

## Evaluation of the California State Water Resources Control Board's Bioassessment Program

### What is it?

This technical document provides the written assessment from the USEPA sponsored evaluation of the Water Board's Biological Assessment Program. The purpose of this programmatic review was to evaluate both the State's technical program elements and its regulatory structure in order to make recommendations that will enhance California's ability to make informed decisions about the ecological condition and management of California's rivers and streams. The scope of the review included a range of topics about the surface water monitoring and assessment program, the structure of the existing water quality standards, the development of bioassessment tools to delineate impaired waters and determine stressor effects, and the use of biological data to support Water Board programs including National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permitting, Nonpoint Source Program (NPS) management, stormwater management, and Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs).

As determined by this review, California's bioassessment program is currently at an above average level of rigor and produces data that is appropriate for use in statewide 305(b) assessments, the 303(d) listing/delisting process, and in support of specific regulatory needs in some Regions. Continued investment and active management support of the bioassessment program will be needed to achieve a fully functional program that will provide more comprehensive support for the suite of regulatory needs and in all Regions.

### Why is it important to the State?

The Evaluation determined that California's bioassessment program has made great strides in recent years due primarily to investments made by the Department of Fish and Game's Aquatic Bioassessment Laboratory (DFG\_ABL) and the Water Board's SWAMP. The Evaluation recognized that with continued management support, SWAMP and DFG\_ABL are capable of building, maintaining, and refining the technical tools that the Water Boards will need to incorporate biological criteria and assessments into their water quality programs.

The Evaluation further determined that SWAMP is presently operating a high quality bioassessment program at the state level and in selected regions. The Evaluation reported that the current bioassessment program operates at level 3 and is appropriate for 305(b) assessments and to support 303(d) listings. It made recommendations that when implemented will eventually result in a level 4 program capable of being used more rigorously in regulatory decisions (Level 4 is the highest rating). It is anticipated that these program enhancements can be in place in four to five years.

## Why is it important to me?

Bioassessment, the use of resident aquatic organisms as direct indicators of the biological integrity of water bodies, is a powerful tool for water resource regulatory programs. The integration of bioassessment results with chemical and physical data and other stressor information that is already included in SWAMP will lead to a better understanding how human disturbance influences measurable biological response and lead to better support for all water quality management programs.

## How will this information be used?

SWAMP has and is making very effective use of their current resources to develop bioassessment tools that will support water quality programs. This means that SWAMP is positioned to provide data and information for more than general status assessments as required by Clean Water Act Sections 303(d) and 305(b), but to all Water Board programs including NPDES, NPS, and TMDLs. These programs rely on monitoring and assessment information to provide an accurate and complete delineation of waterbody impairments and their associated causes. SWAMP data can also provide measures of the overall environmental outcomes produced by Water Board programs. Information will be used in the development of biological objectives.

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