

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 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 new structure for the Management Conference is as follows:

- **Executive Committee** continues with the same structure and function and meets quarterly.
- **Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)** meets at least once per year. The TAC may be convened for additional meetings if sufficient need arises that requires input from a majority of members. The TAC will provide technical input and advice to Estuary Program staff and the Executive Committee. TAC membership will reflect the focus areas of the Estuary Program's work and will not be constrained by a specific number of seats.
- **TAC Work Groups** based on technical focus area (as described below) will meet more frequently to respond to specific program needs.
- **Education and Outreach Committee (EOC)** meets at least two times per year, providing advice on education and outreach projects and reviewing Community Project applications.

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. These focus areas would meet in work groups throughout the year to provide input on projects or issues specific to their area of expertise. For example, a work group may meet on eelgrass research to inform partnerships and monitoring. Similarly, a work group may meet to discuss fish passage projects. Project updates from work groups will be shared with the full Technical Advisory Committee at least once per year. Work groups 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.

The current list of focus areas for Technical Advisory Committee work groups (which may change as projects and priorities evolve) include:

- Monitoring (includes water quality in the bay and creeks, habitat monitoring, wildlife monitoring, etc.)
- Sedimentation (projects to model, monitor, and control erosion and sedimentation)
- Watershed Habitats Restoration (riparian and floodplain restoration, upland habitats restoration, invasive species, climate change)

- Freshwater Flow (projects to conserve water and address needs of special status species dependent on freshwater flow, invasive species, climate change)
- Land Management (conservation and ag BMPs, climate change)
- Bay Habitats and Waterfront (includes salt marsh, other estuary habitat restoration and management efforts, clean boating and other harbor practices, climate change and sea level rise, invasive species, wildlife issues)
- Eelgrass Restoration and Monitoring

Review of Community Project applications (formerly called Community Grants) would be assigned to the focus area work group most aligned with the proposed project. Members from multiple work groups 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 work group 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 work with each work group.

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.

Approval Process:

The new Management Conference structure was generated by a thorough development and review process within the Estuary Program's committees. The process was completed as follows:

Date	Process Steps
October 2017 – February 2018	Estuary Program staff developed revised structure ideas and reached out to key stakeholders, committee members, and EPA staff for initial input
February 2018	Initial ideas were presented and discussed at the IC and EC meetings. Feedback was received and incorporated into draft proposal.
April 2018	Draft proposal was sent to Bay Foundation, IC, and EC members. A survey was also conducted to collect feedback.
May 2018	Draft Management Conference Refresh proposal and survey results were discussed at Bay Foundation, IC, and EC meetings.
June 2018	Feedback survey closed
June 2018- August 2018	Proposal was updated based on feedback.
August 2018	Final new structure was approved by the IC and EC. IC and EC bylaws were also revised to reflect the new structure.
September 2018	Final new structure was approved by the Bay Foundation.

Next Steps:

The new Management Conference structure will be implemented in October 2018. Estuary Program staff has been gathering feedback from committee members and key stakeholders about the new Technical Advisory Committee membership. All IC members will be invited to self-select to the work groups of interest to them. New members will be invited based on gathered feedback. The work groups will begin meeting in late 2018 and the full Technical Advisory Committee will be convened at least once in 2019.