



*Growing Our Impact*

# STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK 2025–2030



## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT & CEO AND CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS



As we near 15 years since the founding of The Water Institute, we find ourselves at an inflection point—both in the life of this organization and in the world around us.

The challenges we face—rising seas, land loss, extreme weather, flood risks, and deep-rooted social disparities—are not new. But today, the stakes are higher, the impacts more widespread, and the need for action more urgent.

The Institute exists to meet moments like this. Built with purpose and uniquely situated as an independent non-profit organization, we have grown into a trusted partner—bringing together scientists, planners, engineers, and strategists to develop real-world solutions rooted in cutting-edge research and meaningful collaboration. Guided by a volunteer board, whose directors include accomplished scientists and engineers, business leaders, philanthropists, and public servants, our success is measured by serving the common good.

This Strategic Framework marks the next chapter in our journey—built on what we’ve learned, driven by what’s ahead, and rooted in our belief that science, collaboration, and innovation can move the needle. Over the next 5 years, the Institute is setting a course to identify and tackle emerging challenges by fostering innovation, deepen our role as a hub for collaboration, strengthen our organization from within, and build financial resilience to grow impact and sustain our mission.

This is a call to lead and scale impact—with purpose and partnership. And none of this is possible without the people who power this work—our team, our board, partners, our supporters, and the communities we serve. We’re grateful for your continued trust and collaboration as we move into this next phase.

As we look ahead, we do so with a sense of urgency and a firm belief that together, we can help shape a future where people, ecosystems, and economies can adapt and thrive in a changing world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Beaux Jones'.

**Beaux Jones**  
President and CEO  
The Water Institute

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Merritt Lane'.

**H. Merritt Lane, III**  
Chairman of the Board  
The Water Institute

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# WHO WE ARE

*The Water Institute is an independent non-profit organization that advances actionable research, technology, and planning to support science-informed decision making. We serve as a collaborative thought partner, bridging across disciplines and organizations. We draw on our roots in the Mississippi River Delta and Gulf Coast, where water is both a strength and a vulnerability, to tackle challenges wherever they are.*

**The Institute's greatest asset is its people.** Our team is creative, curious, and collaborative, working across a wide range of expertise to tackle some of the most complex challenges faced by communities, ecosystems, and economies.

The Institute grew from 45 staff in 2019 to 83 staff at the end of 2024. We have team members based in Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and across the country. Our staff has expertise across disciplines in the natural and social sciences, engineering, planning, law, and technology. Our team is grounded in a wealth of experience conducting fundamental and applied research, developing new methodologies and applications that leverage that knowledge, and translating insights to inform practice and implementation on the Gulf Coast and around the world. Members of our team have backgrounds working in the private and non-profit sectors,

academia, and all levels of government. Collaborating across our diverse disciplines and perspectives—both internally and in partnership with other organizations, researchers, and agencies—enables us to build interdisciplinary project teams, pursue complex challenges, and better support communities and decisionmakers with creative and effective solutions.

Since the Institute's establishment in 2011, we have worked with communities and decisionmakers in Louisiana, across the Gulf Coast, and beyond to address complex challenges with science-grounded approaches. This responsiveness to the real issues and practical decisions communities and natural resource managers face has been, and will continue to be, an essential ingredient in the impact of our work.

Through this diverse work, we have also been able to identify connections across projects and places—common challenges facing different communities, learnings from one project that can improve methods and approaches in the next, challenges or innovative opportunities that may not yet be on the radar of decisionmakers. Key **Areas of Impact** have emerged where the Institute has established a distinct ability to address a pressing problem and has the skills, proximity, and opportunity to have greater impact moving into the future.

This 5-year strategic framework serves as a roadmap for proactively growing our impact—deepening and expanding ways we can serve as a hub of collaboration, innovation, and action to tackle some of the most pressing challenges for communities, ecosystems, and economies.





ECOLOGISTS



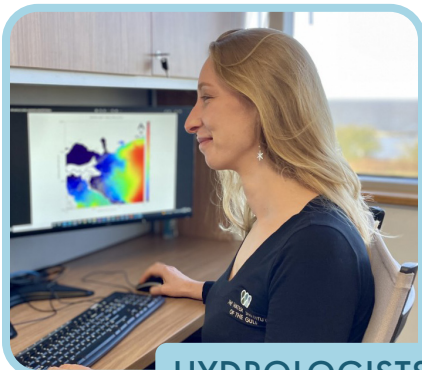
GEOLOGISTS



PLANNERS



POLICY  
RESEARCHERS



HYDROLOGISTS



SOFTWARE  
ENGINEERS



DATA  
ENGINEERS



AND MUCH  
MORE...







## PEOPLE



## COMMUNITIES



## ECOSYSTEMS



## ECONOMIES







# VISION

*A future where all of humanity  
can adapt and thrive alongside  
nature in a changing world*

# MISSION

*To reduce the vulnerability of people,  
communities, ecosystems, and  
economies through transformative  
approaches to interconnected  
environmental and social challenges*

# WHAT SETS US APART

## *Science-Informed Decision Making*



*We tackle  
hard  
problems*

Our *Vision* and *Mission* propel us to address the challenges that are most complex and uncertain, that lack clear solutions, and that require creative and interdisciplinary approaches.



*that matter most  
to people and  
ecosystems,*

Specifically, we tackle pressing **socio-environmental challenges**—complex issues that involve the interconnectedness between people and the environment and require holistic approaches to address them.



