

THE WATER BOARDS'¹ WATERSHED MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE: AN OVERVIEW AND UPDATED CHARTER FOR THE COMING DECADE

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The Water Boards' Watershed Management Initiative (WMI) began in 1996 as a way to make more efficient use of limited State resources and as a tool to establish partnerships with watershed stakeholders to achieve our water quality goals in a collaborative, integrated fashion. More than ten years have passed since this initiative began. Now is the time to revisit the original Charter for the WMI in order to assess the accomplishments of WMI and plan for the next decade. This revised Charter outlines the future implementation of the WMI and gives it new perspective based on the lessons learned over the past decade.

ESTABLISHING A WATERSHED APPROACH TO WATER QUALITY PROTECTION

The Water Boards, in partnership with the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), agreed in 1996 to develop and implement an integrated planning process to more effectively and efficiently direct the limited State and federal funds to addressing the highest priority watershed issues. Enabling legislation authorized establishment of ten watershed coordinator positions at the Water Boards to assist in this effort. The purpose of the WMI is to aid in achieving water quality goals in all of California's watersheds by supporting the development of local solutions to local problems with the full participation of all affected parties (this constitutes a "watershed approach" or "watershed management activities" as used later in this document).

The premise of watershed management is that water quality and ecosystem problems are best prioritized, addressed, and solved at the local watershed level rather than at the individual discharger, waterbody, or state agency level. This approach also was described in the State Water Board's 1997 and 2001 Strategic Plans and should remain a strong component of future Strategic Plans. Of benefit to the State, the watershed approach has opened the door to a more holistic method of solving environmental and resource management problems by using the energy, knowledge and experience of locally-based watershed partnerships. In turn, the State recognizes that it has an ongoing responsibility to help local stakeholders assess their watersheds, create watershed plans and implement watershed management measures to address broad concerns, such as those involving water quality, riparian and wildlife habitat, water supply, flooding and fires - the many issues that often cross political and regulatory boundaries and, therefore, require significant coordination in order to find solutions.

In April 2002, the State Water Board and the Resources Agency released a report, *Addressing the Need to Protect California's Watersheds: Working with Local Partnerships*, which was required by Assembly Bill 2117. This report looked at ten examples of watershed partnerships throughout the state and the extent to which these efforts were supported by state agency and interagency programs. The report concluded that watershed management is a valid and relevant approach to meeting comprehensive resource management objectives and that the State cannot accomplish its natural resource responsibilities without working in collaboration with other watershed partners. The report conclusions were summarized in a set of seventeen recommendations for future action. One of the recommendations was to "Directly support

¹ Water Boards = the California State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) and the nine Regional Water Quality Control Boards (Regional Water Boards)

regional or sub-regional forums for multiple watershed efforts or large scale basin efforts in order to effectively communicate and encourage larger scale planning.” In September 2007, the Secretary of the Resources Agency announced the creation of a new Statewide Watershed Program to be housed at the California Department of Conservation. An Advisory Committee (comprised of stakeholders representing each of the State’s hydrologic units along with representatives from the Environmental Justice community, Sierra Nevada Range and tribal interests) is drafting guiding principles to be used in the development and implementation of the new Program. The Water Boards’ WMI efforts have taken these and other recent watershed efforts into account in focusing on developing more effective regional partnerships and providing technical and other help to local watershed stakeholders.

The WMI of today will continue to encourage the best possible use of existing funds and will be useful to help justify requests for additional funding, based on the priorities set by the individual organizations. Efforts made to date to achieve water quality goals have identified greater needs for resources than were previously realized. Describing and prioritizing resource needs to protect and enhance water quality will continue to be a key goal for WMI.

