

San Diego Water Board Practical Vision

Focusing on What is Most Important: Strategizing for Healthy Waters

The San Diego Water Board’s very reason for being, its overarching purpose and mission, is to protect and restore the chemical, physical, and biological integrity (i.e., the health¹) of waters in the San Diego Region. This Practical Vision is about ensuring that the staff, funding, authority, tools, and influence of the Board, are put to the best possible use for that purpose. This will be accomplished by having clear, overarching goals, and established, region-wide strategic priorities. The San Diego Water Board will remain committed to those goals and priorities over an extended period of time, and evaluate success in terms of meaningful environmental outcomes.

Practical Vision Statement

The San Diego Water Board is committed to using all of its staff and funding to conduct the work that is the most important, useful, and worthwhile for the purpose of protecting and restoring the health of waters in the San Diego Region. The Board will ensure its staff and funding are put to the best possible use by (1) establishing and implementing priorities for its work and the work it requires of the entities it regulates; (2) establishing measurable goals for environmental outcomes; and (3) establishing and using a set of performance metrics to evaluate success in meeting those goals.

Mission Statement

The mission is to ensure that the staff, funding, authority, tools, and influence of the San Diego Water Board are put to the best possible use for the purpose of protecting and restoring the chemical, physical, and biological integrity (i.e., the health) of waters in the San Diego Region.

The Values of the Practical Vision

The San Diego Water Board values effective stewardship, good public service, trustworthiness, integrity, and transparency.

¹ Healthy waters are waters that fully support use and enjoyment by the people of the state. Such “beneficial uses” of waters in the San Diego Region include water supply (domestic, municipal, industrial, and agricultural), fishing (commercial and sport) and shellfish harvesting, recreation, and support of habitats and ecosystems. Beneficial uses of waters in the San Diego Region are identified and described in the San Diego Water Board Basin Plan and in State Water Resources Control Board water quality control plans that apply to the San Diego Region.

Where We Are in 2013

The San Diego Water Board is currently budgeted for about sixty-two full-time staff, to work in about twenty different programs. Different levels of staffing and funding are provided for different programs. The programs are associated with specific types of discharges, facilities, and/or different types of waters, and each program has budget limitations and constraints regarding the type of work that can be accomplished. Program funding comes from a variety of sources and entities, and those entities often require that the San Diego Water Board commit to completing specific work products. These work products may include report reviews, inspections, or permits. Typically, the “success” of the San Diego Water Board is measured by totaling the number of work products completed in a given year.

Such programmatic work plan requirements, measures of success, and requested work are of concern because they are not necessarily related to what is most important, useful, and worthwhile for the purpose of protecting and restoring the health of waters in the San Diego Region. They are also of concern since organizations tend to assign more staffing, more funding, and higher priority to producing whatever is used to measure success. Consequently, if the way in which success is measured does not correspond to what is most important, then more staffing, more funding, and higher priority will be assigned to what is less important. Each increment of staffing and funding devoted to what is less important is an increment of staffing and funding that is not available for what is more important.

Limits and constraints on staffing and funding, including inappropriate reporting requirements and inappropriate measures of success, represent significant obstacles to the San Diego Water Board’s ability to carry out its mission strategically and effectively. These obstacles will remain unless the San Diego Water Board is able to work with others to reduce them and/or figure out how to work with them, so that it can focus on what is most important.

In order for the San Diego Water Board to focus on what is most important, it is necessary to determine what is most important. This has not been done in a comprehensive organization-wide, systematic, coordinated, explicit manner (i.e. a “strategic” manner); and/or has not been well communicated. In general, the San Diego Water Board has not clearly (1) established overarching priorities for its work and the work it requires of the entities it regulates; (2) established measurable goals for environmental outcomes; or (3) established a set of performance metrics to evaluate progress and success in meeting those goals.

Although much has been done, much more needs to be done to protect and restore the health of waters in the San Diego Region. The nature and the magnitude of contemporary problems and threats, the primary causes of those problems and threats, and what should be done about them are often not readily apparent, compared to times past, when some problems and their causes were fairly obvious.

Why This Practical Vision Is A Priority

This Practical Vision is about ensuring that the San Diego Water Board is strategic, effective, and wise in doing what it was created to do. It is the overarching and highest priority Practical Vision.

