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## State Water Resources Control Board

**TO:** [via e-mail]  
Board Members  
**STATE WATER RESOURCES CONTROL BOARD AND  
CALIFORNIA REGIONAL WATER QUALITY CONTROL BOARDS**

**FROM:**   
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Chief Counsel  
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**DATE:** April 25, 2013

**SUBJECT:** TRANSMITTAL OF EX PARTE COMMUNICATIONS QUESTIONS AND  
ANSWERS DOCUMENT

Attached please find an updated document on ex parte communications. This memorandum and the accompanying Ex Parte Questions and Answers supersede all previous Office of Chief Counsel memoranda on the same subject.<sup>1</sup>

The changes in the attached reflect recent legislation that amends the Porter-Cologne Water Quality Control Act effective January 1, 2013. The changes resulting from Senate Bill 965 (Wright) (Stats. 2012, ch. 551) generally allow ex parte communications about issues concerning certain pending general orders of the water boards, but make certain interested persons subject to reporting requirements. Questions 28 through 35 and question 45 of the Ex Parte Questions and Answers document address these new ex parte communication rules and reporting requirements for general orders.

The State Water Resources Control Board and the nine California Regional Water Quality Control Boards perform a variety of functions. The boards convene to set broad policy consistent with the laws passed by Congress and the Legislature. In this regard, the boards perform a legislative function. The boards also routinely determine the rights and duties of individual dischargers or even a class of dischargers. In this regard, the boards perform a judicial function. The judicial function manifests itself when the boards adopt permits and conditional waivers or take enforcement actions. Some water board actions, such as the adoption of general permits, straddle the line between judicial and legislative functions because they establish rights and duties of future, unnamed dischargers.

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent memorandum was a December 28, 2012 memorandum from me to members of the State Water Resources Control Board and the California Regional Water Quality Control Boards. That memo superseded prior memoranda from the Office of Chief Counsel concerning ex parte communications. The only change since my December 28, 2012 memorandum is the addition of question 45 addressing site visits and pending general orders.

Different rules apply depending on the type of action pending before a water board. One of the distinctions between legislative and judicial proceedings is the prohibition against ex parte communications. An ex parte communication is a communication to a board member about a pending water board matter that occurs in the absence of other parties to the matter and without notice and opportunity for all parties to participate in the communication. In legislative-type proceedings, ex parte communications are allowed. In judicial-type proceedings, ex parte communications are prohibited. In hybrid proceedings, such as the issuance of certain general permits, ex parte communications are generally allowed, but communications from certain interested persons must be disclosed. The accompanying questions and answer document addresses common issues pertaining to ex parte communications.

I have structured the questions and answers document to serve as a reference document for board members and the attorneys within the Office of Chief Counsel. By breaking the subject matter into discrete questions, my intent is to provide a list that board members can quickly scan to identify relevant issues and the accompanying legal answer.

There are four broad themes pertaining to communications with board members.

1. If a proceeding is not pending or impending before a water board, board members may communicate with the public and governmental officials regarding general issues within the water board's jurisdiction. Water board members may also participate in information gathering efforts such as tours or site visits.
2. If a proceeding is pending or impending before a water board for the issuance of general waste discharge requirements, a categorical waiver, or a general 401 certification, board members may communicate with the public and government officials about the pending order. Special disclosure requirements apply to communications that involve certain persons with an interest in the proceeding.
3. If any other adjudicative proceeding is pending or impending before a water board, ex parte communications with that water board's members regarding an issue in that proceeding are prohibited.
4. If a rulemaking or other proceeding is pending or impending before a water board, a board member may, if he or she chooses to do so, have ex parte communications regarding issues in that proceeding.

The questions and answer document does not and cannot address all the issues pertaining to ex parte communications. Over time additional questions may be added based on feedback from board members.

#### Attachment

cc: [All via e-mail only]  
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Jonathan Bishop, EXEC  
Caren Trgovcich, EXEC  
All Executive Officers, Regional Water Boards  
All Assistant Executive Officers, Regional Water Boards  
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All Office of Chief Counsel attorneys

# EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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<b>I. Ex Parte Summary .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1. Q. What is an ex parte communication? .....	1
2. Q. What is a communication? .....	2
3. Q. What purposes are served by limitations on ex parte communications?.....	2
4. Q. Do ex parte communications rules prevent water board members from understanding the issues and people's concerns? .....	2
5. Q. How can board members educate themselves without violating the prohibition on ex parte communications? .....	3
6. Q. How can water board members explain ex parte rules to the public? .....	3
7. Q. What proceedings are subject to the prohibition on ex parte communications?.....	3
<b>II. Adjudicative Proceedings.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>A. Types of Adjudicative Actions .....</b>	<b>4</b>
8. Q. What actions are adjudicative? .....	4
9. Q. Are ex parte communications prohibited for pending adjudicative actions?.....	4
10. Q. Does the ex parte communications prohibition apply to a conditional waiver of waste discharge requirements that identifies a specific person or persons?.....	4
11. Q. May discrete policy issues within an adjudicative proceeding be considered separately in a non-adjudicative proceeding? .....	5
<b>B. Pending Adjudicative Proceeding.....</b>	<b>5</b>
12. Q. When is a proceeding pending?.....	5
13. Q. What is an impending matter?.....	5
14. Q. How can a board member determine whether an action is pending? .....	6
15. Q. Are adjudicative matters pending before the regional water boards also pending before the State Water Board?.....	6
16. Q. Does a reopener provision in a permit mean an action is pending? .....	7
<b>C. Scope of Ex Parte Communications Prohibition .....</b>	<b>7</b>
17. Q. What subjects are covered by the ex parte communications prohibition?.....	7
18. Q. Are all communications prohibited with a person interested in an adjudicative proceeding pending before a water board? .....	8
19. Q. Are there exceptions to the prohibition? .....	8
20. Q. What is a matter of practice or procedure that is not in controversy? .....	8
<b>D. Persons Subject to the Ex Parte Communications Prohibition .....</b>	<b>8</b>
21. Q. Who is subject to the rules prohibiting ex parte communications?.....	8
22. Q. May staff communicate with board members without violating ex parte rules?.....	9
23. Q. Are other government officials subject to the ex parte rules? .....	10
24. Q. May a board member attend a publicly noticed staff-level workshop on an adjudicative matter? .....	10
<b>E. Consequences of Prohibited Ex Parte Communications .....</b>	<b>10</b>
25. Q. What are the consequences of violating the ex parte communications prohibition? .....	10
26. Q. How may a board member cure an inadvertent ex parte communication? .....	10
27. Q. What if a board member received a communication about an adjudicative proceeding before becoming a board member? .....	11