Unlike in 1996, the average stakeholder of today is well-versed in the concept of watershed management and is aware of the shortage in resources needed to implement watershed-based water quality solutions. There is less need to promote the concept of watershed management and more need to promote targeted integrated solutions to water quality problems and to provide capacity building and ongoing support for local watershed programs. As the CALFED (Bay-Delta Authority) Watershed Program transitions to become part of the new Statewide Watershed Program and as there is increased focus at the state level to fund Integrated Regional Water and Watershed Management planning and project implementation, the WMI should also change to focus on more regional watershed management strategies. Many watershed efforts have been started or maintained in the past five years with the influx of bond funds from Propositions 13, 40, 50 and 84. The challenge in the coming years will be for local watershed stakeholder groups to become self-sustaining as these bond funds are depleted while continuing to advocate and promote local, state, and federal policies that encourage the watershed management approach.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WMI

Implementation of the WMI includes establishing each of the Water Boards’ priorities, communicating these priorities to the stakeholders to identify areas of mutual benefit, and helping stakeholders achieve their goals in a manner that helps achieve the Water Boards’ priorities. Priorities are based on strategies that each Regional Water Board has developed to address the watersheds within its boundaries. These priorities and the planning process are described in Regional and State Water Board “Chapters,” which are combined into the “Integrated Plan.”

The current version of the Integrated Plan contains nine Chapters (one each for the nine Regional Water Boards) and the Strategic Plan for the State Water Board. The Integrated Plan provides information on the priority actions currently funded and identifies the actions still requiring funding. This information aids our stakeholders in developing project ideas to be funded by grants and loans. The Water Boards’ priorities are generally now merged with the priorities of multiple other state resource agencies and are described in grant solicitation packages.

The Water Board program activities (including core regulatory, monitoring, basin planning, wetlands protection, total maximum daily loads [TMDLs], and nonpoint source management) are integrated on a watershed basis, as appropriate, based on goals developed on a watershed basis. Program activities and tools are used to achieve those goals as much as possible. In some cases, goals are developed on a broader, region-wide basis, which in turn require broader program activities and tools. The Water Boards coordinate these activities and tools with related efforts occurring at other State, local, and federal agencies, as well as with local stakeholders and non-agency initiatives and interests, in multiple ways that vary by Region.

WMI CHAPTERS

The WMI Chapters describe the management plan under which each organization operates. They explain organizational goals, explain how priorities are established, and describe strategies to be used to achieve the water quality goals. The Chapters may contain performance measures, as appropriate. The Chapters are currently updated on an “as-needed” basis. While early WMI Chapter updates focused on detailed calculations of resource needs for the various Water Boards’ programs by watershed, today’s Chapters serve more as descriptions and catalogs of each watershed’s water quality issues, priorities, and unique characteristics and act as guides for both our internal and external stakeholders to use as they plan water quality protection projects.

The Chapters also reflect individual program workplans at the Water Boards, although the workplans will have much greater detail than the Chapters. Annual program workplans are prepared by program managers at the Water Boards to identify which activities are going to be funded in a particular year, based on program priorities and in consideration of available resources.

The Chapters may also identify activities that are currently funded, those currently unfunded, and those that are under funded. The unfunded activities are identified in the Chapters in part to support requests for funding either through State personnel funds or through grant or loan funded projects. The watershed strategies and priorities in the Chapters are used to justify the need to fund activities not currently funded.

Future updates of the Chapters may incorporate the use of performance measures that are specifically designed to evaluate the degree to which organizations have met the watershed goals and objectives stated in their Chapters. These measures will target those high priority activities currently conducted that are not well represented by the use of standard measures, such as counting permit revisions, numbers of enforcement actions, etc. Since watershed goals and objectives will not be the same for each organization, meaningful performance measures will have to be developed accordingly.

STATE AND REGIONAL WATER BOARD WMI PARTICIPANTS

The WMI Coordinators, WMI Workgroup, WMI Committee, WMI Executive Committee, program managers, and the Board members are participants in the WMI and each has certain roles and authorities.

ROLE OF THE WMI COORDINATORS

To implement the WMI, the Water Boards provide funding to support one WMI coordinator at each organization on an ongoing basis. The WMI coordinators are the Water Boards’

representatives to the WMI workgroup. The coordinators maintain the WMI Chapters. More importantly, the coordinators communicate with the various Water Board programs to identify coordination needs and then facilitate discussion between the programs. They also meet with external stakeholders to share the Water Board priorities and to identify areas of mutual benefit. In order to optimize coordination, the WMI coordinators identify issues that are of interest to multiple Water Boards and share these issues with the WMI workgroup. A key stakeholder activity with which the watershed coordinators may become more involved, and that has great potential for holistic watershed solutions, is to improve coordination and collaboration opportunities with the Integrated Regional Water Management planning and implementation programs associated with Propositions 50 and 84 and, potentially, future funding sources.