One way or another, the San Diego Water Board has made and continues to make decisions about what to do and not do, what to do more of and do less of, and what to give greater and give lesser attention. Simply making such decisions does not ensure that the San Diego Water Board's work is focused on what is most important. In order to ensure that its work is focused on what is most important. The San Diego Water Board needs to improve the way it makes these decisions, starting with strategically determining what is most important. In order to ensure that its work is effective, the Board needs to measure success based on meaningful environmental outcomes.

The work that might be good for the San Diego Water Board to do far exceeds what can actually do with currently available staffing and funding. Staffing and funding are unlikely to increase in the foreseeable future. It is more critical than ever to focus limited staffing and funding on what is most important. If good decisions are not made about how best to use staffing and funding, then the San Diego Water Board cannot be strategic or effective in carrying out its mission.

Aspirational Goals

1. The San Diego Water Board will focus all of its staff and funding on doing the work that is most important, useful, and worthwhile for protecting and restoring the health of waters in the San Diego Region, not on producing programmatic outputs, not on picking low hanging fruit, and not on greasing squeaky wheels.
2. The success of the Board will be measured by environmental outcomes, not by "bean counts."
3. The Board will have many success stories about meaningful environmental outcomes.
4. All waters in the San Diego Region will be, become, and remain healthy.
5. The Board will be a positive example of a strategic and effective government agency.

Projects for Practical Vision Success

To ensure that work is aligned with the most important goals and highest priorities, the San Diego Water Board should take the following seven steps. Each step is based on completion of the prior step(s).

1. **Identify key beneficial use categories.** These will be the beneficial uses that are most critical to protecting human and environmental health.
2. **Conduct a comprehensive assessment.** Coupled with the Practical Vision for Monitoring and Assessment, complete a comprehensive assessment of waters in the

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San Diego Region with regard to the key beneficial use categories identified in Step 1. These include but are not necessarily limited to assessment of:

- a. Current, past, and potential future importance or value to key beneficial use categories (e.g., intensity of use).
- b. Current conditions in water bodies.
- c. Vulnerability to existing and potential threats.
- d. Factors most limiting to key beneficial use categories.
- e. Restoration and protection plans, programs, and projects (existing, under development, and planned) of the San Diego Water Board and other organizations.
- f. Roles and commitments of other organizations for protection and restoration.
- g. Potential for protection and restoration.
- h. Potential for the San Diego Water Board to contribute to protection and restoration.
- i. Consequences of little or no San Diego Water Board action.

Some parts of such an assessment may have been done on a programmatic or water body-specific basis. A comprehensive approach that considers different beneficial use categories in different water bodies and types of water bodies in different places throughout the San Diego Region and across all programs has not been done.

3. **Develop a process and decide.** Based on the assessment done in Step 2, develop a process that considers each key beneficial use category and identifies which water bodies are most important for the San Diego Water Board to protect and restore. They can then be ranked from highest priority to lowest priority.
4. **Set measurable goals.** For the most important water bodies identified in Step 3, set a limited number of measurable goals and milestones for meaningful environmental outcomes.
5. **Realign and implement work** Once the goals set in Step 4 have been established the work load must be realigned in order to implement work and achieve these goals. This may result in reassignment of staff, revision of personnel allocations, and/or revision of program work plans to address the established goals and priorities.
6. **Monitor progress.** As the work identified in Step 5 is completed it is important to monitor progress and ensure accomplishment of the new goals and priorities.
7. **Re-evaluate the priorities.** Finally, based on the monitoring in Step 6, re-evaluate the priorities, goals, milestones, and actions periodically throughout the established time frames, as new issues arise, and upon achievement of each goal.

The seven steps are grouped into three projects outlined below. Successful completion of the seven steps will require integration of and communication among all San Diego Water Board programs. This could be accomplished in various ways. One way includes

the leadership of the Monitoring Assessment and Research Unit (MARU) staff and the formation of two committees to guide the seven-step process. The responsibilities of each committee are as follows:

- MARU will be responsible for implementing Project I, which includes Steps 1 and 2.
- A Priority Setting Team (PST) will be responsible for implementing Project II, which includes Steps 3, 4 & 5. The PST might consist of the EO, AEO, representatives from each branch, and, possibly, one or more Board members.
- A Stay on Course (SOC) committee will be responsible for Project III, which includes steps 6 and 7 above. The SOC might consist of the EO, AEO, representatives from each branch, and MARU.