## **EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

---

<b>F. Exception for Certain General Orders .....</b>	<b>11</b>
28. Q. Are proceedings on general waste discharge requirements, categorical waivers, and general 401 certifications (general orders) considered adjudicative proceedings? .....	11
29. Q. Does the ex parte communications prohibition apply to general orders? .....	12
30. Q. Who must disclose ex parte communications regarding general orders? .....	12
31. Q. What disclosure requirements apply to ex parte communications regarding general orders? .....	13
32. Q. How can a board member determine whether a member of a group is a “representative” for purposes of the disclosure requirements for general orders? .....	13
33. Q. Can a water board limit ex parte communications regarding a pending general order? .....	14
34. Q. Are all region-wide or statewide permits “general orders”? .....	14
35. Q. What are the consequences of violating the special disclosure requirements for general orders? .....	14
<b>III. Rulemaking and Other Proceedings .....</b>	<b>14</b>
36. Q. What actions are rulemaking? .....	14
37. Q. Is there a prohibition on private communications in rulemaking actions? .....	15
38. Q. What is the Office of Chief Counsel’s recommendation on handling communications in rulemaking proceedings? .....	15
39. Q. If a member chooses to disclose a communication, what is the preferred procedure? .....	15
40. Q. May a board member communicate with a person about how a general requirement may be translated into a subsequent permit requirement? .....	16
41. Q. What are “other proceedings”? .....	16
42. Q. Are “other proceedings” subject to ex parte rules? .....	16
<b>IV. Site Visits .....</b>	<b>17</b>
43. Q. Is a site visit a form of ex parte communication? .....	17
44. Q. Can a board member visit a regulated facility when an adjudicative action is pending? .....	17
45. Q. Can a board member visit a facility that will be regulated by a pending general order when an adjudicative action is pending? .....	17
46. Q. Can a board member visit a regulated facility when no adjudicative action is pending for that facility? .....	18
<b>V. General Issues .....</b>	<b>18</b>
47. Q. Why can legislators talk to anyone and the board members cannot? .....	18
48. Q. Why can the public talk to city council members and not board members? .....	18
49. Q. How should a board member handle comments concerning pending adjudicative proceedings raised in connection with other proceedings in which the board member participates? .....	18
50. Q. Is a communication about a pending adjudicative matter, received during a public forum, an ex parte communication? .....	19
51. Q. Whom can a board member speak with to clarify ex parte concerns? .....	19
52. Q. Who is responsible for complying with the ex parte rules – the board members or the public? .....	19

# EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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## I. EX PARTE SUMMARY

### Summary of ex parte framework:

1. If a proceeding is not pending or impending before a water board, board members may communicate with the public and governmental officials regarding general issues within the water board's jurisdiction. Water board members may also participate in information gathering efforts such as tours or site visits.
2. If a proceeding is pending or impending before a water board for the issuance of general waste discharge requirements, a categorical waiver, or a general 401 certification, board members may communicate with the public and government officials about the pending order. Special disclosure requirements apply to communications that involve certain persons with an interest in the proceeding.
3. If any other adjudicative proceeding is pending or impending before a water board, ex parte communications with that water board's members regarding an issue in that proceeding are prohibited.
4. If a rulemaking or other proceeding is pending or impending before a water board, a board member may, if he or she chooses to do so, have ex parte communications regarding issues in that proceeding.

### 1. Q. What is an ex parte communication?

A. An ex parte communication is a communication to a board member from any person<sup>1</sup> about a pending water board matter that occurs in the absence of other parties to the matter and without notice and opportunity for all parties to participate in the communication. People often refer to these communications as "one-sided," "off-the-record," or private communications between a board member and any person concerning a matter that is pending or impending before the applicable water board.

One-sided communications does not mean that the communication must occur in privacy or among two people in order to be an ex parte communication. Even a public communication before a large audience may still be an ex parte communication if other parties to the proceeding do not have notice of and an opportunity to participate in the communication.

#### *Examples of ex parte communications include:*

1. A water board has scheduled a hearing to consider the assessment of administrative civil liability against a discharger for an illegal discharge. Before the hearing, a representative of an environmental group attempts to speak to a new board member regarding the discharger's alleged long-term violations of environmental laws. Such a communication would be ex parte.
2. A water board has scheduled a hearing to consider the issuance of a new discharge permit to Dairy X. The president of Dairy X invites a board member out to the site to

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<sup>1</sup> There are special rules for certain staff who advise the board member. Please see Question 22.

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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show him/her the facility and explain its operation. Such a communication would be ex parte.

**2. Q. What is a communication?**

Communications include face-to-face conversations, phone calls, written correspondence, e-mails, instant messaging, and the next level of technology that presents itself. The Office of Chief Counsel also considers site visits and tours to be ex parte communications. By their very nature, site visits communicate evidentiary information to board members. Site visits can be a useful part of the decision-making process and special procedures should be used for site visits. (Please see Questions 43-45.)

**3. Q. What purposes are served by limitations on ex parte communications?**

Rules regarding ex parte communications have their roots in constitutional principles of due process and fundamental fairness. With public agencies, ex parte communications rules also serve an important function in providing transparency. Ex parte communications may contribute to public cynicism that decisions are based more on special access and influence than on the facts, the laws, and the exercise of discretion to promote the public interest.

Ex parte communications are fundamentally offensive in adjudicative proceedings because they involve an opportunity by one party to influence the decision maker outside the presence of opposing parties, thus violating due process requirements. Such communications are not subject to rebuttal or comment by other parties. Ex parte communications can frustrate a lengthy and painstaking adjudicative process because certain decisive facts and arguments would not be reflected in the record or in the decisions. Finally, ex parte contacts may frustrate judicial review since the record would be missing such communications.

