

**REGIONAL WATER QUALITY CONTROL BOARD
SAN DIEGO REGION**

**EXECUTIVE OFFICER SUMMARY REPORT
OCTOBER 14, 2026**

ITEM 4

SUBJECT

Assessment of San Diego Bay Habitat and Ecosystem Key Beneficial Uses (Wayne Chiu)

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Informational item only; no recommendation.

KEY ISSUE

To protect and restore the health of San Diego Bay, the Board needs to identify what is most important to inform how to focus its staff and resources to be most effective. Priorities and goals for a healthy San Diego Bay are based on findings from assessments of key beneficial uses. Assessment of the habitat and ecosystem key beneficial uses in San Diego Bay is a necessary step to help the Board determine priorities and realign work to achieve goals that will improve and restore the conditions of San Diego Bay for its habitat and ecosystem key beneficial uses.

PRACTICAL VISION

Chapter 1 of the 2013 Practical Vision (2013 PV) outlined a seven-step process to effectively align Board staff, funding, authority, tools and influence with the most important goals and highest priorities to achieve or maintain healthy waters. That focus was carried over into the Chapter 1 (Strategize for Healthy Waters) of the [2021 Practical Vision](#) update. As endorsed by the Board in [Resolution No. R9-2015-0086](#), the [Strategy for a Healthy San Diego Bay](#) (Strategy) applies the seven steps to the Bay.

The Strategy also implements Chapter 2 (Monitor and Assess) of the Practical Vision, which is based on [A Framework for Monitoring and Assessment in the San Diego Region](#) (Framework), endorsed by the Board in [Resolution No. R9-2012-0069](#). The Framework is a water body-oriented approach to monitoring and assessment that begins with assessing the conditions of a water body instead of focusing on monitoring the quality of discharges to a water body. Understanding the conditions of San Diego Bay for the habitat and ecosystem key beneficial uses is necessary to fully implement the Strategy.

DISCUSSION

San Diego Bay is a high priority water body in the San Diego region due to its ecological value and because it supports fishing, recreation, tourism, and a variety of maritime, commercial, and military uses. These uses are dependent to some extent on the health of the habitats and ecosystems in the Bay.

After the Board endorsed the Strategy in 2015, Board staff assessed the conditions in San Diego Bay with regards to the key beneficial uses for key areas. The initial assessments focused on understanding the Bay's conditions based on data available at the time. There were data available and methodologies established for assessing the recreation and fish and shellfish consumption key beneficial uses, so initial assessments for the recreation

and fish and shellfish consumption key beneficial uses were completed in 2017. Findings from the initial assessments for the recreation and fish and shellfish consumption key beneficial uses were provided to the Board at the [October 2016](#) and [August 2017](#) meetings. Status sheets with the assessments of the Bay for [water-contact recreation](#), [non-water-contact recreation](#), and [fish and shellfish consumption](#) were published in 2017 and the assessments have not changed in any significant way since then.

Board staff attempted to assess the habitat and ecosystem key beneficial uses using Board data, primarily from the Regional Harbor Monitoring Program (RHMP). The RHMP was initiated by the Board in 2003 to collect data in the bays and harbors of the San Diego region to better understand ambient conditions related to recreation, fish and shellfish consumption, and if “waters and sediments...sustain healthy biota.” The RHMP has been collecting water quality, fish tissue, and sediment quality data from San Diego Bay every 5 years since 2008.

The sediment quality monitoring is consistent with the [Sediment Quality Provisions](#) in the Water Quality Control Plan for Enclosed Bays and Estuaries of California. Sediment quality monitoring includes collecting sediment chemistry, toxicity, and benthic community condition data to assess whether the sediment has been impacted. These data can be used but are limited to assessing the habitats and ecosystems in Bay sediments, not the Bay overall. Therefore, the initial assessment for the habitat and ecosystem key beneficial uses was not completed in 2017 because an approach to assess the overall Bay conditions was not available at the time.

In an attempt to fill this gap between the RHMP data and what is needed to be able to perform a more complete assessment of the habitat and ecosystem key beneficial uses, Board staff developed the [Strategic Water Quality Assessment Approach for San Diego Bay](#) (Bay Assessment Approach), endorsed by the Board under [Resolution No. R9-2022-0019](#). The Bay Assessment Approach provides guidance for the types of data that are needed to assess the key beneficial uses of San Diego Bay.

The Board developed the Bay Assessment Approach in consultation with the Port of San Diego (Port) and U.S. Department of the Navy (Navy) because of the monitoring programs they implement for the San Diego Bay Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan (INRMP). INRMP monitoring includes collecting data about the diversity and abundance of native species (e.g. fish and birds) and the areal extent and distribution of important habitats (e.g. eelgrass beds). These INRMP datasets provide a better understanding of whether the Bay is supporting the flora and fauna that are dependent on the habitats and ecosystems.

This information item will present the findings from an assessment of San Diego Bay's habitat and ecosystem key beneficial uses using RHMP sediment quality data and INRMP fish, bird, and eelgrass surveys data.

PUBLIC NOTICE

The agenda notice for today's meeting was posted on the San Diego Water Board's website and sent to subscribers to the email list for Board meetings. This satisfies the Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act requirements to publish the meeting notice and agenda.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

None.