



Chapter 4

Consequences of Sea Level Rise for Communities, Coastal Resources, and Development

The physical effects of sea level rise described in the previous chapter could have significant consequences for California’s citizens, coastal communities and the resources protected by the Coastal Act. This chapter describes some of these consequences and notes the relevant Coastal Act policies for convenience. It is important to consider both the direct impacts of sea level rise on coastal resources and what these impacts mean for the people and communities who use and enjoy these coastal resources. It is also important to consider environmental justice when analyzing sea level rise impacts, as described in greater detail in the section below.

SEA LEVEL RISE ADAPTATION PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Sea level rise and how we respond to it may result in significant changes in the distribution of environmental benefits, or environmental justice, in California. General planning law in California specifically recognizes and defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment of people of all races, culture and income with respect to the development, adoption, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (Government Code Section 65040.12; and see Public Resources Code Section 71110-71116). Environmental justice demands that all people, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or level of income, are able to enjoy the benefits of our environmental protection programs and our environment generally. [Safeguarding California](#) (CNRA 2018) identifies climate justice as an important cross-sector theme in the state’s climate adaptation and resilience planning efforts. Additionally, the 2018 OPC SLR Guidance recommends prioritizing social equity, environmental justice, and the needs of vulnerable communities in adaptation planning.

The California Coastal Act also recognizes the fundamental importance of the fair distribution of environmental benefits in Section 30001:

The Legislature hereby finds and declares: (a) That the California coastal zone is a distinct and valuable natural resource of vital and enduring interest to all the people and exists as a delicately balanced ecosystem. (b) That the permanent protection of the state's natural and scenic resources is a paramount concern to present and future residents of the state and nation. (c) That to promote the public safety, health, and welfare, and to protect public and private property, wildlife, marine fisheries, and other ocean resources, and the natural environment, it is necessary to protect the ecological balance of the coastal zone and prevent its deterioration and destruction. (d) That existing developed uses, and future developments that are carefully planned and developed consistent with the policies of this division, are essential to the economic and social well-being of the people of this state and especially to working persons employed within the coastal zone.

The Act thus declares that the protection of the coast is of vital interest to *all* the people, of paramount concern to *present and future residents* of the state and nation, and that careful planning and development is essential to *the economic and social well-being* of the people. This broad direction to protect the coast for everyone is underscored in Section 30006, which declares:

. . . the public has a right to fully participate in decisions affecting coastal planning, conservation and development; that achievement of sound coastal conservation and development is dependent upon public understanding and support; and that the

continuing planning and implementation of programs for coastal conservation and development should include the widest opportunity for public participation.

Hence, everyone is entitled to participate in the management decisions that determine how the benefits and burdens of managing California's coast will be distributed. Ensuring low-income and underserved communities are included in environmental decisions is a key tenet of environmental justice and will minimize disproportionate environmental and public health impacts. Furthermore, in 2016, the Governor signed AB 2616 (Burke), which amended the Coastal Act and gives the Commission new authority to specifically consider environmental justice when making permit decisions. This legislation also cross-references existing non-discrimination and civil rights law in the government code and requires the governor to appoint an environmental justice Commissioner to our board.

The Coastal Act's broad concern for all the people is best borne out in its public access policies, which require the maximum provision and protection of the public's rights of access to and along the shoreline (Sections 30210-214). These policies reflect the judgement of the people of California in passing Proposition 20 in 1972 that public access and recreation along our coast is a fundamental environmental benefit to be protected for and enjoyed by all, not just by those with the good fortune or means to live along the shoreline. Public access to the coast is important to the health and well-being of the public, and promoting public access for all citizens provides low-cost, outdoor recreation that can improve the overall quality of life of the public, including low-income and underserved communities.

Unfortunately, public access is also one of the coastal resources most at risk from accelerating sea level rise. As discussed elsewhere in this Guidance, beaches, accessways, recreational amenities, and even surfing resources may be dramatically impacted by rising seas. Where development already exists, and particularly where there is substantial shoreline armoring to protect this development, California stands to lose significant recreational beach areas. These places that are at increased risk provide environmental benefits for everyone, generally at very low cost, or even free. Thus, the potential loss of beach and shoreline recreation areas represents a significant potential impact to a resource that both is especially important to those with fewer economic resources and one that we endeavor to provide for everyone without discrimination, no matter their income levels, ethnicities or cultures; no matter if they are from coastal or inland areas or from outside the state.

