



Chapter 2

Principles for Addressing Sea Level Rise in the Coastal Zone

This chapter summarizes the Coastal Commission’s framing principles for addressing sea level rise, many of which derive directly from the requirements of the Coastal Act. These principles broadly lay out the common ideas and a framework by which sea level rise planning and permitting actions can be assessed, and as such, represent the goals to which actions should aspire. Individual actions and outcomes may vary based on a variety of factors, including applicable policies and location- or project-specific factors that may affect feasibility. There are four categories of principles: using science to guide decisions; minimizing coastal hazards through planning and development standards; maximizing protection of public access, recreation, and sensitive coastal resources; and maximizing agency coordination and public participation. Each category groups important and related concepts that are central to addressing the challenge of rising sea levels. Building on the cumulative knowledge and experience of the Commission, subsequent chapters of this Guidance use these principles to frame practical guidance for addressing sea level rise through planning and permitting decisions in the coastal zone, consistent with the statewide policies of the California Coastal Act as well as the statewide vision of climate resilience outlined in the 2014 [Safeguarding California](#) plan.

USE SCIENCE TO GUIDE DECISIONS [Coastal Act Sections 30006.5; 30335.5]

- 1. Recognize and address sea level rise as necessary in planning and permitting decisions.** Address sea level rise science in all applicable coastal management and decision-making processes, including Local Coastal Programs (LCPs), Port Master Plans (PMPs), Public Works Plans (PWP), Long Range Development Plans (LRDPs), Coastal Development Permits (CDPs), federal consistency reviews, and other Coastal Act decision processes. Sea level rise should be addressed in both hazard analyses and identification of adaptation strategies/alternative analyses, consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act and LCPs as applicable¹⁰.
- 2. Use the best available science to determine locally relevant (context-specific) sea level rise projections and potential impacts for all Coastal Act planning processes, project design, and permitting reviews.** Sea level rise science continues to evolve, and some processes that are not fully understood (*e.g.*, ice sheet dynamics) could potentially have large effects on future sea level rise. At the time of this report’s publication, the best available science on sea level rise in California is the 2012 National Research Council (NRC) Report, [Sea-Level Rise for the Coasts of California, Oregon and Washington: Past, Present, and Future](#) (NRC 2012) (See [Table 2](#)), as stated in the 2014 *Safeguarding California* document

¹⁰ This Guidance document is intended to help implement the Coastal Act and LCPs in the context of sea level rise concerns. However, the standard of review for Commission actions remains the California Coastal Act or applicable certified LCPs. In particular, the recommendations of this Guidance do not constitute “enforceable policies” for purposes of CZMA federal consistency reviews. The enforceable policies for conducting federal consistency reviews will remain the policies of Chapter 3 of the Coastal Act. Also, for federal agency activities, the standard is consistency “to the maximum extent practicable,” with Chapter 3, *i.e.*, federal agency activities must be fully consistent unless existing law applicable to the federal agency prohibits full consistency. See 15 CFR. §§ 930.32 and 930.43(d). However, the Commission looks at sea level rise as one part of determining the coastal effects from an activity through CZMA federal consistency reviews and the use of this Guidance by all parties should help determine what those coastal effects may be or how effects from sea level rise may be mitigated. Pursuant to 15 CFR § 930.11(h), implementation of this guidance would not be grounds for an objection (because it is not an “enforceable policy”) but it might be one means that “would allow the activity to be conducted consistent with the enforceable policies of the program” in order to avoid an objection.

and the Ocean Protection Council’s 2013 State of California Sea-level Rise Guidance Document. As discussed in greater detail in [Chapter 3](#) of this Guidance, these projections should be used in a scenario-based analysis to identify potential local impacts from sea level rise, incorporating storms, extreme water levels, and shoreline change. Other authoritative sea level science and projections may also be used, in part or in full, provided they are peer-reviewed, widely accepted within the scientific community, and locally relevant.

The Commission will re-examine the best available science periodically and as needed with the release of new information on sea level rise.¹¹ In addition, Commission staff intends to submit a periodic status report to the Commission describing updates on the best available science and adaptation practices, and any potential recommended changes to the Guidance document.

