



Clean Water Rule

An analysis of focus group research with communications recommendations

October 2018

Introduction

In this report, Belden Russonello Strategists (BRS) and Emma White Research (EWR) present analysis of five focus groups and strategic message recommendations on effectively communicating the importance of the 2015 Clean Water Rule. The Healing Our Waters (HOW) coalition asked us to conduct this research to provide messaging advice to coalition members when the Trump Administration announces its revisions to the rule.

The focus groups consisted of voters between the ages of 25 and 75 who identify as Democrats or independents and "somewhat conservative," "middle of the road," or "somewhat liberal." Participants were screened to exclude anyone with strongly anti-

environmental views. We held two groups of mixed-race voters (Caucasian, Latinx, and Asian-American) – one among men and one among women – in each of the two target cities: Milwaukee on September 12 and Columbus on September 18. Also, in Columbus on September 19 we held one group of exclusively African-American men and women. For a look at the groups' demographics, see Appendix A.

This report includes an analysis of the findings, with illustrative quotes from the focus groups; recommended messages to educate the public, news media and policy-makers on the need for the strongest possible Clean Water Rule; recommendations on how advocates of a strong rule can answer their critics; and a list of communications do's and don'ts.

Findings

The recent focus groups in Milwaukee and Columbus echoed and amplified our findings in the Great Lakes regional survey in 2016. In that survey, residents across eight states supported the federal government spending over \$300 million a year to clean up toxic waste and bacteria, reduce run-off pollution from cities and farms, and protect and rebuild wetlands. This view was shared by large majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and independents. At the time, the most salient reason for concern for the Great Lakes and willingness to support government action was anxiety over the quality of drinking water in the region. Our recent focus groups demonstrate that this anxiety over drinking water has not been soothed. The importance of referencing the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, which scored so highly in the survey, also emerged front and center in our groups.

Overall, the people in the focus groups gave voice to the findings in the survey, and provided specific message guidance on how to advocate for tougher policies to protect clean water. Their views indicate that frustration and worry over clean water may only have gotten worse in the last two years.

[A discrete look at African Americans:](#) The 2016 Great Lakes survey reported a greater intensity and frustration over the problem of contaminated water among African

Americans than whites in the Great Lakes region. We found the same strong feelings in the African-American group we conducted in Columbus. Nearly every person in that group drank bottled water because of a lack of trust in the authorities to provide safe drinking water.

The African-American frustrations over water quality were more palpable than some of the mixed-race groups, particularly the men. At the same time and just as significantly, overall we heard many more similarities than differences among the African-American and mixed-race discussions in their awareness of the Clean Water Act, their reaction to the current fight over the 2015 Clean Water Rule, and the messages that resonate most strongly.

1. Voters start with existing concerns about water, particularly the safety of drinking water, but also pollution of the Lakes and other water bodies

Mention the topic of water to the voters across our groups and the reactions are uniformly negative: water pollution generally, and specifically contaminated drinking water, is the most frequent association these voters have with "water." Participants' overwhelming concern for their drinking water has led many to drink bottled water. The participants across the groups were remarkably conversant on water issues – able to cite several local and national reasons for their worries about water. The severe water problems in Flint weigh heavily on the minds of the participants in both Milwaukee and Columbus. All of these water problems poured out of participants without much prompting.

In Milwaukee we also heard about sewage overflow and sewage dumping in the Milwaukee river, cryptosporidium, the water demands of Waukesha and the new Foxconn development.

“ Based on what the news is reporting, larger companies like Foxconn are coming in to use some of the water. I think for me the water is an opportunity, and it's a resource that we have in this area, but there is also a risk in using...losing that resource. – *Woman in Milwaukee*

Currently, lead in pipes and some dirty water. – *Woman in Milwaukee*

Flint. – *Woman in Milwaukee*

The destruction of the ocean, how there is just plastic everywhere. – *Woman in Milwaukee*

Lately, the sewage dump. – *Woman in Milwaukee* ”

In Columbus, participants told of waste in their local lakes, toxic algae blooms in Lake Erie affecting drinking water in Toledo, pollution from farm runoff, and problems with Buckeye Lake due to over development.

