



WEFTA Trip Report – El Salvador 2024

OVERVIEW

In October 2024, WEFTA volunteers Ryan “Reno” Shields and Tim Wellman traveled to El Salvador, where they conducted a week-long assessment of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) conditions in communities in the departments of Ahuachapán, San Miguel, and La Unión. This assessment aimed to strengthen partnerships with Paso Pacifico, an environmental conservation organization, and to reconnect with the communities where they previously served as Peace Corps volunteers from 1997 to 2000—Reno as a small business development volunteer in La Unión and Tim as a water and sanitation volunteer in Ahuachapán. Their objective was to gather baseline data on WASH conditions in four communities around Laguna Olomega and one community in Ahuachapán, identify critical needs, and formulate recommendations to improve water access and sanitation in alignment with broader environmental conservation goals.

Initial Assessment

Reno and Tim, in collaboration with Paso Pacifico and local leaders, reviewed existing infrastructure and community practices related to water and sanitation. They noted that while water access is available, it is often limited, and safe sanitation services are scarce. According to national statistics, approximately 20% of rural Salvadorans lack access to basic drinking water, and nearly 50% lack access to safe sanitation facilities, highlighting the urgency of WASH improvements in these communities. Additionally, Laguna Olomega faces increasing environmental pressures, including watershed degradation, which impacts both the water quality and ecological health of the region. Given this dual challenge, WEFTA and Paso Pacifico aim to create a program that simultaneously addresses community WASH needs and fosters watershed protection and environmental conservation.

Program Vision and Objectives

WEFTA envisions a 3–5-year initiative in the Olomega region, implemented in partnership with Paso Pacifico, to enhance WASH standards and community resilience. Key program objectives include:

1. **Infrastructure Renovation:** Modernizing water systems and upgrading sanitation facilities to meet basic access standards. These improvements will support approximately 80% of community members who currently lack reliable water service and safe sanitation.
2. **Capacity Building and Management Support:** Developing the skills and knowledge of local water committees to improve ongoing management and maintenance of WASH facilities.
3. **Community Health Education:** Promoting health and hygiene practices to reduce waterborne diseases, which currently impact 25-30% of households due to limited sanitation and non-potable water sources.

4. **Environmental Conservation - Integration:** Work alongside Paso Pacifico to promote conservation practices, such as reforestation, to protect the Laguna Olomega watershed. By protecting these local ecosystems, the program aims to improve both water quality and regional biodiversity, supporting Paso Pacifico's conservation efforts across Central America.

By addressing WASH infrastructure and watershed health together, WEFTA and Paso Pacifico aim to improve both community health and environmental sustainability, benefiting both local populations and surrounding ecosystems. The attached assessment matrix offers community-specific recommendations based on the recent WASH evaluation, and the photo presentation provides further visual context to this narrative.

Basic WASH Assessment Data of the 5 Visited Communities

Community Name/ Department	Population	# of households/ connections	Water System Type	Source	Water Storage Size (M3)	Transmission (KM)	Distribution (KM)	\$/cubic meter	Water Supply Recommendations	Sanitation Recommendations
San Miguelito, Ahuachapan	520	148	Multiple springs, 2 water storage tanks, Gravity flow	5 springs	32	2	4	\$1.80	Add additional pumped water source for dry season, increase storage capacity, renovate water lines, renovate meter pits	Renovate existing latrines/New latrines
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DAILY NARRATIVE

October 7 - Arrival

Our team assembled at Houston International Airport and flew to El Salvador, where we rented a pickup truck to begin our journey. After landing, we drove west to La Libertad, where we stayed at a small coastal hotel to prepare for our trip to San Miguelito in the morning.

October 8 – San Miguelito, Ahuachapán

We started the day early with a traditional breakfast of pupusas, cortido & salsa, and coffee before driving west to the bustling town of Cara Sucia along the Pan-American Highway. After purchasing lunch provisions to share with community members, we traveled up a four-wheel-drive road to San Miguelito, a community nestled near El Imposible National Park. The drive was scenic, with views of verdant forests and new housing developments along the route.