Table 2. Sea Level Rise Projections for California¹² (NRC 2012)

TIME PERIOD*	NORTH OF CAPE MENDOCINO	SOUTH OF CAPE MENDOCINO	
by 2030	-2 – 9 in (-4 – +23 cm)	2 – 12 in (4 – 30 cm)	
by 2050	-1 – 19 in (-3 – + 48 cm)	5 – 24 in (12 – 61 cm)	
by 2100	4 – 56 in (10 – 143 cm)	17 – 66 in (42 – 167 cm)	

*with Year 2000 as a baseline

- 3. Recognize and address scientific uncertainty using scenario planning and adaptive management techniques.** Given the uncertainty in the magnitude and timing of future sea level rise, particularly over longer time periods, planners and project designers should use scenario-based analysis to examine a range of possible shoreline changes and sea level rise risks to shape LCPs and other plans and project development designs. As appropriate, development projects, resource management plans, and LCP and other planning updates should incorporate an adaptive management framework with regular monitoring, reassessments, and dynamic adjustment in order to account for uncertainty.

¹¹ Major scientific reports include the release of the 2014 National Climate Assessment (Melillo *et al.*) and the 2013 IPCC 5th Assessment Report.

¹² The NRC Committee divided the Pacific coast for California, Oregon and Washington into two regions, north and south of Cape Mendocino, due to differences in tectonics that occur at this location. North of Cape Mendocino, land is rising as ocean plates descend below the North American plate at the Cascadia Subduction Zone. South of Cape Mendocino, the coast is subsiding (NRC 2012, p. 3). Humboldt Bay has not experienced the regional uplift that characterizes most of the coast north of Cape Mendocino, and instead has shown the highest subsidence recorded for the California coast. As a result, the projections for north of Cape Mendocino may not be appropriate for use in or near Humboldt Bay and the Eel River Estuary. Please see [Humboldt Bay: Sea Level Rise Hydrodynamic Modeling, and Inundation Vulnerability Mapping](#) (Northern Hydrology and Engineering 2015) for additional information on sea level rise projections for the Humboldt Bay region.

4. **Use a precautionary approach by planning and providing adaptive capacity for the highest amounts of possible sea level rise.** LCPs and CDPs should analyze the highest projections of sea level rise in order to understand the implications of a worst case scenario. In some cases, it may be appropriate to *design* for the local hazard conditions that will result from more moderate sea level rise scenarios, as long as decision makers and project applicants *plan* to implement additional adaptation strategies if conditions change more than anticipated in the initial design. Similar to the recommendation in the Ocean Protection Council's [2011 State Sea-Level Rise Resolution](#), the Commission does not recommend using values solely in the lower third of the NRC's projections as this does not give a full picture of the risks. Looking instead at both the high and low projections allows users to build an understanding of the overall risk sea level rise poses to the region or site.
5. **Design adaptation strategies according to local conditions and existing development patterns, in accordance with the Coastal Act.** Design adaptation strategies using best management practices for adaptation, and tailor the design to the specific conditions and development patterns of the area, in accordance with the Coastal Act and certified LCPs. LCPs should continue to serve as a key implementing mechanism for these adaptation strategies. Adaptation strategies should be evaluated for their ability to both minimize hazards and protect coastal resources.

MINIMIZE COASTAL HAZARDS THROUGH PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS [Coastal Act Sections 30253; 30235; 30001, 30001.5]

6. **Avoid significant coastal hazard risks to new development where feasible.** Section 30253 of the Coastal Act requires new development to minimize risks to life and property in areas of high geologic and flood hazard. The strongest approach for minimizing hazards is to avoid siting new development within areas vulnerable to flooding, inundation, and erosion, thus ensuring stable site conditions without the need for long-term financial and resource commitments for protective devices. Methods to direct new development away from hazardous locations are included in [Chapter 7](#) of this Guidance.
7. **Minimize hazard risks to new development over the life of the authorized development.** Coastal Act Section 30253 requires that new development minimize coastal hazard risks without the use of bluff retaining or shoreline protection devices that would substantially alter natural landforms. When hazards from sea level rise cannot be avoided, new development should include provisions to ensure that hazard risks are minimized for the life of the development without shoreline protection, including through future modification, relocation, or removal when they become threatened by natural hazards, including sea level rise.
8. **Minimize coastal hazard risks and resource impacts when making redevelopment decisions.** LCPs should encourage and require, as applicable, existing at-risk structures to be brought into conformance with current standards when redeveloped. Improvements to existing at-risk structures should be limited to basic repair and maintenance activities and not extend the life of such structures or expand at-risk elements of the development, consistent with the Coastal Act.

