

**Minutes of the Strategic Planning Commission Meeting of the
Southern California Coastal Water Research Project Authority (SCCWRP)**

**Held at the offices of the Authority:
3535 Harbor Blvd., Costa Mesa, California 92626**

**October 20, 2023
9:00 AM**

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT

Karen Mogus — *State Water Resources Control Board*
Jenny Newman (Chair) — *Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board*
Susana Arredondo — *Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board*
Jayne Joy — *Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board*
David Gibson — *San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board*
Jim Marchese — *City of Los Angeles*
Robert Ferrante — *Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts*
Martha Tremblay — *Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts*
Rob Thompson — *Orange County Sanitation District*
Lan Wiborg — *Orange County Sanitation District*
Peter Vroom (Vice Chair) — *City of San Diego*
Arne Anselm — *Ventura County Watershed Protection District*
Mark Lombos — *Los Angeles County Department of Public Works*
Amanda Carr — *County of Orange*
Grant Sharp — *County of Orange*
Christine Tolchin — *County of San Diego*

REMOTE COMMISSIONERS

Jenn Eckerle — *California Ocean Protection Council*
Kelly Dorsey — *San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board*

CTAG LEADERSHIP

David Laak (Chair) — *Ventura County Watershed Protection District*
Emily Duncan (Past Chair) — *Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board*

STAFF PRESENT

Stephen Weisberg — *Executive Director*
Bryan Nece — *Administrative Officer*
Wes Beverlin — *Legal Counsel*
Eric Stein — *Department Head*
Martha Sutula — *Department Head*
Alvina Mehinto — *Department Head*
John Griffith — *Department Head*
Charles Wong — *Department Head*
Elizabeth Fassman-Beck — *Department Head*
Susanna Theroux — *Principal Scientist*

Amanda Lai — *Engineer*
Edward Tiernan — *Engineer*
Danhui Xin — *Scientist*
Scott Martindale — *Communications Director*
Emily Lau — *Communications Specialist*

OTHERS PRESENT

Chad Loflen — *San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board*
Josh Westfall — *Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts*
Melissa Turcotte — *Los Angeles County Department of Public Works*
Jared Voskuhl — *California Association of Sanitation Agencies*
Karen Cowan — *California Stormwater Quality Association*
Amber Baylor — *South Orange County Wastewater Authority*
Sam Choi — *Orange County Sanitation District*
Jason Dadakis — *Orange County Water District*
Darrin Polhemus — *State Water Resources Control Board*
Jessica Lienau — *Lewis Brisbois*

The meeting was broadcast on Zoom for audience members. Remote audience members were invited to address the Commission by making a request via the Zoom Q&A box.

Commission Chair Newman called the meeting to order at 9:08 AM. It was announced that Commissioners Jenn Eckerle and Kelly Dorsey had provided notification to participate remotely for Just Cause under AB 2449 provision.

AGENDA

1. Welcome and Purpose of the Retreat

Commission Chair Newman welcomed meeting attendees to the Commission's sixth strategic planning meeting, and explained that the purpose of the meeting was to assess SCCWRP's organizational direction, ensure SCCWRP's alignment with its mission, and help shape the future trajectory of the organization. She stated that the meeting is a planning meeting only, and that no final decisions or voting will take place. Newman thanked the Commission's planning committee that organized the meeting, developed the meeting agenda, and worked with SCCWRP staff to develop the meeting materials.

Commissioners introduced themselves, as well as shared a favorite memory from their time interacting with SCCWRP.

Executive Director Weisberg explained that the Commission holds strategic planning meetings every five to seven years and this meeting was originally scheduled for 2020, but was delayed because of COVID-19. Weisberg summarized the outcomes of the previous Commission strategic planning meetings. The first strategic planning meeting in 1994 followed a major 1990 restructuring of SCCWRP that added regulators as SCCWRP member agencies. During the first strategic planning meeting, the Commission discussed how to run the restructured organization, including CTAG's role. The second strategic planning

