

Building Buy-In for a Circular Water Economy

How Leadership, Collaboration, and Long-Term Planning Drive Innovation

VISION & NARRATIVE — MAKING CIRCULAR MEANINGFUL

Andrea Campbell • Julianne Frabizio • Anita Larbi • Doug Larue • Mitch Olds • Julie Heflin

THE CHALLENGE

Circular water isn't a *technology* problem.
It's a **leadership buy-in** challenge.

The Question

How do wastewater agencies continue protecting public health while preparing for an uncertain future?

The Reality

Advancing circular water requires Executives, Boards, City leadership, and Regional partners to say yes — often to something new.

The Gap

Most projects don't fail on engineering. They fail on the story leaders tell before the vote is called.

OUR CASE STUDY

Inland Empire Regional Composting Authority

A 20-year public partnership that turned a disposal risk into a regional asset.

200K

Wet tons of organic material processed each year

230K

Cubic yards of finished compost produced annually

3.2M

Tons processed since operations began

300K

kWh/month cut by on-site wind, solar, and battery

WHAT WE LEARNED

Three leaders. Three lessons.

One shared truth: Circular water succeeds through Leadership, not just Engineering.

01



Build the Case for Change

Start with strategy, not technology.

Arin Boughan
Manager

Inland Empire Regional Composting Authority (IERCA)

02



Build the Coalition

Every Board values something different.

Kevin Stewart
Director of Operations & Maintenance
San Bernardino Municipal Water Department

03



Build the Future

Governance makes innovation possible.

Rob Thompson
General Manager
Orange County Sanitation District

Start with Strategy, not Technology.

“

Leadership didn't support IERCF because it was a composting project. They supported it because it aligned with a long-term Organics Management Plan focused on resilience, diversification, and local control.



Arin Boughan

Inland Empire Regional Composting Authority

What it means

25 years ago, IEUA saw two disposal options — a composting facility they were losing and an Arizona hauling route becoming unreliable — and made a strategic choice: **Control our own future.**

The Board didn't approve a composting project. They approved a resilience strategy that *happened to require* a composting facility.

This sequence of events is the whole lesson.

Every Board values something different.

How a 15-agency coalition was built:

1

Coffee-shop meetings

Informal conversations with neighboring agencies revealed they were facing the same challenges.

2

Shared information, listened first

Not a sales pitch — just facts, and space for each agency to see itself in the story.

3

Jointly funded feasibility study

A low-risk first commitment before larger investment decisions.

4

Phased participation

Agencies can join or leave as they get comfortable — flexibility is the trust.

“

Our coalition wasn't created because we had a cost problem. It was created because we had a resiliency problem.



Kevin Stewart

San Bernardino Regional Biosolids Coalition

Governance makes innovation possible.

“

We don't ask our Board to approve technology. We ask them to understand the long-term risks first.



Rob Thompson

General Manager, Orange County Sanitation District

The OC San Cadence

Every two years, four things align:

Strategic Plan

Where regulations, technologies, and risks are heading.

Board Education

New members briefed before major decisions come to a vote.

Capital Planning

Investments mapped against future risk, not present cost.

Budget

Resources aligned to strategy, not the other way around.

THE SO WHAT

Circular water becomes meaningful when leaders...

01

Start with strategy

Not technology.

02

Meet each Board where they are

Not with one story for all.

03

Build governance first

Then innovation follows.



Thank you.

We'd love your questions.

WLI 2026 • TEAM 1 • LAKE COHORT • VISION & NARRATIVE

Andrea Campbell • Julianne Frabizio • Anita Larbi • Doug Larue • Mitch Olds • Julie Heflin

Mentor: Lisa Melton | Case study: Inland Empire Regional Composting Authority (IERCA)

With thanks to Arin Boughan (IERCA), Jeff Ziegenbein (WM Waste Management), Kevin Stewart (SB Regional Biosolids Coalition), and Rob Thompson (OC San).