



## Assessing Water Education Needs

in Idaho's Treasure Valley

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[www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/iwdl/items/iwdl-needs-assessment-2025.html](http://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/iwdl/items/iwdl-needs-assessment-2025.html)

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# Abstract

We conducted a needs assessment of water education in a southern Idaho locale to determine areas for future Extension programming. We interviewed water managers, agency staff, and educators to synthesize the range of existing water education. We identified a need for more direct groundwater and water conservation education opportunities for high school students and adults. We found that existing collaborative partnerships provide a foundation to leverage the high school watershed outreach program and logistical support offered by University of Idaho Extension. Our findings support the implementation of The Confluence Project curriculum, which strengthens high school student groundwater literacy.

**Keywords:** *needs assessment, participant observation, groundwater, science literacy, experiential learning*

## Introduction

In southwestern Idaho's Treasure Valley, as in many regions of the Western U.S., the effects of climate change compound those of rapid urbanization and population growth to pressure the quality and supply of water resources. The Treasure Valley has one of the fastest growing populations in the U.S., and its municipal groundwater demand is expected to double to over 220,000 ac-ft/year by 2065 (Petrich, 2022). This poses critical challenges for water management and highlights the need to educate the public about water resources.

Water education strengthens scientific literacy and understanding of multiple stakeholder perspectives, both necessary for collaborative water diplomacy that supports successful water management (Klimes et al, 2019). Managing water in the West as land and water use changes is a sensitive challenge that requires interdisciplinary solutions from water managers, policy makers, and water users (Lach et al, 2019). Water education is often delivered from siloed disciplines — such as a riparian ecologist restoring a riverbank or an irrigation district supplying water to users. The variety of users sharing water requires holistic water education that integrates these disciplinary perspectives to represent all stakeholders. In this article, we present the results of a water education needs assessment in Idaho's Treasure Valley, synthesizing the range of existing water education programming and identifying areas for future development.

This work builds upon longstanding water education efforts through the University of Idaho's (U of I) Extension Water Outreach programs, along with collaborations with the

Idaho Water Resources Research Institute (IWRRI) and Boise State University (BSU). Extension Water Outreach develops and facilitates peer-reviewed educational programming and publications state-wide, facilitated by one Extension faculty in Coeur d'Alene and one staff instructor in Boise. Extension works closely with IWRRI, which supports water resource education in conjunction with its role of coordinating and conducting research and training students. Extension and IWRRI both offer a range of educational programs, however, most, like the field-based high school watershed curriculum called The Confluence Project (TCP), are centered in northern Idaho. Boise State University has a strong history of water research and engagement in the Treasure Valley, but no extension program. To bridge these gaps, an interdisciplinary team from Extension, IWRRI and BSU assessed the content and delivery of water education in the Treasure Valley to determine areas of focus for future educational resources.

## Methods

This article draws from an analysis of semi-structured interviews (n=18), structured conversations (n=17), and participant observation of meetings (n=5) conducted from March to November of 2024. Participants included water managers, irrigators, environmental educators, nonprofit staff, local government staff, agency employees, and real estate agents. Participants were identified through chain-referral (snowball) sampling, starting with and building upon the Principal Investigator Dr. Kaiser's existing contacts from previous research and outreach on water management in the Treasure Valley.



## Semi-structured Interviews

BSU and Extension jointly conducted 18 semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of water experts on local water topics. Interviews were roughly sixty minutes long and were conducted over Zoom during the spring of 2024. The semi-structured format provided consistency in addressing a core set of questions while allowing flexibility to explore additional topics as they came up (Patton, 2002, Spradley, 1979). The interview included ten questions, covering participant views on water management, equity, and awareness, as well as perspectives on the current state of water data and the tools and resources that could help improve access and awareness. Example protocol questions included:

*What would you say is the general state of awareness about water resource issues in Idaho?*

*Do you think having more information or better access to information about water would empower you (or your constituents) to engage in decision making about water?*

*Are there certain types of water information that would be useful for you (or your constituency) to have more access to?*

*What would be the most useful way for you (or your constituency) to access that information?*

As authorized by the BSU Institutional Review Board, our informed consent process allowed participants to opt in to being identified or retain default anonymity. We automatically generated transcripts from Zoom audio files and anonymized them as needed.