The intensity of these concerns is heightened among some of the African-American participants. In this group, many express feelings of solidarity with those affected by drinking water problems in primarily African-American communities such as Flint and Detroit. Because of that connection they see their own communities as more vulnerable to threat. In addition, several in this group also knew people affected by the situation in Toledo, and personalized the threat that way.

“ I drink a lot of bottled water and it’s just because I don’t trust faucet water. Alum Creek around here, that water is so dirty. It used to be a nice beach, but you see nothing blue about it. My kids are not going in there. Don’t even dip your toe in it. – *African American in Columbus*

One side of town water is good, and the ghetto section... – *African-American in Columbus* ”

In general, as we have found in all our past research, the participants hold a strong appreciation for the Great Lakes because they see the Great Lakes as part of the overall water system that they rely on for clean drinking water, recreation and for the economic health of the region. Besides the widespread belief that many of the lakes are polluted, we heard a common concern over invasive species, such as zebra mussels and Asian Carp, which threaten Great Lakes habitats.

“ Flint, Michigan, whoever mentioned that. That’s right away. And the red algae or the red tide in Florida shows you that it’s not working. The hog farms that just got flooded in North Carolina that are contaminating all of the water from Raleigh area down to the beach. - *Man in Columbus* ”

2. The Clean Water Act is not well understood, and many of the voters assume it cannot be working that well given the problems they are aware of

The voters, regardless of race and gender, approach a debate over the Clean Water Act with a common view that the "government is not doing a great job" protecting their water resources. They believe it is the job of government – the state DNRs and the federal EPA – to protect water resources, but given what they know about problems with the water, most conclude that these agencies have fallen down on the job. Some say government "is making it easier for polluters," and others say the government "is not enforcing the laws."

“ I think that federal agencies supposedly are drawing back on their regulations, making them much easier on the polluters. That’s a big concern for the whole country. – *Woman in Columbus*

We can’t count on the federal government to have our best interest in mind. We can’t count on that. So now is not the time to back down from regulations. – *Woman in Columbus* ”

Most of the participants have heard of the Clean Water Act but they only have vague notions that it set down principles or guidelines for states to follow in order to protect clean water. Whatever the act was intended to do, they do not believe it is working to their benefit today, considering their dissatisfaction within the quality of water in their region generally.

“ I don’t know much about it. I’ve just heard of It (Clean Water Act) – *African American in Columbus*

Well, I would assume that it tries to keep the water clean. - *African American in Columbus* ”

After reading a definition of the Clean Water Act and a brief description of both sides of the debate over the 2015 Clean Water Rule (see Appendix B), some participants are left wondering about the details, but most reactions reduce the issues to a simple statement: they believe the government should make more of an effort to protect water resources. To the extent that there is a symbol of that need, it is Flint, or local examples of poor water quality.

“ I’m thinking that it’s their duty, it’s what they get paid for. That’s what the money is allocated for, to make sure the water is viable. I believe all levels of government should be responsible.” – *African American in Columbus.* ”

3. Messages

We presented a number of messages in favor and opposed to the 2015 Clean Water Rule in each of the five focus groups (see Appendix B). The participants in all groups read and discussed six positive reasons for supporting the rule, and participants in Wisconsin were given four reasons to oppose. We added an opposition statement in Ohio, so participants there considered five opposition messages.

The strongest messages in support of the Clean Water Rule reference existing firmly-held beliefs about the importance of water and current threats our water faces

Messages in support of a strong Clean Water Rule hold the high ground in the debate from the start. The most powerful messages reinforce already-held beliefs and thus seem irrefutable. They are considered as facts rather than persuasion statements. They reflect the importance of small rivers and streams to the overall water system as well as current water catastrophes of which participants are already aware. The resonance of these messages was consistent across men and women, and in the African-American groups as well as those of mixed race. By adopting these basic message points, you will leave your opponents arguing against accepted truths.

- One of these key messages makes the logical point that all water sources, no matter how small or insignificant, are important to all of us. This water source connection message is an accepted truth that appeals to the values of taking responsibility for one's actions, protecting the health of family and community, and stewardship of the environment:

Wetlands flow into streams, which flow into small rivers, into bigger rivers, and into Lakes, including our Great Lakes, and ultimately the ocean. It is nonsensical to think that we can allow pollution from activity like mining and manufacturing into small waterways without it affecting the rest of the water we all depend on.