*working  
alongside  
our partners,*

We build meaningful and trusted partnerships across sectors and disciplines—working with government agencies, private industry, non-profit organizations, community groups, and universities.





-----> *grounded in  
interdisciplinary  
methods and  
scientific integrity,*

We work creatively across many areas of expertise and uphold the highest standards of unbiased science.



-----> *leading to  
impactful  
outcomes,*

Our applied research, technology, and planning efforts reliably inform decisions that guide the implementation of robust projects, policies, programs, and plans that move the needle on tangible outcomes that matter to people, ecosystems, and economies.



-----> *and building  
transparency and  
trust in decisions.*

Grounding these processes in science builds transparency, understanding, and trust among community members and other stakeholders in the decisions that are made.

# AREAS OF IMPACT

*The Water Institute and its partners have had tremendous impact across hundreds of funded efforts, each of which has benefited our sponsors and the communities and ecosystems in which we work. Across this diverse portfolio, significant Areas of Impact have emerged where the Institute has brought unique skills and advanced science and practice to create meaningful impact.*

RESTORING  
THE VANISHING  
COAST



SUPPORTING  
PLANTS AND  
ANIMALS AT RISK



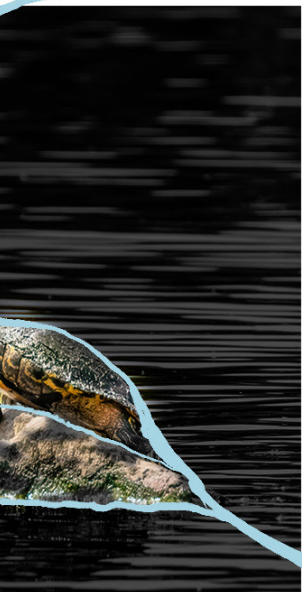
MANAGING  
SEDIMENT  
RESOURCES







STRENGTHENING  
RESILIENCE IN AN  
UNCERTAIN FUTURE



UNDERSTANDING  
EVOLVING  
FLOOD RISKS



ADVANCING  
COMMUNITY-LED  
ACTION



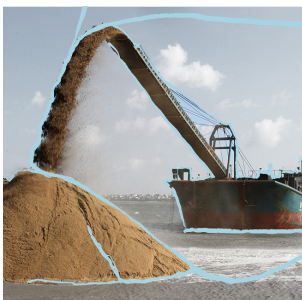
## RESTORING THE VANISHING COAST

**The loss of coastal lands and ecosystems is an existential threat for the Gulf Coast and beyond.** Decisions about when, where, and how to restore coastal landscapes require understanding complex tradeoffs, making choices despite an uncertain future, and considering tough realities like restoration as maintenance rather than as a permanent solution for areas at greatest risk. We focus on collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches that bring together coastal managers, stakeholders, and partners. We leverage our skills in values-focused decision analysis techniques, elicit local and community knowledge, model land change and ecosystem impact, and evaluate the consequences of those changes on people and communities.



## SUPPORTING PLANTS AND ANIMALS AT RISK

**As coastal landscapes change, the plants and animals that depend on them are increasingly at risk.** Managing coastal ecosystems to support habitat is complicated by critical gaps in knowledge about how the changing landscape is impacting species or how potential actions could benefit them. We have developed innovative approaches to large-scale data collection and analysis using emerging methods such as satellite and near-field remote sensing, environmental DNA analysis, and machine learning to support the interpretation of vast observational datasets. We integrate these approaches along with our expertise in strategic planning, facilitation, and scientific communication to inform decisions that maximize benefits to plants and animals as diverse as small worms found on the seafloor, to seagrass, fish, shrimp, birds, and large marine mammals.



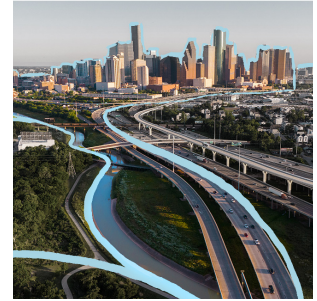
## MANAGING SEDIMENT RESOURCES

**Sediment is a critical and scarce resource for some and an expensive nuisance for others.** Sand and other sediments are vital to restoring degrading coastal landscapes that protect coastal communities and people; provide habitat for fish, sea turtles, and other animals; and are key components to manufacturing products such as concrete. At the same time, rivers and ocean currents deposit sediment in navigation channels and ports, preventing access for ships and requiring costly removal known as dredging. We have developed innovative approaches to support sediment management such as collecting crowdsourced data from vessels to rapidly map the riverbed and predict future changes, which river and port managers can use to make dredging more efficient. We also leverage our understanding of riverine, deltaic, and coastal systems to develop holistic science- and system-based methods that support managing sediment as a natural resource, including weighing difficult tradeoffs for competing uses.



## STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE IN AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

**Communities everywhere face increasing threats from severe weather, flooding, extreme heat, and other hazards.** These hazards are compounded by ongoing stressors such as aging infrastructure, lack of resilient and affordable housing, and access to health care. The difficult choices leaders, residents, families, and businesses must make require approaches that holistically consider the wide range of potential impacts to these communities. We work closely with communities to facilitate collaborative planning processes that bring together scientific and technical rigor with local context, values, and expertise. Drawing from decision analysis methods like Structured Decision Making and Decision Making Under Deep Uncertainty, we focus on developing and applying approaches for transparent and values-focused decisions that are adaptable to the unique needs of different communities and effective despite growing environmental risks and uncertainty.



