



**Institute for
Nonprofit News**

Tapped Out: Water-thirsty communities gain global attention; story unleashes millions in funding

Introduction: ‘In tears with appreciation’

After working on the [Rust to Resilience](#) collaboration about the effect of climate change on Great Lakes cities, Ensia came to the Institute for Nonprofit News to propose a collaboration about drinking water as an environmental justice issue as a follow-up to its series, Troubled Waters. In December 2020, a collaboration of eight INN members was formed to publish the Tapped Out series.

[Six stories](#) were published between May 3 and May 14, 2021. The seventh was published on May 25 in [SJV Water](#), [CCIJ](#) and [The New York Times](#).

The series generated immediate impacts, including:

- The story on [water shortages in Gallup, New Mexico](#), helped free up **\$3 million in federal money** to help bring water to Gallup and surrounding communities. The funding had previously been granted but had not been appropriated. Trip Jennings, executive director of New Mexico In Depth, said it seems someone sped up the process because the story highlighted the issue.

“To see something happen so quickly, especially that can help Americans, Native Americans, New Mexicans, many of whom don’t have running water ... it’s fulfilling as a human being to help people who don’t have as much, at least as it relates to resources,” Jennings said.

- Reporting on a sinking town in Central California, which was [co-published in The New York Times](#), generated **significant republication, several follow-up interviews and international attention**. As a result of the reporting, the state claims it will review its surface water transfer program.

“I don’t think I ever would have thought of this story idea. It just wasn’t on my radar,” said New York Times Los Angeles Bureau Chief and Editor Manny Fernandez, who was the story’s main editor for the paper.

“That was the value that Lois (Henry, the story’s reporter) brought. Lois knows the water world of central California, she is an authority on that subject and has studied it, written a ton about it. You could argue few other people in central California know more about the politics of water than her.”

- Newsrooms reported **deep reader engagement and gratitude** poured in, such as this message from an audience member: "I'm practically in tears with appreciation for your time and effort."
- The series was **widely shared on social media**, with links to the stories posted and retweeted by Twitter accounts with more than 52.7 million total followers and posted on Facebook pages with more than 20 million total followers.

This project was made possible by a grant from The Water Desk, with support from Ensia and INN’s Amplify News Project. Amplify — which provided support for project management and organization, as well as cash stipends for reporting and editing — is funded with support from the Joyce Foundation in the Midwest and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation in Chicago.

Eight INN newsrooms — California Health Report and High Country News; SJV Water and the Center for Collaborative Investigative Journalism; Circle of Blue; Columbia Insight; Ensia; and New Mexico In Depth — spent more than three months reporting on water issues in the Western U.S. to create the series.

Content reach

In addition to publishing stories on their websites and in print, collaboration partners shared links to the series on social media, in newsletters and via the Associated Press’ StoryShare program.

Newsrooms reported the stories continued to receive attention even after the first two weeks, and engagement rates were high, indicating “people who find the story are reading all of it.” For Columbia Insight, the story quickly rose to the third most-viewed story ever on its website, and a very high rate of about 33% of readers engaged with the story on social media. A full metrics breakdown is available in the [appendix](#).

We found that 17 outlets republished at least one story from Tapped Out, notably [Mother Jones](#), [Grist](#) and [Truthout](#), while [Esquire](#) linked to a story. Meltwater estimates the potential reach of these outlets combined is 19.1 million unique visitors.

The final story in the series, [“The Central California Town That Keeps Sinking.”](#) was particularly widely circulated and covered:

- The Center for Collaborative Investigative Journalism translated the story into Spanish; it was republished in more than 20 print, online, broadcast, podcast and radio outlets in Central America, South America, the United States and Africa.
- It merited a mention in Politico's [California Playbook briefing](#), [Futurism](#), [Snopes](#) and [The Science Times](#).
- Other media around the nation and the globe also have shared or scheduled the story, such as The Weather Channel, the Daily Mail, Ghana Business News, Convoca in Peru, Ojo al Clima in Costa Rica, Interferencia in Mexico and the Border Center for Journalists and Bloggers.
- SJV Water CEO and Editor Lois Henry was interviewed by [Valley Public Radio](#) and [KERN radio](#) in California, the [Waterless podcast](#) and German television news service [Tagesschau](#) about her reporting.

