# WEF/AWWA The Utility Management Conference 2026 CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT & CALL FOR CONTENT

**March 23-27, 2026**
**Charlotte, North Carolina**
**Charlotte Convention Center**

**SUBMITTAL DEADLINE: October 14, 2025**
**TO SUBMIT: www.wef.org/UtilityManagement**

*This conference is jointly sponsored by the Water Environment Federation (WEF) and the American Water Works Association (AWWA) and is held in cooperation with NC OneWater.*

The Conference Planning Committee is soliciting abstracts, pre-conference workshops, and session proposals for The Utility Management Conference™. Water and wastewater leaders, managers and professionals will gather to hear the latest approaches, practices, processes, techniques, case studies, and research in all aspects of utility management.

The Utility Management Conference leadership is excited to share the topics that will potentially be discussed at the 2026 conference. Please read your submission options carefully. The descriptions found on the following page will help you understand what aspects of these topics are ideal for a submission. We especially encourage submissions to cover failures and lessons learned- not only successes.

A. Financial Resilience
B. Communications, Public Outreach and Engagement
C. Board of Director Engagement and Management
D. Small Community Challenges and Success Stories
E. Data Center 101
F. Implementation of AI in Utilities
G. Collaborative Delivery and P3s
H. One Water with an Emphasis on Reuse and the Circular Water Economy
I. Healthy Leadership System Management
J. Strategic Planning
K. Leadership Stories
L. Emergency Planning and Response
M. Evolving Practices in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
N. Balancing Innovation and Risk from a Legal Perspective

**After Selection:** All submitters will be notified of their placement in the technical program in December 2025. Per WEF's policy, selected abstract authors are required to submit manuscripts prior to the deadline for inclusion in the conference proceedings. Session and workshop proposal submitters are not required to submit manuscripts.

Presenters are expected to register for the Conference and pay the appropriate registration fee. No travel or assistance funds are available for speakers.

**Session and Workshop Proposals:** The following pages go into detail on what is expected for a workshop or session proposal. For each, the description should be no longer than 9,000 characters (approx. 1000 words). Click here to navigate to the proposal requirements page.

# TOPIC DESCRIPTIONS

### A. Financial Resilience

To enhance financial resilience, water and wastewater utilities need to implement robust long-term financial planning, diversify revenue sources, and build healthy reserves to withstand economic shocks and unexpected capital needs. Balancing user rates requires utilities to meticulously assess full cost recovery for service delivery, while also considering customer affordability and potentially implementing assistance programs or tiered rate structures to ensure equitable access. Sustainable funding for daily operations heavily relies on consistent and adequate revenue generated through user rates, complemented by continuous efforts in operational efficiency and cost management. Finally, securing the substantial funding necessary for critical capital spending often involves a strategic blend of grants, low-interest loans, municipal bonds, and dedicated portions of user fee revenue. Submissions to this track should address one or more areas of the above to highlight how utilities are integrating financial resilience into their ongoing utility management.

### B. Communications, Public Outreach and Engagement

Public trust in US drinking water and treatment systems is at an all-time low.  Utilities must implement strategies to build and maintain public trust in water systems via effective communications, outreach, and engagement. The public needs to be informed about water quality alerts as well as day-to-day operations, including rate increases.  Submissions to this track should explore strategies and programs to engage the public and improve trust.

### C. Board of Director Engagement and Management

Engaging a Board of Directors is a key component of running a public utility successfully. The task involves navigating a complex landscape of personalities, competing objectives, education on key issues, and group dynamics.  Submissions to this track should address how to successfully manage and grow a Board of Directors. Submissions to this track can include regulatory compliance, infrastructure management, financial oversight, strategic planning, environmental stewardship, community issues, and crisis management.

### D. Small Community Challenges and Success Stories

Small communities face unique challenges in managing water and sewer services, but at the same time opportunities for innovative solutions and success stories abound. By leveraging community strengths, fostering innovation, and seeking collaborative solutions, small communities can achieve sustainable and effective service management. Submissions to this track could focus on subjects such as community collaboration, innovative funding, technology adaptation, and regional cooperation.

### E. Data Center 101

What happens when a hyper-scaler data center begins to scout and site facilities in and near your utility service area?  The opportunities, challenges, and areas for innovation are great. Submissions to this track could address collaboration, legal challenges and agreements needed, opportunities for innovation presented by data centers, and the pitfalls.

### F. Implementation of AI in Utilities

AI is rapidly advancing. It is critical for utility managers and leaders to understand a wide range of AI topics from leveraging how to use AI, to implementation and beyond.  Submissions to this track can explore the types of workflows best suited for AI-based solutions, strategies for successful (and not so successful) adoption, and how AI and cybersecurity intersect.