## UNDERSTANDING EVOLVING FLOOD RISKS

**Flood risks are intensifying and changing rapidly, putting more people and places in harm's way.** Communities must be able to understand the extent of their risk and vulnerability to take appropriate action. However, existing flood risk data is often incomplete, may not account for future conditions, and may be presented in ways that are difficult to understand. Compound flooding in particular—when multiple sources of flood risk like storm surge and rain combine—is an immediate and worsening threat to communities, and we are at the forefront of understanding its drivers and impacts. We advance flood risk assessment, visualization, and real-time forecasting to support action ranging from emergency preparedness to long-term planning. Our efforts advance the science of flood assessment and translation of complex flood risk predictions into information that emergency responders, infrastructure managers, land use planners, and others can use to safeguard people and property.



## ADVANCING COMMUNITY-LED ACTION

**Differences in power, knowledge, and resources prevent some Gulf Coast communities from safeguarding their own future.** All communities want to reduce their vulnerability to evolving hazards, but their access to necessary tools, information, and support varies widely. Through the Community Resilience Center at The Water Institute and other efforts, we support communities that are often overburdened and under-resourced in taking action by providing technical expertise, familiarity with government processes, and connections with other entities that can provide assistance. In addition, we bring together residents, nonprofits, government agencies, planners, scientists, and other stakeholders to co-produce projects that meet community needs. We also undertake policy research to address systemic barriers to action, such as mechanisms for improving the affordability and availability of property insurance that effectively covers communities recovering from disaster.



# WHERE WE WORK

*The Water Institute is firmly rooted in and committed to Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, and this region will continue to represent the Institute's core geography over the next 5 years.*

In many ways, Louisiana and the Gulf Coast region are on the frontlines of some of the greatest socio-environmental challenges facing coastal, deltaic, and riverine communities around the globe—and at the forefront of associated approaches to tackling them. In recent years, we have extended our work to geographies facing similar challenges—and we will continue to thoughtfully grow where we work to expand our impact and broaden opportunities for collaboration and shared learning.



## ROOTED IN LOUISIANA AND THE GULF COAST

*and extending our impact to other  
geographies facing similar challenges.*



*In order to be intentional as we pursue efforts in geographies outside of Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, we will ask ourselves the following questions of new opportunities:*

**Is the work aligned with our *Mission* and *Areas of Impact*?** Opportunities in new geographies should progress our Vision and priorities while emanating from our core capabilities. Maintaining this connection ensures we bring proven expertise while continuing to advance methods and practices.

**Does the opportunity push the boundaries of creativity and innovation?** We seek to bring new thinking, cutting-edge science and technology, and forward-looking approaches to complex socio-environmental challenges. Decisions around where to expand our work should be guided by opportunities to introduce or scale transformative approaches that set new standards.

**Is there a strong foundation of partnerships?** Our most successful engagements stem from relationships where trust, credibility, and mutual commitment are established. Decisions to pursue work in new geographies should be driven by opportunities to collaborate with organizations, agencies, and stakeholders who align with our ***Mission*** and values and see mutual benefits in partnering.

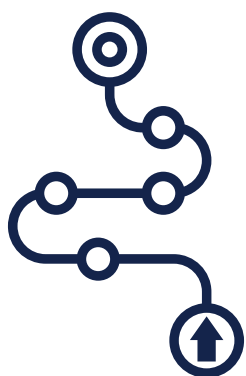
**Do we adequately understand the historical context of the community or ecosystem we plan to work in?** Understanding the context of a community or ecosystem, either directly or by partnering with those who do, is a critical precursor to pursuing or accepting work in new geographies. To ensure that our research is not extractive and will not unintentionally cause harm, expansion of our work into new communities or ecosystems must consider the community's or ecosystem's history and avoid incomplete or inappropriately focused scopes of work.

# PROACTIVELY FURTHERING OUR IMPACT

*As The Water Institute looks to the next 5 years, the goal of this Strategic Framework is to leverage our collective expertise, experience, and creative problem solving to grow our impact through a proactive approach. We will achieve this goal through four interconnected strategic priorities.*

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

1



### *Innovatively tackle key socio-environmental challenges*

We will identify and get ahead of important issues facing communities and ecosystems by fostering creative and forward-looking approaches, advancing novel methods and best practices, and developing scalable resources for decisionmakers.

2



### *Deepen The Water Institute's role as a hub for collaboration*

We don't do this work alone; our impact is only possible with meaningful and trusted partnerships across sectors, disciplines, and with communities. We will continue to foster collaborative relationships in Louisiana, the Gulf Coast, and beyond; bridge across academia, government, industry, non-profit organizations, and communities; and work alongside our partners to tackle key challenges.



The following section outlines each of the strategic priorities in more detail, including featured initiatives that will achieve them. This framework provides a clear direction and set of milestones for advancing our priorities and expanding our impact, while also offering flexibility for additional relevant initiatives to be identified and implemented over the next 5 years.

3



### *Strengthen organizational excellence*

Foundational to our outward impact is a strong internal organizational framework and culture that adapts to evolving needs. We will continue to uphold our **Core Values** in practice, maintain standards of excellence and integrity, and strengthen staff cohesion as the organization grows and evolves.