9. **Account for the social and economic needs of the people of the state, including environmental justice; assure priority for coastal-dependent and coastal-related development over other development.** In planning and project development concerning sea level rise, assure that the social and economic needs of the people of the state are accounted for in accordance with Coastal Act Section 30001.5(b), with special consideration for working persons employed within the coastal zone (Coastal Act Section 30001(d)). Recognize that low-income communities are less equipped to prepare for and respond to the impacts of sea level rise and ensure that LCP and CDP decisions account for environmental justice concerns and include low-income persons and communities in planning efforts.
10. **Ensure that property owners understand and assume the risks, and mitigate the coastal resource impacts, of new development in hazardous areas.** Property owners should assume the risks of developing in a hazardous location (often referred to as internalizing risk). They should be responsible for modifying, relocating or removing new development if it is threatened in the future. Any actions to minimize risks to new development should not result in current and/or future encroachment onto public lands or in impacts to coastal resources inconsistent with the Coastal Act. LCPs and Coastal Development Permits should require recorded assumptions of risk, “no future seawall” conditions, and/or other appropriate mitigation measures to internalize risk decisions with the private land owner.

MAXIMIZE PROTECTION OF PUBLIC ACCESS, RECREATION, AND SENSITIVE COASTAL RESOURCES [Coastal Act Chapter 3 policies]

11. **Provide for maximum protection of coastal resources in all coastal planning and regulatory decisions.** New and existing development, redevelopment, and repair and maintenance activities as well as associated sea level rise adaptation strategies should avoid or minimize impacts to coastal resources, including public access, recreation, marine resources, agricultural areas, sensitive habitats, archaeological resources, and scenic and visual resources in conformity with Coastal Act requirements. Impacts from development and related activities should be avoided or minimized; unavoidable impacts should be mitigated as necessary.
12. **Maximize natural shoreline values and processes; avoid expansion and minimize the perpetuation of shoreline armoring.** If existing development (both private and public) is threatened by sea level rise hazards, it should employ the least environmentally damaging feasible alternatives and minimize hard shoreline protection. Priority should be given to options that enhance and maximize coastal resources and access, including innovative nature-based approaches such as living shoreline techniques or managed/planned retreat. If traditional hard shoreline protection is necessary and allowable under the Coastal Act, use the least-environmentally damaging feasible alternative, incorporate projections of sea level rise into the design of protection, and limit the time-period of approval, for example, to the life of the structure the device is protecting. Major renovations, redevelopment, or other new development should not rely upon existing shore protective devices for site stability or hazard protection. Where feasible, existing shoreline protection that is no longer being relied upon in this way, or no longer needed otherwise, should be phased out.

13. **Recognize that sea level rise will cause the public trust boundary to move inland. Protect public trust lands and resources, including as sea level rises. New shoreline protective devices should not result in the loss of public trust lands.** Where allowed under the Coastal Act or the relevant LCP, shoreline protective devices should be sited, designed, and conditioned to ensure that they do not result in the loss of public trust lands¹³ or encroach onto public trust lands without the permission of the appropriate trustee agency. When sea level rise causes the public trust boundary to move inland such that a protective device that was located on uplands becomes subject to the public trust, the permittee should either obtain permission from the appropriate trustee agency for the encroachment or apply for a permit to remove any encroachments.
14. **Address potential secondary coastal resource impacts (to wetlands, habitat, agriculture, scenic and visual resources, etc.) from hazard management decisions, consistent with the Coastal Act.** Actions to address sea level rise in LCPs or permits should not exacerbate other climate-related vulnerabilities or undermine conservation/protection goals and broader ecosystem sustainability. For example, siting and design of new development should not only avoid sea level rise hazards, but also ensure that the development does not have unintended adverse consequences that impact sensitive habitats or species in the area.
15. **Address the cumulative impacts and regional contexts of planning and permitting decisions.** Sea level rise will have impacts at both the site-specific and regional scales. In addition to the evaluation of site-specific sea level rise impacts, LCPs and projects should include an evaluation of the broader region-wide impacts, in two different contexts. First, the LCP or project should consider how sea level rise impacts throughout an entire littoral cell or watershed could affect the LCP jurisdiction or project. Second, the LCP or project should consider how options to adapt to sea level rise could result in cumulative impacts to other areas in the littoral cell or watershed. Actions should be taken to minimize any identified impacts.
16. **Require mitigation of unavoidable coastal resource impacts related to permitting and shoreline management decisions.** Require mitigation for unavoidable public resource impacts over the life of the structure as a condition of approval for the Coastal Development Permit. For example, for impacts to sand supply or public recreation due to armoring and the loss of sandy beach from erosion in front of shoreline protection devices, require commensurate in-kind mitigations, a sand mitigation fee, and other necessary mitigation fees (for example, public access and recreation mitigation). Because the longer term effects can be difficult to quantify, especially given uncertainty about the exact rate of future sea level rise, consider requiring periodic re-evaluation of the project authorization and mitigation for longer term impacts.

