THE STORY OF WATER

FAQs

THE STORY OF STUFF PROJECT

Why did you make *The Story of Water: Who Controls the Way We Drink?*

We need to protect and advocate for public access to clean, affordable drinking water. Worldwide, one in four people do not have enough safe water to meet their daily needs. In the United States, up to 63 million Americans were exposed to unsafe drinking water in the last decade. On a per capita basis, federal funding in the U.S. for water services has declined 82 percent since its peak. This makes water systems vulnerable to private corporations that are hoping to profit by taking control of public water systems in need of repair. Water is not a commodity to be sold for profit by corporations; it is a human right to have access to safe, clean, and affordable water.

What is water privatization?

Water privatization is when private corporations buy or operate public water utilities, and it is often suggested by the private water industry as a solution to municipal budget problems and aging water systems. Different forms of privatization range from outright sales to long-term leases to so-called "public-private partnerships" or PPPs. Despite this wide range of schemes, the common thread is a forfeiture of public control (or, in the case of a sale, public ownership) of this essential service to a profit-driven corporation.

What does it mean that water is a commons?

This means that water is no one's property and that it rightfully belongs to all of humanity and to the earth itself. It means that water is not a commodity to be sold, hoarded, or otherwise wasted or misused. It is our responsibility to protect the quality and availability of water for everyone around the planet because every living thing needs water to survive. The Public Trust Doctrine holds that certain natural resources like navigable waters are preserved

in perpetuity for public use and enjoyment. The fact that water is a commons–and that access to it is an internationally recognized human right–underscores the need to protect it from corporate control and ensure all people have it, regardless of socioeconomic status.

What happens when corporations buy and control a municipal water utility?

Corporations say they'll invest in our systems and that service will improve, but cost-cutting to maximize their profits makes that impossible. Many systems experience frequent main breaks, service disruptions, and even the drastic downsizing of workforces, meaning fewer jobs and people to keep things running safely. In a survey of 10 drinking water and wastewater privatizations, corporate takeover led to an average job loss of 34 percent. Privately owned water systems charge 59 percent more than publicly owned systems, on average, making it difficult for people to afford their water bills, leading to water shutoffs that threaten the human right to water.

How are cities keeping their systems public?

Every city and water system is different, meaning there are hundreds of different approaches to managing water systems and keeping them public. In The Story of Water we highlight three different cities around the United States that are tackling different problems with different solutions.

In Philadelphia, where 40 percent of the city's water utility ratepayers were unable to pay (or behind on payment of) their water bills, the city started the Tiered Assistance Program (TAP), a new payment program where a resident's monthly water bill is not based on their consumption but rather set as a percentage of their household income and size.

In South Bend, Indiana, a start-up partnered with the city to install more than 150 sensors that gather information about water flow and rainfall. Since implementing the system, South Bend has reduced wastewater overflow by a billion gallons per year. All told, the city is cutting nearly $400 million out of a $600 million proposed infrastructure overhaul by using this technology.

And in Baltimore, voters overwhelmingly chose to ban the privatization of its water and sewerage systems, the first large U.S. jurisdiction to take such a step. Around 77 percent of more than 148,000 voters backed a proposal to prevent the city from selling these systems–after years of private water corporations attempting to privatize–in a major win for public control of our essential services.

What is the WATER Act, and why should I support it?

The WATER Act is the most comprehensive approach to improving water systems and helping ensure that every person has access to safe and clean water in the United States. We need a major federal investment in our public water infrastructure to renovate our nation's old water pipes, stop sewage overflows, address water contamination from chemicals like lead, and avert a looming water affordability crisis by creating a water trust fund. The WATER Act will simultaneously deliver water justice to the millions of people who lack access to safe water, while creating nearly a million jobs. This legislation would help small, rural and Indigenous communities. Other measures to address our water infrastructure challenges that incentivize the takeover of municipal water systems by for-profit corporations are not the answer. We must restore our nation's confidence in its water, and that starts with restoring federal funding to local water systems. Learn more and take action!

I'd like to do more and/or I don't live in the United States. What can I do to address water issues in my community?

Water issues can be wide-ranging: high prices, infrequent or nonexistent access, contamination, mismanaged and underfunded water and sewer systems, privatized and exploitative systems, and reliance on bottled water as a result of one or may of these other problems. The first thing you can do is gather information. Get to know what the barriers are to clean, affordable water access in your community by conducting a poll, speaking with your neighbors, or organizing a gathering where everyone can share their experiences. Try to gather a group of people who are willing and able to work together to address your concerns. Then, write a letter or schedule a meeting with your local leaders and elected officials to discuss the problem, contact the press, and see if there are any local (or

international) organizations or charities that can help support your efforts. If it's possible, try to pass your own local ordinance or resolution like this one to promote safe, clean, and affordable public water. Additionally, encourage the people in your network to use reusable water bottles, public drinking fountains, and water filters instead of bottled water if your water is safe to drink — you could even petition local grocery chain or market to stop selling bottled water.