

Ocean protection plan charts course for defending California coast

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A new ocean protection plan sets out steps to safeguard California's

coast against rising seas, while shoring up public access and building coastal economies.

The Ocean Protection Council on Wednesday approved the Strategic Plan to Protect California's Oceans, a five-year roadmap for navigating threats including climate change, pollution and loss of biodiversity. The council, a policy body within the California Natural Resources Agency, wanted to distinguish the new plan from previous editions, by focusing on specific timelines and funding sources.

"They wanted to make sure that the [strategic plan](#) wasn't the same old plan, but was really an action plan to really protect California's coast and [ocean](#)," said Mark Gold, executive director of the council. "The coast is so important to who we are in California, not just from a biodiversity perspective, but a cultural perspective, people using the beach, and the blue economy."

The plan focuses on four key areas: climate change resilience, ocean access and equity, biodiversity, and the blue economy. As the effects of ocean warming emerge on California's coast, tackling climate change impacts is essential to meeting the other three goals.

"The International Panel on Climate Change recently found that coastal ecosystems are under stress from ocean warming, intensified marine heat waves, ocean acidification, loss of oxygen, and sea-level rise, and that impacts to species, biodiversity, and ecosystem services are already being observed," the report states. "Never before has our state's ambition and effectiveness (for) protecting the ocean and coast been more important."

The plan relies on existing dollars from previous state bonds and other mechanisms, such as the environmental license plate fund, for its first two years of operations, Gold said. After that, council members are

looking to a \$4.75 billion climate resilience bond that Gov. Gavin Newsom plans to float in November, which would include a half-billion dollars for ocean and coastal action, Gold said.

The meeting, held in Sacramento, drew representatives from the Port of San Diego, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife and State Water Resources Control Board, along with host of environmental and marine business groups. Aside from requests for specific technical or language changes, speakers were broadly supportive of the plan.

"California is a powerhouse worldwide in blue technology," said Michael Jones, president of TMA BlueTech, a marine industry incubator in San Diego. "We need to be setting a standard for the world. We think this is a very timely approach, and congratulate your work."

Other acknowledged that the plan sets ambitious goals on swift timelines, but said the situation demands bold measures.

"I do think that they are a stretch, and that's good," said Jonathan Bishop, Chief Deputy Director. "We should be stretching."

Council member Jordan Diamond, executive director of the Center for Law, Energy, and the Environment (CLEE) at the UC Berkeley School of Law, said the support of other agencies and nonprofits will be key to the plan's success.

"The emphasis is on setting ambitious visions, but then working with partners to achieve them," she said. "This is not something we can do on our own. This is all dependent on partnerships."

The first section of the plan lays out strategies to safeguard California's coastal communities and ecosystems from the effect of climate change, ranging from sea level rise and beach erosion to declines in fisheries and

kelp forests. Its first target is ensuring that California's coast can withstand at least 3.5 feet of sea-level rise by 2050.

That includes developing "nature-based" solutions, including restoring wetlands and creating oyster beds that can buffer the effects of sea level rise. It also references managed retreat, a lightning rod in [climate change](#) dialogues in San Diego. Gold said consideration of managed retreat should focus more on public infrastructure, such as the Coaster train or Port of San Diego, instead of private property.

Another target proposes an "infrastructure resiliency plan focused on state roads, railroads, wastewater treatment plants, water supply facilities, ports and power plants by 2023."

"What can we do to ensure that the port, which is an economic engine for San Diego, is protected," he said. "So we're trying to reframe that dialogue. Managed retreat is a tool of last resort."

The plan also aims to minimize ecological effects of ocean warming by "protecting, restoring or recreating" 10,000 acres of coastal wetlands by 2025. And it calls for updating water quality rules to combat ocean acidification and low ocean oxygen, reduce sewage discharge to the ocean, and increase water reuse.

In the second section, the plan sets goals for engaging California's tribal communities and governments in ocean policy, and providing "equitable, convenient, and affordable access to coastal natural resources" and policy-making, and "partnering with underserved communities" on ocean and coastal resources and management. Responding to speakers' recommendations, the council also added language to the plan to increase diversity in its own organization.

The portion on biodiversity calls for completing a 10-year assessment of

the success of California's network of Marine Protected Areas, and developing plans to protect and restore tide pools, seagrass beds and kelp forests. It urges measures to protect whales and sea turtles from ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear, with a goal of zero deaths from those hazards. And it calls for reductions of plastic pollution, with a goal of eliminating trash into the ocean by 2030.

In another target specific to both San Diego recreation and science, the biodiversity section also aims to modernize the harmful algal bloom notification network to provide real time data by 2022, and predictions by 2024. Gold said the council just provided \$1.3 million for that effort, led by Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla.

Other targets would identify and eradicate invasive marine species, and curtail contaminants harmful to marine organisms or human health.

The final section aims to build upon the economic engine of the "blue economy." Its targets include developing a traceability system for sustainable seafood, supporting fishing communities and coastal tourism, and encouraging development of offshore wind energy.

State Assemblyman Mark Stone, who serves on the council, said those hard targets give the plan teeth, and also set accountability standards for the plan, and the potential state bond measure.

"It's more than aspirational, but lays out a real roadmap for steps that can be taken," he said. "This will be the document against which progress is measured."

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