondents revealed additional insights. A significant 43% of those who work for government agencies are unsure whether conditions are improving for our waters. This is concerning since these representatives should know better than anyone else what is going on with the waters in our country. Other types of respondents had significant gaps in their knowledge about current conditions too—concerned citizens (21%), people affiliated with schools and universities (20%), nonprofits (19%) and tribal entities (13%). The most optimistic regarding current conditions were those representing agency-led watershed councils—60% agreed that conditions are improving. And the most concerned were tribal representatives—88% indicated that conditions are not improving.

THREATS TO OUR WATERS

The primary threats to healthy rivers across the United States relate to either water quality or water quantity. While other threats exist such as invasive species, fisheries management, climate change, and land use practices, water quality and quantity remain at the top of the list. They are both types of ‘super threats’ as they conglomerate a variety of sources and can become exacerbated by extreme precipitation and dynamic weather patterns typical of climate change. Water quality threats include runoff from cities, farms and feedlots and contaminants that find their way to rivers through pipes, toxic spills and disasters, energy production activities, and other sources. These sources of pollution typically change the natural chemistry of a river, thereby making it less suitable for people and nature. Water quantity threats include large water withdrawals that remove water from rivers for a variety of purposes (e.g. industry, cities, and agriculture), dams that prevent water from flowing downstream, and increases of water flowing in to rivers due to land use changes, stormwater management, and urban infrastructure. These changes to the natural hydrology of a river result in habitat fragmentation, loss of connectivity between habitats, and declining ecological function. You can have a river with clean water but insufficient flow to support ecological function. The opposite can be true as well—you can have a river with poor water quality but with adequate water volume. To be healthy, we need to take both quality and quantity into account and protect rivers’ natural chemical and hydrologic regimes.

85% of respondents are concerned about both keeping rivers wet and clean.

As the graphs below demonstrate, water quality threats and water quantity threats are a concern to respondents throughout the United States. Water quantity—whether your river has too much or too little water throughout the year—is slightly less of a concern overall, but results vary regionally.



Figure 2

As depicted by Figure 2, over 90% of all respondents, regardless of institutional affiliation, are greatly or moderately concerned with water quality issues. And over 80% of respondents expressed concern about threats to water quantity.

Water quality and quantity concerns can be further differentiated regionally. For example, while water quality is a concern across the country, regions in the eastern U.S. are significantly more concerned. Not surprisingly, the western regions of the U.S. are more concerned with water quantity issues than the rest of the country. Over 85% of respondents from the Intermountain West, Pacific, and Southwest regions expressed more significant concerns related to water quantity. See Figures 3 and 4 for more information.

Pollutants are a bigger concern in water rich areas of the country.