San Miguelito holds special significance as it was the site of Tim's Peace Corps service, where he spent over two years working on community-led water and sanitation projects, including forming a water committee and designing a gravity-flow water system. During our visit, Tim met with the water committee president and community members to assess the current status of their water and sanitation infrastructure. The community's water system, constructed in 2002, remains operational, while the dry pit latrine project completed in 1999 continues to serve residents, despite some damage from earthquakes in 2001. The committee meets monthly, and 150 households contribute a fee based on metered water usage.

Water committee discussions highlighted the need for minor repairs to the distribution network and the potential for an additional storage tank to ensure consistent water access for the entire community. The committee proposed the addition of a pumped water system from a new spring lower than the community for additional supply during the dry season. The committee also identified opportunities for small-scale improvements to the existing spring capture systems that provide water to the community.

October 9 – Paso Pacifico, Olomega Communities

In the morning, we traveled to Intipucá, La Unión, where we met with Carmello Romero, Paso Pacifico's country coordinator, who facilitated our visits to various communities around Laguna Olomega. Carmello's coordination ensured smooth engagement with local leaders and decision-makers throughout our visit. Over breakfast, we discussed Paso Pacifico's efforts in environmental conservation, community outreach, and education in the Laguna Olomega area. Reno and Carmelo, who had collaborated in the late 1990s on community mobilization projects, reconnected over shared experiences and common goals.

We then visited Paso Pacifico's newly established outreach center in Chichipate, where we met with their outreach team to learn more about their conservation efforts. The Paso Pacifico site has exciting potential for a conservation center in the region with established fruit trees, impressive secondary forest, and views of the Chichipate valley.

Later that morning, we traveled to Los Riitos, where we met with the local water committee to discuss community water and sanitation challenges. Los Riitos lacks a piped water system for its 150 households, and most residents rely on shallow, hand-dug wells that are contaminated and unsuitable for drinking. Households spend around \$60 monthly on bottled or trucked water and rely on weekly

deliveries to fill cisterns. The community's sanitation infrastructure is also limited, with makeshift pit latrines contributing to groundwater contamination. The local K-6 school has no access to drinking water or handwashing facilities, compounding health and hygiene challenges.

We toured the community to observe household-level water and sanitation conditions and visited two hillside springs that provide limited, unprotected water access to roughly 30% of the population in lower areas. Due to elevation limitations, these springs cannot supply the entire community. Additionally, each household independently maintains its water pipeline, leading to frequent leaks and service interruptions. The water committee identified potential sites for a new storage tank and deep well that would serve as a dependable, community-managed water source. However, recent well drilling on the west end of the community encountered a geothermal aquifer, rendering the water too hot and unfit for consumption. A hydrogeologic study for the siting of a new potable water well is recommended for Los Riitos.

In the late afternoon, we returned to the Paso Pacifico center for a meeting with the water committee members from Chichipate, Jicarito, El Carao, and Tierra Blanca/La Manguerra. The discussion, held informally under a large mango tree, highlighted water supply and sanitation issues affecting over 540 households served by Chichipate's water committee. Their system relies on a single well and a 50,000-gallon storage tank, with the well operating for up to 12 hours daily. Budget constraints limit the committee's ability to address infrastructure needs, as user fees barely cover operational costs. Upcoming housing developments threaten to further strain the community's water resources.

La Manguerra's water committee shared similar challenges in serving 320 customers with water drawn from deep aquifers, pumped daily to meet demand with limitations on water use by household. The committee operates on a rotational schedule, providing water access to different sections of the community 10 times per month. Households must store water during their scheduled access periods, leading many to invest in cisterns or water barrels to meet monthly needs, which typically total 2,500 gallons per household.