meeting in 1997, not long after Weisberg's arrival as Executive Director, repositioned SCCWRP from an organization focused on generating data to an organization focused on integrating data, and laid the groundwork for SCCWRP to expand its footprint into new research areas, including microbiology. The third strategic planning meeting in 2001 laid the groundwork for stormwater agencies to join SCCWRP, and also to position SCCWRP as a regional meeting center that brings scientists and stakeholders together. The fourth strategic planning meeting in 2007 included administering a survey examining how external target audiences rate SCCWRP's effectiveness as an organization and laid the foundation for investments in communications. It also led to addition of the California Ocean Protection Council as SCCWRP's 14th member agency to better connect SCCWRP with natural resource agencies. The fifth strategic planning meeting in 2014 was preceded by an independent panel of outside experts that reviewed SCCWRP's operations and focused on critiquing SCCWRP's research planning process – which directly led to the development of SCCWRP's thematic research areas, the introduction of CTAG intersessional research planning workshops, and an overhaul of SCCWRP's research plan from project based to thematic based.

Weisberg provided an overview of how the rest of the meeting would be structured. He said the Commission will begin by reviewing results from surveys that the Commission administered in summer 2023 to assess SCCWRP's effectiveness (Agenda Item 2); the survey results will offer context and perspective as the Commission revisits the organization's mission, vision and goals (Agenda Item 3). Then, the Commission will transition to discussing how SCCWRP should be interacting with non-member agencies that are affected by SCCWRP science – a discussion that will include hearing the perspectives of multiple special guests representing some of the key sectors not represented on the Commission (Agenda Item 4). Finally, the Commission will review the strategy that SCCWRP uses to guide how it communicates and engages with the outside world.

2. Survey Results

Executive Director Weisberg began this agenda item by introducing the Commission to SCCWRP's mission, vision and goals – the foundational building blocks for how SCCWRP operates. He explained that the survey results provide important context and perspective about how effective SCCWRP has been in achieving its mission, vision and goals.

Communications Director Martindale began his presentation by explaining that the Commission administered a pair of surveys in August 2023 ahead of the Commission's strategic planning meeting to assess how SCCWRP staff and external audiences, respectively, rate the organization's effectiveness. After reviewing the results of the surveys at its previous September 2023 meeting, the Commission agreed to conduct a third follow-up survey to further examine SCCWRP's impartiality, as impartiality is central to SCCWRP's ability to achieve its mission. Martindale presented three key takeaways from the two initial surveys: (1) SCCWRP staff are satisfied working at SCCWRP and overwhelmingly understand SCCWRP's mission, (2) external audiences say that SCCWRP produces high-quality science that is relevant to member agencies, and (3) while there is nothing in the survey results that suggests SCCWRP is performing poorly in any area, the

lowest-rated section of the survey results is SCCWRP's scientific impartiality. The follow-up impartiality survey, which was open to member agency staff only, found that more than half of the 85 survey respondents say SCCWRP is biased. However, Martindale identified three mitigating factors: (1) Most people do not perceive the bias as severe, (2) the bias is limited to specific individuals and projects, as opposed to pervasive across the organization, and (3) most people who believe SCCWRP is biased say that SCCWRP is biased in favor of the sector opposite the one they work in. The follow-up survey results also found that most of the perceived bias is in how SCCWRP transitions science into application – not how SCCWRP is conducting science. However, survey respondents are split on whether SCCWRP is transitioning science into application too quickly or too slowly – a conundrum for SCCWRP because one of SCCWRP's four organizational goals is to stimulate conversion of science to action.

3. SCCWRP's Mission Statement

Weisberg invited Commissioners to revisit SCCWRP's mission, vision and goals through the lens of the survey results. First, Commissioners engaged in extensive conversation about how to interpret the survey results, particularly the follow-up impartiality survey. Commissioners agreed that the results of the impartiality survey accurately reflect the attitudes of their staff, whom they were asked to consult with ahead of the meeting. Commissioner Carr explained that her staff believes that as some SCCWRP science is being developed, it is initially being billed as a tool to inform management decisions, but they get more concerned when it is subsequently used as a foundation for regulatory actions, which is one step beyond management actions. Commissioner Thompson commented that he doesn't interpret the results of the impartiality survey as concerning, explaining that the tension results from SCCWRP's effectiveness. He noted that since half of the respondents think SCCWRP is biased in direction of the regulators and half in direction of the regulated, the agency must be doing well. He suggested that the key to overcoming perceptions of bias is to proactively spark conversations with stakeholders about management implications at the outset of the work.