The exacerbation of environmental injustices by anticipated sea level rise may be particularly concerning when the Commission and local governments need to make decisions about shoreline protection and hazard mitigation. As discussed elsewhere in this Guidance, the Coastal Act provides for the protection and mitigation of coastal hazards for existing and new development. But some hazard mitigation, such as seawall development or elevated development on beaches, may have significant impacts to public trust shoreline resources. Thus, we face a situation where widely available public beach resources may be diminished in order to protect private or public development along the shoreline – potentially a significant environmental justice concern. Because of this, it will be important for decision makers to proactively consider all aspects of this Guidance in an effort to avoid and mitigate the potential impacts to coastal resources from hazard response. This is particularly true for recommendations to consider alternatives to

shoreline structure development and, where shoreline structures must be approved, for recommendations to fully mitigate the impacts of such structures on public shoreline resources.

A May 2015 decision made by the Coastal Commission emphasizes the importance of analyzing low-cost recreational opportunities in addition to other coastal resource impacts when evaluating shoreline protection and other responses to sea level rise and coastal hazards. The Coastal Commission approved a revetment at the west end of the Goleta Beach County Park to provide protection against erosion. This park is an important public resource in Santa Barbara County and receives up to 1.5 million visitors each year, a large fraction of which are low-income visitors. Park facilities include picnic areas, open parkland, and access to the ocean and a recreational beach for no or low cost. The revetment was approved contingent upon specific conditions, including continued free public access and vehicle parking for the term of the permit. This decision highlights the importance of protecting wide accessibility to shoreline resources even as sea level rises.

The potential impacts of adaptation responses on public shoreline resources, and thus the potential environmental justice impacts of such actions, will need to be considered for all resources protected under the Coastal Act. It is also true that due to current development patterns along the coast, sea level rise hazards may affect various sections of the population differently, as could the implementation and effectiveness of various adaptation measures. The number of people living along the open coast in areas exposed to flooding from a 100-year flood would increase to 210,000 with a 4.6 ft (1.4 m) increase in sea level; approximately 27% or 56,000 of these are lower income people (those earning less than \$30,000 annually); 45,000 are renters; and 4,700 are linguistically isolated and less likely to understand flood warnings (Heberger *et al.* 2009). According to Heberger *et al.* (2009), the greatest increases in the number of people vulnerable to flooding will occur in Los Angeles, San Diego, Ventura, Humboldt, and San Luis Obispo counties. Sea level rise will likely result in the loss of key infrastructure, intrusion of saltwater into water sources, and the creation of additional coastal hazards. Hazards in vulnerable areas will have disproportionate impacts on communities with the least capacity to adapt, which could deepen and expand existing environmental injustice if adaptation responses are not managed appropriately.

For example, lower-income communities and those who live in rental units are more likely to be displaced by flooding or related impacts as compared to property owners because they lack the funds and/or abilities to rebuild, have less control over their safety, and often have limited access to insurance. Relatedly, these same populations are less likely to be able to take proactive steps to adapt to sea level rise. Additionally, loss of local public beaches or a reduction in public access and recreation opportunities would disproportionately affect low-income communities that have few alternative lower cost recreational opportunities. Tribal communities are also vulnerable to sea level rise because they are often tied to specific locations, and therefore can't easily relocate.

Overall, it will be important for planners and decision makers to not only consider the direct impacts and consequences of sea level rise on coastal resources, but to also consider what those consequences mean for the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens along the coast, and the communities that use and rely on those resources, including those who do not live in the

coastal zone but are still impacted by coastal resource management, including workers and visitors. Low-income and underserved communities are less equipped to prepare for and respond to sea level rise, but community engagement and social cohesion can improve coastal resilience and lead to more equitable adaptation planning. Planners and decision makers should consider environmental justice concerns in the analysis of alternative project designs and adaptation measures and ensure low-income and underserved communities are involved in decision-making and planning efforts. This will better ensure that adaptation efforts benefit all Californians, fairly, and that they do not increase vulnerability to sea level rise among any particular group or demographic, and do not have any unintended consequences that lead to social or environmental injustices. In particular, it will be important to consider the potential impacts of hazard mitigation actions to protect development that may only benefit a few, on the public access and shoreline resources that are available for all Californians to enjoy.

CONSEQUENCES OF SEA LEVEL RISE FOR COASTAL ACT RESOURCES

- **Coastal development (Coastal Act Sections 30235, 30236, 30250, 30253):** Sea level rise will increase the likelihood of property damage from flooding, inundation, or extreme waves, and will increase the number of people living in areas exposed to significant flooding. Increased erosion and loss or movement of beach sand will lead to an increase in the spatial extent of eroding bluffs and shorelines, and could increase instability of coastal structures and recreation areas. Levee systems could also experience damage and overtopping from an increase in water levels, extreme wave conditions, or a loss of wetlands, which buffer impacts from high water. The replacement value of property at risk from sea level rise for the California coast is approximately \$36.5 billion (in 2000 dollars, not including San Francisco Bay) (Heberger *et al.* 2009).