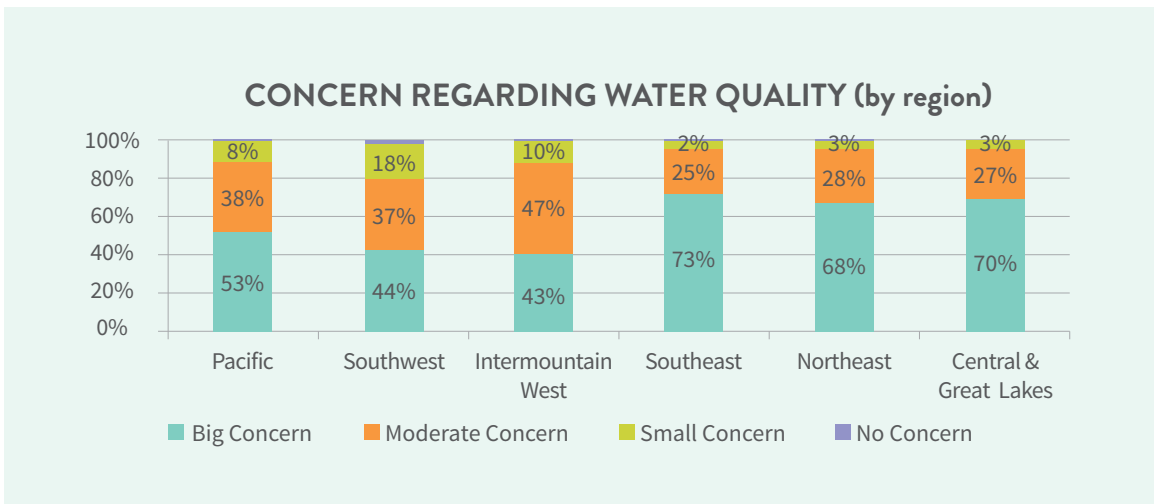


Figure 3

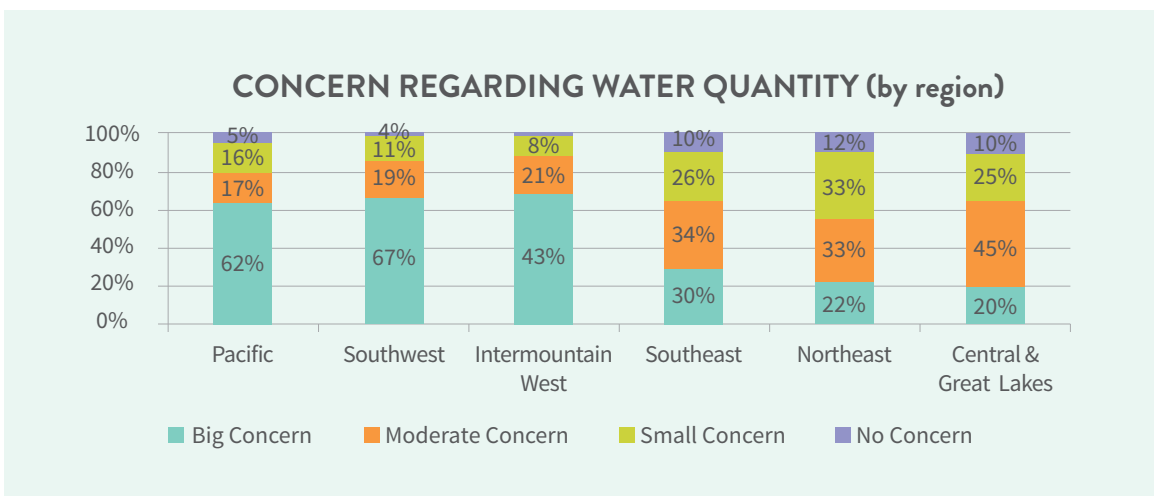


Figure 4

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GREATER PROGRESS

What is holding back greater progress toward healthy rivers? According to the respondents, the number one culprit is not having enough financial resources or staff capacity to address existing threats. However, other factors also come into play too. For water quality, the other two reasons most frequently cited were (a) lack of coordinated approach among stakeholders and (b) insufficient public or community engagement, followed closely by (c) inadequate regulations or laws and/or enforcement. For water quantity, the next two reasons cited were (a) inadequate regulations or laws and/or enforcement and (b) lack of coordinated approach among stakeholders, followed closely by (c) insufficient public or community engagement. **See Table 1 for more information.**

More financial and staff capacity is the top opportunity for making greater progress toward healthy rivers.

AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE ON OBSTACLES TO PROGRESS TO ADDRESS THREATS

	WATER QUANTITY	WATER QUALITY
Practical solutions about what can be done	62.85%	56.74%
Inadequate regulations or laws and/or enforcement	86.32%	68.73%
Lack of coordinated approach among stakeholders	80.51%	70.83%
Insufficient public or community engagement	79.88%	70.23%
Inadequate access to or availability of scientific information	42.01%	43.58%
Not enough resources (financial or staff capacity)	88.71%	71.1%

Table 1

A solid legal and regulatory system with adequate enforcement is crucial, but so too is more coordination among stakeholders, and greater public/community engagement.

More funding and encouragement is needed to provide our community with access solutions and prioritize actions, unify people to solve water problems, and promote greater public or community engagement.

CURRENT DIVERSITY WITHIN OUR COMMUNITY, THREATS, AND OPPORTUNITIES²



CONDITIONS TODAY

Our work to protect and restore rivers and other waters that sustain all life exists within the context of a society that is increasingly diverse. Today, nearly 40% of our population in the United States is diverse, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And by the mid-2040s, predictions suggest that non-whites and people of mixed-race will be a majority of our population. To remain socially relevant, our organizations and our movement should reflect the diversity of society as a whole.

In recognition of this challenge, and in complement to the groundbreaking efforts of Dr. Dorceta E. Taylor and others associated with **Green 2.0** (see *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations & Government Agencies*), we committed to begin tracking equality and diversity within the water protection and restoration sector.

This section of the **2016 Trends Report** includes an evaluation of both women and people who are racially and ethnically diverse. We invite everyone to pursue solutions that involve sharing water or deploying the protections of environmental regulations equitably. But we also believe that our deliberations and solutions will be richer if we have a greater diversity of voices at the table.

1. WOMEN AND WATER

Women are well-represented within efforts to protect and restore our rivers. However, although most work places have a high percentage of women as staff, women do not occupy as many seats in leadership roles. For example, over 30% of respondents indicated that women occupy under 25% of senior staff positions and over 40% indicated that they fill under 25% of board seats. **See Figure 5 for more information.**

Women are well represented in our community but a glass ceiling still exists.

