

May 2023

# Reframing the Conversation Around Emerging Contaminants



Rachel Garrett

206.604.2995

[RGarrett@BrwnCald.com](mailto:RGarrett@BrwnCald.com)



American Water Works Association  
**Pacific Northwest** Section

# Presentation Overview

1. Framing: Where are we now?
2. Reframing: How can we shift?
3. Finding Center: A Proactive Path Forward
4. Keeping It Real
5. Questions





Framing The Issue

**Where Are We Now?**

# Challenges We Face Together

- Emerging Contaminants
- Changing Regulations
- Rising Costs
- And more



# Why Adopt Proactive Communications?

- Science evolving quickly
- Ubiquitous issue
- Low thresholds for new MCLs
- High costs to treat



# Utilities on the Front Lines



- High profile issue
- Utilities connect directly with the public
- Public trust impacts:
  - Consumer confidence
  - Support for rate increases and capital projects



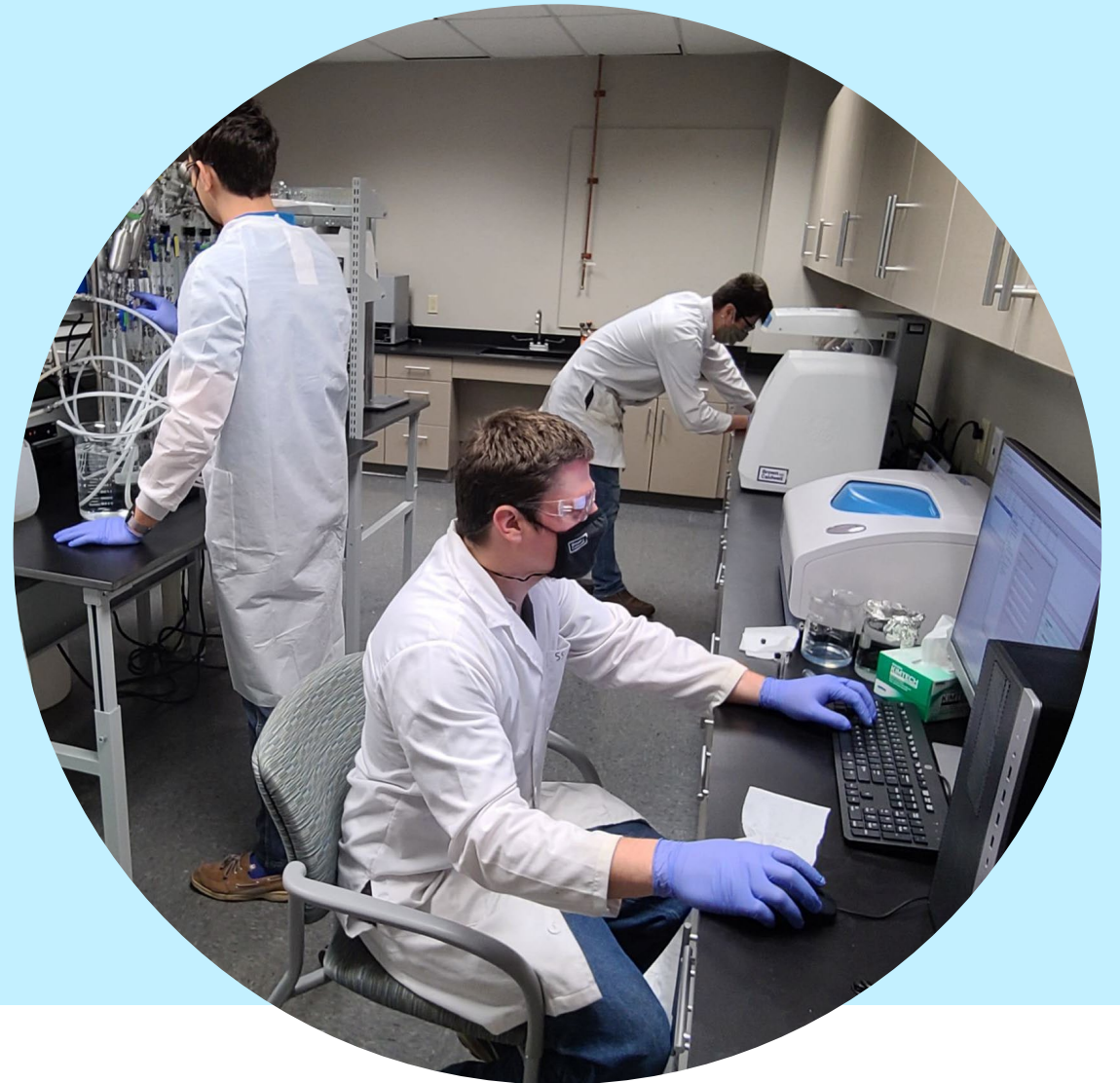
Reframing the Issue

**How Can We Shift?**

# Telling the Story:

Utilities are  
Working Proactively

To Address PFAS and  
Emerging Challenges



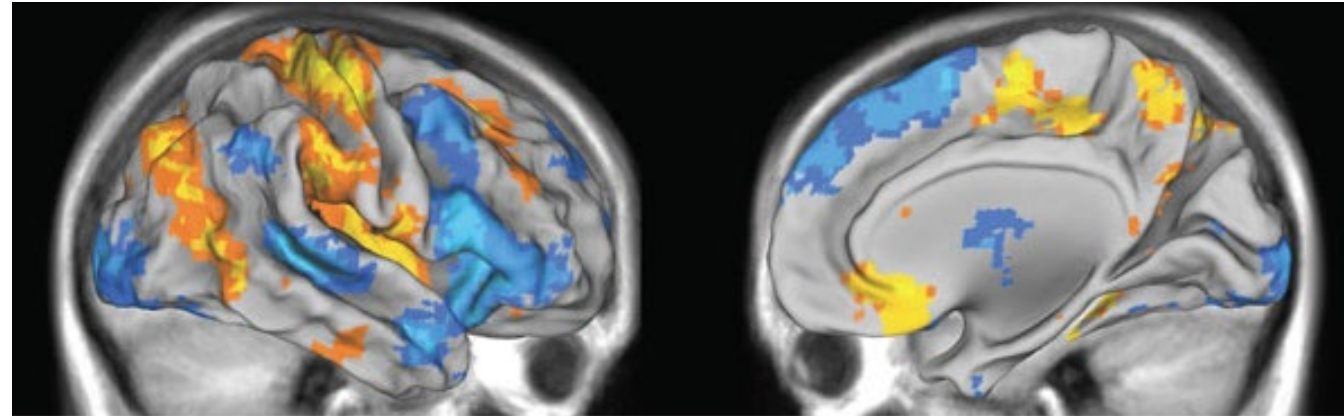


# Creative Water Solutions Require Fluid Thought



# Cultivating Creative Thinking

- **Blue areas**
  - Focused attention
  - Stress response
- **Orange and yellow areas**
  - Creative problem solving
  - Broader perspective
  - Visioning
  - Empathy
  - Sense of purpose
  - Stress reduction