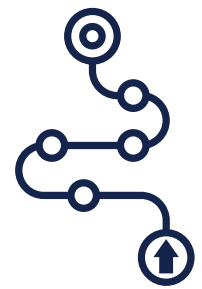
4



### *Increase financial resilience*

Securing the resources necessary to facilitate our organizational evolution towards proactive leadership is critical to the success of the other three strategic priorities. We will leverage diverse sources and types of revenue to maximize the impact of our efforts.

# 1 | *Innovatively tackle key socio-environmental challenges*



The socio-environmental challenges communities face today and will face in the future are increasing in complexity as a result of climate change, an evolving built and natural environment, technological advancements, economic uncertainties, and shifting sociopolitical contexts. Now more than ever, these crosscutting challenges require creative approaches. Through the collective expertise of The Water Institute team and our ability to leverage additional expertise through trusted partnerships, we are well positioned to get out in front of key challenges with innovative approaches that go beyond specific sponsor and partner engagements. Through Strategic Priority 1 and the following initiatives, we will take a forward-looking approach to carrying out our **Vision** and **Mission**.

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## FEATURED INITIATIVES

### 1.1 Cultivate a shared culture of creativity.

While our staff are inherently creative and innovative, an organizational culture requires intention, consistent support, and commitment to tracking progress towards measurable outcomes. To enhance that culture, we will create organizational processes and secure financial support to encourage and enable Institute teams and partners to explore new ideas inside and outside of specific project work, experiment with new methods and new applications of existing methods, reflect on past efforts to advance best practices, take strategic risks, and learn from failures. Further, we will explore additional opportunities to incentivize and reward innovation and expand ways to share our novel science, technology, and practices with wider audiences—whether it is through publications, conferences, new partnerships, or applications. Building and fostering a strong shared culture of creativity is a prerequisite for the two initiatives that follow, which rely on new and transformative ideas coming from our staff.

### 1.2 Identify and address *Institute Target Challenges*.

To ensure that our work over the next 5 years is in alignment with our **Vision** and **Mission**, we will identify and organize an explicit and concerted focus on those pressing socio-environmental challenges we are uniquely positioned to tackle. In addition to continuing to conduct sponsor-driven work across our **Areas of Impact**, we will proactively identify and tackle a small set of pressing socio-environmental challenges—ones that go beyond any single project, partner, discipline, or geography—where we and our partners see the potential for broad and transformative impact. We will select and review these challenges through an annual process that balances aspiration with feasibility and the potential for achieving results. For each *Target Challenge*, we will designate an internal lead, identify specific short- and longer-term objectives and outcomes, develop a timeline and workflow for action, target fundraising, coordinate sponsor and partner support, and identify and track success metrics. In addition, the *Target Challenges* will be communicated in marketing campaigns to both raise awareness of our



## IN ACTION

### Chandeleur Islands Restoration

Sand is a scarce yet vital resource, and there is increasing demand for sand to protect coastal ecosystems and communities as readily accessible sources of sand are depleted. We address sand and sediment management challenges by bringing together teams of scientists, engineers, and planners to work with stakeholders on science-based approaches to sustainable sand stewardship and restoration. The Chandeleur Islands Restoration Project is a collaborative, multi-year effort that reflects our commitment to innovatively tackling key socio-environmental challenges, including sustainable sand stewardship, through shared creativity and the deployment of novel methods. These methods include hydrologic modeling, geologic technical analyses, as well as seagrass and avian monitoring and management. Taking this interdisciplinary, whole ecosystem restoration approach provides science-based guidance for barrier island restoration design and implementation, and supports the advancement of best practices and transdisciplinary approaches within our project-based work.

work and inspire others to take action. Through these focused bold swings designed to address real-world issues, we will work in close coordination with partners and like-minded organizations to help catalyze novel approaches to addressing some of the world's most complex socio-environmental challenges.