Commissioners shifted to discussing what follow-up actions and changes that SCCWRP could make in response to the survey results. Commissioners discussed how to clarify the dividing line between SCCWRP doing science and SCCWRP informing policy development. Commissioners agreed that the solution is for SCCWRP to be transparent about the policy dimensions of SCCWRP's work from the very outset of SCCWRP projects, as well as clarifying source(s) of project funding and the funders' goals. Commissioners discussed potentially revisiting CTAG's charge to give CTAG a more central, proactive role in helping to tee up the management and policy-focused discussions that Commissioners should be having.

Commissioners agreed that SCCWRP staff should present the Commission with an action plan for how SCCWRP will address the impartiality perceptions at its December Commission meeting. Executive Director Weisberg said that based on the Commission discussion his action plan would likely include strategies for more clearly communicating the "why" of projects at the beginning of projects, as well as development of a framework

through which CTAG will be able to identify projects that should be discussed from a policy/management-focused perspective at the Commission level.

4. Strategies for Interacting with Non-member Agencies Affected by SCCWRP Science

Executive Director Weisberg began this agenda item by stating that one aspect of SCCWRP's success is providing a forum for discussion among the member agencies about scientific advances, but there are many organizations affected by SCCWRP research that are not sitting at the table. He called out the drinking water community, other POTWs and stormwater agencies, and environmental advocacy groups as examples. He cited several potential strategies for enhancing interactions with non-member agencies affected by SCCWRP science: (1) Improve communication outreach to members outside of SCCWRP's core target audience, (2) conduct more collaborative projects, (3) establish more stakeholder advisory committees for SCCWRP projects, (4) invite current non-member agencies to attend CTAG meetings and/or become CTAG members, and (5) invite current non-member agencies to join SCCWRP as a member agency, including gaining a seat on the Commission. Weisberg then introduced the five special guests in attendance who were invited to provide perspectives to inform the Commission's deliberations on non-member agency interactions. Each speaker was invited to address the Commission, and Commissioners engaged one-on-one with each speaker at the conclusion of their remarks.

Darrin Polhemus, Deputy Director for the Division of Drinking Water for the California State Water Resources Control Board, and Jason Dadakis, Executive Director for Water Quality and Technical Resources for the Orange County Water District, were the first two speakers, representing the regulatory and regulated sides of the drinking water community, respectively. Polhemus began by explaining that he previously worked in the Division of Water Quality at the State Water Board and thus has carried this perspective into his current role. Polhemus discussed the strong nexus between water quality and drinking water as a result of ongoing efforts to develop regulatory frameworks for direct potable reuse. He emphasized the need for a strong partnership between wastewater and drinking water, and said that SCCWRP has a key role to play in helping to build this trust.

Dadakis agreed with Polhemus, emphasizing that managers are moving to a one water paradigm. In terms of SCCWRP's involvement, Dadakis said the water community has other forums for engagement besides SCCWRP. Dadakis suggested that the best path forward would be for SCCWRP to focus on the direct potable reuse community and to partner with them on a project-specific basis. He also suggested they be invited to attend select CTAG meetings to lend expertise and perspective.

Commissioners acknowledged that the drinking water perspective was absent from the Commission, which is problematic because this community is affected by SCCWRP's work. They encouraged staff to seek further interaction, but felt that this would not extend to shifting effectiveness of SCCWRP's clear, narrowly tailored mission nor adding drinking water agencies to SCCWRP membership. Commissioners agreed that SCCWRP should not proactively market the drinking water community for funding so as to stay focused on its mission, but that it is acceptable for SCCWRP to accept work from these communities as

long as the work includes substantial overlap with the research priorities of SCCWRP's member agencies.

Executive Director Weisberg responded that he will come back to the Commission with a plan for establishing opportunities through which the drinking water community and other stakeholders can engage more meaningfully with SCCWRP. Weisberg said that this process will preserve SCCWRP's present focus and clarity of mission.

