



SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WETLANDS RECOVERY PROJECT

Director's Group Meeting Notes

February 25, 2021

1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

WRP Director's Group Members Present:

Mark Gold, California Natural Resources Agency
Sam Schuchat, California State Coastal Conservancy
Wendy Hall, California State Lands Commission
Kris Peterson, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Ed De Meza, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
David Castanon, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
John Donnelly, Wildlife Conservation Board
Jenny Newman, LA Regional Water Quality Control Board
Phill Hammer, Central Regional Water Quality Control Board
Dave Gibson, San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board
Hope Smyth, Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board
Kate Hucklebridge, California Coastal Commission
Marina Cazorla, California State Parks
Jonathon Bishop, State Water Resource Control Board
Ellen Blake, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Ed Pert, California Department of Fish and Wildlife
Doug Gibson, Nature Collective (Wetland Advisory Group)

INTRODUCTIONS

Mark Gold, Chair

Executive Director, Ocean Protection Council & Deputy Secretary for Ocean and Coastal Policy, Natural Resource Agency

- **Introductions**
- **Meeting Ground Rules**

Recommended Actions: *Approve Meeting Minutes from February 27, 2020. Moved for approval (Sam Shuchat), and seconded (Jonathon Bishop). No objection to approval of meeting minutes. Chose to abstain: Dave Gibson, Jenny Newman, Joe Schroeder, Kris Peterson, Hope Smyth, Phil Hammer. Approval of minutes by acclamation.*

PUBLIC COMMENT ON NON-AGENDA ITEMS

Walter Lamb: presented a map image from certified PEIR on sea level rise for Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project, to raise awareness of the impact of sea level rise on Belding Savannah Sparrow habitat in the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Preserve.

REGIONAL STRATEGY GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Evyan Sloane, State Coastal Conservancy

Informational presentation reminding the Directors Group of the Regional Strategy 2018 wetland restoration objectives

- Collaborative group of agencies, scientists, and stakeholders developed measurable objectives outlined in the Regional Strategy, and key guiding principles
- Science behind the objectives included 3 components:
 - Historical ecology
 - Present day constraints
 - Future impacts of sea level rise
- Historical & present-day mapping effort, and development of regional sea level rise model
 - Results: ~62% of historic coastal wetlands have been lost, with many more acres at risk as time goes on
- Discussion of measurable objectives for each of the following goals:
 - Goal 1: Protect and restore wetland abundance and size
 - Restore wetland area
 - Restore wetland size
 - Restore wetland historic wetland types
 - Habitat diversity
 - Wetland-upland transition zone
 - Restore hydrological connectivity: tidal characteristics, sediment dynamics, freshwater flow
 - Wetland condition: Increase in CRAM scores
 - For sites being restored within current footprint, projects need to be in the ground by 2030 before sea level rise prohibits restoration

- Additional actions (reconnecting fragments) could be done later (2040); larger actions (realigning infrastructure) could be completed by 2070
- Goal 2: Preserve and restore stream, adjacent habitats, and other non-tidal wetland ecosystems to support healthy watersheds
 - Restore and maintain 210,000 acres of non-tidal wetlands
 - Remove artificial barriers to water, sediment, wildlife movement
 - Remove all key steelhead barriers identified by NOAA
- Goal 3: Support education and compatible access related to coastal wetlands and watersheds
 - Not quantitative but focus on supporting community-based restoration, equitable public access components, integrating interpretive programs, promoting educational activities, and disseminating wetland science
- Goal 4: Advance the science of wetland restoration and management
 - Identified key science needs and management questions that could be done before next Regional Strategy update—refining objectives for Goals 2-4
 - Develop quantifiable objectives for subtidal habitats
 - Analyze effects of removing infrastructure that impede inland migration
 - Refine sea level rise vulnerability as projections increase
 - Develop regional monitoring plan
 - Establish regional science advisory panel for all wetland projects