## Structured Conversations

To delve more deeply into water education needs and identify areas for collaboration, Extension Water Outreach conducted an additional 17 structured conversations with

agency staff and education providers (Patton, 2002). These conversations were primarily conducted in person and were about 30 minutes in length. They began with an introduction and prompted providers to talk about educational programming, audience, and frequency and timing of outreach. This structured conversational format allowed us to assess the scope of existing programming across a wide range of providers, to identify areas of overlap and synergy, as well as gaps in programming that Extension could potentially help address.

## Participant Observation

We conducted participant observation of five collaborative meetings to better understand how stakeholders are coming together to address common goals related to water management, education, and conservation in Idaho and the Treasure Valley (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, Schwandt, 2007, p. 219, Goffman, 1989). We observed the regular meetings of the Groundwater Education Committee and the Treasure Valley Urban Conservation Partnership as they worked through a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to develop or clarify their mission statements. We also convened thirty stakeholders for a hybrid in-person/online presentation about TCP's high school watershed curriculum, where we facilitated discussion about local projects the curriculum could highlight and gaps in water education. Participant observation of these meetings enabled us to see how water managers, agency staff, and education providers are interacting in these settings, providing a glimpse into group dynamics and perspectives akin to those revealed in focus groups (Ekins, 2018).

## Thematic Analysis

We conducted a broad thematic analysis to identify trends in perspectives about water education needs identified in the interviews, conversations, and meetings (DeLyser et al. 2010). Semi-structured interview transcripts were uploaded into Quirkos, an online qualitative analysis software that facilitates collaborative coding by multiple team members, along with meeting notes from structured conversations and participant observation. We coded the transcripts and notes for broad themes from the interview protocol, such as ‘state of awareness,’ and ‘data and information needs,’ and education-specific themes of providers, audiences, synergies, and gaps in programming. By synthesizing interview data with insights from conversations and meetings (Ekins, 2020), we were able to gain a better understanding of how water education fits into broader water management goals and how Extension could bridge gaps in programming.

## Results

Water education in the Treasure Valley is conducted by a broad group of agencies, municipalities, non-profits, universities, and utility companies (Table 1; see Appendix 1 for more detail). These organizations deliver both direct and indirect outreach covering topics ranging from surface water quality and stormwater pollution prevention to groundwater, water conservation, and water supply, all of which have areas of overlap (Figure 1). Treasure Valley residents, especially high school students and adults, can benefit from more direct groundwater conservation education opportunities.

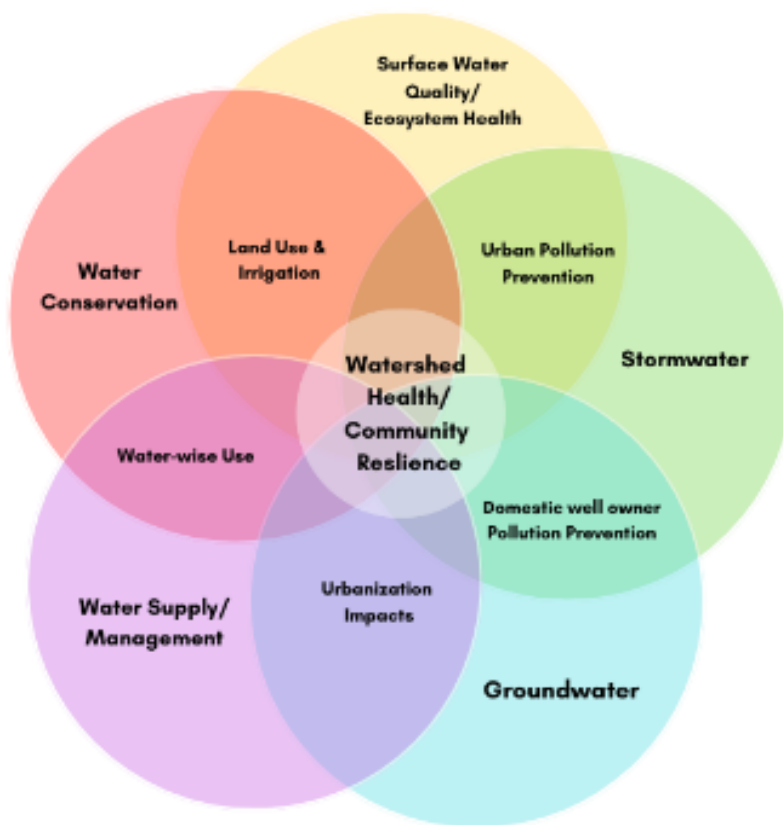


Figure 1 Water education topics tightly overlap

## Opportunities for Groundwater and Water Conservation Education are Needed

Surface water quality, ecosystem health, and stormwater pollution prevention topics are the most represented in direct water outreach opportunities. This is partly because of the mission of the entities providing that education — the City of Boise’s WaterShed Wastewater Renewal facility, environmental nonprofits, and stormwater protection programs. The City of Nampa’s Public Works Department supplies domestic water to Nampa residents and emphasizes water conservation, as does the Ada Soil and Water Conservation District.