**4. Q. Do ex parte communications rules prevent water board members from understanding the issues and people's concerns?**

Ex parte communications rules do not prevent the flow of information to water board members. Instead, ex parte rules shape how the board members receive that information and are intended to ensure that board members receive relevant information in a fair and transparent manner. A person can share issues and concerns by filing appropriate documents with the board and during a public meeting consistent with the water boards' administrative procedures.

Essentially, ex parte rules allow everyone to know and, if desired, rebut the information upon which the water boards make decisions before they make their decisions. The rules are also intended to ensure that all board members have a common record upon which to make their decisions and that a court will be able to ascertain the bases for such decisions.

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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**5. Q. How can board members educate themselves without violating the prohibition on ex parte communications?**

Rules on ex parte communications should not serve to prevent board members from understanding the matters to be considered and decided by the board. If a board member needs additional information about a matter, there are appropriate processes that can be used. There is no substitute for an active, engaged board member when it comes to understanding an issue. Asking questions on the record, or requesting staff and interested persons to specifically address certain issues on the record, helps provide the necessary foundation for board action. In addition, staff assigned to advise the board (see Question 22) may provide assistance and advice, and may help evaluate evidence in the record, so long as the staff does not furnish, augment, diminish, or modify the evidence in the record.

**6. Q. How can water board members explain ex parte rules to the public?**

This is a decision for individual board members to make. Board members are free to refer callers to the Office of Chief Counsel. If the board member chooses to explain ex parte limitations with a person, there are certain themes to keep in mind when explaining ex parte rules.

First, ex parte rules do not prevent anyone from providing information to the water boards or requesting specific actions from the water boards. Ex parte rules simply require that the information come into the record through a writing subject to public review or in a duly noticed, public meeting. Second, ex parte rules are designed to ensure fairness for everyone. No person or interest uniquely benefits from ex parte rules. The rules apply to everyone, and prevent any one person or interest from having special access to water board members. Third, ex parte rules provide transparency, allowing everyone to understand and to appreciate how the water boards reach a decision. By encouraging persons to submit written comments or speak on the record, a person's comments will be heard by all the water board members and other stakeholders. If a person persists, however, a board member can explain that s/he might become subject to disqualification, in which case the person's efforts to communicate with the board member will have been to no avail.

**7. Q. What proceedings are subject to the prohibition on ex parte communications?**

Only adjudicative proceedings are subject to the prohibition on ex parte communications. The water boards function in many capacities, from setting broad policies on water quality control, to planning to implement those policies, to implementing those policies through specific regulatory actions that determine the rights and duties of a person or class of persons. Adjudicative proceedings fall in the latter category of implementing policies through actions that determine the specific rights and duties of persons. (Please see Questions 8-10.)

The continuum from policy-setting to policy-implementing does not have discrete breakpoints. This question and answer document is designed to answer some of the most common questions and provide a useful framework for understanding ex parte issues. It does not create any rules beyond those contained in the Administrative

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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Procedure Act or court decisions. Board members will need to work closely with legal counsel at times to determine whether the prohibition on ex parte communications applies to a specific action or proceeding.

### II. ADJUDICATIVE PROCEEDINGS

#### A. Types of Adjudicative Actions

##### 8. Q. What actions are adjudicative?

Adjudicative actions are those actions where the water boards make a decision after determining specific facts and applying laws and regulations to those facts. Adjudicative proceedings are the evidentiary hearings used to determine the facts by which a water board reaches a decision that determines the rights and duties of a particular person or persons. Adjudicative proceedings include, but are not limited to, enforcement actions and permit issuance. For example, any person who proposes to discharge waste to waters of the state must apply for a discharge permit. The proceeding to consider whether to issue the permit and the conditions to include in the permit would be adjudicative.

Below is a partial list of common water board actions that often follow adjudicative proceedings:

- National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits;
- Waste discharge requirements (WDRs);
- Water right permits and requests for reconsideration;
- Orders conditionally waiving waste discharge requirements;
- Administrative civil liability (ACL) orders;
- Cease and desist orders;
- Cleanup and abatement orders;
- Water quality certification orders (401 certification);
- Permit revocations.

A list of common actions that are not subject to the ex parte prohibition is provided in Part III.

##### 9. Q. Are ex parte communications prohibited for pending adjudicative actions?

Yes. The ex parte communications prohibition for adjudicative proceedings originates in court decisions and has been codified in Chapter 4.5 of the Administrative Procedure Act. The Administrative Procedure Act prohibits “direct or indirect” communications to water board members about an issue in a pending adjudicative proceeding.

##### 10. Q. Does the ex parte communications prohibition apply to a conditional waiver of waste discharge requirements that identifies a specific person or persons?

Yes. The issuance of a conditional waiver pursuant to Water Code section 13269 that identifies a specific person or persons is more appropriately considered an adjudicative proceeding. These types of waivers determine the rights and duties of those persons identified in the order. The orders are directly enforceable against the persons. Conditional waivers are specifically exempt from the rulemaking provisions of the



## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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Administrative Procedure Act. The water boards adopt conditional waivers following the same procedures that are used for any other permitting decision, as opposed to the legislative procedures used to adopt water quality control plans or for administrative rulemaking. Conditional waivers are also subject to the same judicial review standards as any other permit. Together these attributes mean that the issuance of a conditional waiver is an adjudicative action.

**11. Q. May discrete policy issues within an adjudicative proceeding be considered separately in a non-adjudicative proceeding?**

Under appropriate circumstances, a discrete, significant policy issue may be segregated from the adjudicative proceeding and decided using suitable procedures for policy-setting (e.g., regulations, amendments to a water quality control plan, or state policy for water quality control). The Court of Appeal recently sanctioned this approach in the *State Water Resources Control Board Cases*,<sup>2</sup> while noting the importance of recognizing the different requirements that apply to matters decided in an adjudicative proceeding and those decided separately in legislative proceedings. Those issues considered in the policy-setting procedure would not be subject to the prohibitions on ex parte communications during the policy-setting proceeding. However, the ex parte communications prohibition still applies to the adjudicative proceeding (including those issues not involved in the policy-setting proceeding and those issues addressed in the policy-setting proceeding once the policy-setting proceeding has concluded).

**B. Pending Adjudicative Proceeding**

**12. Q. When is a proceeding pending?**

A proceeding is pending from the time the water board issues an initial pleading in an evidentiary proceeding, or from the time an application for a decision is filed that will require an evidentiary hearing, whichever is earlier. In many circumstances, the “initial pleading” will be a notice of hearing with the staff’s proposed action.