We are still learning



Data is incomplete



Risk is hard to define



Yet, utilities must respond to customer concerns



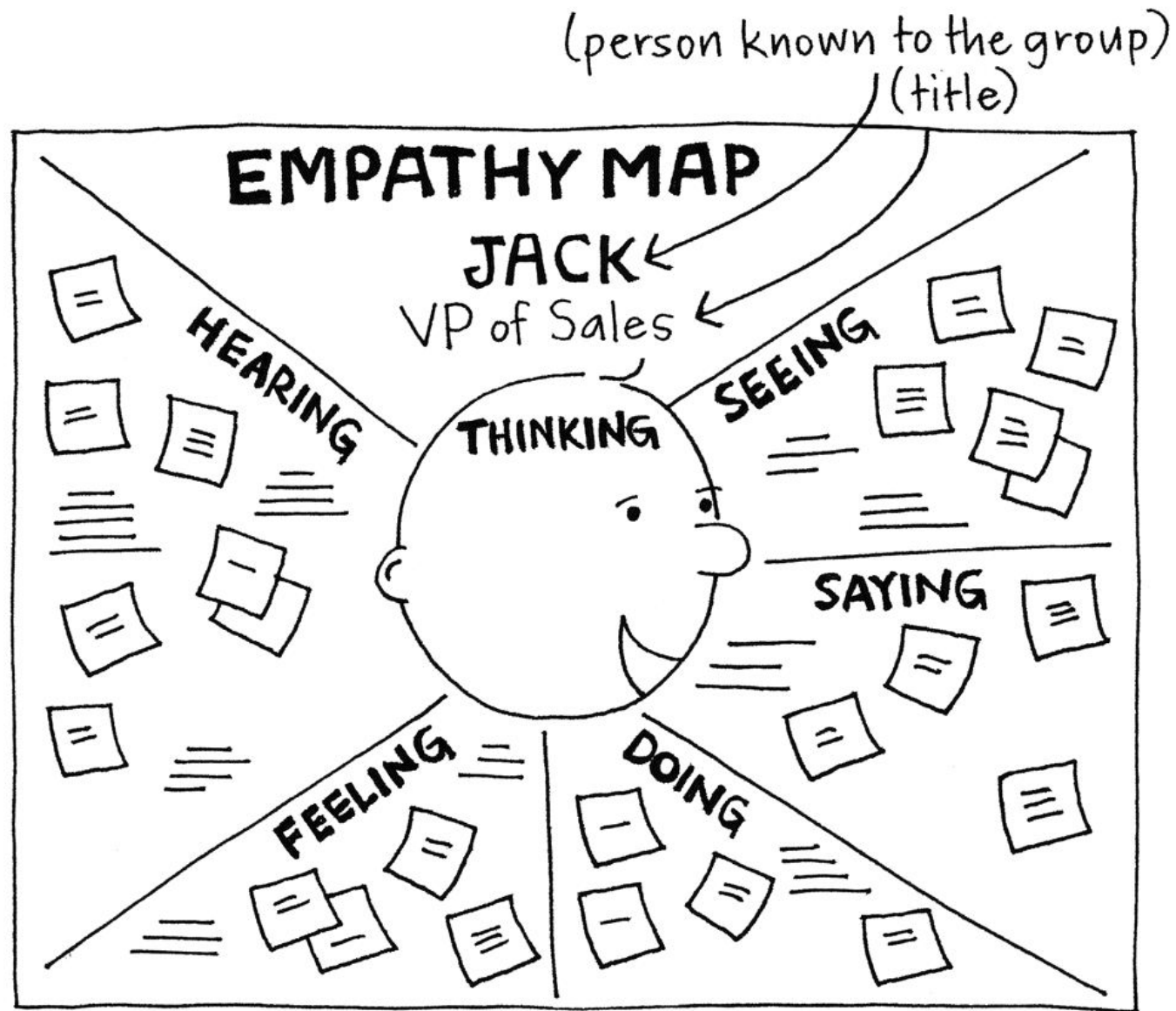


Finding Center  
**A Proactive Path  
Forward**



# Ground, Assess, and Understand

- Come from a centered place
- Frame the issue/problem
- Assess audience groups
- Listen to understand





# Example: PFAS Communications Best Practices Guide

DO 	DON'T 
<p><b>Show your commitment.</b> Take this opportunity to connect and build positive relationships. Show up and listen. Utilities can play a key role in increasing public confidence through their direct connection with customers.</p>	<p><b>Be defensive.</b> While reactivity on the topic of PFAS is understandable, given changing regulatory guidelines and common public misperceptions, it does not build trust.</p>
<p><b>Acknowledge concerns.</b> Hear customers' fears about potential exposure and health impacts.</p>	<p><b>Minimize concerns.</b> People are legitimately worried about their health and the health of their families and loved ones.</p>
<p><b>Address the issue.</b> Share commonly accepted information about PFAS sources, potential health risks, ways to minimize exposure, and how to learn more.</p>	<p><b>Ignore the issue.</b> PFAS have reached a level of heightened concern, given their presence throughout the environment and inability to break down easily.</p>

DO	DON'T
<p><b>Share information that's understandable.</b> Use clear visuals and simple figures. Minimize text.</p>	<p><b>Get too technical.</b> Avoid industry jargon and acronyms. Provide definitions for technical or complex terms.</p>
<p><b>Share relevant information.</b> Connect directly to interests, common concerns, and most likely exposure channels.</p>	<p><b>Forget the context.</b> Provide information that connects directly with your audience's experience.</p>
<p><b>Show your work.</b> Explain concrete actions that your utility or organization is taking to proactively meet regulations and address PFAS.</p>	<p><b>Over-promise.</b> Clarify the time and resources needed to effectively address PFAS.</p>
<p><b>Use available resources.</b> Consult reputable organizations for help in developing a communications approach and effective tools.</p>	<p><b>Go it alone.</b> Connect with other utility leaders facing similar challenges. Consult materials and toolkits developed by organizations such as AWWA.</p>

# Tell a Compelling Story

- Connect with your audience
- Share your purpose
- Highlight benefits
- More data isn't always better





# Message Framework Example



# Project Example: South Adams County, CO Highlighting Project Purpose and Benefits



**A Facility That Benefits the Community**

The new facility will allow us to continue providing high-quality, reliable drinking water to South Adams County into the future.