### 1.3 Establish an Innovation Studio to scale impact through digital solutions.

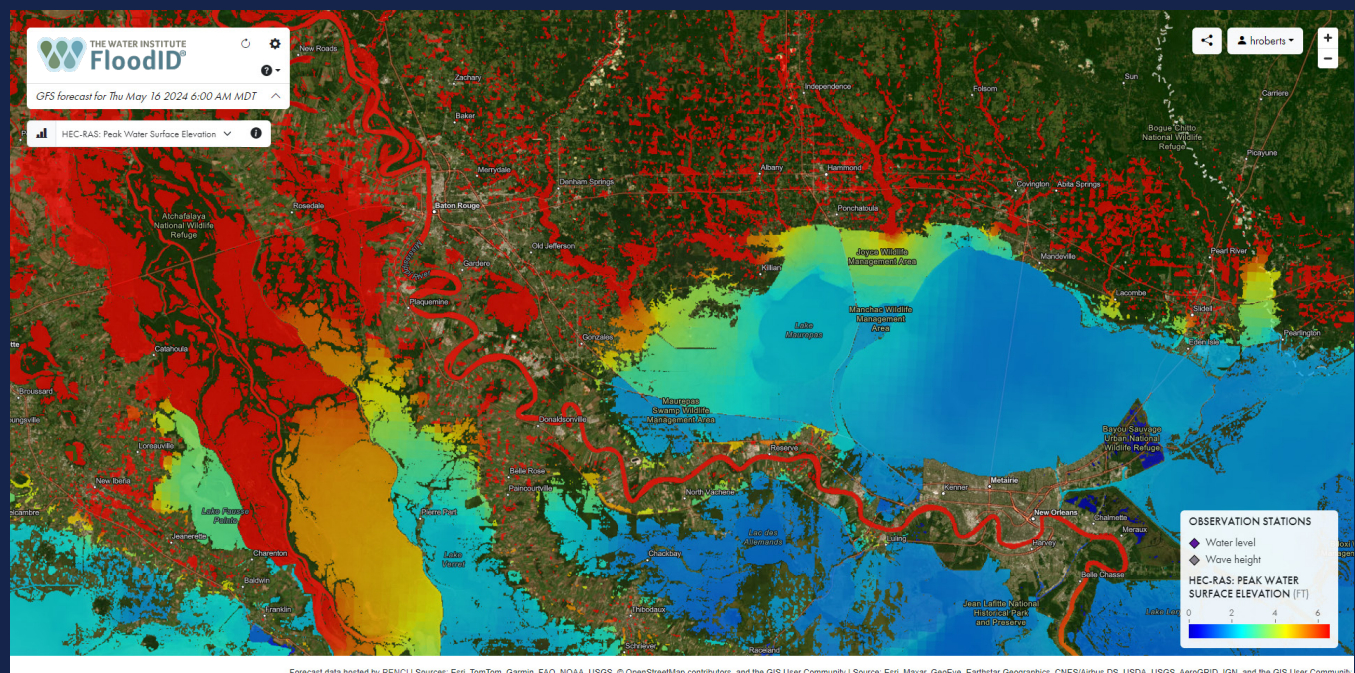
The Institute has a proven track record of developing novel approaches to help communities and decisionmakers tackle complex challenges. Currently, we are operating several web applications funded by a small group of sponsor projects, ranging from applications that illustrate the re-establishment of seabird populations in once endangered ecosystems, to those that create a digital twin of the Mississippi riverbed in near real-time using crowd-sourced depth soundings. Experiences with these applications have made it clear that, in some cases, the approaches and resources we develop for one application can be packaged as a digital solution (dataset, tool,

or product) that can be shared more widely and magnify our impact. To encourage and cultivate the development of these kinds of scalable solutions, the Institute will launch an Innovation Studio that provides a conduit for staff to identify and develop creative ideas and products. At the heart of the Innovation Studio will be an acceleration process that advances the most promising concepts that warrant incremental investment through clear stages of evaluation by an expert panel. Staff teams across disciplines will be able to submit concepts, and in the first stage selected concepts and teams will be given time, resources, and support to focus on market and technical validation. Concepts that advance to the second stage will see a focused push to launch a digital solution widely, pursue additional funding to launch something bigger, or embark on any number of other pathways that account for the long-term lifecycle of providing useful and sustainable digital solutions to users. As a key part of its development, the Innovation Studio will build a collaborative ecosystem of partners, funders, and advisors to ensure it is successfully achieving the Institute's goal of expanding our impact.

## 1.4 Build capacity to support digital solutions internally.

While we have seen initial success and are committed to developing additional digital solutions, sustaining them requires the internal capacity to operate, maintain, and continually improve applications. For existing digital solutions and those that evolve from the Innovation Studio and remain under the Institute's management, we will develop thoughtful and tailored

strategies, including identification of capacity needs, appropriate pathways for long-term operation, and continued research and development to ensure their continued availability and expand their potential reach and utility. To support those that will be managed in-house, we will establish the appropriate operational framework, continuous improvement processes, and ongoing investment strategies necessary to maintain a product.



FloodID® in use during Hurricane Francine

### IN ACTION

## Advancing Real-Time Forecasting through FloodID®

In response to critical needs identified by emergency managers, we developed FloodID®, a comprehensive, web-based flood forecasting and decision support system. FloodID® enables proactive decision making before, during, and after flood events by delivering localized impact forecasts, real-time nowcasts, and post-event assessments, each designed with direct input from users. It streamlines access to high-resolution data and intuitive dashboards to support

critical actions such as evacuations, rescue operations, and infrastructure protection. FloodID® is scalable across a wide range of geographies and types of flood risk ranging from hurricane storm surge to rainfall induced flash flooding—highlighting our commitment to expanding the reach and effectiveness of our digital solutions and novel products in order to reduce the vulnerability of people, communities, ecosystems, and economies.



## 2 | *Deepen The Water Institute's role as a hub for collaboration*



Since The Water Institute's founding, our team has established valuable and trusting relationships with academic, government, industry, non-profit, and community partners, and we have developed strong collaborative networks in Louisiana, the Gulf Coast, and beyond. Moving forward, we aim to strengthen our role as a hub for collaboration across sectors, disciplines, and communities at multiple geographical scales to ensure the work of the Institute and its partners is transformative, actionable, and broadly accessible. Through this Strategic Priority and the following initiatives, we will create an intentional structure and focus around fostering collaborative networks of research and practice, deepen relationships with state agencies, work alongside communities, and strategically target federal partnerships.

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### FEATURED INITIATIVES

#### **2.1 Build and nurture collaboration networks.**

Partnerships and collaborations are critical to helping us reach our most ambitious goals. To sustainably further our impact, we must be deliberate in how we foster and grow our partnerships and sponsor base. We will use our **Areas of Impact** to guide collaborative work and inform our strategic approach to building partnerships in new geographies. Establishing and growing effective, collaborative partnerships grounded in diverse expertise, complementary skillsets, an openness to new ideas, and a strong foundation of trust will require increased coordination, internally and externally. We plan to holistically evaluate the networks our staff has already built, identify gaps where partnerships could enhance impact, and design new approaches to building new relationships and deepening existing ones.