“ Put your money where your mouth is and make it a priority because it is a health issue. It's seeping into our homes, and our children are in great danger because they're the higher risk and people with weakened immune systems. But I just feel like they have to feel like it's more important than they do. - *Woman in Milwaukee* ”

- Another central message adds urgency to the message by referencing the recent water crises in Flint, Detroit, Toledo, and other local examples. Using these symbols of government neglect and failure reinforces what participants already believe – that we need more, not less, protection of water quality. This screams we need action NOW:

Now is not the time for us to be eliminating protection for clean water. The failure of state government agencies that led to the tragedy in Flint, Michigan, and drinking water crises in Toledo, Ohio and other cities make it clear that we need more federal efforts to protect our water supply, not less.

“ Flint and Toledo gave real examples of how we saw the government fail and the amount of people that live in those areas that were affected. – *Woman in Columbus* ”

- Other messages that are not as compelling as the top two but fortify the message cite the large number of people whose drinking water is affected by the clean water rule and its impact on wetlands and wildlife habitat. Mentioning the 117 million Americans affected was cited by many participants as important, but not as motivating as the water source connection message, which conveys that "we all" depend on these water sources, and therefore could be threatened by reducing protections. The wetlands and habitat message appeals to many participants' concern for fish and wildlife, which is helpful but not as salient as the first two messages:

Repealing the clean water act's protections for small rivers and streams will threaten drinking water for 117 million Americans.

Taking away federal protection for small rivers, streams, and wetlands will degrade important habitats for fish and wildlife and put some of the most beautiful natural areas in the Great Lakes at risk.

“ The clean water is really important, but also the fish and wildlife. She was saying her husband is an avid fisherman. I'm not that into fish but I do enjoy a natural habitat and the natural areas. All of that's affected by the environment and the clean water. – *African American in Columbus* ”

- A third message that supports but does not lead the reasons to support the Clean Water Rule focuses on the special interests that have always opposed the Clean Water Act. A consensus quickly forms in each group that the accusation against the oil and gas industry, agribusiness and real estate developers is true. However, highlighting the corrupting influence of these interests is not a strong reason by itself to favor the Clean Water Rule, because it does not answer the question of why protecting clean water is needed.

One part of this message does have potential for building a sense of urgency to the issue; the last line about needing "to make our voices heard to save the clean water rule" motivates several the participants.

Repealing the Clean Water Act has been the long-standing goal of the oil and gas industry, agribusiness, and real estate developers. For the past 40 years, under both Democratic and Republican presidents, these special interests have not gotten their way because Congress and the Presidents have placed clean water – and the public interest – first. We need to make our voices heard to save the Clean Water Act.

- A message that is less helpful to build support for the Clean Water Rule praises the accomplishments of the Clean Water Act and its history. This message lacks credibility, as participants cite many examples of the failure of government to protect water quality.

The Clean Water Act is one of the most successful laws ever enacted. Since 1972, the law has been responsible for the clean-up of thousands of river, lakes and streams that are vital to our drinking water and to those who hunt and fish and swim in these waters. We should let the 2015 Clean Water Rule stand because we should maintain the strongest version of the Clean Water Act.

“ It says, “the most successful laws ever enacted.” To me... Maybe I’m thinking of it the wrong way. But I’m thinking then why are we having the problems that we have? But you can say on the other side of the coin, “Well, if we didn’t have this, it’d be even worse.” That’s why I kind of laughed about it. Because you can look at it both ways. – *Man in Milwaukee*

We were talking about the issues that we see with the water around us and in Flint and all those other things. It doesn’t seem to have been the most successful, I guess. – *Woman in Columbus* ”

4. Pushing back against the opposition

Despite some concern about government overreach, the opposition messages largely fall flat because complaints of farmers or homebuilders cannot compete with a desire for clean drinking water.

Participants' reaction to the statements in opposition to the Clean Water Rule indicate that the rule's opponents have a steep climb to win public support. The opposition to a strong Clean Water Rule has its best chance of weakening the pro-rule presumption of the focus group participants if it frames the issue as "over-reaching by federal bureaucrats" that threaten individual families.

