

Wetlands Demonstration Project Prospectus

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Why Are We Doing This?

Over the last 20 years, billions of public and private dollars have been invested in the protection, restoration, creation, and enhancement of wetlands and riparian areas throughout California. Unfortunately, information on the effectiveness of these investments is not readily available to resource managers, regulators, elected officials, NGO's, and the public because the condition of wetlands and riparian habitat is not being monitored systematically. To address this problem, California, with funding from the USEPA, is building a statewide Wetlands Monitoring Program. This program will help the state evaluate its progress toward achieving its stated goal of "no net loss of wetland resources". The need for a state program is supported by two national reports on wetlands mitigation and monitoring. In 2001, the National Research Council issued a report titled "Compensating for Wetland Losses under the Clean Water Act". This report calls for replacing the current procedures of assessing wetlands with "science-based, rapid assessment procedures." More recently, the National Wetland Mitigation Action Plan calls for improvements in wetland monitoring, project tracking, and follow-through in evaluating compensatory mitigation in order to better track net change in wetland and riparian acreage and condition.

What is the Statewide Wetlands Monitoring Program?

The state is working towards the implementation of a toolkit of standardized data collection and assessment methods to monitor wetlands and riparian habitat within various state programs. The toolkit supports three levels of assessment activities, which stem from USEPA's general approach to comprehensive wetland monitoring. Each level is briefly described below.

Landscape Assessment (Level 1) uses remote sensing data and field surveys to inventory the wetlands and riparian areas of a region. A new statewide inventory is being produced by the USFWS through an agreement with the California Resources Agency. Inventory data can also be produced for a particular wetland project to show pre- and post-project change in wetland and riparian habitat.

Rapid Assessment (Level 2) uses field diagnostics to assess conditions at wetland and riparian sites. Work has been recently completed on the development of the California Rapid Assessment Method (CRAM). CRAM can be used in ambient surveys or project assessments of condition.

Intensive Site Assessment (Level 3) provides the data to validate rapid methods, characterizes reference condition, and diagnoses the causes of wetland condition observed in Levels 1 and 2.

The toolkit will consist of the following tools:

- Standardized wetland and riparian mapping methodologies that can be applied at the project or regional-scale. Wetland and riparian inventory data are available for various parts of the state
- CRAM plus "field to PC" data management tool for CRAM data (a.k.a CRAM-IT)
- Conceptual approaches to conducting probability-based surveys
- Standardized data transfer formats to collect and share data among agencies and the public on projects that impact wetland and riparian habitat quantity and quality. This is known as "project tracking."

What Will the Project Demonstrate?

Through a \$900K USEPA Wetlands Demonstration Pilot grant to the Resources Agency, the state will begin phased implementation of a statewide wetlands monitoring program. This program will demonstrate the implementation of this wetland and riparian assessment toolkit in various state agency (regulatory and non-regulatory) programs. The project goal is to improve state capacity to evaluate its "No Net Wetland Loss Policy."

Targeted Activities Include:

1. The creation of a Steering Committee to oversee project activities and create state policy. In particular, the Committee will develop policies on the minimum set of data required to track projects through standardized data transfer formats and specify the methodology used to evaluate the performance of the state's "No Net Wetland Loss" policy.
2. The completion of a statewide wetland inventory and initiation of riparian habitat mapping.
3. Coordination with state agency partners (Regional Water Quality Control Boards, State Water Board, State Coastal Conservancy, Department of Fish and Game, and others) to develop standardized data transfer formats to track projects and to provide consistent guidance for reporting on wetland and riparian extent, and condition on a variety of protection, restoration, and mitigation projects.
4. Where desired, creation of databases and enhancement of existing interactive web-based interfaces to upload, store and provide public access to these project tracking data.
5. Assessment of status and trends of estuarine wetlands statewide. This assessment includes: 1) a summary of the extent and geographic distribution of estuarine wetlands, 2) a probability-based survey of the ambient condition of estuarine intertidal habitat with CRAM, and 3) an assessment of the status of estuarine restoration projects relative to the statewide ambient picture.
6. Assessment of status and trends of streams and associated riparian areas in three demonstration watersheds. This assessment includes: 1) a summary of the extent and geographic distribution of habitat, 2) a probability-based survey of the ambient condition of habitat with CRAM, and 3) an assessment of the status of stream and riparian restoration projects relative to the watershed ambient picture.

What are Anticipated Project Benefits to Resource & Water Quality Protection Agencies?

1. Wetland and riparian protection, restoration, and mitigation project performance evaluations (monitoring condition over time) can be standardized and coordinated among various agencies.
 2. Consistent inventory updates and monitoring guidance from funding and permitting agencies to project and permit applicants will streamline assessment and reporting.
 3. Information about wetland and riparian acreage and condition can be scaled up from the project to a statewide picture to assess beneficial uses and track the success of various protection policies.
- These activities began in spring 2006 and will culminate in the State of the State's Wetland Report in the fall 2008.

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