#### **2.2 Continue commitment to Louisiana and the Gulf Coast.**

We have supported planning efforts along Louisiana's coast in partnership with the Louisiana Coastal

Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) for almost 15 years. We also proudly serve as the RESTORE Act Center of Excellence for Louisiana—administering a competitive grants program for research institutions in the state and providing coordination and oversight support to fund research and ensure the success of the state's Coastal Master Plan. As Louisiana state agencies reorganize and consolidate statewide flood management planning and natural resource management efforts, we will be their steadfast partner and support them however we can, both along Louisiana's Coastal Zone and further inland. Our headquarters is now and will continue to be in Louisiana, and through increased outreach and engagement we will foster even more active working relationships with key universities, commercial architectural and engineering firms, and communities in the region. We will also build on our existing work in communities and habitats within the Mississippi River Delta and across the Gulf Coast and leverage our lessons learned in Louisiana to strengthen our partnerships with state, regional, and local agencies in Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida.

## 2.3 Focus on community-led resilience.

We are committed to addressing systemic barriers to climate resilience by supporting capacity building and providing expertise to a wider array of communities. To accomplish this, we established the Community Resilience Center (CRC) in 2023. Through collaborative research and engagement, we outlined the following community-centric focus areas for the CRC that we will continue to implement through 2027 and revisit thereafter: 1) foster effective community-led resilience planning and action by addressing gaps in necessary capacity and knowledge; 2) address decreasing insurance affordability and availability by enhancing the current system while bridging to more flexible and responsive insurance products; 3) identify and address gaps in inclusive decision-making processes that guide climate migration coordination, planning, and implementation; and 4) develop and implement flood risk management practices that leverage best available science and include policy processes that consider potential negative impacts. Beyond the ongoing efforts of the CRC, we will

continue to advance resilience at the community level and effectively connect communities to critical state, federal, university, and other partners and activities.


## 2.4 Cultivate strategic federal agency partnerships.

Effective support of federal agencies through partnership, research, outreach, engagement, and scientific communication can result in greater public trust and fill an identified gap for agencies that may lack specialized expertise and/or resources. These types of partnerships can also enable us to scale our work beyond Louisiana and the Gulf Coast. To engage more strategically with federal partners, we will: define the desired capabilities and/or focus areas for strategic federal partnerships; monitor the rapidly evolving and uncertain federal agency landscape; assess existing strategic partnerships; identify gaps to inform where to focus future engagement and partnership development; and build out an internal strategic partnership framework to foster more intentional and impactful collaboration with select federal agencies.

### IN ACTION

## Supporting the United Houma Nation's plans for strengthening resilience

Through our Community Resilience Center, we have been working alongside the United Houma Nation—Louisiana's largest Indigenous Tribe—to provide expertise in grant strategy, proposal development, and project implementation through technical assistance, capacity-building, and strategic guidance. This work supports the Tribe in addressing environmental threats by enhancing resilience hubs, expanding networks, and exploring strategies for community-led migration. This partnership between the Institute and the United Houma Nation illustrates our focus on fostering trusted relationships and working alongside partners to support community-led resilience.

 Lora Ann Chaisson, Chief of the United Houma Nation, speaking at a press conference announcing a \$56.6 million grant award from NOAA's Climate Resilience Regional Challenge.





## IN ACTION

### Developing guidance for coastal bird-nesting habitat restoration

Partnerships with federal agencies have allowed us to scale our work and expand our impact and will continue to be a critical part of deepening our role as a hub for collaboration. In 2020, we began working with state and federal partners to collaboratively develop the ***Guidance for Coastal Ecosystem Restoration and Monitoring to Create or Improve Bird-Nesting Habitat***. This guidance, which draws upon the expertise of bird experts, wetland scientists, ecologists, wildlife and land managers, and engineers, provides specific and detailed information on designing ecosystem restoration projects that support nesting birds within coastal marsh, barrier island, and ridge habitats. The guidance is already being used to inform restoration planning in Louisiana and is inspiring similar efforts in neighboring Gulf states, including Alabama and Mississippi. The restoration guidance also provides an avenue for current and future research to be shared and implemented in restoration project design decisions. The process of developing the restoration guidance serves as an example of how the co-production and synthesis of restoration science across interdisciplinary teams of experts can result in enhanced restoration outcomes.



### 2.5 Amplify awareness of our priorities and capabilities through improved communication and outreach.

Expanding the awareness and impact of our work with our partners and collaborators requires widespread recognition of challenges, opportunities, and advancements among all of our stakeholders and audiences—both internal and external. We will invest in a coordinated effort to increase awareness and elevate the visibility of our work and how it supports science-informed decision making by building

robust and targeted marketing and communications programs. These campaigns will help build a network of aligned collaborators, support individuals in addressing socio-environmental challenges, and enable more communities, natural resource managers, and decisionmakers from around the nation and the world to connect with us. These campaigns will also serve to provide our staff with the best communications tools and assistance to develop the kind of strategic messaging, collateral, and channels necessary to effectively and collaboratively engage with external partners.

