

Karla Nemeth

ACWA Executive Director

After years at the center of California water policy, she's bringing a new perspective to ACWA — and a clear vision for what comes next.



Getting to Know New Executive Director Karla Nemeth



Former California Department of Water Resources Director Karla Nemeth started her new position as Executive Director of ACWA on Sept. 1, bringing more than two decades of water policy experience and high-profile statewide recognition to the association.

ACWA's Board of Directors selected Nemeth for the position in May following a nationwide recruitment process. Marwan Khalifa, who served as Interim Executive Director for the past 19 months, will remain at ACWA through the end of the year.

Nemeth recently sat down with *ACWA News* to provide some insight into her priorities and plans for the future.

Opportunities to Connect

There will be several opportunities to get to know ACWA's new Executive Director in the coming months. More details and registration at acwa.com/events.

- **Virtual Town Hall (members only):** Oct. 6
- **Regional office hours (members only):** Oct. 23, Oct. 30, Nov. 6 and Nov. 13
- **ACWA Fall Conference:** Dec. 1-3

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Q. What inspired you to apply for the position of ACWA's Executive Director?

A So many water solutions require a new recognition of our interdependencies and a willingness to evolve the relationship between our local agencies and the state and federal government. ACWA members are some of the biggest innovators in the business — using cutting-edge forecasting to adapt our reservoirs; operating the largest desalination plant in the western hemisphere; investing in working lands that reduce flood risk, refill groundwater supplies, and support salmon; protecting and restoring headwaters to make them more resilient to wildfire; and deploying state-of-the-art value engineering to deliver valuable safe water to our customers.

After many years in the California Governor's Office, Department of Water Resources and Natural Resources Agency, I understand the value of local water agencies uniting around actions that will make a real difference in the lives of Californians — the reliability and affordability of our water supplies. It simply won't happen without the robust leadership of local water districts.

Last, but certainly not least, I love the public sector and its mission-driven people. I'm very inspired by the opportunity to bring up the next generation of water leaders who will also face the challenges of fire, flood and drought. We share the responsibility for their readiness and cultivating their passion for public service.

Q. You bring an impressive background in water policy experience to the association. Do you have specific goals for ACWA's advocacy efforts?

A I'm excited to build upon ACWA's Vision for Our Water Future, a member-driven initiative for providing affordable water for California. It will be critical that our recommendations reflect the needs of our members — large and small, ag and urban; and on our coasts, in our valleys, deserts and mountains. Many of our advocacy efforts right now relate to that Vision, such as the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program, wildfire liability, clean energy fleet requirements and golden mussels to name a few. But there is more work to be done to position our eventual recommendations for implementation.

I started engaging with state leaders and water industry partners on behalf of ACWA from day one, and I plan to visit our nation's capital soon. I look forward to working with our members and staff to bring this Vision home in time for the new state administration and legislature.

Q. What are your top priorities for ACWA?

A My immediate priority is to get to know ACWA members and staff. So many industries are at a moment of transformation — both in terms of generational changes in the workforce and the scale of the challenges facing our own industry. I'm meeting with member agencies to better understand not only their common water challenges, but what they need and expect from ACWA. Our diversity of membership is our strength, but it's also a real challenge in setting our California water agenda for the state and federal governments. Understanding our myriad perspectives is essential.

Over time, we need to drive water policy research based on our experience as water managers in California and eventually become nimble enough organizationally to put these policies into action. ACWA is also a great convener. But gathering is not enough. A big part of ACWA's job is to support the momentum that being together generates so that we can turn it into action throughout the state, in Sacramento and in Washington DC.

Q. How can ACWA bolster its audience with the next governor and his administration?

A Another year of challenging hydrology may help, but we'll be ready. As we swing between very wet and very dry conditions — sometimes within a single water year — it can really grab Sacramento's attention. And that's where our Vision comes in. Our recommendations need to be sewn into a strategy that connects the need for safe, reliable and affordable water with the state's most pressing challenges, such as extreme weather, the economy and housing. ACWA is also focused on influencing the quality of administration appointees. We will be looking for people with strong backgrounds in government operations and a track record not just for collaboration, but delivering outcomes as well.

We know the challenges ahead are significant. Our hydrology is changing, our infrastructure is aging, and the demands on our water system continue to grow. We also know that no single agency or region can solve these challenges alone. We need to be willing to collaborate, invest and act as ACWA. Fortunately, there is no other organization with our breadth of experience and expertise. California has a tremendous opportunity in front of us, and we need to be ready to insist on and forge 21st Century water solutions. It's a big job, and I want to hear from you! ♦

Nemeth has been a familiar voice at ACWA conferences for years, including the 2018 Fall Conference. Now she returns to the association in a very different role — at the helm as Executive Director.