Update on the WRP's efforts to track objective implementation using EcoAtlas

- Since the publication of the Regional Strategy in late 2018, there have been 2 wetland restoration implementation projects authorized for funding
- Will provide an update on objective progress at the next Directors Group meeting in 2022
- WRP and several member agencies already require Work Plan projects to be uploaded onto Eco Atlas' Project Tracker
- San Francisco Estuary Institute (SFEI) is developing EcoAtlas dashboard specific to the WRP objectives to track progress in Southern California
- Objective tracking on EcoAtlas will help the WRP not only determine its own progress, but also for other state projects and goals such as OPC's aquatic resources mapping effort, the State's goal of conserving 30% of land and water by 2030, and OPC's wetland restoration objectives, and SFEI's effort to map states aquatic resources
- **DiG Comments and Questions**
 - Mark Gold: The 30x30 initiative hasn't been discussed on a habitat-by-habitat basis, but how will the WRP strive to meet this important administrative goal for wetlands?

- The Coastal Conservancy requires all projects to be uploaded on EcoAtlas with associated maps. This will make information about where and when wetlands are being restored widely transparent and accessible to meet goals such as 30x30. The SFEI project will aid in providing the most up-to-date information on the current distribution of wetlands.
- Megan Cooper: WRP has tools in place to help inform the governor's priorities in the larger state-wide framework, and to track progress.
- Mark Gold: What is the percentage of increase for coastal wetlands that will be achieved through the WRP?
 - Referred to figure in Regional Strategy 2018
 - Mark Gold: May be beneficial to start thinking of Regional Strategy restoration objectives in the context of the 30x30 targets, as well as Natural and Working Lands targets.
- Hope Smyth: Wetland restoration objective regarding the 7,700 acres (Goal 1)— is this distributed throughout Southern California, or are there other areas where restoration activities are viable?
 - This acreage associated with this objective is distributed throughout Southern California. Agricultural lands was one of the land types that was included as undeveloped lands that could become wetlands—a lot of opportunity in the Ventura subregion, but there were also opportunities across all of the other subregions. Regional strategy report includes this breakdown by sub region.

Public Comment:

- Tom Malone: Using the example of agricultural land in Ventura—Is there thought to preemptively acquire in management retreat, to target land for acquisition upstream/upriver/up estuary?
 - Evyan Sloane: There is active acquisition projects occurring in Ventura region to facilitate wetland restoration
 - John Donnelly: Wildlife Conservation Board is engaged in acquisitions in Ventura county as well, and has recently approved a project on Ventura River and Stream
- Fred Sandquist: With the recent administration change and rejoining of the Paris accord, this could lead to more opportunities to get additional monetary resources, and other resources for wetland restoration efforts

WORK PLAN 2021

Maggie Jenkins, State Coastal Conservancy

- The Work Plan is a list of prioritized wetland projects for Southern California
 - The Work Plan contains proposed preservation, acquisition, restoration, and enhancement projects that will accomplish the goals and objectives identified in the Regional Strategy 2018
- Work Plan projects have been vetted by member agencies that comprise the Wetland Managers Group
- There are 37 projects on the Work Plan. The cost of these projects is \$420M with a total of \$229M needed and 12,952 acres and 480 stream miles to be restored
- 5 projects were added during 2020
 - Big Canyon Creek Restoration and Estuary Adaptation Project: Phase 2B/C Final Design and Permitting
 - Redondo Beach AES Power Plant: Acquisition and Site Planning
 - Santa Margarita River Fish Passage Project: Final design
 - Santa Margarita River Fish Passage Project: Implementation
 - San Joaquin Marsh Hydrology & Climate Adaptation Feasibility and Planning
- There are currently 17 Community Wetlands Restoration Grant Program projects that involve local groups doing small restoration projects led by volunteers.
 - Program is currently undergoing a revisioning process, before releasing an RFP; an RFP is expected to be out by the end of 2021
- **DiG Comments and Questions:**
 - Sam Schuchat: Informed audience that this was Maggie's last DiG meeting, as her Sea Grant fellowship is coming to an end.
 - John Donnelly: What is the difference between project cost and the funding need?
 - Maggie: The difference is the amount that has already been secured. \$420M represents the total cost of all of the projects collectively, and the funding need (\$229M) represents the amount needed to fundraise for those projects.
 - Mark Gold: The funding need represents Work Plan projects that are ready to go, not all projects that are priorities of the WRP
 - Evyan Sloane: Agrees, projects that are ready for funding—often planning phases. That is why that amount may seem small when considering large implementation phases happening in the future.

