

Refreshing the Morro Bay National Estuary Program's Management Conference

Engaging stakeholders and advancing the rigor of our work.

Background:

Since 2001, the Estuary Program has operated with a three-tiered Management Conference structure. The Executive Committee (EC) is the policy decision-making body for the organization, approving annual workplans and assessing progress toward goals. The Executive Committee has specific representative seats that denote the wide range of interests in the bay and watershed, including local and state government agencies and members of the commercial fishing, tourism/recreation, environmental, research, and agricultural communities.

The Executive Committee is advised by the Implementation Committee (IC), a broad stakeholder group with no assigned seats and an open membership policy that encourages participation from a variety of groups. The Implementation Committee makes recommendations to the Executive Committee on projects and new ideas. The Implementation Committee also provides a forum for information exchange among groups engaged in conservation in and around the estuary.

The third tier of the Management Conference is working groups that are convened to provide technical advice to the Implementation Committee and Executive Committee on education/outreach and science/restoration projects.

The Bay Foundation is the nonprofit that operates the Estuary Program. The nonprofit Board of Directors provides operation and fiscal oversight, as well as engaging in consensus-based decision making with the Executive Committee.

Current Status:

For many years, the Estuary Program managed funding from an environmental settlement to support restoration and research/monitoring in the Morro Bay watershed. This funding provided a focal point for much of the Management Conference decision making and was often distributed to partner organizations. Since the original funds under the settlement agreement have been spent, the Estuary Program has shifted the policy focus of the Management Conference to developing partnerships and projects that comprise the annual workplan and implement the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan.

Participation in the Implementation Committee has waned over time, partly due to the transition away from giving grants and partly due to changing priorities of partner organizations and limited staff resources. Efforts to revitalize the group, such as changing meeting location and adding guest speakers, have had limited success. Based on input from members and our observations of engagement, we have concluded that meeting content is not perceived as relevant to participants' daily work or other projects. Thus, we began considering ways to restructure the Management Conference so that it remains relevant and valuable for the Estuary Program and for our partners. Stakeholder and partner

engagement is a central tenet of the Estuary Program. Our goal in making these changes is to promote engagement and participation by engaging people in more efficient and specific ways.

New Proposed Structure:

A refreshed Management Conference structure will reinvigorate participation and focus on the areas that the Estuary Program most needs external input. Many of the Estuary Program's most successful partnerships center around specific technical expertise. Building on this scientific and technical strength will result in a more effective Management Conference while also maintaining broader connections within the community.

The proposed structure for the Management Conference is as follows:

- Executive Committee will remain the same in structure and function and continue to meet quarterly.
- The Implementation Committee will be divided into two committees:
 - Technical Advisory Committee that meets 1-2 times per year. Subgroups based on technical focus area (as described below) will meet more frequently, depending on project needs.
 - Education and Outreach Committee that meets 2 times per year.

The Technical Advisory Committee would include a wide variety of local experts and practitioners across the scientific and restoration fields that are relevant to the Estuary Program's mission. The Education and Outreach Committee would incorporate current members of the Education and Outreach Working Group and Implementation Committee members working in this realm, as well as other engaged community and regional groups.

Technical Advisory Committee members would self-select by technical focus area (e.g. water quality, habitat conservation, freshwater flow, sediment, etc.) These focus areas would meet in subgroups throughout the year to provide input on projects or issues specific to their area of expertise. For example, a subgroup may meet on eelgrass research to inform partnerships and monitoring. Similarly, a subgroup may meet to discuss fish passage projects. Recommendations and project updates from subgroups will be shared with the full Technical Advisory Committee at 1-2 meetings per year. Subgroups and the full Technical Advisory Committee could also get project updates and share information through an online resource set up specifically for this purpose. This approach is designed to efficiently engage members with topics specific to their knowledge and interests while still providing opportunities for input from the full Technical Advisory Committee.

Review of community project applications (formerly called community grants) would be assigned to the focus area subgroup most aligned with the proposed project. Multiple subgroups may review the same application. Recommendations would be compiled and provided to the Executive Committee. All projects with an education or outreach component would be reviewed by the Education and Outreach Committee.

Technical Advisory Committee and subgroup updates would be provided at each Executive Committee quarterly meeting.

This revised structure is expected to involve all of the current organizations participating in the Implementation Committee, and may even expand participation beyond the current contributors. This structure would more directly draw upon the technical expertise of members and have more direct overlap with their organization's own projects and efforts.

Estuary Program staff will be assigned to staff each subgroup, with one Technical Advisory Committee member appointed to be the lead partner in supporting agenda development and communications.

Public Engagement:

In addition, the Estuary Program will continue to host at least three Science Explorations events each year. These events present the current status of scientific projects within the watershed and Central Coast region that are relevant to the goals and mission of the Estuary Program. Science Explorations are opportunities for the public to engage with the Estuary Program staff and partners on issues of importance to the bay in a discursive setting. This form of broader outreach beyond our usual partners brings new opportunities for recruiting volunteers, fostering community projects, and learning about what issues are important to community members.

The Estuary Program will continue to share project updates through our weekly blog, annual report, and triennial State of the Bay report. The Estuary Program will also provide regular updates in existing public forums (such as City Council and county meetings) to share high level updates with the community.

The Estuary Program will also explore other ways to share updates between partners outside of this meeting structure. Feedback from Implementation and Executive Committee members has consistently highlighted the value of the update portion of the agenda, when each member provides projects updates relevant to the watershed. We would like to continue fostering this exchange among members as we refresh the Management Conference structure.