For example, an adjudicative proceeding is pending for an administrative civil liability order from the time an administrative civil liability complaint is issued. A proceeding for issuance of waste discharge requirements is pending before a regional water board when the board receives a report of waste discharge, because that is an application for decision that will occur in a hearing before the board. For general waste discharge requirements, the notice of an evidentiary hearing makes the matter pending. For water rights permits, the best legal interpretation is that the proceeding is pending when the State Water Board issues a notice of hearing, because prior to that time there is no assurance that there will be an evidentiary hearing since the division chief may issue certain water rights permits.

**13. Q. What is an impending matter?**

The Administrative Procedure Act only addresses “pending” proceedings, however, there may be circumstances where board members are aware that an adjudicative

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<sup>2</sup> *State Water Resources Control Board Cases* (2006) 136 Cal.App.4th 674.

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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action is impending. The fairness and transparency of the process are no less compromised if an ex parte communication takes place a few days before the issuance of a notice of hearing or the filing of a report of waste discharge. The desire of a person to speak with a board member about a specific site should generally be viewed as a signal that something is impending. Where a proceeding is clearly impending, water board members should consider ex parte communications to be prohibited based on due process considerations. For example, if a water board member knows that a notice on an enforcement action is to be signed on a Tuesday, it would be inappropriate for the board member to receive an ex parte communication concerning the enforcement matter on Monday night. On the other hand, a matter would generally not be considered impending if the issuance of a notice of hearing or the filing of a report of waste discharge is not reasonably expected to occur until several months after the communication in question.

The issues concerning impending matters can be difficult and fact-specific. The most important issue with impending matters is to avoid a situation where it appears the communication was timed to avoid the Administrative Procedure Act's prohibition on ex parte communications for pending adjudicative actions. In the event there is a communication received on an impending matter, the board member may want to consider whether an appropriate disclosure should be made to avoid a subsequent allegation of impropriety. (Please see Question 26.) Water board members should consult with legal counsel if they have any questions on a specific communication in an impending matter.

**14. Q. How can a board member determine whether an action is pending?**

Some regional water boards maintain a list of applications under consideration and outstanding notices. Confer with your regional water board's Executive Officer (or for State Water Board members, the Executive Director) to determine how your water board maintains a list of pending adjudicative actions.

**15. Q. Are adjudicative matters pending before the regional water boards also pending before the State Water Board?**

No, but once the State Water Board receives a petition requesting the State Water Board to commence review of a regional water board action, the ex parte communications prohibition applies to the petition proceeding. The State Water Board has the authority to review the regional water boards' adjudicative actions. Most regional water board adjudicative actions are not petitioned to the State Water Board. It would be inappropriate to consider a matter pending before the State Water Board while it is still pending before the regional water board and it might never be challenged to the State Water Board.

A State Water Board member may wish to confer with the Office of Chief Counsel before having a communication about a controversial regional water board adjudicative action where there is a substantial likelihood that a petition will be filed with the State Water Board. In certain circumstances, the more cautious legal advice may be to regard the adjudicative proceeding as *impending* before the State Water Board, even though it is still pending before the regional water board. Determining whether the matter is

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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impending would be a fact-specific inquiry, and would only be the advice of legal counsel in light of those facts.

Once the State Water Board receives a petition, the basis for the State Water Board's review will generally be the evidentiary and administrative record before the regional water board. As a result, the same prohibition on ex parte communications that applies to regional water board members in the region taking the action applies to the State Water Board members deciding the petition on the merits. The prohibition on communications with the State Water Board members concerning a petition begins when the State Water Board receives a petition requesting the State Water Board to commence review of a regional water board's action or inaction.

The State Water Board's regulations authorize an interested person to submit a petition and hold that petition abeyance. The regulations also authorize a petitioner to request that a petition be removed from active review and placed in abeyance. Consistent with the Administrative Procedure Act, a petition in abeyance is not pending before the State Water Board because a petition in abeyance does not request the State Water Board to make a decision. The petition in abeyance serves as placeholder that allows the interested person to request a decision from the State Water Board at a later date. Until and unless a petition in abeyance is activated, there is no application for a decision pending before the State Water Board.

**16. Q. Does a reopener provision in a permit mean an action is pending?**

No, not until a specific reopener or permit modification action is noticed for board action. Many permits include provisions that allow the regional water board to modify the permit based on subsequent information or conditions. The ability for a regional water board to reopen and modify the permit in the future does not trigger the prohibition on ex parte communication. However, once a water board issues a notice to reopen the permit, the rules concerning pending adjudicative proceedings would apply to the consideration of permit amendments.

**C. Scope of Ex Parte Communications Prohibition**

**17. Q. What subjects are covered by the ex parte communications prohibition?**

The Administrative Procedure Act's prohibition on ex parte communications is very broad. It extends to "direct and indirect" communications. Board members must be mindful that persons who ordinarily would not be subject to the prohibition (e.g., secretaries, staff assigned to advise the board) cannot be used as a conduit for a prohibited ex parte communication, and thereby a source of an indirect communication.

The ex parte communications prohibition also extends to "any issue in the proceeding." With limited exceptions discussed in Questions 19-20, if the communication involves any issue in the proceeding, be it a factual issue, a legal issue, or a policy issue, it is subject to the ex parte communications prohibition.

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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**18. Q. Are all communications prohibited with a person interested in an adjudicative proceeding pending before a water board?**

No. Communications are only prohibited to the extent they reach an issue in the proceeding. Even where a matter is pending before a water board, a communication with a party to the matter is not considered ex parte if the communication does not relate to the matter.

**19. Q. Are there exceptions to the prohibition?**

There are certain limited exceptions to the prohibition on ex parte communications. First, as discussed in Questions 28-3534, different rules apply to proceedings involving general orders. Second, as discussed in Question 22, certain staff advising the board are not subject to the prohibition. Second, there are limited statutory exemptions, but generally they should only be used after consultation with legal counsel. The first statutory exemption is typically not available to the water boards, and involves communications to resolve an ex parte matter specifically authorized by statute. The second statutory exemption is for communications that concern a matter of procedure or practice that is not in controversy.

