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CCC and Local Government Working Group Workshop

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EXHIBITS

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California's Changing Coast

A Call to Action for the Next Phase of Sea Level Rise Adaptation

California's beaches and coastal communities face growing pressure from sea level rise. Erosion, flooding, storms, development, and local shoreline conditions create distinct challenges along the coast. Protecting communities, infrastructure, beaches, and coastal resources requires locally tailored approaches and difficult choices.

Coastal armoring can protect homes and critical public infrastructure in the near term, but it also carries significant consequences. As sea levels rise, seawalls and other hard armoring can narrow or eliminate beaches by preventing shorelines from moving inland. Armoring can also create long-term physical, financial, and institutional commitments that make other adaptation strategies more difficult to pursue.

At the same time, alternatives such as nature-based solutions, property acquisition, and relocation of vulnerable development require funding, legal tools, coordination, and community support that are not yet readily available at the scale needed. *California cannot immediately implement every long-term solution, nor can it rely indefinitely on approaches that may limit future choices.*

There is growing common understanding of the long-term challenges and the need for adaptation, even as difficult questions remain about near-term decisions. Progress will require flexibility to address different local circumstances, along with trust and credible commitments to revisit decisions as conditions change.

California has made significant advances in sea level rise science, policy, and planning. But implementation has not kept pace with the challenge, and delay is not consequence neutral. Waiting can increase costs, deepen commitments to existing approaches, and reduce opportunities for more deliberate adaptation.

The challenge now is to act while we still have choices and preserve meaningful options for tomorrow.

Accelerating Coastal Adaptation

Since 2019, the Coastal Commission–Local Government Working Group (LGWG) has worked to advance sea level rise adaptation that combines statewide coastal protection objectives with flexibility for different local conditions. Together, the group developed the concept of Strategic Coastal Adaptation and Local Enhancement District planning – or SCALED adaptation planning.

SCALED adaptation planning would move beyond parcel-by-parcel decisions toward planning for meaningful coastal areas, with combinations of adaptation strategies that evolve over time. Phased approaches can address near-term needs while preserving future choices, provided they include credible commitments, monitoring, decision triggers, and reassessment.

This work is part of broader progress across California:

- **Legislation and funding:** SB 1 (2021) established a framework for coordinated sea level rise adaptation and planning support. SB 272 (2023) requires covered coastal jurisdictions to prepare adaptation plans by 2034, with approved plans receiving priority consideration for certain state funding. Proposition 4 (2024) authorized new coastal resilience investments.
- **Science and policy guidance:** The Ocean Protection Council's 2024 Sea Level Rise Guidance updated projections and risk-based planning recommendations. Coastal Commission sea level rise policy guidance and newer nature-based adaptation guidance support local planning and shoreline management.
- **Regional planning:** The Bay Conservation and Development Commission's 2024 Regional Shoreline Adaptation Plan provides a framework for coordinated adaptation across San Francisco Bay jurisdictions.
- **Local innovation:** Numerous local governments have initiated a variety of sea level rise adaptation planning activities including developing vulnerability assessments and adaptation plans, and about 20 jurisdictions have certified LCP updates or targeted amendments to address SLR.

Together, these advances strengthen the foundation for adaptation, but do not resolve the challenges of implementation.

Communities still need sustained funding, technical and institutional capacity, practical legal and financial tools, and workable approaches to difficult choices over time.

A Call to Action

No single agency, jurisdiction, law, funding program, or constituency can accomplish coastal adaptation alone. The next phase requires coordinated action at every level.

1. Fund the Transition

Legislature and State Leadership

Adaptation is a long-term public investment, not a succession of isolated projects and emergency expenditures.

- Substantially expand and sustain funding for adaptation planning and projects, including nature-based solutions, sediment management, critical infrastructure adaptation, and relocation.
- Build practical transition tools, including voluntary acquisition, buyouts, buyout-leaseback, transfer of development rights, and related approaches.
- Make disaster-recovery funding more flexible so communities can reduce future vulnerability rather than simply rebuild it.

- Address statewide legal, financial, and institutional barriers that individual jurisdictions cannot solve alone, and develop a diverse set of financial assistance tools.

