Event Themes

- Water availability, or lack thereof, has a direct impact on the competitiveness of U.S. companies and the environment. As water prices rise and shortages of water increase in frequency, water's economic impact will become more prominent. Though national attention has focused more on other environmental challenges such as climate change, projected demands on water make it arguably one of the most urgent sustainability issues facing U.S. industry today.

- There is currently a significant lack of available data on sector-specific industrial water use. Though the U.S. Geological Survey is in the process of collecting substantially better data in this area, lack of facility metering, lack of uniformity of water reporting methods between states' regulatory and reporting programs and lack of information on consumptive use continues to hinder in-depth analysis of water use trends.

- There needs to be a broader awareness among companies and policymakers of all the various ways water use can impact a company's bottom line. In addition to the direct costs of purchasing and discharging it, water requires energy to move, heat, cool, treat and recycle it, not to mention chemicals to treat it. Consideration of this broad array of direct and indirect costs is key to the formulation of any successful and comprehensive water efficiency strategy.

- Because water is not often seen as a cost center or main sustainability issue by companies, there are still many opportunities for companies to reduce water use. There is still low hanging fruit. Established water saving technologies have not been implemented widely.

- With 96% of U.S. industry sectors using more water indirectly (from their supply chain) than directly, and the growth of manufacturing overseas in recent decades, effective water efficiency strategies will increasingly have to involve engagement with foreign suppliers. In a global economy, water disruptions abroad can lead to business disruptions at home.

- Successful water efficiency supply chain strategies typically involve the provision of data and resources to suppliers. Suppliers need to understand the water availability risks they face in their region and need a means to address these risks, either through financial, technical or technology-based assistance.

- Detailed metering and monitoring of water use is critical to becoming more water efficient. By leveraging current technologies, this is a process that can be easily automated and render immediate results.

- The linkage between water availability and climate change cannot be ignored. Climate change is threatening supplies of water worldwide, driving up costs and exacerbating supply chain disruptions across a variety of industry sectors. Some climate change solutions also require trade-offs with water use (biofuel production, for example, requires significant amounts of water). Addressing climate change, while navigating such trade-offs, will be a key part of overcoming our water availability challenges.

- Because the true cost of water is often not reflected in its price, many U.S. companies remain unconvinced that water efficiency should be a priority. Thus, the risks posed by potential future water shortages, which typically impact industry before farmers or public water utilities, need to be quantified and communicated more broadly to the U.S. business community. Doing so could help advance public-private efforts to deploy technologies and processes that help improve industrial water efficiency and competitiveness.

- Technology demonstrations, done in conjunction with a local development agency/nonprofit, can be an effective way to promote regional industrial water efficiency. Companies are also more likely to consider technologies that are recommended by their peers. Such demonstrations help local manufacturers to better understand the value proposition of new water efficient technologies and help to overcome resistance to new process improvements.

- Water efficiency strategies by themselves are often insufficient to ensure sustainable supplies of fresh water. If the water manufacturers are using is polluted, prices may rise and shortages may continue. Private sector efforts to ensure that the rivers, wetlands and soil that clean water are well maintained can help guarantee adequate supplies of water in the long-term while helping companies earn the trust of local communities.

- Industry is often the first to be blamed by society for water pollution issues, regardless of whether or not it is the cause. Leveraging the experience of nonprofit organizations to implement sustainable water use strategies can both improve operational efficiencies while enhancing brand image and trust among communities and consumers.

- The financial community is becoming increasingly involved in the area of water risk assessment. Because the incidence of water shortages and price hikes are poised to increase in coming years, investors need better information how water-related risks are going to impact businesses. Accordingly, those companies that develop successful strategies to identify water risks, measure their water footprint and prevent business disruptions will be better positioned to access new sources of capital. Conducting source vulnerability assessments to better understand your facility's watershed impacts is one proven way of effectively mitigating water risk.

- As stresses on water increase in future years, water recycling will increasingly be looked to as a primary means of conservation. Accordingly, water quality standards for various activities may have to be modified or restructured to realize the full benefits of this practice.

- There needs to be broader awareness of the fact that water shortages can happen anywhere the U.S., not just in its arid regions. Recent droughts in places like North Carolina, Kentucky and Georgia draw attention to the fact that water availability is a national challenge.

- Water efficiency projects will often have a low internal rate of return compared to other projects in a company. This may make it less likely for such projects to be approved. Creative presentation of the project to decision makers or different profitability analyses may be required to obtain approval for these projects.