Recommended Action: *Approve Work Plan 2021*

Work Plan 2021 approval moved (Kate Hucklebridge) and seconded (Dave Gibson). No objection of approval for the 2021 Work Plan. Work Plan is approved by acclamation.

Public Comment:

- No public comment at this time

WETLAND RESTORATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Meghan Martinez, State Coastal Conservancy

Video presented highlights for both the Work Plan and Community Wetland Restoration Grant Program projects that have continued to progress since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

DiG Comments and Questions:

Various remarks about how it was inspiring to see great work continuing during the pandemic.

Public Comment:

- Robert Vanderhook: Shared ecology relating to Castor Bean. In his experience along the Southern California coast, if Castor Bean is left in place, it will support the growth of native plants. If pulled out, it disrupts soil and is replaced by invasive species.

REGIONAL COORDINATED PERMITTING

Melissa Scianni, Chair WRP Wetland Managers Group (WMG)

- Update on WRP's activities to coordinate wetland restoration permitting efforts across southern California
- Recap from last year's DiG identified activities for WMG to undertake in 2020
 - All activities are consistent with the state's Cutting the Green Tape
- Following direction from the DiG in February 2020, the WRP has started implementing two permit pre-application meetings for Work Plan projects
 - Agreed that there are two points in the planning/permitting phase when applicants could need assistance.
 - During the planning phase when CEQA documents are being prepared to ensure proper studies are being conducted, and necessary information for regulatory permits are applied to CEQA documents
 - When applicants are ready to submit their regulatory application—to ensure all necessary information is provided the first time
 - These meetings include all relevant state and federal regulatory agencies for each project with one WRP Wetland Manager Group member and one permit analyst in attendance for each agency

- SCC staff (Evyan Sloane, Project Specialist from the Coastal Conservancy), organizes, schedules, and facilitates these meetings including all preparatory and follow-up work with the project proponent
- Two Work Plan projects had permit pre-application meetings in 2020:
 - Ormond Beach wetlands
 - Aliso Estuary restoration project
 - Both projects were at CEQA planning stages
 - Meetings were ~2 hours each and had great representation across the regulatory agencies
- Three Work Plan projects are scheduled to have permit pre-application meetings in 2021:
 - Loma Alta Slough
 - Los Cerritos Wetlands: Southern Area
 - San Joaquin Marsh restoration
- Following direction from DiG in February 2020, WMG coordinated with the State Board on General Order for restoration projects to ensure that it would cover projects on the Work Plan.
 - No problems flagged; it appears the General Order should cover all of the types of projects expected on the Work Plan
 - Awaiting release of draft EIR, and once released will have discussion with Jessica Nadolski (State Water Board) to ensure that there is nothing in the Work Plan projects that would preclude the WRP from using this.
- Following direction from DiG in February 2020, the WRP started adapting the San Francisco Bay's Sand in the Gears memo outlining key issues slowing down the permitting process for voluntary wetland restoration
 - Some of the key issues identified in the document include habitat type conversion, public access, listed species issues, and monitoring requirements among agencies
 - The WMG will continue to develop this document and will finish by the next Directors Group meeting in 2022
- 2021 Planned activities
 - Continue pre-application meetings
 - Complete Sand in the Gears report
 - Compile existing permitting resources/guidance/tools from each agency
- **DiG Comments and Questions:**
 - Mark Gold: How many pre-application meetings will be typical for the Southern California region on an annual basis?
 - Melissa Scianni: Considered workload for staff and consulted with existing Work Plan project partners to gauge pace of process and when they might be ready for meetings; expecting less than 5 meetings

annually, or an average of 3 per year for the whole region; may be variable.