Jared Voskuhl, Manager of Regulatory Affairs for the California Association of Sanitation Agencies (CASA), was the third special guest to address the Commission. Voskuhl said that while SCCWRP is not an organization that involves itself in policy-making, some of CASA's member agencies view SCCWRP as such. Voskuhl commended the Commission for looking critically and introspectively at SCCWRP's effectiveness. He said his takeaway from the Commission's effectiveness survey results is that SCCWRP should focus on addressing trust issues first – before discussing whether to add other sectors like drinking water as SCCWRP member agencies. He expressed support for creating more stakeholder forums through which non-member agencies. Voskuhl suggested that SCCWRP could enhance trust with non-member agency stakeholders by: (1) lengthening public comment periods to give stakeholders more time to respond to SCCWRP's draft manuscripts and other products, (2) responding to every public comment with an explanation for how the feedback was or was not incorporated, and (3) providing more third-party reviews of more of SCCWRP's work. Voskuhl also suggested that SCCWRP should seek laboratory accreditation from the California Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program.

Commission Chair Newman stressed that while the Commission is looking critically and introspectively at SCCWRP's effectiveness, especially on issues like impartiality, the Commission is not suggesting that SCCWRP has a problem that requires correcting. Rather, the Commission is on a quest to work toward continuous improvement. Executive Director Weisberg added that SCCWRP takes stakeholder feedback seriously and requires comments to be addressed before the manuscript can be published. He said SCCWRP will explore how to increase transparency around how SCCWRP uses comments from CTAG and others in revising journal manuscripts and other products.

Commissioner Lombos commented that unless a stakeholder is providing funding for SCCWRP's work, such as CASA's funding for the independent expert review of the ROMS-BEC coastal water quality modeling tools, there is no established mechanism through which other stakeholders can engage with SCCWRP during a project's lifecycle – unless the stakeholders are specifically invited to a CTAG meeting. Lombos said a SCCWRP-facilitated stakeholder engagement process could help close this gap.

The Commission opened up this agenda item for public comment. Amber Baylor from the South Orange County Wastewater Authority (SOCWA) commented that SOCWA is committed to supporting science that influences policy, and is pleased that SCCWRP has developed a forum through which non-member agency stakeholders can engage with SCCWRP on the ROMS-BEC modeling work. Baylor said stakeholder advisory committees

are critical for multiple reasons, including that they can help identify additional relevant science.

Sean Bothwell, Executive Director of the California Coastkeeper Alliance, was the fourth special guest to address the Commission. Bothwell said SCCWRP's communication and outreach with NGOs has been excellent and grown in recent years, and encouraged the Commission to support continued interactions with the NGO community. He said there are SCCWRP projects that NGOs are interested in engaging in, but that they don't always hear about these opportunities until it is too late to meaningfully engage. He suggested establishing a quarterly meeting with SCCWRP to receive regular project updates and dialogue directly with SCCWRP staff, especially on topics that NGO staff need help getting up to speed on.

Weisberg asked the previous speakers if they receive SCCWRP's quarterly Director's Report newsletter and most said they did not. He suggested more aggressively offering such affected partners the opportunity to get on the mailing list. He also said he would explore expanding "office hours" to enable stakeholders to informally engage with key SCCWRP staff at specific times. Commissioners discussed ways to better publicize the remote attendance option for Commission meetings. Commissioners agreed it also was their responsibility to help publicize SCCWRP's work.

The Commission Chair paused the meeting for a lunch break.

Following lunch, Karen Cowan, Executive Director of the California Stormwater Quality Association (CASQA), was the fifth and final special guest to address the Commission. Cowan said her organization recently held its own strategic planning meeting and noted similarities in what kinds of topics were being discussed, including problem solving and exploring the "why" and "how" of SCCWRP's research. Cowan said the line between science and policy can sometimes be blurred, and said that acknowledging this blurring is the first step to progress. Cowan said that CASQA perceives SCCWRP as routinely doing impactful work that benefits the regulatory community, but that not all voices are at the table during this process, and that not all voices feel welcome at this table. Cowan said that a one-size-fits-all approach to enhancing stakeholder engagement is not the solution, as different initiatives require different engagement processes. Cowan emphasized that CASQA has the ability to help bring disenfranchised voices to the table, but that this process takes time.

Commissioners commented that enhancing stakeholder engagement is important, and emphasized that the key to successful engagement is to (1) engage stakeholders early and often, and (2) convince stakeholders that their feedback is being heard and being used to improve a project's outcomes.

