

AWRA Women in Water Resources Interview #2: Brenda Ortigoza Bateman



Brenda Bateman, Administrator, Technical Services Division, Oregon Water Resources Department and current AWRA Board Member

This interview is the second of a six part series, written/conducted by AWRA President Martha Narvaez, celebrating the role of AWRA Women in Water Resources.

Length of Time in the Water Resources/Natural Resources Field

24 years

Current Position

Administrator, Technical Services Division, Oregon Water Resources Department (Salem, OR)

Positions Held

- Senior Policy Coordinator, Oregon Water Resources Department (Salem, OR)
- Public Policy Coordinator, Tualatin Valley Water District (Beaverton, OR)
- Policy Director, U.S.-Asia Environmental Partnership (Washington, DC)
- Research Analyst, Investor Responsibility Research Center and Calvert Investments (Washington, DC)

Education

- BA and MA in International Relations from the Johns Hopkins University
- Ph.D. in Public Policy from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Honors and Appointments

- AWRA's Henry P. Caulfield, Jr. Medal (2013) for exemplary contributions to national water policy
- AWRA's Ivan A. Johnson Award for Young Professionals (2008)
- Courtesy faculty appointment to Oregon State University's School of Public Policy

Q&A

How did you get involved in the water resources field? I started my career conducting research on behalf of institutional investors, some of the largest pension funds and endowment funds in the U.S. I traveled overseas to conduct factory audits of publicly-held corporations, analyzing their environmental, social, and governance behavior. While I saw a lot of interesting things, what fascinated me the most was the water—the use of water, the discharge of water, and the purchase of and negotiation for water. I then went to work as a contractor for USAID, analyzing environmental policies and practices in Southeast Asia. Back in the U.S., I realized that water allocation takes place at the state level and that's where I wanted to keep my focus. Ultimately, that's why I landed with the State of Oregon, at the Water Resources Department.

How did you get involved with AWRA? When I began working for a local drinking water provider, many of my colleagues were already members of national-level industry associations such as the American Water Works Association and American Society of Civil Engineers. We didn't yet have a strong tie to AWRA. My supervisor encouraged me to join AWRA, to get involved, and to start to take on leadership roles at the national level. It was great advice!

How has the water resources field changed since you started your career? Competition for water has become even more fierce as pressures from climate change, regulation, and litigation increase. This ferocity is compounded by volumes of misinformation in the public domain and a highly charged political arena. This leaves very little room to be creative and collaborative. When I was growing up, I watched with interest and admiration those politicians who could negotiate the noise and get to good solutions.

How will the water resources field change in the next few years? If we are disciplined about it, we will make better use of information than we do today. Many of our data systems in the natural resources arena are still pretty old school and even though we have great data that we have collected it doesn't always get where it should in a timely and friendly format. We need to make information accessible and usable by more people, both in and out of government.

Biggest career success? I think I'm proudest of the role I played leading the team that developed Oregon's first Integrated Water Resources Strategy (state water plan) in 2012. This is a document that is both implementable and practical, and involved years' worth of public process, visiting with Oregonians, documenting their water challenges, and writing and re-writing drafts that resulted in a solid set of recommended actions. The resulting Strategy will help Oregon understand and meet its water needs into the future. We're working on the 2017 update right now.

Biggest lesson learned? The biggest lesson I have learned is that no success is possible without a good team. I've discovered that working full time and trying to raise a family is really difficult! I had no idea how challenging and tiring it would be to try to do everything I wanted to do, and to try to do it well. The fact that I'm still doing both, and enjoying both, is because of the team of folks that surround me and help me every day. My husband, Mark, in addition to his own successful career and business, is also the chief chef and shopper in our family. He frees up a lot of space so that I have the time and energy to do the things I love at work. In addition, my staff members are the most talented folks I know. And, I've had three of the most incredible mentors throughout my career; Owen Cylike, Todd Heidgerken, and Phil Ward were all generous enough to grant me access to their own professional networks. They made sure that I got to peek behind the curtain and understand how things *really* work. And all three made sure that I had an opportunity to travel, write, and negotiate.

Biggest regret? I can't think of any regrets. I have had great support, staff, and colleagues at every step.

Share a leadership story? Most of the products and projects that I'm most proud of were completed using informal leadership, meaning that I didn't have staff under my direct supervision. From AWRA's policy white papers, to Oregon's state water plan, these efforts involved the formulation of ideas, refinement of concepts, and vetting of the details. Such efforts depend heavily upon public participation, agency collaboration, and a willingness to incorporate new information.

As an example, through my work with a local water utility a decade ago, I became interested in the concept of pharmaceutical take-back programs. These are programs where citizens can safely take unused or unwanted medications to law enforcement for proper disposal in burners or lined landfills, instead of dumping them down the drain. Our local healthcare community included a number of adult care facilities, which deal with this issue in bulk on an everyday basis. Because I had the time, energy, and interest, the local City Council allowed me to convene a group of local law enforcement officers, public works officials, healthcare providers, solid waste haulers, and regulators to design a program for these healthcare facilities that met everyone's specifications. This was a program each participant strongly supported for very different reasons; implementation was the tough part. Through a series of meetings and negotiations, we were able to address everyone's concerns and create a successful program, the first of its kind in Oregon.

Biggest challenge as a woman in the business? In my work, I have never come up against a bias or glass ceiling with regard to gender. I credit the strong and capable women in previous generations who paved the way and took the brunt of these challenges. I'm deeply appreciative of the women who have come before me. Even now, I'm surrounded by strong female leaders in my personal and professional life—my mom and sister; the female scientists, programmers, engineers, planners, and policy advisors in my own agency; my mayor; my governor.

One piece of advice you wish someone told you early on in your career? I wish someone had told me it was all right to not have a career plan. I never was one of those kids who knew what they wanted to be when they grow up. I didn't have that one job, that one career, or that one goal I was striving for. By staying open to the unknown, I said yes to research assignments, international travel, experiences in the military, public and private sectors, and other adventures I didn't even know existed. I like to say that I've been around the world and back again, and I love where I landed. With my home in Oregon, and AWRA friends around the globe, I'm in a very good place.

True inspiration? Family. I want to be such a good steward of resources and ideas that my kids find me interesting and find the work I am doing interesting. I want them to be proud of me each night at the dinner table when I talk about my day. My kids are my biggest inspiration.

As mentioned, this is a six-part series on AWRA's Women in Water. Watch for next month's interview with [AWRA Past President Jane Rowan](#).