We were encouraged by the water committee meeting, where representatives from both committees in Chichipate and surrounding communities collaboratively discussed the potential for external investment in their WASH systems. The committees underscored the importance of governmental support to strengthen their organizational structure, enabling more effective and sustainable water management.

October 10 – Community Meeting on Olomeguita Island

In the morning, we met with Carmello in Intipucá for breakfast and debriefed on the previous day's events. Carmello's insights on a holistic approach that integrates WASH, and environmental conservation highlighted his commitment to sustainable development in these communities. On our way to our meeting in Olomeguita we stopped at the Paso Pacifico property again to take a short hike to see more of the property and climb the short ridge to get a better view of the valley. We discussed the possibility of drilling a well on the Paso property complete with a storage tank that would provide water to the planned conservation center. There is currently an old, abandoned hand dug well on the property with groundwater at around 20 meters. Drilling a new deeper well would be feasible given groundwater available in the area.

Afterward, we traveled with the Paso Pacifico team to Laguna Olomega, where we boarded a boat Carmello had reserved for a journey across the lake. En route, we observed stunning vistas, abundant bird life, and shoreline areas impacted by invasive water hyacinth.

Upon arrival at Olomeguita Island, we were welcomed warmly by community members who had gathered in the public area for our meeting. Olomeguita, home to approximately 35 households and over 100 residents, supports a small K-6 school for island children. The community meeting attracted over 25 participants and served as a platform for discussing WASH challenges, economic constraints, and environmental pressures on the lake ecosystem.

The residents face significant WASH limitations, as there is no reliable potable water source, and adequate sanitation infrastructure is lacking. Most households rely on shallow hand-dug wells, drawing water that is frequently turbid and contaminated, especially during the rainy season. Due to these limitations, community members spend more than \$60 monthly on bottled water for drinking and cooking. The island has one community well that serves a portion of the population, but it too becomes contaminated during heavy rains.

Additionally, Olomeguita's composting latrine system, initially provided by a CARE project following Hurricane Mitch in 1998, continues to serve the community, with most latrines remaining functional. The community displays strong management practices for the latrines, but some units are in disrepair and require replacement or renovation to meet sanitation needs.

The community members shared concerns about economic hardships stemming from limited access to markets and a decline in fish populations, which may be linked to lake contamination. The spread of invasive water hyacinth is exacerbating these issues by obstructing shorelines and fishing areas, likely a result of nitrification from wastewater and fertilizer runoff. The meeting, combined with a tour of the island, underscored the resilience of the Olomeguita community and their eagerness to foster a more sustainable future.

October 11 – Chichipate and La Manguera Visits

Our team returned to Chichipate, where we met with the water committee over breakfast in an informal setting, which allowed for deeper discussions on the WASH project. The conversation also covered community development initiatives, including a recent land donation designated for a new soccer field and a small park, providing valuable recreational spaces for residents.

After breakfast, we visited Chichipate's groundwater well and water storage facility, both in moderate condition and needing minor cleaning, painting, and repairs. GPS data gathered at these sites will assist with detailed mapping of the community's water infrastructure, helping us better understand system capacity and outreach requirements. Our team departed Chichipate with plans for future water system renovations and water committee training seminars.

In La Manguera, we reconnected with water committee members and hiked up to the water storage tank for an assessment. Similar to Chichipate, the tank showed signs of moderate degradation but could be improved with minor repairs and repainting. The committee highlighted a nearby parcel donated for constructing an additional water storage tank. We agreed that a new well and expanded storage capacity would significantly enhance water supply consistency for the community. After our final discussion, we bid farewell to the Manguera water committee and the Paso Pacifico team.

Later in the day, Carmelo joined us for a working lunch at Playa Las Tunas, where we reviewed progress and potential next steps. Following lunch, we headed east to Conchagua, a community where Reno served as a Peace Corps volunteer.