2. Clear the Path to Implementation

State Agencies

California has produced substantial guidance. Agencies now need to help communities use it.

- Streamline appropriate permitting for nature-based adaptation, restoration, sediment management, and other beneficial projects.
- Strengthen interagency coordination and shared monitoring, mapping, technical information, and statewide systems.
- Clarify approaches to managing and preserving public trust lands and resources as shorelines migrate with sea level rise.
- Develop replicable models for acquisition, mitigation, relocation, financing, and phased adaptation.
- Ensure funding, staffing, and technical assistance are all available from planning to design and implementation.

3. Plan for Decisions, Not Just Possibilities

Local and Regional Governments

- Use SB 272, Local Coastal Program (LCP) updates, SCALED planning, and related processes to move beyond vulnerability assessments and menus of options. Identify preferred strategies for places, near-term actions, longer-term pathways, responsible parties, funding needs, and monitoring and decision triggers.
- Coordinate regionally where beaches, sediment systems, development, infrastructure, watersheds, habitat, and hazards cross jurisdictional boundaries.

4. Start the Hard Conversations Earlier

Communities, Property Owners, Advocates, and Coastal Stakeholders

The first serious community conversation about sea level rise should not occur during a public hearing on a seawall proposal, after a damaging storm, or when a relocation decision is already on the table.

Planning processes inform decision-making. Communities also need inclusive discussions about tradeoffs that prepare them to make difficult decisions well.

Communities should begin talking now about what they value, how they want their coastlines to evolve, and the choices they may face. These conversations should bring together residents, property owners, elected officials, visitors, environmental advocates, businesses, regional

organizations, and technical experts before a project, permit, or crisis forces people into opposing positions. They should build shared understanding of changing conditions, realistic alternatives, constraints, costs, consequences, and tradeoffs. The goal is not always consensus. It is readiness.

These conversations must also reach people often left out of traditional planning processes, including disadvantaged communities, visitors, service workers, and other underrepresented coastal users. Practical collaborative pilots can help identify what works without adding major burdens to already stretched local planning staff.

Critical Questions for the Next Phase

The actions above can move California from planning toward implementation. Success will require working through difficult questions that no single agency, jurisdiction, or constituency can answer alone. California need not resolve every question before acting; building common understanding is part of the work ahead.

1. How do we make phased adaptation credible?
What commitments, safeguards, milestones, monitoring, and reassessment are needed to ensure near-term flexibility supports meaningful long-term adaptation? When is temporary shoreline protection appropriate?

2. How do we make alternatives to armoring feasible?
What funding, authorities, implementation tools, and practical steps are needed to expand nature-based adaptation, acquisition, relocation, and other alternatives? What can begin now even when transitions may take decades?

3. How do we evaluate coastal protection tradeoffs?
How should communities assess costs and impacts on beaches, habitat, public access, infrastructure, and development across different places and time horizons? What constitutes meaningful mitigation or compensating coastal benefits, and at what scale?

4. How do we prepare communities before decisions become crises?
What information, engagement, collaborative planning, and relationship-building are needed before a project, permit, or emergency forces a decision? How can phased approaches support earlier action?

5. What must California solve together?
Which legal, financial, regulatory, institutional, and regional barriers require action beyond individual jurisdictions? How can agencies, local governments, and stakeholders develop and test practical solutions?

The Next Phase: Questions and Action

California has built a stronger foundation for coastal adaptation. The task now is to put it to work, while developing the tools and partnerships that communities still need. Uncertainty about long-term outcomes should not prevent practical steps today.

In 2027, the Coastal Commission–Local Government Working Group plans to continue these conversations with its members and a widening circle of partners. Three areas merit particular attention: the mechanisms available for strategic relocation; the costs, consequences, and tradeoffs of coastal armoring; and the funding, time, and capacity needed for local planning and implementation.

The Working Group cannot settle these questions alone. It can help test assumptions, build common understanding, and identify opportunities for action by those with the authority and resources to act.

The next move is to turn shared understanding into practical choices and keep learning and adapting together.

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