ROLE OF THE WMI WORKGROUP

The WMI Workgroup is composed of representatives of the State Water Board and the nine Regional Water Board WMI Coordinators. The WMI Workgroup's main task is to plan for and support implementation of the WMI. Workgroup's members must be able to represent all of the programs and activities at their organization in order for the Workgroup to meet its objectives.

The WMI Workgroup itself does not make fiscal decisions. That responsibility primarily rests with the managers of the ten organizations. The workgroup, working closely with the relevant program staff and management, may participate in specific water quality decisions by reviewing and evaluating how the decisions are made. The workgroup may then make recommendations to management on how these decisions could be improved to better support the watershed management strategies at the State and Regional Water Boards.

Other functions of the WMI Workgroup include:

1. Facilitating communication and coordination among the Water Boards' staff.
2. Providing a forum for outside agencies to learn about WMI and for the Water Boards to learn about watershed management activities at other agencies.
3. Assisting local stakeholders' efforts by identifying opportunities for watershed training, technical assistance, and financial assistance.

ROLE OF WMI COMMITTEES

The WMI Committee consists of the Assistant Executive Officers from each of the organizations while the WMI Executive Committee consists of the Executive Officers. Ultimately, decision-making passes from the WMI Workgroup up through the WMI Committee and to the WMI Executive Committee. In practice, however, only formal decisions of far-reaching consequence go through that level of review and sign-off.

ROLE OF PROGRAM MANAGERS

State and Regional Water Board Program Managers need to communicate and coordinate with both the managers of their respective organizations and with the WMI Workgroup if implementation of the WMI is to be supported at the program level. Program managers are then able to align program goals in a manner that will achieve the Water Boards' WMI priorities, to the extent practical, and to make recommendations that lead to desirable water quality outcomes. Program staff will communicate program coordination needs and issues to the WMI coordinators for resolution.

ROLE OF BOARD MEMBERS

Each Water Board organization is directed by Board Members appointed by the Governor. These Board Members have the final responsibility to set policy and, as appropriate, affirm and approve the actions of their staff. The five State Water Board Members approved the WMI when they adopted the original Strategic Plan in 1995. Many of the fiscal decisions that will affect implementation of the WMI need final approval by the State Water Board members.

Since Regional Water Board Members set regional policies and priorities, each Regional Water Board has some latitude to decide which strategy will best address the different watersheds in their Region. The WMI supports the premise that local problems need unique, local solutions and the chapters describe the Regional Water Board's strategies for solving these problems. The priorities for action that are set at each Region will be a factor in making fiscal decisions.

The State Water Board's strategy will prioritize activities with a statewide scope. These priorities include, but are not limited to:

1. Developing statewide policies (e.g., Inland Surface Waters Plan, Initiatives in Nonpoint Source Management, Ocean Plan);
2. Providing program and administrative support for Water Board staff (e.g., preparation of agency grant applications and work plans);
3. Providing financial assistance to local watershed practitioners to solve water quality problems;
4. Responding to inquiries from a variety of entities, including the Legislature, the Governor, the California Department of Finance, and California Environmental Protection Agency (Cal/EPA) and coordinating efforts with Federal and State agencies.

Implementation of the WMI will require that Regional priorities and Statewide priorities be integrated into a coherent plan for addressing all of the State's water resource problems.

FISCAL AND FUNDING DECISION-MAKING

Implementation of the WMI should be supported by integrated fiscal and funding decision making processes. To achieve the most resource protection benefit, these decisions should be well coordinated, both internally and externally. The current reliance on multiple agencies' priorities in the grant project solicitation and award process begins to approach that ideal. Water Board organizations continue to make many individual programmatic fiscal and funding decisions related to water quality every year, although not all of these decisions are driven by watershed management goals. The WMI seeks to ensure that fiscal and funding decisions are made to fund the highest priority activities based on the watershed strategies at each of the Regional Water Boards and the State Water Board, consistent with legal requirements.