- Mark Gold: In the case of projects that have urban renewal benefits (e.g., LA River that has multiple projects), could they be considered for these pre-application meetings? If there is a project that is not on the Work Plan, could it be considered?
 - Initially thought pre-application meetings would be offered to projects that are explicitly on Work Plan, SCC staff would reach out to Work Plan project contacts to schedule meetings
 - San Joaquin Marsh project (removed from Work Plan)—WMG decided to have a pre-app meeting despite not being on the Work Plan because it directly affects other Work Plan projects. If there are many requests for projects that are not on the Work Plan, capacity will have to be discussed.
- David Castanon: What triggers when the pre-application meeting occurs? How does this process address the issue of getting federal engagement occurring earlier?
 - Melissa Scianni: The reason for choosing 2 meetings (one earlier in the planning phase/ one when ready to apply), is that the WMG thought it best to not wait until application submission. It is more helpful to engage earlier in the process. Trigger for first meeting is open-ended and dependent on when the applicant is ready. Helpful to have federal regulatory agencies participate earlier and offer input, even if not technically engaged yet.
 - Kate Hucklebridge: The benefit of early engagement is avoiding long planning processes, and various issues arising because regulatory agencies weren't involved from beginning. First meetings are critical and ensuring that all necessary regulatory staff are present to develop the pre-application process. Happy to see this process being implemented.
 - Melissa Scianni: Much valuable discussion around the timing. The earlier meeting may be more critical to avoid wasted time and helping to get applications completed in an efficient way.

Public Comment:

- Marsha Hanscom: Speaking on behalf of Sierra Club. Agrees with Kate Hucklebridge about early planning. Expressed that this process hasn't been applied to the CEQA process for the Ballona wetlands, more specifically that many of the comments in EIR from various agencies haven't been adequately

addressed; referenced 4 ongoing lawsuits. Believes the Cutting Green Tape initiative is a good idea, but that the public needs to be involved.

- Robert Vanderhook: Agreed with Mark Gold about comment on LA River and expressed gratitude about accessibility of virtual meetings to the public. Commented on use of terminology “recovery vs restoration” in the context of endangered species, and how the use of the term recovery is important. LA River presents as an opportunity to incorporate kiosks and interpretive centers along the bicycle path, with added focus on necessity of uplands and not just wetlands
- Tom Maloney: Question directed to Melissa Scianni about compensatory mitigation funds. Did the WMG do any assessment of the capacity that might be available to utilize the in-lieu fee program to avoid loss of these funds over time?
 - Melissa Scianni: WMG hasn’t done an analysis of all in-lieu fee project funds that are outstanding in Southern California, and what projects those might be able to go to. In-lieu fee funding may be an option for projects on the Work Plan, it is more onerous to get a project funded with compensatory mitigation money.
 - Megan Cooper: Specifications for where compensatory mitigation funds can be spent can make it challenging to find a project where those funds can be applied. Focused on trying to incrementally expand by watershed where we can look for projects where funds can be used.
 - Tom Maloney: Probably a lot of capacity for the In-Lieu Fee Program (referenced Cutting Green Tape Initiative). Available to help if necessary.
 - John Donnelly: Is it SCC that approves the project and use of funding, or does the regulatory agency approve the project and SCC allocates funding?
 - Megan Cooper: Regulatory agency (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) needs to approve, and SCC disperses funds.
- Walter Lamb: It can be difficult to allow the public to engage more but is necessary to do so early. Problematic to wait until the last minute—can lead to the filing of lawsuits. These meetings haven’t felt inviting to members of the public. Where is the right place to get answers to questions?

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