¹³ The State holds and manages all tidelands, submerged lands, and beds of navigable waterways for the benefit of all people of the State for statewide purposes consistent with the common law Public Trust Doctrine (“public trust”). In coastal areas, the landward location and extent of the State’s trust lands are generally defined by reference to the ordinary high water mark, as measured by the mean high tide line. Public trust uses include such uses as maritime commerce, navigation, fishing, boating, water-oriented recreation, and environmental preservation and restoration.

17. **Consider best available information on resource valuation when planning for, managing, and mitigating coastal resource impacts.** Planning, project development, and mitigation planning should evaluate the societal and ecosystem service benefits of coastal resources at risk from sea level rise or actions to prepare for sea level rise. These benefits can include flood protection, carbon sequestration, water purification, tourism and recreation opportunities, and community character. Resource values can be quantified through restoration costs or various economic valuation models.

MAXIMIZE AGENCY COORDINATION AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION [Coastal Act Chapter 5; Sections 30006; 30320; 30339; 30500; 30503; 30711]

18. **Coordinate planning and regulatory decision making with other appropriate local, state, and federal agencies; support research and monitoring efforts.** Given the multitude of sea level rise planning, research, and guidance efforts occurring in California, it is critical for agencies and organizations to share information, coordinate efforts, and collaborate where feasible to leverage existing work efforts and improve consistency. Additionally, since many sea level rise hazards affect multiple jurisdictions, their management may also need to be coordinated through multi-agency reviews and coordinated decision making. The Commission will continue to meet this goal through coordination, engagement with stakeholders, and trainings. However, ongoing financial support for these Commission efforts is critical.
19. **Consider conducting vulnerability assessments and adaptation planning at the regional level.** Where feasible, local governments should coordinate vulnerability assessments and adaptation planning with other jurisdictions in the region that face common threats from sea level rise. A regional vulnerability assessment provides an opportunity to evaluate impacts that span multiple jurisdictions, assess and implement regional adaptation strategies, coordinate responses, and leverage research and planning funds.
20. **Provide for maximum public participation in planning and regulatory processes.** The Coastal Commission will continue to provide avenues for maximum public participation in planning and regulatory processes, and will continue to establish and/or expand non-traditional alliances (*e.g.*, between/among public and private resource managers, tribal groups, scientists, decision makers), share knowledge openly and actively, and regularly and clearly communicate to the public on the science as well as on a range of solutions to prepare for sea level rise.

This document and its guiding principles both reflect and complement the priorities outlined in the State of California's climate adaptation strategy, the 2014 *Safeguarding California* plan. While this Guidance specifically focuses on the California Coastal Act and the regulatory work of the Coastal Commission, it also echoes key concepts in *Safeguarding California* that apply statewide. For example, a central theme in *Safeguarding California* is to provide risk reduction measures for California's most vulnerable populations, something that is addressed here in Guiding Principle #9. Similarly, this Guidance and *Safeguarding California* both emphasize the use of best available science (Guiding Principle #2) and the need for communication, outreach,

and public participation to increase understanding of climate risks and adaptation options (Guiding Principle #20).

Safeguarding California's Coast and Oceans chapter also states that “new development and communities must be planned and designed for long-term sustainability in the face of climate change,” which captures a central purpose and focus of this Guidance. It goes on to specify that “California must ensure public access to coastal areas and protect beaches, natural shoreline, and park and recreational resources” and “the state should not build or plan to build, lease, fund, or permit any significant new structures or infrastructure that will require new protection from sea level rise, storm surges or coastal erosion during the expected life of the structure, beyond routine maintenance of existing levees or other protective measures, unless there is a compelling need.” Again, these values are reflected here, as Guiding Principles #6 and #12. In these ways, and through the shared goal of ensuring planning for and resilience against climate change impacts, the two documents are readily consistent and complementary.