California Water Commission
Final Draft 2025 Strategic Plan

Introduction

Historically, the California Water Commission has played an important role in the development of water resources in the State of California. Today the Commission is morphing into a more modern institution that continues to manage statutory responsibilities that date to the middle of the last century while administering the Water Storage Investment Program and providing a public forum to advise State decision-makers on matters of water policy, planning, and management. This strategic plan for the Commission looks ahead several years and sets goals and objectives that advance both the Commission's long-standing and emergent work at a moment when California must adapt to a hotter, drier climate and more frequent hydrologic extremes. The plan also takes a fresh approach to engaging under-represented parties and bringing considerations of equity into its work.

The Commission intends to update its strategic plan every five years in order to evaluate the effectiveness of Commission activities and to ensure that the Commission focuses on current and important California water issues. The strategic plan is a living document, and the Commission may adjust its goals or objectives as needed to respond to policy developments or direction from the Governor and other State decision makers. The Commission will use this document to develop its annual work plans.

The Commission's nine Commission members are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the State Senate. Seven members are chosen for their general expertise related to the control, storage, and beneficial use of water, and two are chosen for their knowledge of the environment.

Mission Statement

Using its public forum, the California Water Commission explores water management issues from diverse perspectives to advise State decision-makers on equitable ways to improve water policy, planning, and management in response to California's changing hydrology.

Vision Statement

To promote smart, fair water management today for a sustainable California tomorrow.

History

The Commission traces its roots to the mid-1950s, when the California State Legislature created the Department of Water Resources (DWR or Department). During the following decades, DWR planned and constructed the State Water Project, a massive public works project that captures water in Northern California and delivers it throughout the state. During this early period of State-led water management in California, the Commission provided public transparency and accountability surrounding the construction and operation of the State Water Project and played a critical advisory role to the Director of DWR. The Commission continues to fulfill these roles today.

In 2014, California voters passed Proposition 1, the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act, which dedicated $2.7 billion for investments in specified public benefits associated with new water storage projects and tasked the Commission with administering these funds. This task greatly expanded the Commission's role. The Commission developed the Water Storage Investment Program (WSIP). Since 2014, the importance of modernizing water storage has become even more important as Californians face "weather whiplash" – severe droughts followed in short order by intensive wet periods – and the need to shore up infrastructure in the face of climate change. The WSIP remains the Commission's most significant and ambitious work.

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Over the course of the past five years, the Commission has supported the Newsom Administration's Water Resilience Portfolio by leading three collaborative water policy efforts, each directly linked to an action in the Portfolio. The Commission has developed a track record of success, creating white papers for the public, interested parties, and State decision-makers that have been used to shape ongoing State work on conveyance infrastructure, groundwater trading, and drought. With this work, the Commission leaned into equitable engagement, built important relationships, crafted smart, fair water policy suggestions, and established its credibility as an advisor to the Administration.

A Case for the Next Five Years

It is well known that water in California is a complicated, thorny issue. As California's climate gets hotter and its weather more extreme, water issues could become more fraught and contentious. The Commission seeks to cultivate its role as a State entity capable of engaging diverse interests and leading difficult conversations about equitable water policy, planning, and management in a changing climate. The Commission has taken up the issue of embedding climate change considerations in its work for the past decade. This strategic plan continues that trend and takes a novel approach to public engagement, expressing a firm commitment to equity. In its second goal, the plan highlights the importance of the proactive engagement of diverse and under-represented parties and calls on the Commission to formally embrace equity through the adoption of a resolution that commits to considering equity in all aspects of the Commission's work.

A recent survey by the Public Policy Institute of California of Californians and the environment underscores the need for the Commission to do so. The survey found that the most important environmental issues to Californians are climate change (17%), wildfires (15%), and water supply (14%). Most Californians are concerned that climate change will cause drought (82% very or somewhat concerned), but few have great confidence in the government's response to extreme weather events. The time is ripe for the Commission to engage Californians in discussing the important and intertwined issues of climate change, drought, water supply and wildfires; to work within its purview to help State decision makers craft better water policy; and to help demonstrate to Californians that State leaders are responding appropriately to extreme weather events.