## 3 | *Strengthen organizational excellence*



Expanding The Water Institute's outward impact requires a strong and adaptive organizational culture, structures, and processes that can evolve as our work grows. Since 2020, our staff has grown by over 80%, driven by expansion into new and emerging areas of research as well as overall revenue increases. This growth has come amidst difficult challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of a beloved leader. Today, we are an organization of over 80 staff across multiple states. It is clear that in order to focus and maximize our impact over the Institute's next phase of growth, we must clearly define and communicate the organizational culture we seek to embody and take deliberate steps to carry out and nurture those ideals.

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### FEATURED INITIATIVES

#### **3.1 Strengthen staff cohesion, grounded in shared core values.**

Our team's diverse skillsets and increased geographic reach are assets to the organization but also require a more strategic approach to building and maintaining staff unity around shared values, goals, and culture. To ensure that every individual, regardless of role or division, feels connected to the Institute's **Vision** and **Mission**, our team will clearly define what our **Core Values** mean in practice and adjust operational procedures that are not aligned with these values.

#### **3.2 Uphold scientific rigor and integrity.**

As an independent applied research organization, our credibility depends on public confidence in our research. Scientific integrity, with open science and open data, is the foundation of trust between the Institute and our partners, sponsors, and stakeholders. To uphold our organizational standards for scientific

integrity, our team will take actions that: 1) facilitate connecting internal and external expertise; 2) create cross-functional teams; 3) encourage and support publications, interactive tools and other accessible summaries of our work; and 4) define stronger standards for internal and external review. We will also maintain and strengthen data management processes that enable access and discoverability—investing in improved data storage infrastructure, cloud-computing workflows, code management practices, and dissemination platforms that sustain our high standards, foster cross-disciplinary coordination within and beyond the Institute, and promote a more agile and collaborative research environment.

#### **3.3 Adapt the organization to support the implementation of our strategic priorities.**

As we continue to evolve as an organization, there will be a consistent need to evaluate organizational structures and processes to ensure they are



supporting and not inhibiting our progress. One example might be changes necessary to operate and maintain digital solutions within the Institute, which require different ways of working, approaches to financial management, contracting, and so on. To support implementation of this Strategic Framework

over the next 5 years, Institute leadership will continuously evaluate and adapt the organization when needed—whether that means creating new roles, adjusting hierarchical processes, or otherwise—while remaining clear and transparent as change occurs.



 The Water Institute team gathered for an all-staff retreat in April 2025.

## IN ACTION

### Increasing staff cohesion by supporting in-person opportunities for collaboration

Our growth over the past 5 years has resulted in a significant increase in our staff—from Louisiana-based team members in Baton Rouge and New Orleans to other places across the Gulf Coast and beyond. Recognizing the multiple benefits of increased in-person collaboration across departments and project teams, we have created additional opportunities for these types of internal engagements for staff. In 2024, we dedicated time and resources to making these opportunities a reality—from establishing a satellite office in Pittsburgh to facilitate increased

cohesion among staff located in the Northeast and Midwest, to planning and hosting a 2-day staff retreat in Baton Rouge for all Institute team members to come together and co-identify implementation pathways for our strategic priorities over the next 5 years. These efforts demonstrate our commitment to adapting organizational processes to meet the needs of Institute staff and creating opportunities to strengthen relationships among team members in alignment with our core values.

# WATER INSTITUTE CORE VALUES



## IMPACT

We seek to create meaningful outcomes through our work by advancing knowledge and contributing to the wellbeing of communities and the environment, resulting in positive and sustainable change.



## SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY

We uphold the highest standards of honesty, transparency, and objectivity by utilizing verifiable methods in proposing, performing, evaluating, and reporting research activities to ensure our science remains rigorous, trusted, and free from external bias.



## EXCELLENCE

We strive for the highest quality in all our endeavors by committing to continuous improvement and a culture of outstanding performance.



## ACCOUNTABILITY

We take individual and collective responsibility for owning our actions, being transparent, and upholding the highest standards of integrity and excellence, including in the conduct of research and dissemination of results.



## DIVERSITY

We foster an environment where people from all backgrounds, identities, and experiences are valued and all individuals are supported in contributing to their fullest potential.



## RESPECT

We value each individual's contributions, acknowledge differences, and foster an inclusive and supportive environment where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.



## WORK/LIFE BALANCE

We promote a culture where all employees can thrive both personally and professionally.



## TRANSDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

We build bridges between disciplines to tackle big and complex challenges, bringing people together to develop new knowledge or approaches and integrating different types of expertise and perspectives to foster innovative approaches.

## 4 | *Increase financial resilience*



To successfully scale impact, sustain our mission, and support long-term stability, The Water Institute must enter the next phase of our organization’s lifecycle by increasing our financial resilience. This will require leveraging diverse sources and types of revenue and strengthening and streamlining core practices like effective financial planning and forecasting to support strategic decision making. Prioritizing the organization’s newly created Mission Advancement efforts, we will work to cultivate strategic relationships and funding opportunities that support the pursuit of our ***Vision*** and ***Mission***.

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### FEATURED INITIATIVES

#### **4.1 Bolster strong financial management strategies.**

To support the growth of diverse revenue streams, it is critical that our team establishes an implementable set of strategies that contain clear, mission-aligned financial objectives and explicitly support our strategic priorities. We will develop a comprehensive financial strategy with the goal of optimizing resources, generating cost savings, maximizing investment returns, and sustaining the organization’s ongoing operations. This strategy will guide operational accounting, financial governance, analysis and planning, and cash management. We will also uphold and strengthen policies and procedures to uphold our fiduciary duty to stakeholders.