**20. Q. What is a matter of practice or procedure that is not in controversy?**

The Law Revision Commission comments supporting the Administrative Procedure Act give several examples of the types of “practice and procedure” matters that are not in controversy. Matters of practice and procedure include the format of papers to be submitted, the number of copies, manner of service, and calendaring meetings. The Administrative Procedure Act also identifies continuances, as a matter of practice or procedure. Delays associated with a continuance request, however, may often be controversial. As a result, a request for continuance ordinarily should be made through more formal procedures to ensure that all parties are aware of the request and have an opportunity to respond.

Generally, staff or counsel, as opposed to a board member, would handle the types of matters embraced by this exception to the Administrative Procedure Act’s prohibition on ex parte communications.

**D. Persons Subject to the Ex Parte Communications Prohibition**

**21. Q. Who is subject to the rules prohibiting ex parte communications?**

Generally, the prohibition on ex parte communications extends to any person attempting to communicate with a board member about an issue in a pending adjudicative proceeding. The Administrative Procedure Act broadly defines person to include “an individual, partnership, corporation, governmental subdivision or unit of a governmental subdivision, or public or private organization or entity of any character.” As a result, essentially anyone expressing an interest in a water board action and attempting to communicate with a board member is subject to the prohibition on ex parte communications in adjudicative proceedings.

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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The notable exceptions to the prohibition are for communications between board members and from certain staff of the water boards (see Question 22), as well as the exception to the prohibition for certain general orders (see Questions 28-35). Because board members collectively serve as the presiding officer for an adjudicative hearing, communications among the board members are not subject to the ex parte prohibition. Obviously the members remain subject to other substantive and procedural laws (such as the Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act, which prohibits a quorum of a state board from discussing an issue either collectively or through serial discussions).

### 22. Q. May staff communicate with board members without violating ex parte rules?

Certain staff may communicate with the board members without violating ex parte rules. Staff may communicate with water board members about a pending adjudicative proceeding under three circumstances. Staff and legal counsel will generally be responsible for knowing their assignments on specific proceedings, and will only contact board members if appropriate pursuant to one of the following circumstances. If a board member wishes to communicate with staff and does not know which staff may be an appropriate contact, the board member should contact the Office of Chief Counsel to determine the appropriate staff contact. (Please see Question 51.)

(1) *Staff Assigned to Assist and Advise the Board:* In virtually all circumstances, there are some staff (including at least one attorney) assigned to assist and advise a water board. These staff members are not advocates for a particular action, and in fact, cannot have served as investigators, prosecutors, or advocates in the proceeding or its pre-adjudicative stage for the ex parte exception to apply. These staff members may evaluate the evidence in the record but shall not furnish, augment, diminish, or modify the evidence in the record. For certain proceedings, the water board may issue a memorandum detailing staff responsibilities and identifying the staff assigned to assist and advise the board.

(2) *Staff Advising the Board on a Settlement Offer:* A staff member of the water boards, even if s/he has previously served as an investigator or advocate in the pending adjudicative proceeding, may communicate with a board member concerning a settlement proposal advocated by the staff member. In order to fit within this exception, the settlement proposal must be a specific proposal, supported by the staff member and another party to the proceeding, and the staff member must be advocating for the specific proposal. While the Administrative Procedure Act permits such communications, the more cautious approach would be for the water board to receive the proposed settlement communication in writing to avoid any subsequent claims of irregularity and to allow the water board to receive a candid assessment from advisory staff who have not participated in the investigation or advocacy of a specific action. A written communication should be used when the proposed settlement is not supported by all the parties to the proceeding.

(3) *Staff Advising the Board in Nonprosecutorial Proceedings:* A staff member of the water boards, even if s/he has previously served as an investigator or advocate in the pending adjudicative proceeding may communicate with a board member concerning issues in a non-prosecutorial proceeding. These discussions are not subject to the ex parte communications prohibition.

## **EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

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**23. Q. Are other government officials subject to the ex parte rules?**

Yes. Persons representing other government officials and agencies (local, state, or federal) are subject to the Administrative Procedure Act's prohibition on ex parte communications if they attempt to communicate with a water board member about a pending adjudicative proceeding. Keep in mind that the State Water Board and regional water boards are separate state agencies. As a result, the ex parte rules extend to communications between members of different water boards. However, the limitations on communications from governmental officials generally will not apply to certain general orders as discussed in Questions 28-35.

**24. Q. May a board member attend a publicly noticed staff-level workshop on an adjudicative matter?**

Yes. When water board staff notice a meeting, even as a staff-level workshop, interested persons are on notice that issues pertaining to the adjudicative matter will be discussed. The staff workshop record (including, for example, the audio tape from the workshop) would become part of the record and basis for the subsequent action by the water board. It is permissible for a board member or multiple board members to attend such a workshop, and the communications received during such a workshop are not ex parte communications. If a quorum of the water board may be present, a Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act notice may also be necessary.

**E. Consequences of Prohibited Ex Parte Communications**

**25. Q. What are the consequences of violating the ex parte communications prohibition?**

Prohibited ex parte communications can have a number of consequences. First, board members must disclose a prohibited ex parte communication on the record and the board may be required to hear comments or additional evidence in response to the ex parte communication. Second, a prohibited ex parte communication may be grounds for disqualifying the board member from participating in the adjudicative proceeding. Third, a prohibited ex parte communication could be used as a basis for a subsequent legal challenge to the board's adjudicative action, especially if the communication is not properly disclosed and the board member participates in the proceeding. The Administrative Procedure Act also authorizes a water board to sanction a person violating the prohibition on ex parte communications, although this is likely to be used only for egregious or recurring violations.

**26. Q. How may a board member cure an inadvertent ex parte communication?**

The Administrative Procedure Act provides explicit procedures that a board member is required to follow if there has been an ex parte communications. These procedures do not subsume the rule or provide a mechanism for circumventing the Legislature's prohibition on ex parte communications in adjudicative proceedings.

In the event of receiving a prohibited ex parte communication, the water board member must disclose the communication on the record. Disclosure requires either (1) including

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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a written ex parte communication in the record, along with any response from the board member, or (2) memorializing an oral communication by including a memorandum in the record stating the substance of the communication, identifying who was present at the time of the communication, and any response from the board member. The board member must notify all parties of the ex parte disclosures. Additional proceedings may be necessary if a party timely requests an opportunity to address the disclosure.