The Commission is particularly qualified to convene disparate parties and advance balanced solutions to water issues in a public forum. The Commission is not an implementing or regulatory agency; instead, it creates space for conversations with diverse parties on charged issues. The Commission will consider multiple perspectives on complex issues, creating opportunities to hear and learn from interested parties, especially those facing the highest risks from hydrologic extremes. The Commission's public forum, which has been in use for roughly 60 years, provides transparency, open access to information, and a platform for public engagement. Commission members themselves bring a wide variety of perspectives based on their background, expertise, and interests.

The Commission has an opportunity in the coming five years to nurture relationships with diverse parties, to utilize its public forum, and to explore important topics and make recommendations to the Department of Water Resources, California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA), Governor, and the Legislature while also advancing its work on existing programs. To increase its effectiveness, the Commission seeks to:

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- Execute its role as the administrator of the Water Storage Investment Program, supporting ecosystem and other public benefits of new water storage projects while positioning California to better weather the extremes of climate change;
- Better highlight the role and capacity of the Commission;
- Augment engagement in Commission activities, paying particular attention to historically disenfranchised perspectives;
- Use its public forum to convene discussions about timely and complicated water issues;
- Enhance its advisory role to the Director of DWR by working with the Department to implement its bold new strategic plan; and
- Continue to serve its historic role by reporting on the State Water Project and approving key decisions made by DWR.

The Commission serves Californians broadly and is well-positioned to support governmental transparency and collaborative, equitable water policy, planning, and management.

Definitions

This document offers five goals, each with a suite of objectives that aim to advance progress toward that goal. The Commission also has developed metrics to measure its performance toward achieving each goal. The Commission defines these terms as follows:

- *Goals* – Outcomes the Commission intends to achieve in order to fulfill its mission.
- *Objectives* – Specific actions that the Commission needs to take to achieve its goal.
- *Metrics* – Standardized measures that the Commission will use to track, monitor, and assess various aspects of its performance.

Goals, Objectives, and Metrics

Goal 1: Implement the Water Storage Investment Program to Achieve Public Benefits[1]

Objectives

1. Support movement of WSIP projects toward final Commission funding awards by engaging with project proponents, State agencies, and other partners to identify and resolve issues.
2. Carefully track the progress of WSIP projects that have not yet received final funding awards to assess the need for exercising Commission discretion.
3. Review draft contracts for the administration of public benefits and make those documents available to the public prior to the decision to award final funding.
4. Make final funding decisions for projects that meet all statutory requirements.
5. Fulfill contractual oversight responsibilities, including monitoring the public benefits received after projects begin operating and adaptive management actions taken to ensure public benefits materialize.

[1] Per Proposition 1, Chapter 8, to qualify for funding, projects are required to provide public benefits in the form of ecosystem improvements, water quality improvements, recreational benefits, flood control benefits, or emergency response. The State is only allowed to fund these specific public benefits.

Metrics

1. By the end of 2025, the Commission articulates clear timeframes for projects seeking WSIP funding.
2. By the end of 2026, the Commission exercises discretion to release projects that are no longer demonstrating progress toward securing WSIP funding.
3. By 2029, the Commission considers final funding awards for all remaining unfunded projects.

Goal 2: Support Smart Water Management through Outreach, Engagement, and a Commitment to Equity

Objectives

1. In 2025 and beyond, work with key partners to develop new opportunities to advance the Commission's mission.
2. Use the Commission's public forum to provide interested and impacted parties with the opportunity to inform Commission activities and decision-making and encourage Commissioners to consider and engage with public comments.
3. In 2025 and beyond, develop, implement, and evaluate a targeted outreach approach to increase engagement in Commission work that considers:
    a. Connecting with Tribes, communities, and historically marginalized and under-represented parties;
    b. Engaging diverse and representative perspectives in Commission decisions;
    c. Connecting interested and impacted parties with topics of interest and relevance to them; and
    d. Holding Commission meetings outside of Sacramento.
4. In 2025 and beyond, increase the public's understanding and awareness of the Commission's work by utilizing social media and other public information venues.
5. In 2025, adopt a resolution that is in alignment with the policy of CNRA and the Human Right to Water and that commits to considering equity in all aspects of the Commission's work.

Metrics

1. By 2029, the Commission receives regular requests from key decision-makers and other parties to engage in water policy, planning, and management discussions.
2. Year over year, the Commission increases engagement in Commission meetings, as measured against the 2020-2024 baseline.
3. By 2029, the Commission applies an equity framework to all items brought before the Commission or under consideration by the Commission.