### G. Collaborative Delivery and P3s

Traditional procurement methods may not be the best fit for complex projects, particularly those that involve multiple stakeholders and industrial users.  Submissions to this track should help utilities explore how collaborative delivery methods and public-private partnerships (P3) have been used to build, finance, and operate water projects.

**H. One Water with an Emphasis on Reuse and the Circular Water Economy**
As water challenges become increasingly complex and interconnected, managing drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater in silos is no longer viable. The One Water/Circular Water Economy approach champions a holistic, integrated framework—recognizing all water as a shared resource with interconnected value. Submissions to this track should explore how One Water supports the principles of a circular water economy, enabling resource reduction, recovery, and regeneration.

**I. Healthy Leadership System Management**
This track will focus on providing valuable situational insights, fostering networking opportunities, and inspiring water and sewer leaders to adopt forward-thinking strategies that address both current challenges and future needs. Submissions to this track could cover best management practices, decision making, project prioritization and internal communications, change management, community engagement, workforce leadership, crisis management and emergency preparedness, and future trends.

**J. Strategic Planning**
Strategic planning is critical for water and wastewater utilities facing aging infrastructure, climate uncertainty, evolving regulations, and shifting customer expectations. Leadership plays a vital role in visioning and decision-making and can be supported through practical frameworks and ongoing measurement and monitoring. Submissions falling under this topic should look at the fundamentals of a robust strategic planning process including setting priorities, aligning with council or board mandates, engaging stakeholders, and building measurable and adaptive plans. Case examples and lessons learned are especially welcome.

**K. Leadership Stories**
Leaders and managers from water and wastewater utilities have valuable insights to share from real-world stories of leadership in action – the successes, the setbacks, and lessons learned along the way. Submissions to this track should explore how leaders navigated challenges, made difficult decisions, and ultimately helped their teams and organizations grow stronger. Stories about both successes and failures are welcome.

**L. Emergency Planning and Response**
This track will focus on emergency planning and response from management's perspective.  Submissions to this track should explore elements of an effective emergency management program, including risk assessment, business continuity, incident command systems and communication protocols. The focus is on practical strategies for utility leaders to prepare their organizations for a range of emergencies and to respond confidently when a crisis arises.

**M. Evolving Practices in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**
DEI remains an essential yet evolving priority for water and wastewater utilities across North America. This track will explore how utilities in both the US and Canada are approaching DEI in a changing social and political landscape. With emphasis on leadership's role, this topic will unpack regional differences, shared challenges and practical opportunities for advancing inclusive practices in recruitment, community engagement, and workplace culture to foster a respectful and resilient organization.

**N. Balancing Innovation and Risk from a Legal Perspective**
For utilities, integrating innovation requires proactively considering an array of legal concerns, ranging from regulatory compliance to data security, evolving liability, and the legal implications of new technologies themselves. To effectively balance these inherent risks with the desire for new technologies or processes, utilities need to strategically draft comprehensive policies that establish clear legal boundaries, guide procurement processes for novel solutions, address human resources impacts like training and new skill sets, and outline robust frameworks for pilot programs, thereby facilitating responsible new technological or process adoption. Submissions should feature how utilities are addressing these concerns as they integrate innovative ideas, technologies and processes into their ongoing utility management.

# SUBMISSION REVIEW CRITERIA

While using a blind review process, reviewers will score both individual abstracts and session proposals based on the following criteria. Typically, less than 50% of submissions are accepted into the technical program. Submitters should take the time to ensure all submissions meet or exceed the scoring criteria.

### APPLICABILITY

The submission provides concepts, context setting, or lessons learned that are transferable/usable.
- For session proposals, this is **25%** of the score.
- For abstracts, this is **30%** of the score.

### RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

The submission provides information supporting lessons learned and proof of concepts, lessons learned, or context.
- For session proposals, this is **30%** of the score.
- For abstracts, this is **40%** of the score.

### AUDIENCE APPEAL

The submission provides new concepts, ideas, hot topics, or a novel application of concept. The idea has not been presented at this conference in the past.
- For session proposals, this is **25%** of the score.
- For abstracts, this is **30%** of the score.

### CONCEPT INTEGRATION & ACTIVITIES

The submission walks the reviewer through the session layout, ensures cohesive participant experience, and includes meaningful points of engagement (interactive activities) that support adult learning.
- For session proposals, this is **20%** of the score.

UTILITY LEADERS AS AUTHORS AND CO-AUTHORS - The abstract should reflect, to the extent feasible, active engagement of utility leaders as lead authors or co-authors on the paper.