- Many of the participants have some doubt about federal government bureaucrats making the right decisions regarding the regulations necessary to protect water quality, and some believe the average homeowner can be victimized by poorly conceived regulations. Some participants are initially sympathetic to the following statement:

The EPA ought to stay focused on big polluters, not spend its time on ordinary homeowners. For example, the EPA threatened an Idaho family with a \$32,000 a day in fines for filling in a wetland on their property – and that kind of over-reach will only get worse if the new rule gets implemented.

“ What if you're building a house by a dried-up stream? That hasn't had water flowing through it for 25 years. But it's under that Act because it has a little stream. What if you want to build something that there's just a tiny, little pond in back that has little cattails in it, but that makes it a wetland. Okay, now you can't build a house there. You've got to pull special permits. I know a guy who couldn't sell his land, actually in New Berlin, because the DNR flew over with an airplane and they saw little cattails. He planted them there because it was a little bit wet in the back of his yard. They wouldn't let him sell because they had to pull special permits. So he lost out on a deal worth \$400,000 because he couldn't sell it. - *Man in Milwaukee.*

It ought to focus on big polluters and not spend time on the little guy. – *Woman in Columbus* ”

Others, however, counter this theme by arguing that small sources of pollution add up to bigger problems, and everyone, including homeowners, has a responsibility to do the right thing.

- Following this frame with a message of willingness to compromise would also help the opposition. For example, some participants are drawn to the statement below because it acknowledges the importance of clean water and reflects the voters' attitude that the solution is usually to be found somewhere in the middle between two extremes:

We believe we can update the Clean Water Act to protect water quality without trampling the rights of farmers, homebuilders and businesses in our state.

- We heard less concern for farmers or ranchers than for homeowners being overburdened by clean water regulations. When farmers are mentioned, participants are more likely to think of large corporate farms than small family farmers, and they do not see these corporations as good stewards of our water resources. Especially given the news coverage of run-off from hog farms in North Carolina, there is recognition of the water problems that farming can cause.

Therefore, the participants feel there is a real need to strengthen the enforcement of clean water protections among farmers. There is very little appeal to these opposition messages:

Farmers and ranchers know the importance of clean water and we work hard to protect our natural resources. We are especially conscious of protecting our sources of clean water. We do not need the federal government imposing new extreme and unnecessary regulations that will hurt family farmers.

Those who are pushing the new rule exaggerate the problem and create extreme and unnecessary regulations as solutions. We don't need to expand federal control over land areas, such as ditches, dried up stream beds, and agricultural lands that are wet only during storms. The rule would require farmers to get a federal permit for doing

ordinary field work, for building a fence, or just planting crops. This is overreaching by federal bureaucrats that will not improve water quality.

“ There are so many big corporate farms that they’re probably taking business away from these smaller farms. So you really want to paint this picture of this family farm in rural wherever, but that’s not really the case right now in America.
– *Woman in Columbus*

I don’t really trust companies like Monsanto and the big companies. Yeah, I trust a farmer, a local farmer, to do the right thing and keep the water clean. But when these major companies come in, they don’t care. – *Woman in Milwaukee*

They’re feeling that any kind of regulations would be extreme and unnecessary. They haven’t been convinced. I think it’s really important to have evidence to prove to them the importance of all the regulations. – *Woman in Columbus*

There is a lot of pollution that comes from farms, and that would shift the responsibility onto them. It’s going to be more expensive for them and they don’t want to do that. - *Woman in Columbus*

When I was driving up here, I was hearing on the radio about the flooding in the Carolinas and stuff and the farms and the farm ponds, which are mostly manure pits and they’re being flooded over. So all that stuff is going to be draining down through wherever. - *Woman in Columbus.* ”

- Participants across the focus groups also express very little sympathy for homebuilders who seek to build new homes near lakes. They had no problem requiring time-consuming and expensive permits for the developers or the wealthy people who would buy those homes. There is little support for this statement:

Homebuilders say that the new rule would reduce the possibility of having new homes near lakes and streams in the Great Lakes region. The rule would require time-consuming and expensive federal permits for countless areas where new home could

be built. These bureaucratic roadblocks would make housing in many areas unaffordable.