Groundwater supply and water management education are more limited, especially for adults, partly because no entity in the valley currently has a core mission to conduct groundwater supply or water management education for the public. The Idaho Rural Water Association conducts technical groundwater training for Public Water System employees, and source water protection education for the

the Boise WaterShed conduct groundwater classroom outreach to elementary students.

Recurring interview themes included the need to address groundwater supply management, create more public educational resources, help homebuyers make informed decisions, and ease the burden on agency and county staff who field questions. Groundwater is visually hidden

**Table 1 Core Providers of Active Water Education Throughout the Treasure Valley.** Within sections, providers are separated by organization type: Agency, Municipality, Non-profit, University, & Private provider.

<b>Content</b>	<b>Provider</b>	<b>Audience</b>
<b>Surface Water Quality/ Ecosystem Health</b>	Idaho Department of Environmental Quality US Fish & Wildlife, Deer Flat Wildlife Refuge Idaho Fish & Game, MK Nature Center	Adults, K-12
	City of Boise Public Works, Boise WaterShed	
	Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area Idaho Rivers United	
<b>Stormwater</b>	City of Nampa Stormwater Protection City of Boise Stormwater Protection	Adults, K-12
<b>Groundwater</b>	Idaho Department of Environmental Quality Idaho Department of Water Resources Department of Health and Welfare Ada Soil & Water Conservation District	Adults, elementary, middle
	Idaho Rural Water Association City of Boise Public Works, Boise WaterShed	
	UI Extension, Water Outreach	
	Veolia	
<b>Water Supply/ Management</b>	Idaho Department of Water Resources	Adults, elementary, middle
	City of Nampa Public Works City of Boise Public Works, Boise WaterShed	
	Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area (snow science)	
	UI Extension, Water Outreach	
<b>Water Conservation</b>	Ada Soil & Water Conservation District	Adults, elementary, middle
	City of Nampa Public Works	
	UI Extension, Water Outreach	

rural public. Staff from the Idaho Department of Water Resources give presentations occasionally when requested, but as an organization they are charged with managing water and administering water law, not outreach. Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ), Veolia (private water utility) and

from the public — out of sight, out of mind — and the complexity of groundwater models make general education difficult. Surface and groundwater hydrology in the Treasure Valley are changing rapidly with urbanization. A municipal interviewee shared that even among water professionals and engineers water



supply “is a little confusing for people [...] in terms of what is an adequate supply, or what is a good groundwater level” at specific locations (Interview, 04/18/2024). This translates to lack of education for the homebuyer and occasional scenarios where “somebody buys a lot with a well, and then they find out the well is bad” (*ibid*).

Mixed messages about water supply and conservation exist in part because of the historic abundance of water in the region and the nuances of local groundwater levels versus valley-wide municipal water supply. The same municipal interviewee shared that “there’s been studies indicating, at least in the Treasure Valley, that there is plenty of water available...as long as we’re all communicating and coordinating and tracking growth and working together on projects” (Interview, 04/18/2024). Defining common understanding and messaging based on up-to-date groundwater supply and management information is integral to coordinating across the valley to build community resilience to the impacts of population growth, urbanization, and climate change.

The Ada Soil and Water Conservation District partners with Veolia and the Boise WaterShed to provide water conservation education to interested adults through a spring Water Wise workshop series that invites agency experts to present water supply and conservation topics to audiences of 40-80 residents. These experts, however, have sometimes downplayed the need for water conservation in these presentations. This may in part be due to a state agency interviewee’s observation that “there’s just not enough of an urgency with most people to see what’s coming, because right now we’re okay [...] but I think there should be more forward-thinking solutions” (Interview, 03/20/2024). Some such solutions include the City of Nampa’s Drought Task Force and the water-wise landscaping guidelines recommended by

their Public Works department ([City of Nampa, 2023](#)). Raising awareness about issues without actionable solutions sometimes “shuts people down,” offers another agency interviewee (Interview, 03/21/2024), but the Treasure Valley is at a critical juncture precisely because it is not yet in a water crisis. Water professionals and educators can unify their groundwater conservation messaging to empower the community.