Impacts to public infrastructure, ports, and industrial development include:

- **Public infrastructure:** Low-lying roads, wastewater treatment facilities, energy facilities, stormwater infrastructure, and utility infrastructure such as potable water systems and electricity transfer systems are at risk of impaired function due to erosion, flooding, and inundation. Heberger *et al.* (2009) estimated that 7 wastewater treatment plants, 14 power plants, including one in Humboldt County and 13 in Southern California, and 250 miles (402 km) of highways, 1500 miles (2414 km) of roads, and 110 miles (177 km) of railways could be at risk from a 100-year flood with 1.4-m rise in sea level (Heberger *et al.* 2009). Facilities and highways located on coastal bluffs subject to erosion will become more susceptible in the future. Sections of Highway 1 have already had to be realigned due to erosion or are in the planning stages for realignment projects, including areas in San Luis Obispo County, Monterey Bay, Half Moon Bay, and Marin County and the sections at risk in the future will likely increase.



Figure 7. Photo of infrastructure at risk near Rincon Beach, Ventura, CA, during the King Tide in December 2012. (Photo courtesy of David Powdrell, California King Tides Initiative)

- **Ports (Coastal Act Sections 30703 – 30708):** Sea level rise could cause a variety of impacts to ports, including flooding and inundation of port infrastructure and damage to piers and marina facilities from wave action and higher water levels. A possible benefit could be a decreased need for dredging. But, unless facilities have already included accommodations for larger ships than they currently service, higher water levels could increase the difficulty for cargo handling facilities due to the higher vessel position (CCC 2001; CNRA 2014). Increased water heights could reduce bridge clearance, reducing the size of ships that can access ports or restricting movement of ships to low tides, and potentially increasing throughput times for cargo delivered to ports. Heberger *et al.* (2009) found that significant flooding from sea level rise is possible at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Given that these two ports handle 45-50% of the containers shipped into the United States, and 77% of goods that leave the state, sea level rise could affect the efficiency of goods movement, and have serious economic implications for California and the nation (Heberger *et al.* 2009).
- **Industrial development, refineries, and petrochemical facilities (Coastal Act Sections 30260-30266.5):** Sea level rise could reduce areas available for siting or expansion of industrial development. Inundation of contaminated lands near industrial development could lead to problems with water quality and polluted runoff. Sea level rise could lead to an increase in flooding damage of refineries or petrochemical facilities, and impacts from sea level rise could be an issue when locating or expanding refineries or petrochemical facilities, or when mitigating any adverse environmental effects.
- **Construction altering natural shorelines (Coastal Act Section 30235):** Sea level rise may lead to an increase in demand for construction of shoreline protection for existing development, public access, and coastal-dependent uses in danger of erosion. Shoreline protection devices alter natural shorelines and also generally have negative impacts on beaches, near-shore marine habitat, and scenic and visual qualities of coastal areas.

- **Public access and recreation (Coastal Act Sections 30210, 30211, 30213, 30220, 30221):** One of the highest priorities in the Coastal Act is the mandate to protect and maximize public access to the coast. Sea level rise could lead to a loss of public access and recreational opportunities due to permanent inundation, episodic flooding, or erosion of beaches, recreational areas, or trails. In areas where beaches cannot migrate inland due to development or more resistant landforms, beaches will become narrower or will disappear completely. Access and functionality of water-oriented activities may also be affected. For instance, sea level rise, by increasing water levels and altering sediment patterns, could lead to a change in surfing conditions or affect the safety of harbors and marinas (Kornell 2012).
- **Coastal habitats (Coastal Act Sections 30230, 30231, 30233, 30240):** Coastal habitat areas likely to be affected by sea level rise include bluffs and cliffs, rocky intertidal areas, beaches, dunes, wetlands, estuaries, lagoons and tidal marshes, tidal flats, eelgrass beds, and tidally-influenced streams and rivers.

Importantly, there are many endemic and endangered species in California that are dependent on these coastal environments. For example, grunion need a sandy beach environment in order to reproduce and survive, the California clapper rail is dependent on marshes and wetlands, and the black abalone requires rocky intertidal habitat. Nesting habitat, nursery areas, and haul-out sites important for birds, fish, marine mammals and other animals could also disappear as sea levels rise (Funayama *et al.* 2012).

