

**Stream and Wetlands System Protection Policy
California Regional Water Quality Control Boards
North Coast and San Francisco Bay Regions**

Introduction

Staffs of the North Coast and San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Boards propose to develop amendments to the Water Quality Control Plans (Basin Plans) for the North Coast and San Francisco Bay Regions that will protect stream and wetlands systems, including measures to protect riparian areas and floodplains.

The goals of the proposed Stream and Wetlands System Protection Policy are:

- To achieve water quality standards and protect beneficial uses of waters of the state
- To protect drinking water through natural water quality enhancement and protection of groundwater recharge zones
- To restore habitat and protect aquatic species and wildlife
- To enhance flood protection through natural functions of stream and wetlands systems
- To restore the associated recreational opportunities, green spaces and neighborhood amenities that water resources provide
- To protect property values and community welfare by protecting natural environments
- To encourage local watershed planning and support local oversight over water resources
- To improve Regional Water Board permitting and program efficiency

The Stream and Wetlands System Protection Policy will achieve these goals by recognizing that it is necessary to protect and restore the physical characteristics of stream and wetlands systems—stream channels, wetlands, riparian areas, and floodplains—including their connectivity and natural hydrologic regimes, to achieve water quality standards and protect beneficial uses. The Policy will clarify that stream and wetlands system protection and restoration are viable forms of pollution prevention in all land use settings, and that the strategies of pollutant source control and stream and wetlands system protection need to be integrated to complete the entire watershed water quality management strategy. The Policy will be based on sound scientific principles and will develop reasonable methods to protect water quality.

A single Stream and Wetlands System Protection Policy will be proposed for Basin Plan adoption in the North Coast and San Francisco Bay Regions to improve regulatory consistency. The Policy will serve as a model for other Regional Water Boards and for the state in the protection of water quality. The Policy will promote regulatory efficiency by linking to existing relevant permit conditions and provisions in 401 water quality certifications, timber harvesting plans (THPs), waste discharge requirements (WDRs), WDR waivers, and urban runoff National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits. The Policy will also promote general efficiency by linking to the

Regional Water Boards' monitoring programs (e.g., Surface Water Ambient Monitoring Program) and grants program. The Policy will provide incentives for local jurisdictions to develop watershed management plans that can be used by project applicants to offset impacts to stream and wetlands functions when on-site avoidance of impacts is impossible. In this way the Policy will create a vehicle for working with local jurisdictions to develop effective implementation strategies consistent with local stakeholder interests.

Policy Framework

All reasonable alternatives will be evaluated and discussed in an accompanying staff report and implementation plan. In addition to a synthesis of the relevant science and technical data linking physical characteristics to water quality, the staff report will include an economic analysis of the public and private benefits and costs of stream and wetlands system protection. Potential elements of the Stream and Wetlands System Protection Policy may include:

- 1) Developing statewide definitions for function-based beneficial uses of waters of the state.
- 2) Defining functional relationships between streams, wetlands, riparian areas, and floodplains and describing scientifically the importance of each in protecting water quality.
- 3) Compiling case study information linking the physical characteristics of stream and wetlands systems with measurable water quality effects.
- 4) Offering prescriptive solutions to protect water quality based on the preceding analysis. Such solutions may include specific measures as justified, but will otherwise describe the methodology that should be used to avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts on a watershed or project-specific basis.
- 5) Developing an implementation plan to enhance local jurisdictional development, adoption and implementation of watershed management plans in accordance with the goals of the Stream and Wetlands System Protection Policy.

Contact Information

For more information on the proposed Policy in the North Coast Region, please contact: Lauren Clyde at (707) 576-2674 or LClyde@waterboards.ca.gov or Bruce Ho at (707) 576-2460 or BHo@waterboards.ca.gov. Additional information can also be found online at: <http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/programs/basinplan/swspp.html> or by calling the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board at (707) 576-2220.