Social media distribution

The series caught the attention of a number of influential accounts on social media, with the reporting posted on pages with more than 20 million followers on Facebook and posted and retweeted by Twitter accounts with 52.7 million total followers.

- Links directly to collaboration partners' stories appeared on 48 Facebook pages with a total of almost 18.5 million followers, including 14 groups.
- The stories were shared on Facebook 266 times and received more than 1,000 reactions and 225 comments.
- In addition, the stories republished by Mother Jones and Truthout were shared on Facebook pages with a total of 2.47 million followers.
- The New York Times story appeared on Reddit subreddits with a total of 1.3 million members, including [r/environment](#) (740,000 members), [r/collapse](#) (296,000 members) and [r/California](#) (259,000 members).

Significant social sharing included posts by public officials and political organizations; advocacy groups; and journalists from outlets including the Los Angeles Times, PBS Newshour and Bloomberg. More information on social sharing is available in the [appendix](#).

Collaboration feedback

When the collaboration concluded we asked the partners to provide feedback on their experience through a survey. Several important themes emerged:

- **INN funding makes better journalism possible.** Participants said their reporting would not have been possible without the project funding. “INN funding allows us to hire high-quality journalists and, as important to us, photographers and graphic artists to bring stories to light.”
- **Distribution drives impact.** Participants valued the partnerships that brought their stories to a wider audience. “The story was republished widely and I believe added to the conversation and understanding about California's water struggles.”
- **Management matters.** The leadership provided by INN was described as “superb” and regularly cited as a positive element for the participants. “I was impressed by how well the group gelled and worked together. I would welcome any opportunity to plug into this again.”

Participants were asked to rank different aspects of the project management from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). The responses were overwhelmingly positive, with rankings of 4.25 and above. The full breakdown is available in the [appendix](#).

Challenges & Observations for the Future

Unsurprisingly, reporting amid the COVID-19 pandemic was cited as a key challenge for participants, who had to adapt their plans in order to do field reporting.

We learned from this project that national outlets are willing to work closely with INN members on local stories of national interest and importance. The partnership with The New York Times meant that the CCIJ/SJV story was pushed back, publishing 11 days after the other stories. This brought renewed attention to the project.

Two pairs of partners worked together on their pieces (CCIJ/SJV and High Country News/California Health Report). The success of these partnerships paved the way for INN to encourage more shared reporting in subsequent collaborations.

A relatively small number of newsrooms participated, which allowed for a more cohesive group of participants than in larger collaborations.

Plans are in the works to leverage this successful collaboration by seeking funding for a “Phase 2” that would follow up on angles that emerged from the initial reporting.

Appendix

Story performance by outlet:

Outlet	# of stories in collab	Cumulative unique page views	Average active/engaged time on the story page	Cumulative Facebook shares	Cumulative Facebook comments
California Health Report	1	848	unknown	0	0
Center for Collaborative Investigative Journalism (CCIJ)	1	546	4:32	1	0
Circle of Blue	2	1,564	7:57	1	0
Columbia Insight	1	1,141	7:05	78	98
Ensia	1	225	5:12	unknown	unknown
High Country News	1	1,738	4:28	11	15
New Mexico In Depth	1	718	:31	2	5
SJV Water	1	7,642	1:42	8	0

Outlets that republished stories:

[Arizona Patch](#)

[Bakersfield.com](#)

[California Health Report](#)

[Casa Grande Dispatch](#)

[East Oregonian](#)
[edairynews](#)
[Ghana Business News](#)
[Grist](#)
[GVWire](#)
[Mother Jones](#)
[Newsrust](#)
[Resilience](#)
[The NM Political Report](#)
[The New York Times](#)
[Truthout](#)
[USA News Hub](#)
[WaterWatch](#)

Social sharing highlights:

Public officials and political groups

- [California State Sen. Melissa Hurtado](#)
- [The California Democratic Environmental Caucus](#)
- [Chair of California's State Water Resources Control Board E. Joaquin Esquivel](#)
- [The DNC Council on the Environment and Climate Crisis](#)
- [California Party Democratic Progressive Caucus Chair Amar Shergill](#)
- [California State Association of Counties](#)

Advocacy organizations

- [Food & Water Watch](#)
- [American Rivers](#)
- [The Center for Food Safety](#)
- [Geoscience Education Division of the Geological Society of America](#)
- [Clean Water Action](#)
- [Western Governors Association](#)
- [Society of Environmental Journalists \(SEJ\)](#)