The seven-step process is intended to be implemented through a continuous, iterative approach. Starting this process requires an initial investment of time and a long term commitment to focus only on the selected priorities for a period of time that is long enough to evaluate effectiveness. It is important to note that some programs have already begun a shift towards this approach, but what is needed is a comprehensive approach that considers different beneficial use categories in different water bodies and types of water bodies in different places throughout the San Diego Region, and across all programs. Once the process is in place, the benefits will far outweigh the resources required to maintain it. The following is the initial implementation of all seven steps through these three projects:

1. Project I: Comprehensive Assessment

a. Project Description and Purpose

This project implements the first two steps. It compiles the necessary information to make informed and strategic decisions about priorities. To conduct the comprehensive assessment, staff from the MARU will identify key beneficial use (key BU) categories, such as those expressed by the questions posed on the *Welcome to My Water Quality*² website:

- Is the water safe to drink? (MUN)
- Is the water quality safe for swimming? (REC1)
- Are fish and shellfish safe to eat? (COMM & SHELL)
- Are habitats & ecosystems healthy? (MAR, EST, WARM, COLD, BIOL, RARE, WILD, etc.)

Next, MARU staff will identify waters, places, and/or types of water bodies that are important for each key BU category. For instance, for MUN, drinking water

² My WQ Portal is a database that presents California water quality monitoring data and assessment information related to specific questions about the health of waters.
<http://www.mywaterquality.ca.gov/index.shtml>

supply reservoirs and groundwater basins with potable supply wells might be identified as key places.

Then, MARU staff, with internal and external support, will collect and analyze other information about key places, as outlined in step 2. MARU staff will also identify important information that is not available, and evaluate ways to gather that information for future assessments.

b. Project Goals

Upon analysis completion, MARU will produce a tabulation of key places, associated with each key BU, and the information outlined in step 2 about those key places.

c. Desired Outcomes

Information necessary for the Priority Setting Team to make informed and strategic decisions on what should be the San Diego Water Board's highest priorities will be compiled in a user-friendly format.

d. Underlying Contradictions

Some might think that the highest priorities already are or should be known, and, therefore, might not consider such an assessment to be necessary or worthwhile.

e. Contribution to the Practical Vision

This process will contribute to the practical vision by providing essential information so that priorities can be set in a more systematic and informed manner.

f. Schedule/Milestones

This project overlaps with, and relies on, a project being proposed in the Monitoring and Assessment chapter, and should be coordinated accordingly.

i. 0-6 month:

a. Identify key BU categories.

b. Identify "key places" - i.e. waters, places, and/or types of waters and places connected with each key BU category.

ii. 6-9 months:

Compile other information outlined in Step 2.

iii. 9-12 months:

Write up and present findings.

g. Resources Needed

Approximately 1 Personnel Year (PY) is necessary to complete the initial assessment. A portion of a PY should also be set aside annually to continue to periodically re-evaluate new information.

h. Tasks that Might Not be Done in Order to do this Project

If MARU takes the lead on conducting the assessment, it is likely that other priorities that MARU has been tasked with will need to be streamlined, postponed, or possibly eliminated. However, this exercise will inform the Clean Water Act Section 305(b) and 303(d) assessments.

2. Project II Setting Priorities and Goals

a. Project Description and Purpose

This project will develop and implement Steps 3-5 of the seven step process. It will align work with the most important goals and highest priorities. Upon presentation of the results from the initial assessment (Project I), the PST will meet to determine how to prioritize within each key BU category and the key places. This process will take various factors into consideration in order to determine which of the key places should be given highest priority. As part of the priority setting exercise, the PST will use the assessment information to numerically rank key places of highest priority. The prioritized list will be communicated to staff and the San Diego Water Board.

Based on the "priority list", executive management, with support from the PST, will then set quantifiable goals, with interim milestones where necessary, and realistic time frames for meaningful environmental outcomes. An example of a quantifiable goal will be a 25% decrease in mercury concentrations in Hodges Reservoir within 10 years. Based on these goals, they will also develop a "road map" of actions the San Diego Water Board will take to achieve the goals. The list of measureable goals will be focused and finite to ensure that the priority activities do not conflict. In other words, if everything is equally important, nothing is more important. The goals will also be communicated to the Board and the public.

