The Fine Line

When I arrived at SCCWRP seven years ago, the most frequent critique I heard was that the organization's research was esoteric and largely irrelevant to management decision-making. Since that time, we have refocused our efforts on timely topics, such as developing better ways to monitor beach water quality, quantifying the presence of marine debris, studying how land use affects water quality and addressing contaminant effects on the food web. This annual report contains a number of articles on those subjects.

As our research has become more relevant to management issues, we have begun to face a different challenge: ensuring that we don't breach the fine line between science and policy. How do science and policy differ? Science is about truth, establishing facts without judgment. Policy is about judgment, interpreting scientific truth in context of societal costs and benefits. SCCWRP was established to develop an unbiased scientific foundation for coastal management in southern California. If we cross that fine line into policy, we run the risk of undermining our ability to serve as a neutral party in developing a scientific foundation.

Nowhere is this fine line more apparent than in our work to develop watershed models, such as the manuscript on page 78. At one level, this work is entirely about science. Watershed models have been applied primarily in temperate east coast climates and our work is unique in assessing their capabilities in the arid west, where rainfall is sparse and seasonal. Moreover, these models are typically applied on daily or annual time scales and our work is important for assessing how well they apply to shorter time scales, which is necessary to evaluate many potential stormwater management strategies in southern California. At a second level, however, application of our models has tremendous potential to affect the direction of TMDLs, thereby bringing us closer to the policy threshold. The challenge for us is to inform decision-makers about the results from our models without becoming the focal point for determining the management actions in response to the findings. It is a fine line.

Watershed models are only one example of studies that can lead us up to that fine line. This report also describes experiments that quantify the retention of stormwater nutrients in embayment systems, which leads to suggestions as to whether nutrient control strategies are better focused on low flow summer inputs or high volume winter inputs. This work also has implications for nutrient criteria development. Similarly, many of our benthic infauna, chemistry and toxicology projects have the potential to influence development of sediment quality criteria.

It's a balancing act because we want to meet the need of managers, particularly those from our member agencies, for information on which to base their policy decisions, but we have to be careful not to become leaders in formulating the policy recommendations (which sometimes flow naturally from the scientific information). We work hard to ensure that our scientists are cognizant of this difference and I believe they carry out our role appropriately. The fine line, though, is as much about perception as it is about reality. I look forward to hearing from people outside our organization if you think our toes start to stray over the line.

Stephen B. Weisberg
Executive Director