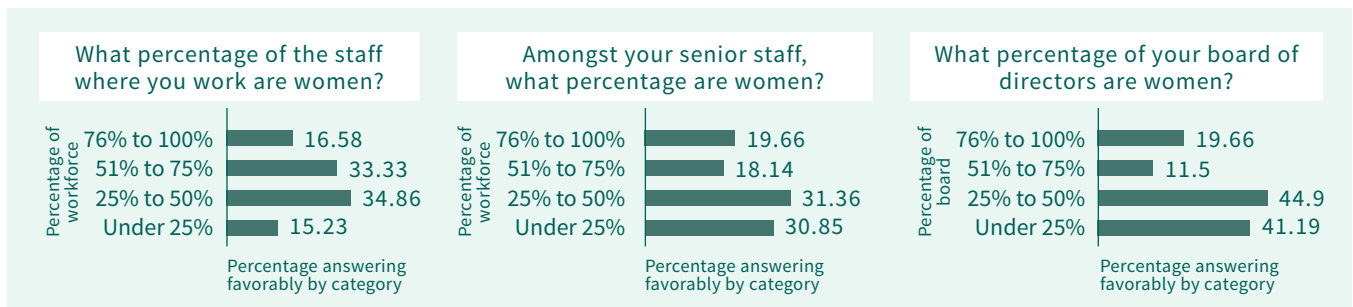


Figure 5

²Data for this section of the 2016 Trends Report includes responses from those with relevant experience.

2. DIVERSITY AND WATER

Non-whites are woefully under-represented in the water community. Less than 4% of organizations are over 50% racially or ethnically diverse. Over 85% have a workforce that is less than 25% diverse. Percentages are no better among senior staff or board leaders. Considering that nearly 40% of the U.S. populations today includes people who are racially and ethnically diverse, diversity within our community today seems dramatically out of balance. [See Figure 6 for more information.](#)

Over 85% of our workforce is under 25% ethnically and racially diverse.

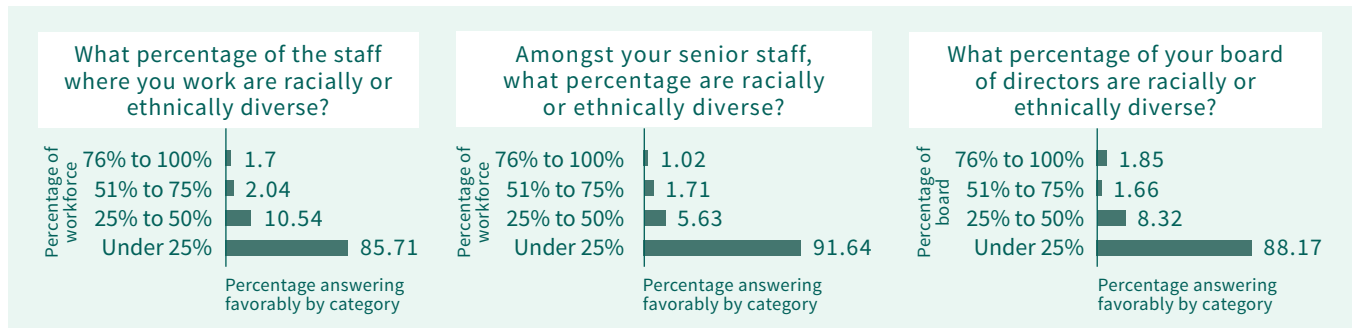


Figure 6

Although some variation exists regionally across the United States, notably, in the Southwest region, the current state of diversity within our community is surprisingly consistent. And even regions with a higher representation of non-white staff, there is very little movement by those staff to management positions. [See Figure 7 for more information.](#)