**We value our community's health and wellbeing. We will be one of the first Colorado water utilities to comply with anticipated federal PFAS regulations.**

**We protect future ratepayers by maintaining our own sustainable water supply rather than purchasing from other suppliers.**

**This project is phased to minimize financial burden to customers while maintaining high quality drinking water.**

**Building a new treatment facility allows us to fully use our existing water supply.**

**Project Purpose**

- Continue to supply high-quality, reliable, sustainable drinking water.
- Comply with current and future regulations.

# Telling a Project Planning Story in Simple Terms



The infographic is set against a teal background. On the left, there is a stylized blue icon of a water tap with three water droplets falling from it. Below the icon is the logo for South Adams County Water & Sanitation District, which consists of a white wave-like shape above the text 'SOUTH ADAMS COUNTY WATER & SANITATION DISTRICT'. The main title 'Project Planning: Choosing the Best Technology' is written in large white font. Below the title is a paragraph of white text. To the right of the title and paragraph are three blue boxes containing text. Below these boxes is a section titled 'ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED' with a wavy line separator. This section contains two columns: 'Activated Carbon' and 'Ion Exchange'. The 'Activated Carbon' column has a circular image of a water treatment tank and a list of three bullet points. The 'Ion Exchange' column has a circular image of two large blue water tanks and a list of two bullet points. Below the wavy line is a circular image of a landscape with water and trees, followed by a paragraph of text. To the right of the 'ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED' section is a photograph of a young child in an orange shirt holding a glass of water. Below the photo is a blue box with the title 'Project Purpose' and a list of two bullet points.

**SOUTH ADAMS COUNTY**  
WATER & SANITATION DISTRICT

## Project Planning: Choosing the Best Technology

We are working proactively to ensure reliable access to high quality drinking water by planning for enhancements to our water treatment facility.

We evaluated the best ways to remove contaminants, such as PFAS and 1-4 dioxane.

Over the past 8 years, we evaluated potential options and made decisions based on sound data.

We chose a solution that is reliable and proven to be the best available technology in the field.

### ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

#### Activated Carbon

- Builds on existing technology
- Less expensive to install
- Limited effectiveness for treating PFAS to low levels
- More time-and cost-intensive to maintain

#### BEST LONG-TERM SOLUTION Ion Exchange

- ✓ Efficient PFAS removal
- ✓ Low cost to maintain

#### Project Purpose

- Continue to supply high-quality, reliable, sustainable drinking water.
- Comply with current and future regulations.

Different water sources, such as purchasing from Denver Water, were explored. However, this was not found to be an affordable or sustainable alternative.