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**All abstracts, session, and workshop proposals must be submitted online
no later than midnight Eastern time on October 14, 2025.
To submit: www.wef.org/UtilityManagement**

For more information on submitting content and accepted presenter requirements, please see the WEF Speaker Information page: www.wef.org/sc-speaker-information

**For questions or additional information, please contact:**
Water Environment Federation
Education & Training – WEF/AWWA The Utility Management Conference 2026
Email: UtilityMgtConf@wef.org
Phone: 703-684-2400 x7450

# Submitting a Session Proposal

**Submittal Deadline:  October 14, 2025**
**Submit Online at: www.wef.org/UtilityManagement**

*Session proposals can be presented in different formats from the traditional podium presentation, such as a panel discussion, and interactive discussion.  Utility Leaders Forum bring together a formative panel discussion on a particular topic or topics. We are open to innovative formats and encourage creativity. Utility presenters are encouraged along with faciliated, interactive dialogue.*

With a traditional abstract proposal, the Conference Planning Committee evaluates and places selected, related abstracts together to form a 1.5-hour session. However, with a session proposal, the Session Coordinator (submitter) is responsible for finding all the speakers to fill 1.5 hours of content/discussion and developing the timing and format of the session as a whole.

WEF requires that a proposal be completed and submitted for review through the online submittal site, Attendee Interactive (AI), by the Session Coordinator.  The Conference Planning Committee will review all submittals and announce accepted sessions at the same time as the final technical program in November.

**For complete proposals, WEF requires information on the following items:**
- ❖ **Session Title**
- ❖ **Confirmation of Time Allotted**
  - o Half Session: 1.5 hours long
- ❖ **Contact Information for Session Coordinator**
  - o This person will be WEF's main contact throughout the process and is expected to work with the speakers throughout the development of the content for the program.
- ❖ **Contact Information for Each Session Presenter**
  - o The selected speakers should be from different companies, utilities, and organizations. As an example, a successful session would not provide content from speakers who are all from the same company or clients of the same consultant.
- ❖ **Session Description**
  - o Should be no longer than 9,000 characters (approx. 1000 words)
- ❖ **Three Learning Objectives**
- ❖ **Session Agenda**
  - o Sessions are 1.5 hours long with no breaks
  - o Should include title, timing, and speaker for each portion to be included in the public program
- ❖ **Target Audience** (a suggested list will be provided)

*Questions about your submittal? Please email: UtilityMgtConf@wef.org*

**All session proposals must be submitted online by October 14, 2025 at www.wef.org/UtilityManagement**

# Submitting a Workshop Proposal
**SUBMITTAL DEADLINE:  October 14, 2025**
**SUBMIT ONLINE AT www.wef.org/UtilityManagement**

Pre-conference workshops are additional programs available for conference registrants. This conference features both full day and half-day workshop offerings.

Speakers and facilitators are encouraged to brainstorm and incorporate interactive activities to deliver their subject matter expertise and content in a meaningful way to the participants. As speakers also help facilitate and support the interactive components, plenty of face time, one-on-one, and small group knowledge should be exchanged. **Workshops with interactive components interspersed throughout the session will be prioritized for selection.**

These programs follow strict guidelines so that the highest level of education credits (Continuing Education Units, or CEUs) can be awarded for all workshops.  In order to be approved for CEUs, workshop agendas and descriptions must be finalized and submited to staff abiding by strict deadlines.

WEF requires that a proposal be completed and submitted for review through the online submittal site, Attendee Interactive (AI) by the workshop coordinator.  The Steering Committee will review all submittals and announce accepted workshops in November.

**For complete proposals, WEF requires information on the following items:**
- ❖ **Workshop Title**
- ❖ **Half- or Full-Day Program**
  - o Full-day Workshop: 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m.
  - o Half-day Workshop: 8:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m. or 1:30 p.m.-5:00 p.m.
  - o Breaks for all workshops: 10-10:30 a.m., 12 p.m.-1:30 p.m., and 3-3:30 p.m.
- ❖ **Contact Information for Workshop Coordinator**
  - o This person will be WEF's main contact throughout the process and is expected to work with the speakers throughout the development of the content for the program.
  - o This person will ensure WEF receives all deliverables.
- ❖ **Contact Information for Each Workshop Presenter**
  - o The selected speakers should be from different companies, utilities, and organizations. As an example, a successful workshop would not provide content from speakers who are all from the same company or clients of the same consultant.
- ❖ **Workshop Description**
  - o Should be no longer than 9,000 characters (approx. 1000 words)
- ❖ **Three Learning Objectives**
- ❖ **Description of All Breakout Group Activities and/or Interactive Components**
- ❖ **Workshop Agenda**
  - o Following Full-day or Half-day workshop timing listed above, including breaks
  - o Should include title, timing, and speaker for each portion to be included in the public program
- ❖ **Target Audience** (a suggested list will be provided)
- ❖ **Preferences for Room Layout, Attendance, and More**

*Questions about your submittal? Please email: UtilityMgtConf@wef.org*

**All session proposals must be submitted online by October 14, 2025 at www.wef.org/UtilityManagement**