5. Communication Strategy

Communications Director Martindale began the presentation explaining that SCCWRP's present-day communications strategy follows from the Commission's 2007 strategic planning meeting, when Commissioners determined that SCCWRP had been underinvesting in communications. He said today is the first time since 2007 that the Commission is

comprehensively revisiting the communications investments SCCWRP has made over the past 15 years. Martindale introduced SCCWRP's communications strategy by explaining that it consists of three main pillars: (1) Build consensus among researchers and stakeholders on SCCWRP's science, (2) communicate science, first by identifying who are the most important targets of SCCWRP communications, and then by developing communications products designed to optimally resonate with target audiences, and (3) develop brand ambassadors – Commissioners, CTAG representatives, and staff – to help position SCCWRP optimally in the fields and markets where SCCWRP works. Martindale ended the presentation by highlighting three next steps that SCCWRP is taking: (1) Working with CTAG to develop a framework to guide SCCWRP in deciding when and how to create stakeholder engagement opportunities, (2) training SCCWRP staff to look at everything SCCWRP communicates through an impartiality lens, and (3) developing quality control frameworks for sharing data products.

Commissioners discussed SCCWRP's communications strategy and agreed that while SCCWRP has generally the right ideas and foundation for its communication strategy, the strategy will necessarily evolve as a result of today's discussions and action items. Commissioners critiqued specific aspects of the strategy, including recommending that SCCWRP position itself via its communications strategy as a neutral resource for science, as opposed to suggesting that the endpoint of SCCWRP's communications strategy is to influence and shape management decision-making. Commissioners suggested developing a process whereby the Commission can periodically reassess SCCWRP's progress and accomplishments across the three pillars of the strategy. Asked by Commissioner Chair Newman if the communications strategy will be updated at specific intervals, Martindale said there is no established timeline for revisiting the communications strategy; the last time the strategy was formally revisited was during the Commission's 2007 strategic planning meeting.

Weisberg said SCCWRP will explore how to periodically report on SCCWRP's progress toward achieving its vision, including potentially by refocusing the Commission's quarterly review and approval of SCCWRP contracts around communicating where each contract fits into SCCWRP's long-term research vision, and where specifically SCCWRP is in terms of its progress toward achieving this vision.

Commissioners broadened their conversation to discussing how the communications strategy intersects with SCCWRP's organizational goals and overall operations. Commissioners suggested that SCCWRP explore developing some sort of reporting mechanism, perhaps annually, for explaining SCCWRP's major accomplishments for the year across each of its research themes. Commissioners again broached the topic of whether CTAG is optimally set up to review SCCWRP's research agenda and to tee up the conversations that the Commission wants to be having. Commissioners also questioned if they are engaging optimally with their CTAG representatives to enable CTAG's successful functioning.

Asked by Commissioner Thompson how SCCWRP makes decisions about accepting contract work, Weisberg said makes decisions to accept funding based on how well-aligned

the work is with the priorities of SCCWRP member agencies. Asked by Commissioner Thompson about how well-aligned SCCWRP's research agenda is with the priorities of SCCWRP member agencies, CTAG Chair Laak and CTAG Past Chair Duncan affirmed that SCCWRP and CTAG's research priorities are well-aligned.

6. Meeting Summary

Commissioners agreed to form a committee made up of Commissioners and CTAG representatives to help develop potential revisions to CTAG's charter and responsibilities. Commissioners Ferrante, Carr and Mogus and CTAG Representatives Laak and Duncan volunteered to serve on the committee, with Ferrante as Chair. CTAG Vice Chair Kempter, who was not present at the meeting, also will be asked to join the committee.

Commissioners agreed that SCCWRP will revise its written communications strategy document following development of an action plan by the Commission committee – ideally over the next six months. Then, the revised communications strategy document will come back to the Commission. SCCWRP will also ensure that its Director's Report distribution list captures key target audiences.

Executive Director Weisberg was asked to present a summary of this meeting, along with proposed next steps to address items raised during this meeting at the next regular Commission meeting.

7. Other Business and Communications

None

8. Public Comments

No additional members of the public requested to address the Commission.

9. Adjournment

Commission Chair Newman adjourned the meeting at 3:00PM until the Commission's next meeting on December 1, 2023 at 9:00 AM.

Attest:

Bryan Nece
Secretary