Impacts to wetlands, intertidal areas, beaches, and dunes include:

- **Beaches, dunes, and intertidal areas:** Inundation and increased erosion from sea level rise could convert habitats from one type to another and generally reduce the amount of nearshore habitat, such as sandy beaches and rocky intertidal areas. Sea level rise will cause landward migration of beaches over the long term, and could lead to a rapid increase in the retreat rate of dunes. Beaches with seawalls or other barriers will not be able to migrate landward and the sandy beach areas will gradually become inundated (NRC 2012). A loss of beach and dune areas will have significant consequences for beach and adjacent inland ecosystems. Beaches and dunes provide critical habitat for species and act as buffers to interior agricultural lands and habitat during storms (CNRA 2009).
- **Wetlands:** Sea level rise will lead to wetland habitat conversion and loss as the intertidal zone shifts inland. Of particular concern is the loss of saltwater marshes from sea level rise, which have already decreased by about 90% from their historical levels in California (CNRA 2010). California's 550 square miles (885 km) of critical coastal wetland habitat (Heberger *et al.* 2009, including wetlands in San Francisco Bay) could be converted to open water by 4.6 ft (1.4 m) rise of sea level if they are not able accrete upward or to migrate inland due to natural or anthropogenic barriers. Although barriers are plentiful, inland migration of these wetlands is possible for over 50% of the potentially inundated wetland area based on land use compatibility alone (Heberger *et al.* 2009). Consideration of adequate sediment supply and additional barriers to inland migration would further constrain wetland migration potential. A 4.6 ft (1.4 m) increase in sea level would flood 150 square miles (241 km) of land immediately adjacent to wetlands, which

could become future wetlands if that land remains undeveloped. Loss or reduction of wetland habitat would impact many plant and animal species, including migratory birds that depend on these habitats as part of the Pacific Flyway. Species that are salt-tolerant may have an advantage as sea level rise occurs and exposes new areas to salt water, while species that have narrow salinity and temperature tolerances may have difficulty adapting to changing conditions.

- **Biological productivity of coastal waters (Coastal Act Sections 30230, 30231):** Sea level rise could affect biological productivity of coastal waters by changing the types of habitats that are available. This change could alter species composition, and could potentially result in cascading effects through the coastal food chain. Changes in water quality can have differing impacts on biological productivity. For instance, decreased water quality due to increased nutrient pollution has been found to increase biological productivity at the base of the food chain to undesirable levels, and has been linked to harmful algal blooms which result in hypoxic conditions for other marine species (Kudela *et al.* 2010; Ryan *et al.* 2010; Caldwell *et al.* 2013).
- **Water quality (Coastal Act Section 30231):** Sea level rise could lead to declines in coastal water quality in several ways. First, coastal water quality could be degraded due to inundation of toxic soils and an increase in nonpoint source pollution from flooding. In particular, the presence of facilities or land containing hazardous materials in coastal areas susceptible to flooding or permanent inundation presents toxic exposure risks for human communities and ecosystems. Second, rising seas could impact wastewater facility infrastructure and other methods and structures designed to protect water quality near the coast. In addition to damaging equipment and blocking discharge from coastal outfall structures, floods could force facilities to release untreated wastewater, threatening nearby water quality (Heberger *et al.* 2009). Salt water draining into sewer lines as part of extreme weather flooding might also damage biological systems at wastewater facilities if the organisms present in these systems are not salt-tolerant. Third, sea level rise could lead to saltwater intrusion into valuable groundwater aquifers, potentially rendering some existing wells unusable and decreasing the total groundwater supply in coastal areas. The extent of saltwater intrusion will likely vary based upon local hydrological conditions, with the worst impacts occurring in unconfined aquifers along low-lying coasts that have already experienced overdraft and saline intrusion. This change could force affected communities to turn to more costly water sources such as surface water transfers or desalination. Finally, loss of wetlands could decrease water quality given that wetlands act to improve water quality by slowing and filtering water that flows through them.
- **Coastal agriculture (Coastal Act Sections 30241- 30243):** Sea level rise could lead to an increase in flooding and inundation of low-lying agricultural land, saltwater intrusion into agricultural water supplies, and a decrease in the amount of freshwater available for agricultural uses. Flooding of agricultural lands can cause major impacts on local businesses, national food supplies, and the state's economy.
- **Archaeological and paleontological resources (Coastal Act Section 30244):** Archaeological or paleontological resources could be put at risk by inundation, flooding, or by an increase in erosion due to sea level rise. Areas of traditional cultural significance to California Native American tribes, including villages, religious and ceremonial locations, middens, burial sites, and other areas, could be at risk from sea level rise. For

example, the Santa Barbara Channel area has thousands of archaeological sites dating over 13,000 years that are at risk of being destroyed or altered from small amounts of sea level rise (Reeder *et al.* 2010).

