



# NET BLUE

## Frequently Asked Questions

A collaborative initiative of the Alliance for Water Efficiency, the Environmental Law Institute, and River Network  
[www.net-blue.org](http://www.net-blue.org)



## 1. What is Net Blue?

"Net Blue" is an approach to keep water use at the same or reduced levels as a community continues to develop. This concept of "water neutral" growth is achieved by integrating land use planning and water management to require or incentivize water use offsets (e.g., water efficiency retrofits) that will equal or exceed the additional demand of new development or redevelopment (residential and commercial). By choosing to adopt an ordinance or incentive that requires or encourages this approach, communities can stretch their water supplies, decrease the need for new infrastructure, and help ensure more water for fish, wildlife and recreation as well as provide other benefits. The Net Blue team has created a model ordinance toolkit to assist communities interested in tailoring this approach for their specific needs and context at [www.net-blue.org](http://www.net-blue.org).



## 2. Why might my community be interested in adopting Net Blue?

There are many benefits to Net Blue. Communities with high growth and stressed water supplies are finding that water scarcity is affecting their economic development potential. Water demand offset policies thus offer communities a meaningful and sustainable way to enable population and economic growth without increasing overall water demands in a utility service area. Making sure that additional development does not further increase demand for highly treated water will reduce the need to pump and treat additional water and the need for new withdrawals from local water sources, and thus reduce expenses for the community. Another benefit of Net Blue is to defer new and costly infrastructure investment. Water efficiency is often the least expensive form of new supply, especially when compared to developing new reservoirs, diversions or other infrastructure. Even in communities that are not immediately water-stressed, reducing water use helps to build in additional resilience for the future by stretching existing supplies. Net Blue also can benefit recreation and fish and wildlife by keeping more water flowing in streams and rivers.

## 3. How can Net Blue benefit local streams and rivers and other freshwater resources?

In many places, rivers, streams, groundwater and other waterbodies are suffering from depletion when the amount of water withdrawn is greater than the amount returned. When this happens, fish, wildlife, recreation and downstream communities all suffer. Using a Net Blue approach can help to prevent further depletion of our rivers, streams and aquifers by reducing the current amount of water withdrawn or preventing the need for increased withdrawals. Although this approach may not automatically translate into more water for our rivers, it is one important tool in the toolbox to reduce demand for highly treated water, taking some pressure off of our waterways and groundwater resources.



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## 4. What is a water offset?

A Net Blue “offset” or “offset credit” is the amount of water saved via fixture replacements and other water-saving measures that reduce the demand for water from a community source of water or water provider. The model ordinance worksheet at [www.net-blue.org](http://www.net-blue.org) walks the user through the issues that a community will need to consider when designing an offset, such as the amount of new water demand that will need to be offset, what sort of offsets will be allowed and where they can be put in place. For instance, when considering how much water will need to be offset by any new development, a community will choose a method to project the net increase in water demand from the new development (or redevelopment) taking into account existing water use at the property and whether any alternate source of water, like reused graywater, will be used. There are many different types of offset projects that a community might identify as acceptable when developing the ordinance, such as replacement of toilets, clothes washers and dishwashers with high efficiency fixtures, cooling tower efficiency management, turf removal and the installation of rainwater recovery systems. In addition to the types of offsets identified, a community can also decide where these offsets should be placed (e.g. on the development site or off-site in the community). All of these issues are addressed in the model ordinance toolkit and the offset workbook at [www.net-blue.org](http://www.net-blue.org).



## 5. How does Net Blue differ from reducing water use on a building scale (e.g., net zero water)?

By integrating water resource and land use planning, Net Blue aims for community growth that is water-neutral. In contrast, there are several programs, like Net Zero Water, that focus on water neutrality at a site or building scale. Both approaches are important and site scale approaches can be embedded into the broader Net Blue approach.

## 6. What materials are available to help my community consider and/or adopt a Net Blue approach

The Alliance for Water Efficiency, Environmental Law Institute and River Network have created several tools to assist in developing and tailoring a Net Blue policy for their community. These include:

- ▶ **Net Blue Ordinance Worksheet** - this automated worksheet will help individuals, groups, and governments draft a water demand offset ordinance, tailored to the unique needs of the community. The worksheet leads users through many policy options, encouraging thoughtful discussions and choices. It is a first step, simplifying the drafting (and re-drafting) process, before review, editing, and ideally, adoption.
- ▶ **Net Blue Ordinance User’s Guide** - the user’s guide describes how to use the worksheet, focusing on the automated portions.
- ▶ **Net Blue Ordinance Examples** - there are three example model ordinances available with different characteristics to provide a sense of how Net Blue can apply in different contexts.
- ▶ **Net Blue Offset Methodology Workbook** - this tool accompanies the ordinance worksheet and will help communities evaluate and select strategies to offset the increase in projected potable water use, including a calculator for specific offset strategies.
- ▶ **Net Blue Offset Methodology User Guide** - this user guide accompanies the offset methodology workbook and explains how the workbook functions, what the various offset calculations and worksheets are, and how to create an offset strategies summary sheet for a new development.
- ▶ **Three Water Demand Offset Strategy Examples** - these three examples demonstrate how offsets can be calculated for the three prepared ordinance examples.



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## 7. Can my community take an incentive approach to Net Blue as a first step?

Yes. The Net Blue Ordinance Worksheet includes an option for taking an incentive-based approach.

## 8. Has the Net Blue concept been adopted in some communities already?

Yes. A handful of communities, mostly on the east and west coasts, have adopted a similar approach. As part of the development of the Net Blue ordinance toolkit, the team reviewed all existing local policies. An AWE report summarizing existing programs can be found at [www.allianceforwaterefficiency.org/net-blue-research.aspx](http://www.allianceforwaterefficiency.org/net-blue-research.aspx).

Additionally, we have created three Net Blue model ordinance examples at [www.net-blue.org](http://www.net-blue.org) that illustrate how Net Blue might vary under different political, environmental and geographic circumstances.

## 9. How does Net Blue differ from impact fees?

An impact fee is a fee imposed by a local government on new development to cover some or all of the costs of providing public services (like sewer, roads, schools) to that development and reduce the financial burden of new development on local governments. In contrast, a Net Blue approach requires developers to offset their projected increase in water demand by reducing water use off site (or on-site over and above any existing requirements) to keep neutral or move toward neutral the overall demand for water throughout the community.

## 10. How can Net Blue fit in with stormwater programs and requirements?

Local stormwater management practices and requirements can be designed to reduce the amount of stormwater runoff and also provide water for irrigation or indoor water use through techniques like rainwater capture and reuse. If done on-site, these techniques could reduce the projected net increase in water demand from the development, thus decreasing the amount of water that would need to be offset under a Net Blue policy. If done off-site, they could be a source of offset credits if the ordinance is designed to allow such activities to qualify for offset credits.

## 11. Will Net Blue prompt a shifting to alternative water sources?

Under a Net Blue approach, the use of “alternative water sources” (potentially including reused graywater, captured rainwater or water from another source) will reduce the amount of water usage that must be offset. Care must be taken when defining what does (and does not) qualify as an “alternative water source.” Unintended consequences could occur, such as new private wells that increase demand on the same overdrawn aquifer that supplies the utility, or the loss of return flows to surface water or groundwater sources, thereby resulting in a net depletion of the source.

Learn More – [www.net-blue.org](http://www.net-blue.org)

