

# Proposal to Develop a California Estuaries Portal Initially Focused on the San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary

## The Problem

The San Francisco Bay-Delta is the state's largest and most important estuary. Many state, federal and local agencies, regulated dischargers, and water bond grant recipients spend millions of dollars each year monitoring, assessing and reporting on the condition of the San Francisco Bay-Delta estuary ecosystem. While some coordination efforts currently exist—including the Interagency Ecological Program (IEP), the San Francisco Bay Regional Monitoring Program (RMP) and an emerging Delta RMP—there is no overall structure to coordinate all of these activities. As a result, the specific mandates of each agency/organization result in inconsistent monitoring objectives and methods to collect, assess, and manage the data, making it difficult to integrate data from different studies and sources. What is more, there is no single user-friendly place to access the data.

## The Monitoring Council's Solution

To directly address such problems, California Senate Bill 1070 mandated that the California Environmental Protection Agency and the California Natural Resources Agency enter into a Memorandum of Understanding to establish the California Water Quality Monitoring Council. The Monitoring Council has developed recommendations, accepted by the two Agency Secretaries, that include a bold new vision. The best way to coordinate and enhance California's monitoring, assessment and reporting efforts is first to provide a platform for intuitive, streamlined access to water quality and associated ecosystem health information that directly addresses users' questions. Theme-specific workgroups, under the overarching guidance of the Monitoring Council, evaluate existing monitoring, assessment and reporting efforts and work to enhance those efforts so as to improve the delivery of water quality and ecosystem health information to the user, in the form of theme-based internet portals. To date, a number of theme-specific workgroups and portals have been created. Their efforts clearly demonstrate that the Monitoring Council's vision was, in deed, correct.

## Needs Identified

The need for a workgroup and a portal focused on delivering answers to users' questions about the San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary has already been identified:

- The Water Boards' *Strategic Workplan for the San Francisco Bay/Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Estuary* identified the need for a comprehensive monitoring program for the Delta, with the short-term goal of compiling existing data sets and regularly assessing and reporting, and a long-term goal of comprehensively coordinating water quality monitoring in the Delta to ensure most efficient use of resources and regular assessment and reporting. The Delta RMP is forming to address this need. At the Delta RMP kick-off meeting, stakeholders identified several needs for data compilation, analysis and reporting:
  - Agreed upon assessment questions that drive the assessment and reporting process and ultimately design of the RMP
  - A scientifically credible process, in which stakeholders can participate, to ensure that data are appropriately assessed, interpreted, and reported
  - Ensure that data are accessible
  - Ensure that when data from multiple sources are integrated, it is appropriate to do so
  - An appropriate level of QA/QC will ensure that data are of a quality needed to answer the assessment questions
- The *Contaminant Synthesis Report*, recently published by UC Davis, stated, “[u]ntil such time as a single monitoring program is put into place that frames sample collection for multiple ecological and

taxonomic parameters in a biologically meaningful way, future discussions of contaminant-related issues will end in disappointment.” The report recommended that “[t]he long term monitoring program should have ongoing data interpretation and analysis as a co-equal goal along with sampling and analysis” and that “[d]ata from all water quality data generators in the Delta should be submitted to the State’s Regional Data Center in SWAMP-comparable format.”

- The IEP Coordinators and Lead Scientist recently raised several needs to the IEP Directors regarding the future of the program. The team identified three overarching science activities in need of immediate improvement:
  - Data management and accessibility
  - Analysis, synthesis, assessment, and communication
  - Modeling

Options for program adaptation were divided into four categories:

- Broadening the geographic scope of the program to include water bodies upstream and downstream of the Delta
- Broadening the scope to include shallow water and riparian habitats
- Incorporating additional mandates, plans and initiatives, including coordination with the Water Board’s Bay-Delta Strategic Workplan and the Monitoring Council
- Additional science activities, including ecological status and trends monitoring, monitoring tool development, reporting and communication, and improving science interaction and cooperation

## **A California Estuaries Portal and Workgroup**

Rather than expanding any of the existing programs or coordination efforts independently, greater efficiency and effectiveness can be achieved through the assembly of these entities into a Monitoring Council-sponsored workgroup tasked with identifying assessment questions, the data available and needed to answer the questions, and the methods to assess and display the data through a new California Estuaries Portal, linked from the *My Water Quality* website ([www.CaWaterQuality.net](http://www.CaWaterQuality.net)). The Monitoring Council has already identified the need for a portal, and an underlying workgroup, devoted to the health of California estuarine ecosystems. The California Estuaries Workgroup would initially focus its efforts on our largest and most important estuary, the San Francisco Bay-Delta. In that capacity, it would assess existing monitoring efforts and data sets, as described above, identifying redundancies, data gaps and inefficiencies in the current monitoring framework and developing solutions to improving the system. Synthesis and reporting goals identified above would be accomplished through development of the Estuaries Portal. Through such coordination and cooperation, several goals of the existing monitoring programs and coordination efforts would be addressed, thereby allowing both broader and more in-depth assessments of the Bay-Delta condition than were heretofore possible. By forming a new Estuaries Workgroup under guidance of the Monitoring Council, the benefits to all players are many and include:

- Identifying monitoring and related activities already underway that address the needs of each member
- Integrating data on biology, contaminants, and flow and making it available for multiple purposes
- Identifying issues related to QA/QC and data comparability
- Identifying and refining assessment questions to address the needs of agency decision makers, legislators, agency staff, scientists, and the public
- Ensuring a transparent process through workgroup structure and function
- Partnering with other Monitoring Council workgroups, such as the California Wetlands Monitoring Workgroup and the Healthy Streams Partnership, to gain access to additional data types