“ I was figuring if you’ve got money to put a house by a lake, you can afford the extra twenty for the permits. It’s not going to be the regular people that’s going to buy them kind of homes. And if it’s a rarity that you get them that cheap. But from my opinion, it seemed the only type [to] live by the lake or nice places are people that have good incomes. – *Man in Milwaukee*

I think the biggest thing is like you’re building a house. That’s expensive. If there are expensive federal permits or the rules are too much, which it’s a bad idea to build on water anyway. Just go build a home somewhere else. – *Woman in Columbus* ”

Communication Recommendations

Strategic Communications Recommendations

The key to effective messaging on the Clean Water Rule is to reinforce two already accepted beliefs: that many cities and towns have experienced drinking water crises, and that we need to protect all sources of water because if we allow pollution in one area, we all may be at risk. This message should be consistent regardless of your audience.

Short-hand message:

With many of our cities and towns living with unsafe drinking water, now is not the time to cut back on clean water enforcement. We need more – not less – protection for clean water

Core message:

Clean water is a basic need. And with many of our cities and towns living with unsafe drinking water, now is not the time to cut back on clean water enforcement.

The Trump administration wants to roll back water pollution rules for wetlands and small streams. But we cannot allow pollution from mining and manufacturing and large farms into small waterways without it affecting the rest of the water we all depend on. We all know wetlands flow into streams, which flow into small rivers, into bigger rivers, and into lakes, including our Great Lakes, and ultimately the ocean.

The failure of government agencies that has led to drinking water crises in Flint and in (local example) make it clear that the government needs to step up its efforts to protect our drinking water, not scale back the rules for big polluters.

We need to make our voices heard for a clean water rule that strengthens, not weakens, protections for clean water.

Secondary helpful messages:

The Trump Administration's repeal of the Clean Water Act's protections for small rivers and streams will threaten drinking water for 117 million Americans.

Taking away federal protection for small rivers, streams, and wetlands will degrade important habitats for fish and wildlife and put some of the most beautiful natural areas in the Great Lakes at risk.

Answering the opposition

There are three fundamental attacks on a strong clean water rule, and we have effective counter arguments for all.

1. Opposition says the rule is an over-reach by federal bureaucrats that will hurt individual families.

Answer: The opposition to a strong clean water rule is not coming from families but from large entities, like mining and corporate farms that want permission to dump their pollution into our rivers and streams. Families will be the victims if we weaken clean water protections.

- 2 Opposition says the rule hurts farmers and homebuilders.

Answer: We need more protection for our water resources, not less; and clean water is everybody's responsibility. The rules should apply to everyone, and the wealthy homeowner, developer, or farmer does not deserve special treatment or exemption. They can follow the laws like everyone else.

- 3 Opposition says that the old rule is unreasonable because it covers streams and rivers that are dry most of the year.

Answer: All streams and rivers flow into bodies of water that we rely on for our health and recreation. There are no streams and rivers where it is safe to pollute.

Communications dos and don'ts

- ✓ **Do** make your message about more clean water protection versus less protection.
- ✓ **Do** lead your message with a reminder that many cities and towns suffer from contaminated drinking water. Reference the problems in Flint.
- ✓ **Do** cite a local example in your state, if possible.
- ✓ **Do** state that all waters, no matter how small they are, contribute to the water system that we rely on to be healthy.
- ✓ **Do** include mention of the big polluters who want to weaken protections, such as corporate hog farms, manufacturers, developers.
- ✓ **Do** mention how many millions of Americans will lose water protection because Trump Administration's plan.
- ✓ **Do** cite the importance of maintaining healthy habitats for fish and wildlife.
- ✓ **Do** include a call to arms, urging people to make their voices heard for a strong clean water rule.
- × **Do not** make your message about saving the Clean Water Act
- × **Do not** try to explain the Clean Water Act or educate people about its historic contributions.
- × **Do not** spend message energy trying to educate people on the ways that wetlands contribute to clean water
- × **Do not** rely only on attacking the large polluters.
- × **Do not** treat farmers as a sainted constituency. They are largely seen as polluters.