In the event a board member receives what may be a prohibited ex parte communication, it is important to work with legal counsel to determine whether the communication is indeed prohibited, and, if the communication is prohibited, that it is disclosed as required by the Administrative Procedure Act.

**27. Q. What if a board member received a communication about an adjudicative proceeding before becoming a board member?**

The Administrative Procedure Act requires a water board member to disclose any communications the member received, prior to becoming a board member, about adjudicative proceedings pending before the water board at the time the member received the communication. This provision recognizes that the communication was not per se prohibited (because the person was not yet a board member), but still provides a mechanism to disclose such communications in the interest of fairness. The disclosure follows the same procedure discussed in Question 26.

Importantly, this provision of the Administrative Procedure Act does not require all communications the new board member has ever received to be disclosed simply because the communication involves an issue in the adjudicative proceeding. Instead, the provision only reaches back to the time the adjudicative proceeding was pending before the water board. Further, the factual circumstances requiring disclosure rarely occur because there are three necessary elements to trigger this disclosure requirement: (1) a communication the member recalls receiving prior to serving on the board, (2) the communication involves an adjudicative matter pending before the board, and (3) the communication occurred at a time the adjudicative matter was already pending before the board.

**F. Exception for Certain General Orders**

**28. Q. Are proceedings on general waste discharge requirements, categorical waivers, and general 401 certifications (general orders) considered adjudicative proceedings?**

Yes. A general order determines the rights and duties of those persons subject to the general order. A general order does not identify the specific dischargers it covers by name, but instead allows discharges to enroll for coverage under the general order. Upon enrollment, these general orders are directly enforceable against the dischargers who enroll under them. In addition, general orders are specifically exempt from the rulemaking provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act. The water boards also issue general orders following the same procedures that are used for any other permitting decision. Finally, general orders are subject to the same judicial review standards as any other permit. In function and form, the issuance of general orders is an adjudicative

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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action. The proceedings culminating in the issuance of general waste discharge orders are, therefore, more appropriately considered adjudicative proceedings.

**29. Q. Does the ex parte communications prohibition apply to general orders?**

No. Effective January 1, 2013, the Water Code exempts general orders from the ex parte communications prohibition. A general order for this purpose is an order that does not name specific dischargers, but instead allows persons to enroll for coverage under the order. Any person may engage in oral or written ex parte communications with board members regarding a pending or impending general order, but certain categories of persons must provide public disclosure of those ex parte communications.

The ex parte exception for general orders only applies to the water board's adoption of the order. Once a facility enrolls in a general order, enforcement actions are subject to the usual ex parte communications prohibition.

**30. Q. Who must disclose ex parte communications regarding general orders?**

The Water Code requires three categories of persons to disclose ex parte communications with a water board member about a pending general order. These categories are:

- (i) a potential enrollee in the general order, and representatives or employees of such person;
- (ii) any person with a financial interest in the general order, and the representatives or employees of such person; and
- (iii) a representative acting on behalf of any formally organized civic, environmental, neighborhood, business, labor, trade, or similar association who intends to influence the board's decision.

For purposes of ex parte communications concerning general orders, these persons are considered "interested persons," and the ex parte communication disclosure requirements for general orders only apply to these three categories of interested person.

The Water Code places the disclosure obligation for general orders on the interested person engaged in ex parte communications with a board member. A board member who participates in ex parte communications regarding general orders is not required to make any oral or written disclosures; however, nothing precludes a board from assisting an interested person in making the required disclosure. Further, if for some reason an interested person neglects or refuses to make the required disclosure, then the board member should disclose the ex parte communication at the board meeting where the general order is considered to ensure completeness of the record and to afford an opportunity for other persons to address the communication.

There is no disclosure requirement for members of the public who do not fall within one of the three categories above. Board members are nevertheless encouraged to disclose ex parte communications in the same manner as in rulemaking proceedings. (Please see Questions 38-39.)



## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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**31. Q. What disclosure requirements apply to ex parte communications regarding general orders?**

As with other adjudicative proceedings, no disclosure is required for an ex parte communication about a matter of procedure or practice that is not in controversy. (Please see Question 20.) For all other ex parte communications concerning a general order, interested persons in the three categories identified in Question 30 must provide a written disclosure to the applicable water board within seven working days after the communication takes place. The disclosure must include the date, time, location, and type of communication (written, oral or both); identify all participants; state who initiated the communication; and describe the substance of the communication. All materials (including PowerPoint presentations) used as part of a meeting or other communication must be included.

Board members are encouraged to request meeting agendas in advance to facilitate the meeting participants' timely preparation of disclosure materials. Board members should remind any interested person requesting ex parte communications on a general order of the disclosure requirement, and provide contact information for the staff member designated to receive the disclosure documents.

Water board staff must post the disclosure on the board's website and email a copy to any available electronic distribution lists for the general order. Before posting and distributing a disclosure, the staff should provide a copy of the disclosure to the member and any water board staff who were present during the ex parte communication to ensure the disclosure accurately summarizes the communication.

Although the statute only refers to "pending" general orders, the same disclosure process should be used for "impending" general orders. (Please see Question 13.)

**32. Q. How can a board member determine whether a member of a group is a "representative" for purposes of the disclosure requirements for general orders?**

The special disclosure requirements for general orders apply to "representatives acting on behalf of" an association that intends to influence the board's decision. If it is not clear whether an individual represents an interest group or is simply a member, board members may ask what the individual's position is with the organization; whether the individual is speaking on behalf of the organization; whether the organization has formally or tacitly authorized the individual to speak on its behalf; and what the individual's role will be in preparing formal written comments or speaking at the hearing.

Because the disclosure requirement is intended to ensure fairness and transparency in water board proceedings, the term "representative" should be interpreted broadly. In cases where it is unclear whether a particular individual is acting in a representative capacity, board members should request the individual to provide the disclosure. Any questions about the requirements may be addressed to the board's legal counsel.

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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**33. Q. Can a water board limit ex parte communications regarding a pending general order?**

Yes. A water board may prohibit ex parte communications during the 14 days prior to the board meeting at which the board is scheduled to adopt the general order. If the item is continued, the board may lift any existing 14-day prohibition on ex parte communications, in which case it then has the option to impose a new prohibition for the 14 days prior to any rescheduled adoption meeting. Individual board members may decline invitations to meet with members of the public at any time, even if no prohibition is in place.