Media and notable figures

- [KQED Science](#)
- [Environmental Health News](#)
- [Civil Eats](#)
- [Los Angeles Times energy reporter Sammy Roth](#)
- [Los Angeles Times data visualization journalist Paul Duginski](#)
- [Arizona Republic reporter Ian James](#)
- [PBS Newshour reporter Cresencio Rodriguez-Delgado](#)
- [Bloomberg reporter Janet Lorin](#)

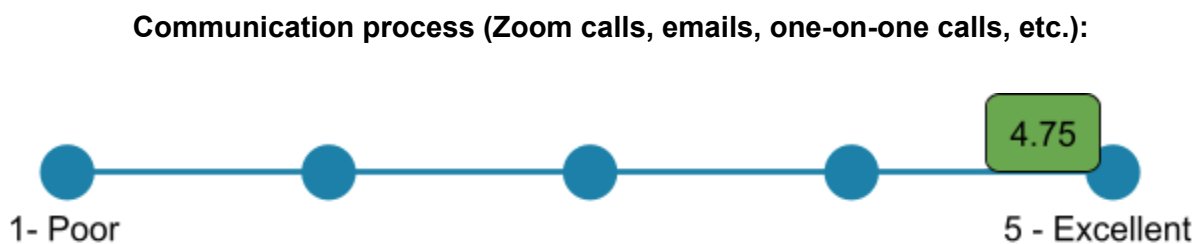
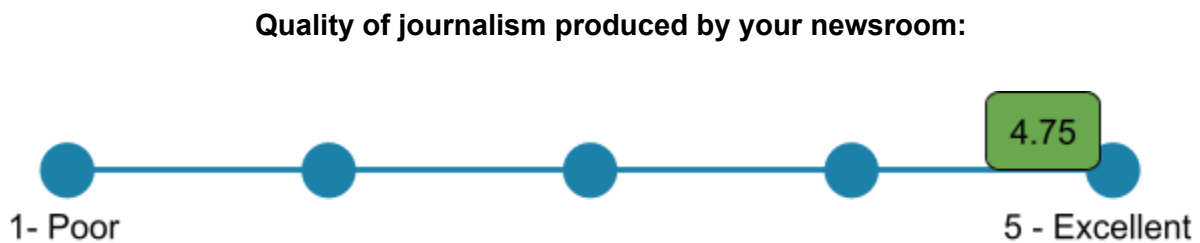
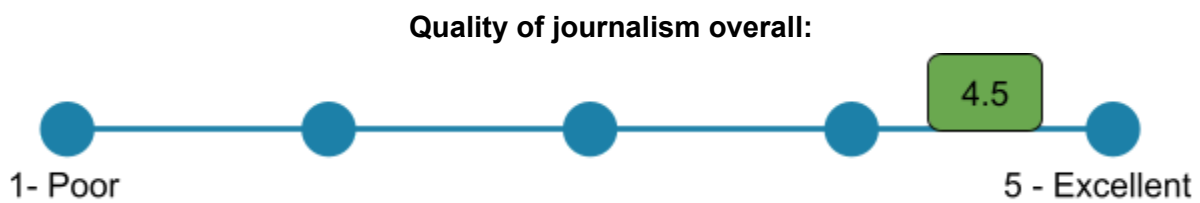
- [Former Reagan White House advisor Bruce Bartlett](#)
- [Actress Morgan Fairchild](#)

Communities impacted by the reporting

- [Gila River Indian Community](#)
- [News and events group for Corcoran residents](#)

Collaboration feedback

Below are the average responses from the eight INN newsrooms asked to rank their experiences on a 5-point scale:



Ability to get questions answered:



Ability to get concerns resolved:



Distribution process:



Pickup by news organizations within the collaboration:



Likelihood that you will follow up on this series:



Likelihood of participating in another INN collaboration in the future:



How did we find this data?

We asked participants to provide engagement data from their sites and social accounts for web metrics and qualitative feedback via a survey.

For content distribution, we searched [Meltwater](#), a media monitoring service, for mentions of “Tapped Out: Power, justice and water in the West” and variations of the series attribution. We also searched for the first sentence of each story.

For social distribution results, we searched Meltwater’s social feature using the same search terms as well as the first sentence of each story. Additionally, we searched for social captures from each story through the CrowdTangle browser extension.