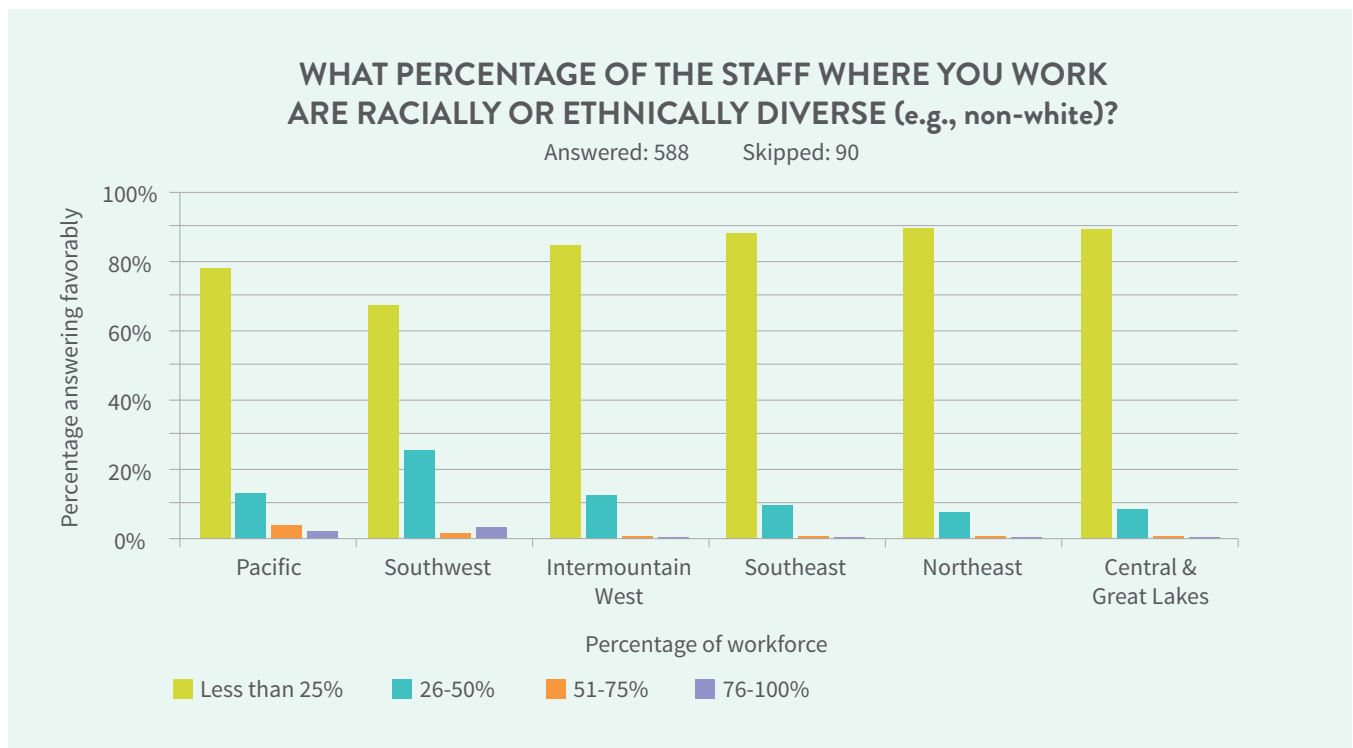


Figure 7



THREATS TO OUR COMMUNITY'S EVOLUTION

According to the Green 2.0 report noted at the top of this section, unconscious bias, discrimination, and insular recruiting as well as lackluster interest in addressing diversity have held back faster progress across the environmental community writ large. These same culprits are in play within the water community.

A few of the respondents contacted for this survey questioned the relevancy of our inquiry and raised issue with the implication that building a diverse, inclusive and equitable movement for our waters is important to healthy rivers. Today, under 10% of nonprofits within our community report diversity data through Guidestar or have developed or disseminated any statements articulating their goals or aspirations regarding equity, inclusion or creating an inclusive work environment.

Building more diverse and inclusive efforts to protect and restore our rivers will take time. It won't happen overnight. But with focus, determination, and humility, together we can do more to support a future of clean and ample water for **all** people, led by all people.

As part of this journey, we must be willing to engage and respond to those within our community who do not understand why this is important. By listening, we can learn so much. But we also need opportunities to learn from each other. Sharing water equitably is hard work. So too is creating workplaces that are inclusive rather than exclusive, embracing of cultural and racial variety, and accepting of different styles of communication.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GREATER PROGRESS

What is holding back our community's evolution? Our community needs leadership to show the way forward, training to help uncover unconscious bias and modernize recruitment tactics, mentoring to build an inclusive workplace and guidance for how to bring people together to solve water problems and empower civic engagement, and encouragement from funders.

Because water matters to everyone, it provides impressive opportunities for broad social engagement. Today efforts to protect and restore rivers are often culturally disconnected from citizen concerns over safe drinking water and access to water or the concerns of small family farms and economic survival. New solutions require the ability to listen and build trust. They also require sincerity and integrity.

At best, our community is at the beginning of a journey to embrace all people in our work. We can use your help to elevate the importance of diversity and inclusion within the river and watershed organizations as an enabling condition to unifying all people to solve water problems.



CONCLUSION

As stated above, 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.

History and experience teaches us that solving water problems requires working together across lines of power and authority, profession, expertise, and social standing. It requires an engaged public that demands the enforcement of environmental laws and regulations, and even policy changes to better reflect public interests. It also includes providing a seat at the table for those who may not have had a voice previously. 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.

At River Network, we are determined to do more to improve the quality of engagement related to the protection and restoration of our rivers. We are also committed to make the changes necessary within our own organization to remain socially relevant moving forward and build the skills and opportunities to make a difference across our larger community—from dialogue, to training, to mentoring. We know we can't do this alone. It will require attention from all of us to change the way we approach solving water problems.





MISSION, VISION, AND FOCUS

River Network empowers and unites people and communities to protect and restore rivers and other waters that sustain all life. We envision a future of clean and ample water for people and nature, where local caretakers are well-equipped, effective and courageous champions for our rivers. Our three strategies for focused investment are strong champions, clean water, and ample water.

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