**34. Q. Are all region-wide or statewide permits “general orders”?**

No. The ex parte exception only applies to orders that do not name specific dischargers but instead require eligible dischargers to enroll or file a notice of intent to be covered by the general order. Several regional water boards have issued region-wide or regional municipal separate storm sewer system (MS4) permits that identify specific dischargers. Issuance, reissuance, or modification of these orders is subject to the same prohibition on ex parte communications that applies to individual waste discharge requirements. Any other waste discharge requirement, waiver, or 401 certification issued to a group of named entities would also be subject to the ex parte communications prohibition.

**35. Q. What are the consequences of violating the special disclosure requirements for general orders?**

Board staff or legal counsel should contact the interested person for further information if a disclosure does not meet the statutory requirements. If the disclosure does not accurately summarize the communication, the board member or staff may request the interested person to correct the disclosure or the board member or staff may supplement the disclosure either in writing or at the board meeting where the general order is considered.

In appropriate circumstances, a water board may impose sanctions on an interested person who violates the disclosure requirements.

### **III. RULEMAKING AND OTHER PROCEEDINGS**

**36. Q. What actions are rulemaking?**

Rulemaking proceedings are proceedings designed for the adoption, amendment, or repeal of any rule, regulation, or standard of general application. Rulemaking proceedings include proceedings to adopt regulations, water quality control plans, policies, or guidelines. The water boards adopt most total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) as basin plan amendments, so TMDLs typically are rulemaking proceedings.

Below is a partial list of common water board actions resulting from rulemaking proceedings:

- Water quality control plans (e.g., basin plan amendments, statewide plans such as the Ocean Plan);

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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- State Policy for Water Quality Control (e.g., the State Water Board's Water Quality Enforcement Policy);
- Regulations;
- Guidelines.

**37. Q. Is there a prohibition on private communications in rulemaking actions?**

No. The Administrative Procedure Act contains no prohibition against private communications during rulemaking proceedings. However, information obtained outside of the public record for the rulemaking action may not form the basis for a board's action and the board's action must be supported by the information contained in the record. Some of the same policy rationales for the ex parte communications prohibition exist for rulemaking. Nothing prevents individual water board members from choosing to avoid such communications during rulemaking proceedings.

**38. Q. What is the Office of Chief Counsel's recommendation on handling communications in rulemaking proceedings?**

There is no constitutional or statutory duty to disclose private communications in rulemaking proceedings, but the Office of Chief Counsel advises water board members to disclose on the record any private communications received during rulemaking proceedings. The reasons for this recommendation are multifold. First, the water boards must base rulemaking decisions on the public record, because the public record is a water board's justification for defending an action in court. If a board member supports a specific rulemaking decision because of technical information the member receives from an ex parte communication but fails to disclose the communication, that information will not be in the record to support the board's action.

Second, the same fairness and transparency issues that underlie the ex parte prohibition for adjudicative proceedings support disclosing private communications in rulemaking proceedings. The water boards only have limited jurisdiction within the ambit delegated by the Legislature. It is appropriate that the public know the information and basis for the water boards' decisions to ensure that those decisions are being made not only in conformance with the law, but also within the scope of the considerations identified by the Legislature and water board regulations.

**39. Q. If a member chooses to disclose a communication, what is the preferred procedure?**

If a board member chooses to participate in private communications in rulemaking proceedings and chooses to disclose those communications, the Office of Chief Counsel recommends a procedure similar to that described in Question 26 for adjudicative proceedings. First, the board member would notify the person that a full disclosure of the private communication will be entered in the water board's record. Second, the board member would disclose the private communication in the water board's record. The disclosure would include the identity of the persons involved in the communication, the approximate date of the communication, and the substance of the communication.

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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**40. Q. May a board member communicate with a person about how a general requirement may be translated into a subsequent permit requirement?**

Yes, as long as the subsequent permit proceeding is not pending or impending. When a water board is considering a general provision of rulemaking action it is appropriate to hear testimony about how the general provision may be converted into specific, subsequent permit requirements. The fact that this information is received during a rulemaking proceeding does not trigger the ex parte communications prohibition for the subsequent adjudicative proceeding that implements the requirements of the rulemaking. The ex parte communications prohibition will attach when the subsequent adjudicative action is pending. (Please see Questions 12-13.)

**41. Q. What are “other proceedings”?**

Certain proceedings before the water boards are neither adjudicative nor rulemaking proceedings. For example, the water boards often have informational items presented by staff or stakeholders. Informational items do not necessarily lead to a specific board action, but inform members about general water quality or water rights matters. In addition, the State Water Board takes some actions that are neither rulemaking or adjudicative actions (e.g., certain contracting and grants actions).

Below is a list of common, other proceedings:

- Information items;
- Workshops not conducted as part of an adjudicative or rulemaking proceeding;
- Contracting;
- Grant awarding;
- Hiring decisions and awards for employee accomplishments;
- Adopting or making comments to other entities conducting their own proceedings, such as comments on a federal Environmental Impact Statement;
- Discretionary actions to initiate or consider initiating proceedings, not amounting to a decision on the merits, such as referral of a matter to the Attorney General for enforcement.

**42. Q. Are “other proceedings” subject to ex parte rules?**

These other proceedings do not trigger ex parte communications prohibitions under the Administrative Procedure Act and do not have the same factors supporting the Office of Chief Counsel’s recommendation to disclose ex parte communications in rulemaking proceedings. Where these proceedings involve closed sessions, communications subject to the attorney-client privilege, or certain law enforcement related information, confidentiality protections may apply. Otherwise, nothing prevents individual water board members from choosing to avoid such communications or to disclose such communications.

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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### IV. SITE VISITS

**43. Q. Is a site visit a form of ex parte communication?**

Yes. Unless a tour or site visit is publicly noticed, the Office of Chief Counsel considers a site visit or tour of a facility, while an adjudicative proceedings is pending for that facility, to be an ex parte communication. By their very nature, site visits communicate evidentiary information to water board members. In addition, site visits frequently result in communications from the site operator about the pending matter.