Goal 3: Utilize Public Forum to Explore Pressing Water Management Issues

Objectives

1. Engage with and invite experts, interested and impacted parties, and State representatives to brief the Commission on pressing water management issues related to adapting California's water system to a changing hydrology. Explore integrated watershed management, water infrastructure, groundwater recharge, flood management, and other relevant topics, inviting diverse voices and public discourse.

2. Work with CNRA, DWR, and other departments to use the Commission's public forum to evaluate and discuss progress toward implementing the Water Resilience Portfolio, California's Water Supply Strategy, and California Salmon Strategy.
3. Track efforts related to the Commission's previously issued white papers on conveyance, groundwater trading, and drought strategies, and use the Commission's public forum to daylight State progress on these topics by inviting briefings and public input.
4. Continue to examine flood advocacy in California and consider a role for the Commission in line with its statutory authority, as captured in Water Code section 12602 and 12604.3.

Metrics

1. By 2029, the percentage of the public that feels that time spent engaging with the Commission was worthwhile has increased over the 2024 baseline survey.
2. By 2029, the Commission can point to meaningful ways in which it has influenced water policy, planning, or management.
3. By 2027, the Commission has identified its role in flood advocacy.

Goal 4: Advise the Department of Water Resources to Support Implementation of DWR's Strategic Plan

Objectives

1. In 2025 and annually thereafter, receive annual updates on the Department's activities that highlight the past year's accomplishments and challenges, outline expected activities in the coming year, demonstrate how DWR is progressing toward its strategic goals and objectives, and specifies how DWR would like to work with the Commission.
2. In 2025 and beyond, work with the Department to inform and leverage outreach and engagement practices and to lead annual listening sessions, providing recommendations based on those sessions.
3. In 2025, request briefings from DWR staff and experts, solicit input from interested parties, and produce recommendations to advise the Director of DWR on DWR's goal to integrate and transform California water management.
4. In 2025, consult with and hear briefings from Department staff to understand how climate resilience, equity, public safety, and environmental stewardship are being embedded into major infrastructure and investment decisions.
5. In 2026, work with the Department to explore the opportunity for using nature-based principles to inform project design.
6. By 2028, work with the Department to identify and map the interconnections and dependencies of DWR-owned or controlled infrastructure on other infrastructure systems.
7. Review, consider, and take appropriate action on the list developed by the Department of areas where flood control work is needed in the Delta to protect public facilities or provide public benefits, as specified in Water Code section 12313.

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Metrics

1. By the end of 2025, the Commission is working closely with DWR executive staff, strategic plan leads, and other key staff to advance these objectives.
2. By 2029, the Commission can point to meaningful ways in which it has worked with DWR to influence smart water management.
3. By 2029, the Commission is a valued advisor to the DWR Director, as demonstrated by new opportunities and engagement proposed for the 2030-2034 Commission strategic plan.

Goal 5: Exercise Statutory Authorities to Ensure Transparency, Accountability, and Sound Public Processes

Objectives

1. On an annual basis, continue to receive briefings on the State Water Project (SWP), and to produce a report, as specified by Water Code section 165, that includes findings and, as appropriate, recommendations for the Department and Legislature. Through these briefings and reports, improve the public's understanding of decision making within the SWP. Create accountability by using previous findings and recommendations to guide subsequent briefings.
2. As needed, exercise statutory authorities to hold a hearing for additional SWP facilities and to name SWP facilities, as contemplated by Water Code sections 166 and 161.5, respectively.
3. As needed, review, consider, and take appropriate action on regulations proposed by DWR, and facilitate public participation in the rulemaking process.
4. As needed, review DWR's eminent domain proceedings for consistency with the standards specified in Code of Civil Procedure 1245.230 and other applicable law, as provided by the Commission's procedures for Resolutions of Necessity and Eminent Domain (revised May 17, 2023).

Metrics

1. On an annual basis, the Commission delivers reports on the SWP to the Legislature.
2. As needed, the Commission works closely with DWR staff to identify and advance these objectives within procedurally appropriate timelines and uses its public forum to clearly explain the intent and ramifications of the decisions being made.

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