For a summary of some of the sea level rise impacts and potential consequences for the coast, see [Figure 8](#). Many of these consequences are conditions that coastal managers already deal with on a regular basis, and strategies already exist for minimizing impacts from flooding, erosion, saltwater intrusion, and changing sediment patterns. Preparing for sea level rise involves integrating future projections of sea levels into existing hazard analyses, siting, design, and construction processes, ecosystem management, and community planning practices. Processes for integrating sea level rise in Local Coastal Programs and Coastal Development Permit applications are described in the following chapters.

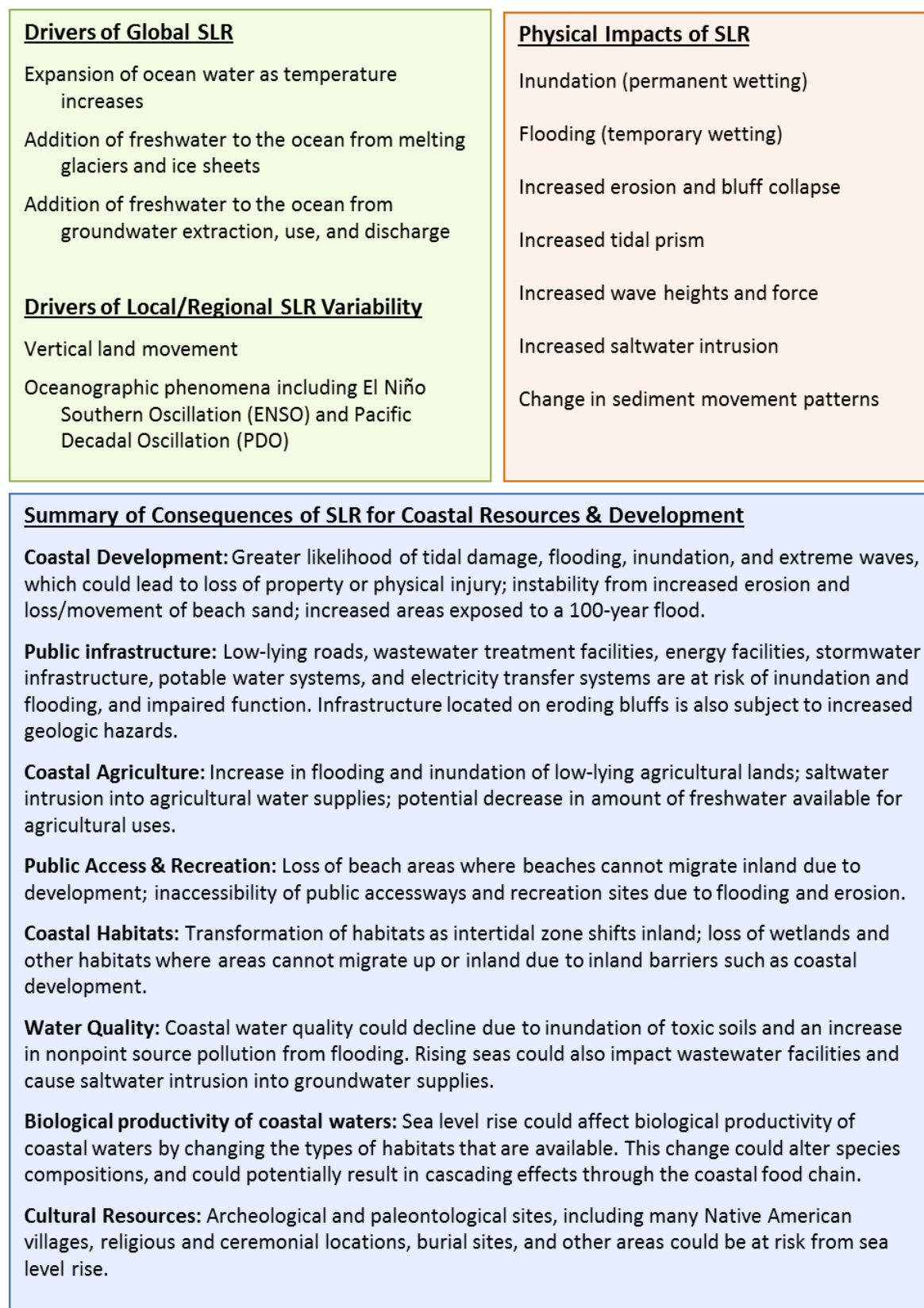


Figure 8. Summary of sea level rise impacts and consequences