With the revised priorities and goals in mind, executive management will consider any necessary changes to the organizational structure to facilitate achieving the goals. Where there is flexibility, staff resources will be shifted to work on the priority actions. Work plans will be modified or evaluated to determine how to fit the priority actions into the existing programmatic demands. It is expected that many "bean counting" work requirements will still be met, although their assignment and completion will instead be done with a focus on Board priorities and goals for healthy waters. For example, decisions about where to conduct inspections of construction sites might be based on site location in relation to key places, rather than on site size.

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As part of the implementation, all levels of the organization will evaluate their work and measure their success based on the overarching goals and actions identified. Implementation will also entail being aware of conflicting non-priority obligations, and determining how best to handle those.

b. Project Goals

The PST will develop a process for prioritizing the San Diego Water Board's work, based on what is most important, useful, and worthwhile for the purpose of protecting and restoring the health of waters in the San Diego Region. Using all pertinent information available and the prioritization process, the PST will identify the Region's highest priorities, and set measurable goals for healthy waters. The San Diego Water Board's work will be realigned to maximize working on the Region's highest priorities so as to achieve the measurable goals established for healthy waters.

c. Desired Outcomes

Water Board employees at all levels will have a clear understanding of what is most important, useful, and worthwhile for the purpose of protecting and restoring the health of waters in the San Diego Region. They will have a clear understanding on what "their essential part" will be, and will adjust their work to accomplish those priorities.

d. Values and Underlying Contradictions

Both staff and management are accustomed to thinking within unit, branch and program boundaries and to measuring their success by program actions, or "outputs". The San Diego Water Board has been rather successful in producing outputs, so it will take courage and initiative to commit to measuring success in a different manner. There will need to be a shift in thinking from "what program actions are supposed to be done" to "what actions are most important to do to achieve the healthy water goals identified". This will involve creative thinking and innovative approaches. An additional challenge may be the need to efficiently handle matters that must be worked on "as justice may require."

Some staff and some entities, such as USEPA and State Board, may have difficulty accepting and adjusting to this. The San Diego Water Board will need to continue to articulate the reasons for, and the benefits of, this approach.

e. Contribution to the Practical Vision

This process will contribute to the practical vision by effectively directing resources to what is most important, useful, and valuable for the purpose of achieving the goal of healthy waters, and evaluating progress toward long-term goals.

f. Schedule/Milestones

This project relies on the completion of the prior project, the Comprehensive Assessment.

- i. 0-3 month:
Evaluate comprehensive assessment, develop basis for prioritization.
- ii. 3-6 months:
Numerically rank key places and the associated issues of highest priority.
- iii. 6-9 months:
Develop “road map” and measurable goals and milestones.
- iv. 9-12 months:
Realign work accordingly.

g. Resources Needed

Approximately 1 PY is necessary to develop the priorities, analyze the assessment information, identify the key places of highest priority, and set measureable goals. The initial realignment of work should not take more than 0.5 PY, recognizing that the obligation to modify work plans is already part of routine work. Likewise, the implementation should not require any additional PY because implementation of this work will be the same as, or will substitute for, the implementation of the work currently conducted.

h. Tasks that Might Not be Done in Order to do this Project

Tasks that do not contribute substantially to achieving the goals identified will need to be streamlined, postponed, or possibly eliminated. It is expected that many tasks will simply be accomplished at a slower rate due to the re-direction of staff time to more important work. As such, deadlines of the lowest priority projects throughout the organization may not be met.

3. Project III: Staying on Course

a. Project Description and Purpose

This project will develop and implement the last two of the seven step process in an ongoing manner, to ensure that work remains aligned with the most important goals and highest priorities at all times.

The Stay on Course (SOC) committee will be responsible for meeting periodically to monitor and evaluate progress made towards healthy waters goals. MARU staff will provide updated monitoring and assessment results to evaluate progress towards meeting the goals or interim milestones, and staff from each Branch will identify their completed priority actions and their contributions towards those goals or milestones. Specifically, the group will address:

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- Are the goals, or interim milestones, being met?
- Are the selected priority activities being accomplished?
- If not, why not, and what could/should we do different?

