

CALIFORNIA'S BLUEPRINT TO CLIMATE-READY WATER POLICY



California is trying to address 21st century water challenges using 20th century technology and 19th century laws. California's economy was built by taking water at unsustainable rates from faraway places, pumping it around the state at high energy costs, using it once, and then dumping it into the ocean.

The majority of the state's rivers and creeks are dammed or channelized. Laws that exempt major sources of pollution, disproportionately impact communities of color, and have not kept up with emerging threats or been properly enforced created conditions where most of our waters are not "fishable, swimmable, and drinkable" as required by the Clean Water Act.

Tens of millions of Californians are at risk of water insecurity as their major sources of water are polluted and/or drying up due to excessive use and climate change. The state's complex water rights and fragmented water governance makes climate-ready, equitable water planning virtually impossible.

This approach to water management is no longer acceptable in the face of climate change, the devastating 'drought to drench' phenomenon that we are experiencing, and the rising costs and associated inequity in the current system. It does not have to be this way. California Coastkeeper Alliance has developed an actionable blueprint for a more climate-ready and equitable approach to water management in California.

1. Prioritize resilient and multi-benefit local water supplies over imported water to ensure safe and affordable water for all Californians.

- **Ensure water investments prioritize local resilience** - Adopt policies to prioritize local investment in wastewater recycling, stormwater capture, water efficiency, and groundwater remediation before permitting more impactful options like ocean desalination, dams, and diversions.
- **Provide critical funding to facilitate transition to local water** - Advance a \$15B Water Bond to invest in local, multi-benefit regional water resiliency projects.
- **Protect our waters from importation** - Adopt plans that include science-based instream flow requirements that are designed to achieve endangered species recovery and protect instream beneficial uses. These instream flow requirements should prioritize historically over-diverted waters, including the Bay-Delta, the Colorado River, and Mono Lake/Owens Valley.
- **Provide safe and affordable drinking water** - Set enforceable agricultural discharge limits for nitrates to protect drinking water in farmworker communities. Create a Low-Income Rate Assistance program to provide affordable drinking water to all Californians.
- **Implement our groundwater laws** - Oversee progress toward sustainable groundwater management to ensure all basins are on track to meet the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act's (SGMA) 2040/2042 deadlines. Ensure County oversight of groundwater pumping - independent of SGMA - to protect the public trust of local waterways. Modernize

the state's understanding of the groundwater-surface water connection with increased monitoring, modeling, and reporting.

California Water Quick-Facts

- ✓ The water sector is among the largest energy users in the state, consuming 19% of CA's electricity and over 30% of its natural gas...making it a leading driver of climate change.
- ✓ 30,000 miles of California's shores, streams, and rivers do not meet basic water quality standards.
- ✓ Over 90% of California's wetlands have been lost, severely reducing natural filtration and flood protection.
- ✓ Native fish populations have collapsed: over 80% of California's native fish species are now threatened, endangered, or extinct in parts of their range.
- ✓ More than 1,400 dams choke California's natural river systems and block access to over 90% of historical salmon spawning habitat.
- ✓ 1 million Californians are served by water systems that consistently fail to meet safe drinking water standards. About 700,000 Californians rely on unregulated drinking wells that are vulnerable to contamination and drought.
- ✓ Water affordability is a growing crisis: low-income households can spend over 5% of income on water, far above federal affordability benchmarks.
- ✓ California is ranked among the top five states nationally for flood risk, with atmospheric rivers posing multi-billion-dollar threats.

2. Strengthen and enforce water laws to address the major sources of pollution, and to protect, restore, and make accessible our coast, ocean, and inland waterways.