#### **4.2 Foster and expand philanthropic contributions to facilitate proactive innovation and impact.**

Our organization’s unique structure as an independent, applied research nonprofit that values partnerships has allowed our team to address some of the most pressing socio-environmental challenges that we face today. For our team to achieve the ambitious goals outlined in this framework, we must expand awareness of our organization and our various efforts among individuals, corporations, and foundations with the capacity and interest to support and advance this vital work. The Mission Advancement Team at the Institute will develop and implement a robust and targeted strategic communications program to increase outreach to potential donors. At the same time, the Mission Advancement team will build its internal capacity for fundraising, working hand-in-hand with staff to create cogent and well-articulated appeals to potential philanthropic partners, creating a set of standard operating procedures and adopting best practices that build trust and confidence of our donors and funders.



Researcher Martijn Bregman meets with Jerry and Donna Jolly at the Water Campus in Baton Rouge. Through their philanthropy, the Jollys are investing in the Institute's ability to innovate and broaden our impact.

## IN ACTION

### The role of philanthropy in advancing our Mission

Addressing the vulnerabilities of people, communities, ecosystems, and economies is at the core of our mission, and the issues we tackle are often urgent and require more nimble and diverse funding sources. The Institute was founded with seed funding from the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, one of the largest community foundations in the United States, and other critical philanthropic partnerships have allowed donors to directly support efforts that are vital to coastal resilience. Philanthropic support provides us with the ability to quickly seize opportunities for impact when they arise and can help bridge gaps in funding that are needed to pursue novel approaches that lead to larger-scale, impactful outcomes. Through strategic Mission Advancement efforts, we will work to expand existing relationships, build new ones, and pursue diverse funding opportunities that support work that brings us closer to achieving our **Vision** and **Mission**.

### 4.3 Secure funding and resources necessary to successfully implement the Institute's strategic priorities and partnerships.

The strategic priorities and initiatives in this framework are synergistic and interconnected, but will require different sources of funding and unique pathways for implementation. For example, funding and resources for each of the Target Challenges will be largely dependent on the types of funds available through

aligned sponsored work, grants and programmatic research funding, and/or support from individuals and organizations. Though the development of our existing digital solutions has historically been supported by sponsor engagements, it will be critical for our team to develop and execute a strategy that includes go-to-market methods and plans for attracting and securing capital investment. For the Innovation Studio specifically, we will seek out an upfront investment to support the organization in scaling the kind of work that moves us closer to achieving our Mission.



# IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

*As The Water Institute continues to evolve over the next 5 years, the strategic priorities and associated initiatives laid out in this framework will inform ongoing decisions about work we pursue, partnerships we build and strengthen, the way we communicate our strengths and capabilities, and how we strategically co-create and support plans, projects, programs, and events alongside collaborators and stakeholders. The contents of this framework will guide decisions around staff training and needs—providing the direction needed to support existing staff and effectively recruit and retain talent.*

## STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing the strategic priorities and featured initiatives in a structured way is critical to ensuring the framework's utility and facilitating our ability to expand our impact through proactive leadership. New structures and processes to support implementation include creating a new role dedicated to coordinating and tracking strategic framework implementation; assigning a lead accountable for each initiative; identifying resources and timelines for each initiative; and coordinating with leadership and the Board to incorporate progress towards initiatives into the annual planning process. In order to implement the featured initiatives detailed in this framework as well as others identified over the next 5 years, departments and teams at the Institute will also be charged with articulating and implementing their own contributions to the initiatives and the furtherance of the strategic priorities.

## TRACKING IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS

Proactively furthering our impact is the Institute's "north star." In order to implement each of the initiatives, we will develop and operationalize a shared tracking system that establishes key performance indicators (KPIs) and measures progress towards achieving these KPIs on a quarterly basis. These indicators will vary among initiatives and will provide the structure necessary to review successes, challenges, and alternatives regularly (e.g., establishing and adhering to clear quit criteria for *Target Challenges*, evaluating the feasibility of novel research or tools being conceptualized and explored through the Innovation Studio, or setting and tracking targets for increased collaborative partnerships). This tracking system will also support the organization's annual impact reports over the next 5 years—providing updates to our partners, stakeholders, and supporters on our progress based on clear and measurable outcomes.



## MOVING WITH PURPOSE INTO THE FUTURE

Our team at The Water Institute brings vision, discipline, and deep curiosity to some of the most pressing challenges facing people, communities, ecosystems, and economies. That collective strength is the foundation of our work and the reason we're ready for what's next.

This strategic framework sets the stage for us to become more proactive in identifying the challenges we're best positioned to solve, expanding our thinking, and building the kinds of partnerships that make big things possible.

As we move forward over the next 5 years, we are committed to focusing our efforts on fostering innovation, deepening our role as a hub for collaboration, strengthening our organization from within, and building financial resilience. These priorities will guide us and amplify our collective impact.

The partnerships we've built—and those we'll continue to grow—are the foundation of our impact. Together, let's connect knowledge to action and build the partnerships that support a resilient future.

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@THEH2OINSTITUTE

THE WATER INSTITUTE  
1110 RIVER ROAD S, SUITE 200  
BATON ROUGE, LA 70802