October 12-13 – Visit to Conchagua

Over the next day and a half, we visited Conchagua to reconnect with community members and long-time friends, reflecting on Reno's prior work in small business development. In the refugee community of Nueva Esperanza, we inspected the water storage tank Reno and colleagues built, which remains in good condition, adorned with a world map painted by the original team. We also visited Conchagua volcano, where panoramic views of the Gulf of Fonseca, nearby islands, and Laguna Olomega were striking, framed by the San Miguel and Usulután volcanoes.

October 14 – Departure

Reno and Tim concluded the trip with a shared commitment to return and build on the progress made, focusing on essential WASH improvements, capacity-building through water committee trainings, and advancing the watershed protection program.

TRIP CONCLUSION

This trip marked a meaningful step forward in strengthening relationships with local water committees and community partners in San Miguelito, Los Riitos, Chichipate, La Manguera, and Olomeguita. Through collaborative discussions and on-site assessments, we identified specific WASH needs and areas for environmental protection that will guide a sustainable development plan for the region. The commitment shown by community leaders and Paso Pacifico underscored a shared vision for improved water access, sanitation, and watershed health. As we return, we are more determined than ever to support these communities through targeted WASH interventions, capacity-building initiatives, and conservation efforts that will empower local stakeholders and foster resilience for years to come.

EL SALVADOR

Community WASH Assessment Trip

OCTOBER 2024



***WEFTA and Paso Pacifico WASH Assessment Trip for the Communities of:
San Miguelito, Los Riitos, Olomeguita, La Manguera, & Chichipate***

A special thanks to all those involved in making this trip a success.

They are:

- Ryan “Reno” Shields, WEFTA volunteer
- Sarah Otterstrom, Executive Director, Paso Pacifico
- Carmelo Romero, Country Coordinator, Paso Pacifico
- Paso Pacifico Conservation Team
- Water Committees of:
 - San Miguelito, Ahuachapán
 - Los Riitos, San Miguel
 - Chichipate, La Union
 - La Manguera, La Union
 - Olomeguita, La Union
- Donations from Waterlines (NGO)
- Tim Wellman, Executive Director, WEFTA and WEFTA volunteer
- The wonderful people of El Salvador

Community WASH Assessment Summary

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When in El Salvador you must start your day with a breakfast of Pupusas.



Reno and Tim traveled west to Ahuachapán and the bustling town of Cara Sucia.



The house where Tim spent his Peace Corps service (1997-1999) in the community of San Miguelito.



Beans and tortillas are still cooked on wood fired stoves.



A traditional snack of Pacaya with lime and salt.



A view of the National Park 'El Imposible' with rain on the way.



The traditional 'pila' where piped water is stored and used for washing clothes and dishes.



Thanks to a water project partially funded by Waterlines in 2001, the San Miguelito water system is functioning well. Water is metered and customers are paying their water bill.



One of the water storage tanks in San Miguelito that serves 148 metered connections.



We traveled east to the department of San Miguel crossing the Rio Lempa in time for the sunset.



WEFTA volunteers Reno and Tim were welcomed to the small community of Los Riitos on the Laguna Olomega.



In Los Riitos we heard from community members about their challenges to improve access to water and sanitation.



A traditional plate of new corn tamales.