Address past and emerging sources of pollution to California's waters

- **Protect human health from emerging toxic chemicals** – Rapidly develop water quality monitoring standards for emerging contaminants (e.g. PFAS, 6PPD, fire retardants), and develop new water quality standards for those contaminants, including phase out of PFAS products.
- **Address the Tijuana crisis** – Advance/support legislation to allocate border crossing fee revenue to fund Tijuana River infrastructure and restoration projects, and coordinate with local government to address air pollution public health impacts affecting south San Diego County communities.
- **Elevate stormwater as a resource through public-private partnerships** – Establish a statewide Commercial, Industrial, and Institutional Stormwater Permit that drives Clean Water Act compliance and incentivizes collaborative investment in green infrastructure to capture, treat, and reuse stormwater.
- **Green our schoolyards** – Incorporate K-12 campuses into the state's stormwater program. Create incentives for permittees to install nature-based solutions on school grounds that capture runoff, cool schoolyards to enhance learning, and create public greenspace in park-poor communities.

Safeguard California's iconic coast and ocean from climate change and other threats

- **Combat coastal acidification and hypoxia** – Establish enforceable statewide water quality standards that limit nutrient pollution from wastewater discharges and protect coastal ecosystems and communities.
- **Achieve 30x30 in our oceans** – Create water quality protections (i.e. Areas of Special Biological Significance) for all Marine Protected Areas in the state.
- **Standup against new offshore oil** – Protect against new and expanded federal offshore oil drilling along the California coast.

Protect and restore the state's rivers, creeks, and lakes, and make them accessible to the public

- **Set healthy river flow requirements** – Implement instream flow requirements for priority watersheds in the California Salmon Strategy that protect Tribal, recreational, and ecological uses. Requirements shall be sufficient to achieve recovery of endangered species and protect Tribal beneficial uses of instream flows.
- **Reconnect rivers to floodplains** – Relocate or remove levees and create riparian setbacks to enhance flood protection, improve water quality & supply, create habitat, increase groundwater recharge, and help facilitate dechannelization.
- **Establish a statewide "Forest-to-Flows" program** - Restore one million acres of priority headwater forests by 2035 to measurably increase late-season streamflow, improve instream habitat for native fish, and reduce catastrophic wildfire risk.
- **Make it "safe to swim" for all California communities** - Create a freshwater beach access program to create more public access to freshwater areas and monitor these areas to protect public health.

3. Modernize California's antiquated water governance to ensure it is inclusive, transparent, and responsive to our waterways and communities.

- **Strengthen environmental leadership in water governance** – Reform Water Board appointments to ensure each Water Board has an environmental justice and/or Tribal representative and create a biological representative on the State Water Board by merging the two engineer seats.
- **Protect California's values from federal attacks** – Ensure California's waters are protected from the Trump Administration by enshrining pre-existing clean water protections into state law (ex: Pre-Sackett WOTUS Rule, federal Clean Water Act and Endangered Species Act requirements & the Roadless Rule).
- **Recognize Tribal water rights** – Correct historic inequities caused by state-sanctioned acts inflicted upon all California Native American Tribes by acknowledging Tribes were the first people to put water to a beneficial use for food and cultural practices in the state and thus establish instream water rights and tribal beneficial uses accordingly; Prioritize development of Tribal Beneficial Uses and support Tribal-led stewardship and co-management of rivers and watersheds.
- **Modernize the California Constitution (Proposition 218) to provide flexible water financing solutions** – Support a constitutional amendment to allow water agencies to establish low-

income ratepayer programs, to set water conservation pricing and to move stormwater into the utility exception.

- **Hold polluters accountable & make communities whole from pollution** – Ensure clean water permits are enforceable; establish a robust enforcement strategy that includes enhancing citizen enforcement; make corporations pay their fair share of cleanup that includes re-investment to impacted communities.

Benefits of this Approach for California’s Waterways, Economy, and Communities:

- ✓ Secure water future
- ✓ Reduce water pollution
- ✓ Healthier habitat & wildlife
- ✓ Reduced carbon footprint
- ✓ Greener, healthier communities
- ✓ Human Right to Water protected
- ✓ Economic security (requires reliable water)
- ✓ Green job creation