## **Collaborative Partnerships Offer a Foundation of Support**

The strong collaborative partnerships that exist between many environmental education organizations in the valley offer a foundation to support programming that will meet the need for increased groundwater education. The capacity of state and federal agencies to implement educational programming varies based on their mission. Agency outreach at IDEQ, a regulatory state agency, is often based on requests by direct contacts and limited by outreach time written into positions, rather than an inter-organizational outreach plan. The Department of Health and Welfare’s drinking water division has a strong outreach mission and leads the interagency Groundwater Education Committee (GWEC) built by IDEQ. Multi-agency discussion during GWEC meetings showed that agency staff are interested in supporting existing outreach opportunities (Table 2), rather than creating new events.

Many municipalities and counties operate under federal and state permitting processes that require some funding or effort towards water education, like the robust stormwater education efforts through the Cities of Boise and Nampa. The City of Boise Public Works department additionally runs the WaterShed

necessary for programming and even coordinate use of indoor and outdoor educational spaces.

Overall, staff and organizations in the Treasure Valley are passionate about water education outreach opportunities. Existing collaborative

**Table 2 Observations from collaborative meetings**

<i>Collaborative</i>	<i>Lead Entity</i>	<i>Meeting Purpose</i>	<i>Takeaways</i>
<b>Groundwater Education Committee</b>	Department of Health and Welfare/Idaho Department of Environmental Quality	Quarterly multi-agency meetings focused on enhancing public awareness and understanding of groundwater resources and management, as per Policy III-A of the Idaho Ground Water Quality Plan.	Need for groundwater education opportunities that participating agencies can support.
<b>Treasure Valley Urban Conservation Partnership</b>	Deer Flat Wildlife Refuge	Biannual meetings to strengthen the connection between organizations and community through collaboration and conservation.	Multi-organizational collaborative partnerships build relationships that support increased capacity through program collaboration.
<b>Treasure Valley Water Summit</b>	Ada County Board of Commissioners	Biannual presentations from water experts across the valley to discuss water resource challenges and identify mechanisms for water resiliency.	Need for unified water resource and conservation education across the valley.
<b>Boise School District Environmental Field Experiences, Water Strand</b>	City of Boise WaterShed, Bogus Basin Environmental Education, MK Nature Center, U of I Extension	Planning meetings to facilitate 24 to 36 water science fall field trips for 6 <sup>th</sup> graders in the Boise School District.	Multi-organizational collaborative partnerships increase outreach capacity by sharing supplies and apportioning programming.
<b>The Confluence Project</b>	U of I Extension & IWRRRI	Summer presentation to gather stakeholder input about interest, capacity, and water education needs.	Agencies value the opportunity to participate in outreach frameworks offered by other entities.

education center, funded by sewer system user fees. Collaborations between municipal and nonprofit environmental organizations and school districts support many direct outreach opportunities, such as the Boise School District's Environmental Field Experiences, which seek to facilitate environmental science field trips for every 6<sup>th</sup> grader in the district. No single organization has this capacity, but collaboration allows multiple organizations to arrange staff schedules, share supplies

partnerships provide a foundation to leverage the outreach program and logistical support offered by TCP. In northern Idaho, U of I works with school districts and partner agencies to schedule water quality, snow science, and groundwater field trips for high school TCP students in Environmental Science or Earth Science classes. U of I then collaborates with partnering organizations to facilitate curriculum components and teacher trainings based on partner expertise.

## Adults and High School Students Can Benefit from Groundwater Literacy

Water education increases the scientific literacy and conservation capacity of communities of all ages and demographics. Many elementary students participate in field explorations like the Boise School District's or the Deer Flat Wildlife Refuge's SEEDS7 program for Caldwell 7<sup>th</sup> graders. Many organizations utilize lessons from the Project WET curriculum, tied to national Next Generation Science Standards, in classroom outreach ([Project WET Foundation, 2024](#)). Some opportunities, like the Watershed Watch, span Ada and Canyon counties, while others originate in individual school districts. Interviewees noted that experiential education is not always tied to high school standards, creating a barrier for teachers, and that the more demanding academic and extracurricular schedules of middle and high school students reduce their opportunities to participate in field-based environmental education. Opportunities located at sites in Boise, like the MK Nature Center or Bogus Basin, require extra funding and time for students outside Boise to participate.

