



The Language of Change

Language is a powerful tool that can be used to help change the way people think about stormwater. It can also help convince different groups to adopt the projects and regulations you wish to promote. Changing the language we use to discuss new approaches to managing urban runoff can help transform the perception of water as a waste product to treating water as a valuable resource. Carefully selected language can also be used to effectively target the message we wish to convey to different groups.

New approach to managing water in an urban environment

The process of stormwater management, while easy to describe and define, carries with it the impression of water as a nuisance and a potential threat (e.g., flooding, pollution, and degraded streams). Changing the language and terminology used to describe urban water management can help convey the idea of water as a resource that can be managed in a way that benefits and protects the community while preserving a valuable commodity.

As more people have embraced this concept of using water as a resource, several new development approaches have been embraced, each with their own language and terminology (e.g., low impact development, better site design, green infrastructure, etc.). The language used to describe and promote these new concepts can help you as you take your message to the community, be it through a project proposal, a new regulation, a stormwater manual, or a presentation given during a community planning meeting.

Speak to your audience

The vocabulary you use to communicate with your partners and stakeholders plays a key role in connecting with your audience. Learn the terminology that most closely matches what you are trying to express and that will resonate with your stakeholders. For example, regulators think of stormwater management in terms of TMDLs and NPDES requirements, while parks and recreation managers may relate more to projects that preserve open space and offer recreational amenities. Community development groups might like projects that make their area more “livable.” City engineers are most likely to connect with projects that reduce sediment loads or increase infiltration rates. Also, different industries and organizations will have their own vocabulary and jargon that you should learn and use when speaking to these groups.

In addition to a standard collection of terms and ideas, each group you speak with will come to the discussion with a set of values, cultural ideals, and assumed knowledge. Different terms may have different meaning for different groups based on these underlying factors. Take the time to learn the factors that influence and motivate different stakeholders and tailor your language to address the particular concerns and interests of these groups.

[Kansas City, Missouri](#), found a receptive audience for their project to improve stormwater quality by connecting a desire to improve stormwater management and runoff reduction in their 10,000 Rain Gardens initiative. Gardening is a popular pastime and residents were eager to implement these control

practices in their homes with help from the city planners. Messages were tailored to appeal to audiences who enjoyed gardening as a hobby.

Be consistent

Once you have introduced a new project or idea, be consistent in the language you use to refer to the various concepts or practices it encompasses. Determine the set of terms you will use and what they mean before you bring your message to your stakeholders. Changing the terminology you use to communicate your message may cause confusion and create barriers to successful communication.

Beyond the written word

Remember that words are not the only form of communication available to you. Images and pictures can also be used to help you communicate ideas. Language and terms that help the audience visualize, such as rain garden, will also carry with them a set of values and ideas that can help promote an aesthetic or ideal.

As a final note, don't let a search for the "perfect" word or phrase derail your efforts. Sometimes, just your awareness of the impact language has on the discussion of sustainable stormwater practices can help you avoid or minimize miscommunication.

You may also be interested in:

[Bring Your Ideas to the Community](#)
[What Makes a Project Successful?](#)
[Drivers and Motivating Factors](#)
[Tools and Glossary](#)

Case study cited above:

- [Kansas City, MO](#)