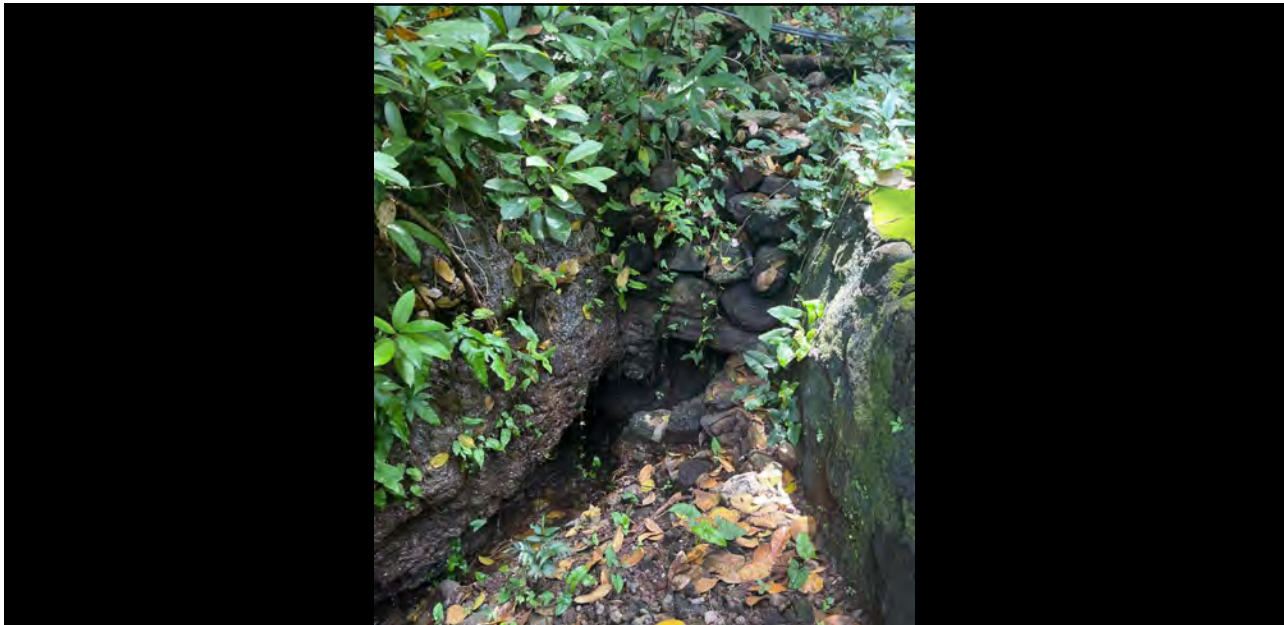
Some of the community members in Los Riitos have completed their own small pipelines to bring water from a spring for household water use.



Los Riitos community members and Paso Pacifico staff walked with us to the spring capture.



We discussed the need for a community wide water system that would provide water to everyone not just those tapped into the small spring source.



There are two springs located above some of the houses in Los Riitos. There is insufficient flow, and the springs are lower in elevation than most houses in the community. The plan is to drill a groundwater well that would provide potable water with adequate quantity and quality to the whole community on metered household connections.



We looked at multiple water storage tank sites along the way to provide water supply and pressure to the communities.



One of the spring sources in Los Riitos provides water for livestock.



Individual household waterlines mix with greywater and trash in the community of Los Riitos.



One of the water committee members in Los Riitos said he will donate this parcel of land for a new community water well.



The community water system of La Estructura, along the shores of Laguna Olomega uses groundwater adjacent to the lake for water supply. Some community members from Los Riitos purchase water here to truck back to their homes.



WEFTA and the Paso Pacifico staff met with the water committees from the communities of La Manguera and Chichipate to hear about their water and sanitation challenges.



The groundwater well that provides water to the community of La Manguera. Additional water supply is needed for the growing community.



WEFTA volunteer, Reno, Paso Pacifico staff, and water committee members of La Manguera at the water storage site.



WEFTA and Paso Pacifico along with water committee members from Chichipate visited the water well site for the community of Chichipate.



We also visited the water storage site for the community of Chichipate.



The Salvadoran street dog is called a 'chucho'.



One of the children of the area around Laguna Olomega shows a bag of potable water. Most community water systems in El Salvador are not considered to be potable water so many people purchase water that has been treated.



Reno and Tim along with the Paso Pacifico staff travel by boat to the island of Olomeguita for a community meeting.



A view from the lake of the community of La Estructura and the surrounding mountains.



Local fisherman catch fish from the lake in nets for home consumption and sale to the markets.



Fish are salted and dried in the sun.



The market in La Union has a variety of dried fish and shrimp for sale.



WEFTA and Paso Pacifico attend a community meeting on the island of Olomeguita to talk about water and sanitation challenges.