Unlike students participating in organized curricula, water education may or may not reach adults, who have diverse interests and communication preferences. Assessment participants acknowledged that many adults receive water education through groups they choose to join or information they seek out. This looks like participation in informational meetings, like those of Trout Unlimited or the Greater Boise Recreationalists, or in community science programs, like Idaho Rivers United's Urban Water Stewards. Adults who participate in these programs or attend tours are, as one water educator explained, "people that want to learn and people that maybe are a little more

informed about our water resources in the state" (Interview, 04/03/2024). This interviewee then noted that because of that "there may be some bias there as to who our visitors are" (*ibid*).

Although most organizations have digital resources that include videos, written PDFs, or ArcGIS Story Map narratives, few adults seek out information related to water. In fact, water and water management are frequently taken for granted. A real estate agent interviewee admitted that "I don't really pay attention to [water]. Like if I didn't have access to it, well then I would pay more attention" (Interview, 04/24/2024). Other conversations throughout this assessment affirmed that the public faces information overload, and individuals are interested in relevant information shared via their preferred form of media. When asked about the most useful ways for their constituency to access water data and information, an agency interviewee suggested packaged information that "appeals to [a particular demographic's] interests" (Interview, 03/20/2024).

There is a need to further understand diverse communication preferences among both English and Spanish speaking audiences to direct information where specific populations are already looking. Reaching broader adult audiences with water education is important to empower communities and individuals to make decisions that will ensure access to clean water for all into the future.

## Conclusion

The future of water education is collaborative. Our interviews, conversations, and participation with stakeholders and educators revealed a clear interest in expanding water education in the Treasure Valley, and a need for more collaboration to bridge gaps in programming. U of I is well poised to respond to the needs

assessed here through implementation of TCP. Based on the outcomes of this needs assessment, our goal is to coordinate across the Treasure Valley to pilot TCP's high school watershed curriculum.

TCP addresses the gap in experiential education opportunities for high schoolers through its alignment with national Next Generation Science Standards and Idaho State Science Standards and through identification of field trip transportation funding. Experiential learning through effective programming in outdoor settings supports positive learning outcomes for students (Dale et al., 2020). Through exploration of local topics, TCP integrates water sciences disciplines to present a holistic and applied curriculum that brings science to life for students (Engels et al., 2019). TCP students culminate their year of involvement by presenting water research projects at the Youth Water Summit. Local water professionals judge student posters and a keynote speaker concludes the experience. The Youth Water Summit offers students the opportunity to connect with participants from other districts and to build relationships with judges. TCP also reaches adult audiences like teachers, parents of participants, and community members invited to the Youth Water Summit.

TCP strengthens interagency partnerships by providing an outreach framework that brings multiple organizations together according to their capacity. TCP will leverage the robust water quality and snow science education resources that exist in the valley and will add needed groundwater education curriculum and opportunities. Our team has partnered with hydrologists and graphic designers to update the groundwater topics, maps, and data in Boise State University's online ArcGIS resource, the Treasure Valley Water Atlas (2018). These updates form the basis for additions to TCP, and for Extension Water Outreach presentations to adults in the valley.

U of I Extension, IWRRI, and BSU are joining and strengthening a strong network of water professionals and educators conducting outreach across the valley. The work of each organization is necessary to support community resilience in the face of impacts to our watershed from climate change, population growth, and urbanization. Additional groundwater and water conservation education will empower residents of the Treasure Valley to respond to these challenges to protect water availability for all into the future.

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## Appendix

Treasure Valley water education (noncomprehensive). Acronyms: Caldwell School District (CSD), Boise School District (BSD), Environmental Field Experiences (EFE), University of Idaho (UI), The Confluence Project (TCP)