After a few years of implementation, or as new issues arise, goals, priorities, and actions will need to be re-evaluated. The SOC Committee will meet to evaluate new information or new issues and how they fit into the priorities, using the process developed in Step 3. This recurring evaluation will consider:

- Are there changes to key BU categories and/or key places?
- Is new information available to better inform prioritization?
- What additional information is needed?
- Are the selected priorities still a priority?

b. **Project Goals**

The goal of this project is to monitor progress, re-evaluate priorities, and ensure that San Diego Water Board remains committed to what is most important, useful, and worthwhile for the purpose of protecting and restoring the health of waters in the San Diego Region.

c. **Desired Outcomes**

To stay focused on what is most important, useful, and worthwhile for the purpose of protecting and restoring the health of waters in the San Diego Region.

d. **Values and Underlying Contradictions**

As work progresses, some individuals or groups may be tempted to put off the exercise of consciously evaluating progress because accomplishing the goals may seem more urgent than evaluating the progress.

Additionally, when re-evaluation results in a shift in priorities, it may be difficult to put past priorities aside and acknowledge that the Board may no longer be working on them.

e. **Contribution to the Practical Vision**

This project will contribute to the practical vision by ensuring that the Board remains committed to the selected priorities, and monitoring progress towards reaching goals for healthy waters.

f. **Schedule/Milestones**

This project should be initiated after implementation of the prior projects. The SOC Committee should meet annually, or more frequently, if needed (e.g. if a new concern should be evaluated for priority), and to review available information and discuss progress.

g. Resources Needed

It would take less than 0.1 PY per year to continue to periodically re-evaluate new information and priorities. The monitoring, information gathering, and assessment work is not included in this estimate, because it overlaps with, and relies on, the Practical Vision for Monitoring and Assessment and its resource need estimates.

h. Tasks that Might Not be Done in Order to do this Project

Those tasks that do not contribute substantially to achieving the goals identified will need to be streamlined, postponed, or possibly eliminated. It is expected that many tasks will simply be accomplished at a slower rate due to the re-direction of staff time to more important work. As such, deadlines of the lowest priority projects throughout the organization may not be met.

San Diego Bay: The Importance of Doing What is Most Important

To better appreciate the importance of setting priorities and being strategic in working for healthy waters, it is useful to consider San Diego Bay, the largest estuary and natural enclosed bay in southern California. The bay has been greatly modified and intensively used since Europeans first set foot on its shores in 1542. Much of the stream flow that once entered the bay is now captured in water supply reservoirs or channelized away from the bay. Large areas of the bay, including wetland areas, have been dredged or filled. Much of the filled area, the bay shoreline, and other areas surrounding the bay have been built on and are now occupied by military, industrial, marine terminal, marina, and other facilities. Roughly a million people now live in the watersheds of the bay, large portions of which have been developed. Past, ongoing, and potential discharges from in-water, shoreline, and watershed sources continue to affect or potentially affect the bay. Bay floor sediments at a number of sites and some fish in the bay have elevated levels of certain toxic substances. Trash and litter, including plastic debris, is present in many areas of the bay. Several non-native species of organisms have become established in the bay.

Nevertheless, many people go to San Diego Bay to fish and recreate. Subsistence and recreational fishing is done from piers, shoreline areas, and boats throughout much of the bay. A number of bayfront parks provide swimming beaches, picnic tables, walking paths, and boat launch ramps. Paddle boarding, kayaking, and boating take place in many parts of the bay.

Despite substantial change, degradation, and loss, the San Diego Bay ecosystem still provides important – albeit in many cases diminished – habitats for many native species of plants, invertebrates, fish, birds, and other organisms. Dozens of native fish species occur in the bay; for many of these the bay is an important nursery area; for some the bay is at or near the northernmost edge of their range. Some native species found in and around the bay are now rare or endangered, most because of habitat loss. All of these are found in the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, which is also a nesting area for several shorebird and seabird species.

San Diego Bay is a special place; protecting and restoring its physical, chemical, and biological integrity is important. Recognizing that is not enough, however; it is also necessary to recognize that the bay is or could be affected in various ways by a variety of human influences and that resources available for protection and restoration are limited. The challenge is not simply to do good things, but to use limited resources to do what will contribute *most* to ensuring that bay fish and shellfish are safe to eat, bay water is safe for swimming, and the bay ecosystem is healthy.