A good portion of the community of Olomeguita turned out to discuss water, sanitation, and environmental conservation.



A view of the school on the island of Olomeguita and the handwashing station for students.



Dry composting latrines are used in areas of high groundwater or where pit latrines do not work. The community of Olomeguita all use composting latrines. There is need to renovate some of the latrines due to overall age.



Reno, during his Peace Corps service, worked with the cooperative ACOCONCHAGUA on business development and economic development in the town of Conchagua.



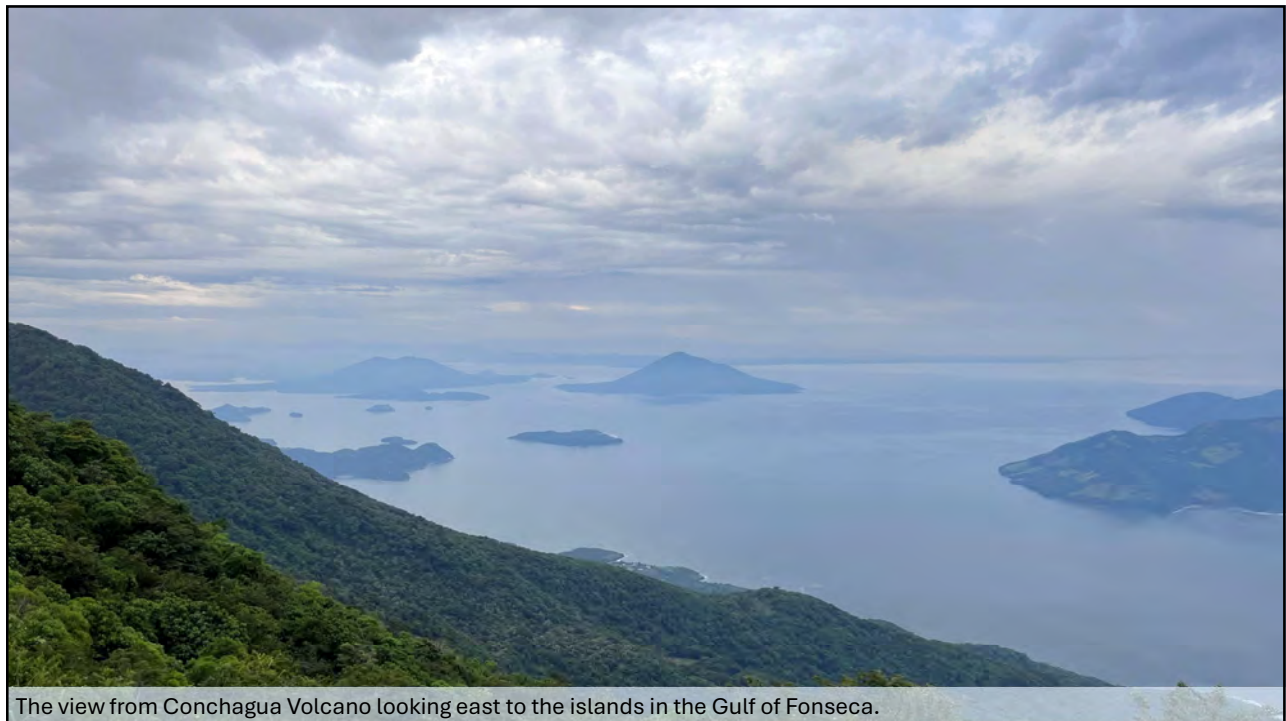
A view of a typical 'pila' set up built by Reno and another Peace Corps volunteer in Conchagua.



Visiting with one of the local store owners in Conchagua.



A view of a water tank Reno built, during his Peace Corps service in 1999, with CARE in the community of Nueva Esperanza. There is also a world map on the tank. Peace Corps volunteers know the world map project as a great way to engage with the host community.



The view from Conchagua Volcano looking east to the islands in the Gulf of Fonseca.



Sunset on the Pacific coast of La Libertad.