<b>Provider &amp; Program Type</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Audience</b>
<b>State &amp; Federal Agencies</b>		
Ada Soil & Water Conservation District <i>Classroom outreach</i> <i>BSD EFE provider</i> <i>Water-wise Workshop coordinator</i>	Water Conservation Groundwater	Adults, elementary, middle
Department of Health and Welfare <i>Tabling</i> <i>Online &amp; print resources</i>	Groundwater Quality	Adults (private well owners)
Idaho Department of Environmental Quality <i>Presentations and classroom outreach as requested/able</i> <i>Watershed Watch participants</i> <i>Online &amp; print resources</i>	Surface Water Quality Groundwater Quality	Adults, elementary, middle
Idaho Department of Water Resources <i>Presentations as requested/able</i>	Groundwater Water Supply/Management	Adults
Idaho Fish & Game, MK Nature Center <i>Campus: tours &amp; visitors</i> <i>BSD EFE provider</i> <i>Master Naturalist provider</i>	Ecosystem Health	Adults, families, elementary, middle
US Fish & Wildlife, Deer Flat Wildlife Refuge <i>Campus: tours &amp; visitors</i> <i>CSD SEEDS7 provider</i>	Ecosystem Health Surface Water Quality	Adults, families, 7 <sup>th</sup> graders, Spanish-speakers
US Forest Service, Boise National Forest <i>Tabling</i>	Ecosystem Health	Adults, elementary, middle, high school (rural)
US Geological Survey <i>Presentations as requested/able</i> <i>Watershed Watch participants</i>	Surface Water Quality Groundwater Water Supply	Adults
<b>City and County Governments</b>		
City of Boise Public Works, Boise WaterShed <i>Campus: tours &amp; visitors</i> <i>Project WET coordinator</i> <i>Classroom outreach</i> <i>Field trip provider</i> <i>BSD EFE provider</i> <i>Watershed Watch facilitator</i> <i>IDAHO20 facilitator</i> <i>Water-wise Workshop coordinator</i> <i>Master Naturalist provider</i> <i>Online resources</i>	Surface Water Quality Ecosystem Health Water Conservation Water Supply/Management Groundwater	Adults, families, K-12
City of Boise Public Works, Public Art Program <i>Public art</i>	Water Conservation	Adults
City of Boise Stormwater Protection, Partners for Clean Water <i>Trainings</i> <i>Classroom outreach</i>	Stormwater	Adults, K-12 (BSD & CSD)
City of Nampa Public Works <i>Classroom outreach (One Water)</i> <i>Online &amp; print resources</i>	Water Conservation Water Supply/Management	Adults, K-12
City of Nampa Stormwater Protection	Stormwater	Adults, K-12

<i>Trainings</i> <i>Classroom outreach</i>		
<b>Nonprofits</b>		
Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area <i>Snow School coordinator</i> <i>BSD EFE Provider</i>	Ecosystem Health Snow Science (Water Supply)	Adults, K-12 (valley-wide)
Boise River Enhancement Network <i>Volunteer opportunities</i> <i>Online resources</i>	Surface Water Quality Ecosystem Health Water Supply/Management	Adults
Idaho Rivers United <i>Presentations</i> <i>Urban Water Stewards</i> <i>Volunteer opportunities</i>	Surface Water Quality Ecosystem Health	Adults
Idaho Rural Water Association <i>Trainings</i> <i>Tabling</i>	Groundwater	Professionals, Adults (rural)
Idaho Water Users Association <i>Online videos &amp; resources</i>	Water Management	Adults
Treasure Valley Water Users Association <i>Online videos &amp; resources</i>	Water Management	Adults
Trout Unlimited <i>Presentations</i> <i>Volunteer opportunities</i> <i>Online resources</i>	Surface Water Quality Ecosystem Health	Adults
<b>Universities</b>		
Boise State University <i>Presentations and classroom outreach as requested</i> <i>Treasure Valley Water Atlas (online resource)</i>	Water Supply/Management Groundwater Surface Water Quality Ecosystem Health Water Conservation	Adults, K-12
College of Idaho <i>Presentations and classroom outreach as requested</i>	Water Supply/Management Surface Water Quality Ecosystem Health Water Conservation	Adults, K-12
Idaho Water Resources Research Institute <i>TCP coordinator</i> <i>Online seminars</i>	Water Supply/Management Groundwater Stormwater Surface Water Quality Ecosystem Health Water Conservation	Adults, high school
UI Center for Ecohydraulic Research <i>Classroom outreach</i> <i>Campus: tours</i>	Flow Hydraulics (Water Supply/Management)	K-12
UI Extension, Water Outreach <i>IDAH20 coordinator</i> <i>TCP coordinator</i> <i>Project WET facilitator</i> <i>BSD EFE provider</i> <i>Watershed Watch participant</i> <i>Water-wise workshop presenter</i> <i>Master Gardener presenter</i> <i>Treasure Valley Water Atlas (online resource)</i>	Groundwater Water Conservation Water Supply/Management Surface Water Quality Ecosystem Health	Adults, K-12 (valley-wide)
<b>Private Utility Suppliers</b>		
Veolia <i>Classroom outreach</i> <i>Online &amp; bill resources</i>	Water Supply/Management Water Conservation Groundwater	Adults, elementary, middle