**44. Q. Can a board member visit a regulated facility when an adjudicative action is pending?**

Yes, but only if the board provides interested persons notice and an opportunity to participate. Site visits can be a useful part of the decision-making process and special procedures should be used for site visits. A site visit essentially moves part of the evidentiary proceeding from the board hearing to a visit of the site. It is not necessary that all board members participate in the site visit for it to be permissible. In fact, a single board member can participate in a staff-level site visit if the board properly notices the visit.

To notice a site visit, the interested party list for an adjudicative proceeding should be provided sufficient notice with information about the tour and how to participate. There may be special concerns about accessibility and liability that may raise other legal issues. It is important to work with legal counsel when arranging site visits during a pending adjudicative proceeding.

**45. Q. Can a board member visit a facility that will be regulated by a pending general order when an adjudicative action is pending?**

If a site visit concerns a facility that will be regulated by a pending general order subject to the special disclosure requirements of Questions 29-31, then the board member should work with legal counsel to determine the extent to which any special disclosure or notice requirements apply. The most transparent and fair way to handle site visits while a general order is pending is to provide notice and an opportunity for interested persons to participate as described in Question 44. Providing public notice also reduces potential evidentiary concerns. For these reasons, the Office of Chief Counsel recommends the procedure described in Question 44 for site visits to a facility that will be regulated by a pending general order.

If notice and an opportunity for public participation is not provided, then the disclosure requirements in Questions 29-31 apply to any site visit concerning a pending general order. Moreover, because site visits are inherently evidentiary in nature, steps should be taken either by the person hosting the site visit, the board member, or the water board staff to visually document the portions of the site visit relevant to the proceeding (e.g., photo documenting physical features, best management practices, etc.). Unlike most ex parte communications, which discuss or explain evidence that is already in the record, the visual documentation is evidentiary in nature. Therefore, any site visits should occur and be reported before the close of the evidentiary record. Board members should work

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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closely with staff and counsel to ensure the appropriate timing and documentation of these types of site visits.

**46. Q. Can a board member visit a regulated facility when no adjudicative action is pending for that facility?**

Yes. When there is no adjudicative action pending or impending, a water board member may visit a site that is subject to the water board's regulations. Before scheduling such a visit, it is important to coordinate with water board staff to ensure there is no pending enforcement action involving the facility and to ensure that the owner has no objection to a visit.

### V. GENERAL ISSUES

**47. Q. Why can legislators talk to anyone and the board members cannot?**

Ex parte communications rules reflect the water boards' hybrid powers. Unlike the Legislature, the water boards have attributes of both legislative power and judicial power. The ex parte communications prohibition arises when the water boards are exercising their judicial power. Rules and due process preclude judges from receiving ex parte communications on matters pending before them or inferior courts. Similarly, even when exercising legislative power, the water boards do so within the narrow confines of power granted by the Legislature. Ex parte rules can help ensure that the water boards are exercising the powers conferred by the Legislature within the confines of the power conferred by the Legislature.

**48. Q. Why can the public talk to city council members and not board members?**

There is some overlap between ex parte communications prohibitions for city council members and water board members. To the extent the prohibition is broader for water board members it reflects the greater number of adjudicative matters decided by the water boards and the breadth of the Administrative Procedure Act. The Administrative Procedure Act is not directly applicable to city councils. As a result, ex parte communications with city council members do not necessarily reach "direct and indirect" communications on "any issue in the proceeding."

**49. Q. How should a board member handle comments concerning pending adjudicative proceedings raised in connection with other proceedings in which the board member participates?**

As part of a board member's participation in other matters, a board member may receive communications relating to specific adjudicative proceedings. For example, a legislator may ask a State Water Board member to participate in a meeting related to proposed proceedings relating to application processing. As part of that meeting the legislator or another participant may complain about how a particular application, that is the subject of a pending adjudicative proceeding, is being handled. The meeting does not involve an improper ex parte contact, because it concerns proposed legislation, not an adjudicative proceeding, but the specific complaint involves an inappropriate ex parte contact.

## EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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To avoid this problem, board members should make clear at the outset that they cannot discuss specific adjudicative proceedings pending before the water boards. If, despite this warning, a participant begins to raise issues concerning a specific pending proceeding, the board member should interrupt to remind the participants that the board member cannot discuss those issues. Any ex parte communications that occur as part of the meeting should be disclosed following the procedures discussed in Question 26.

**50. Q. Is a communication about a pending adjudicative matter, received during a public forum, an ex parte communication?**

Yes. While the water boards traditionally allow members of the public to briefly address during a “public forum” any items not on the agenda, persons interested in a pending adjudicative proceeding do not have notice that their issue may be discussed during a specific public forum. Therefore, even though the board receives the communication during a public meeting, the communication may violate the ex parte prohibition if it concerns a pending adjudicative proceeding. Legal counsel will typically work with a water board’s chair if this circumstance occurs. Fortunately, such communications can typically be cured by including a copy of the public forum transcript or tape into the administrative record for the adjudicative proceeding.

**51. Q. Whom can a board member speak with to clarify ex parte concerns?**

Water board members should contact the Office of Chief Counsel with questions about ex parte issues. A regional water board member should contact the attorney assigned to represent the member’s region or the assistant chief counsel for regional board services. State Water Board members should contact the chief counsel.

In all circumstances, a water board member should indicate that he or she has a question about ex parte communications in *Matter X*—identifying the specific matter. It is important to identify the specific matter, because at times certain attorneys within the Office of Chief Counsel (even the chief counsel) may be recused from a matter or may be assigned to prosecute the matter. By identifying the matter from the outset of the communication, the attorney can make sure you are getting the correct advice from the correct person.

**52. Q. Who is responsible for complying with the ex parte rules – the board members or the public?**

There is a shared responsibility for complying with the ex parte communications prohibition of the Administrative Procedure Act. Water board members are expected to know the rules and remain vigilant in their application of the rule. If a person attempts to violate the prohibition on ex parte communications, the board member should be prepared to stop the communication, because of the risk the communication could result in disqualification of the board member.

Persons participating in adjudicative proceedings also have an obligation to understand and follow the rules, particularly attorneys and professional lobbyists. As discussed in

## **EX PARTE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

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Question 25, in egregious circumstances violating the prohibition on ex parte communications can subject a person to civil contempt proceedings.