# Connect and Reflect

- Build relationships
- Adopt a reflective practice
- Collaborate with partners





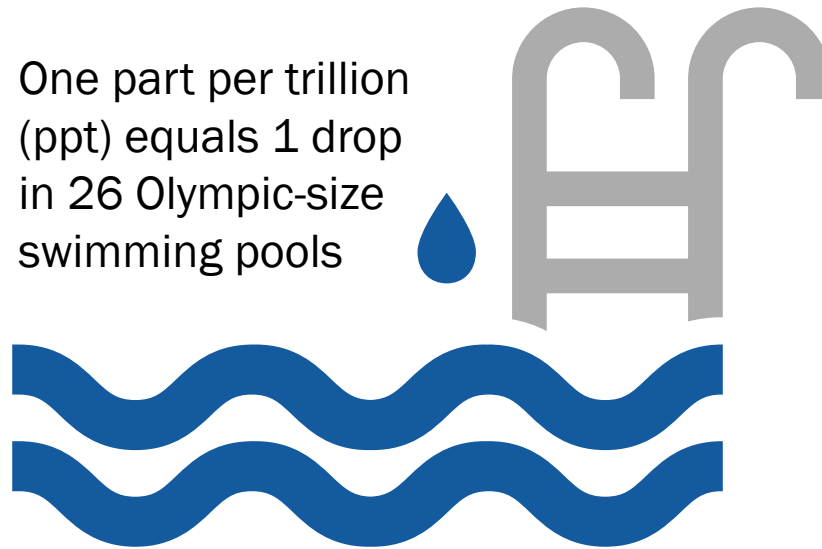
Keeping It Real

# Demystifying Technical Details

# Visualizing Risk

## How Much is One Part Per Trillion?

One part per trillion (ppt) equals 1 drop in 26 Olympic-size swimming pools



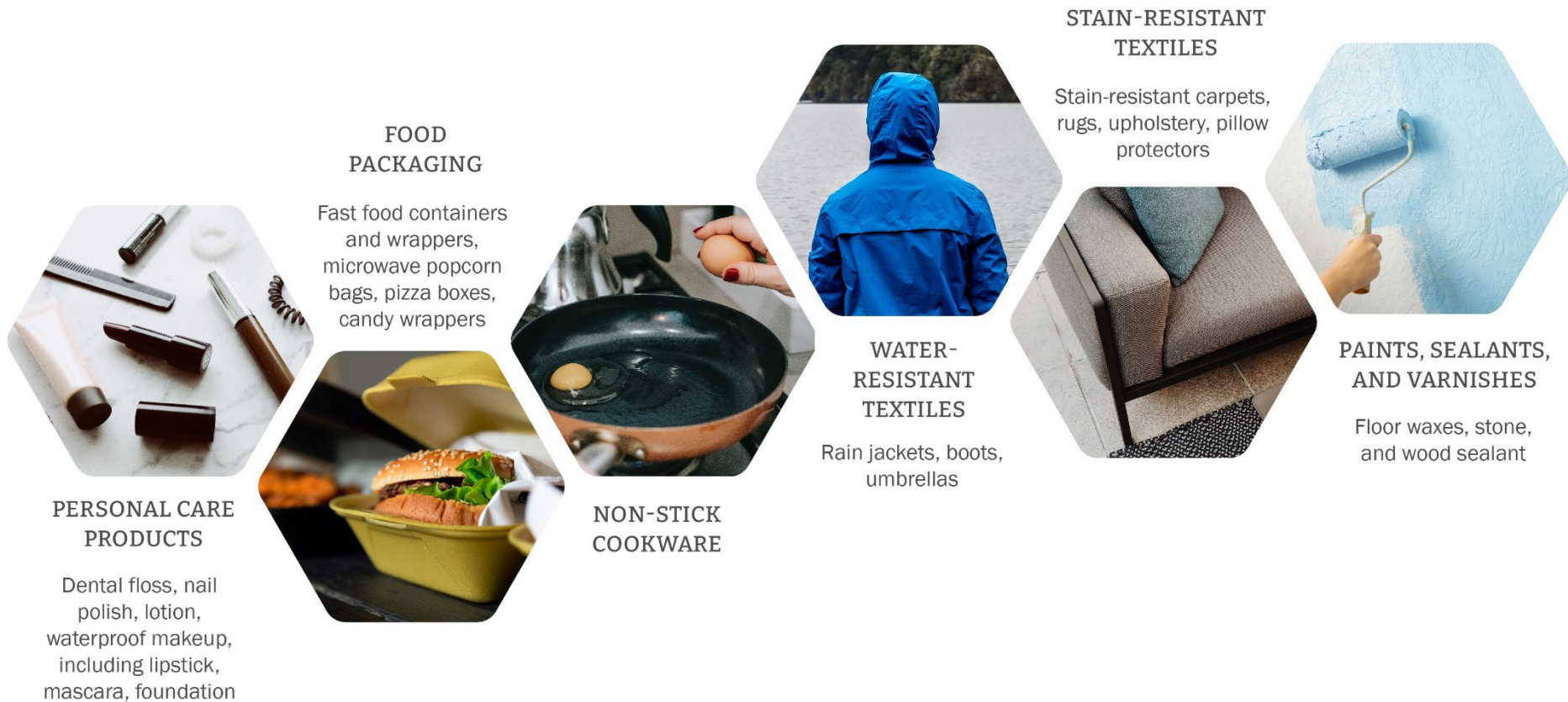
**OR**

It is 1 second in 31,710 years



# Visualizing the Issue

## COMMON PFAS SOURCES



A person is shown from the chest up, wearing a striped long-sleeved shirt, washing their hands in a sink. The faucet is on the left, and water is running. The person's hands are covered in soap suds. The background is slightly blurred, showing a kitchen or bathroom setting. The entire image has a blue tint.

# Engagement that Builds Trust

- Ground, Assess, and Understand
- Tell a compelling story
- Connect and reflect





Questions?

---

Thank you.

**Brown** AND **Caldwell** :



