

**Greater Monterey County Integrated Regional Water Management Program  
Regional Water Management Group Meeting**

**October 20, 2021  
Zoom Conference Call**

**RWMG Entity Attendees:**

Horacio Amezcuita – San Jerardo Cooperative, Inc.  
Jenny Balmagia – Central Coast Wetlands Group  
Melanie Beretti – Monterey County Housing and Community Development Department  
Shandy Carroll – Monterey County Housing and Community Development Department  
Ross Clark – Central Coast Wetlands Group  
Beth Febus – Big Sur Land Trust  
Alex Henson – Monterey County Water Resources Agency  
Bridget Hoover – Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary  
Heidi Niggemeyer – City of Salinas  
Paul Robins – Resource Conservation District (RCD) of Monterey County  
Eric Tynan – Castroville Community Services District

**Non-RWMG Attendees:**

John Hunt – UC Davis  
Sarah Lopez – Preservation, Inc.  
Kelli McCune – Sustainable Conservation  
Susan Robinson – Greater Monterey County IRWM Program Director  
Lucas Sharkey – Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, Stormwater Unit

**Meeting Minutes**

**1. Brief Introductions.**

**2. Vote on “Agency” Representative for the RWMG Executive Committee:** Susan Robinson summarized: The Greater Monterey County RWMG has a five-member Executive Committee, the purpose of which is to make decisions on behalf of the RWMG that don’t necessarily need the full deliberation of the group, or that are time-sensitive. Oscar Antillon (City of Soledad) was serving as the “Agency” representative for the Executive Committee but Oscar recently left the City. Melanie Beretti (Monterey County Housing and Community Development) volunteered to serve as the “Agency” representative. Susan noted that four RWMG members who were not present at the meeting emailed their votes in favor of Melanie serving on the Executive Committee:

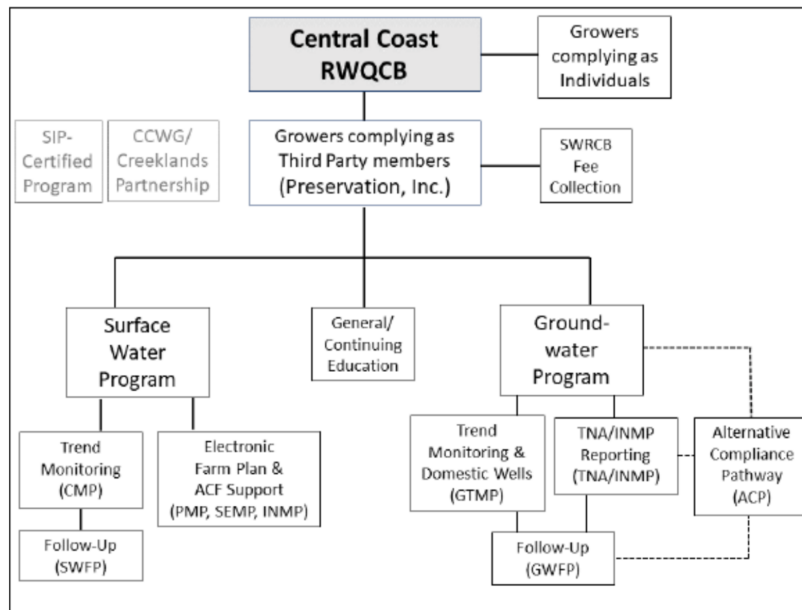
- John Olson, CSUMB
- Oscar Espinoza, City of Soledad
- Emily Gardner, Salinas Valley Basin GSA
- Brian True, Marina Coast Water District

Ross Clark motioned to approve Melanie for the “Agency” seat. Paul Robins seconded. All voted in favor.

**3. Updates from Preservation, Inc.:** Sarah Lopez, Executive Director of [Central Coast Water Quality Preservation, Inc.](#) provided the Third Party update and discussed Preservation, Inc.'s ongoing work with growers to implement monitoring requirements per the Central Coast Regional Board's Irrigated Lands Regulatory Program (Ag Order 4.0). Sarah noted that a handful of growers comply with the Ag Order as

individuals, while most comply as Third Party members. There are incentives to participating as a Third Party member. Individual enrollees pay a 28x-higher rate than Third Party members.

Sarah provided an overview of the program structure:



“SIP” is Sustainability In Practice, a group of winegrowers who are already implementing many practices. “CCWG” is Central Coast Wetlands Group who, with Creek Lands, is partnering with Preservation, Inc. to offer growers a watershed approach to compliance. “CMP” refers to Cooperative Monitoring Program, the ongoing monitoring program that Preservation, Inc. has been implementing for growers. Preservation, Inc. will be offering Electronic Farm Plan support as well as general education programs in the coming years.

The Groundwater Program is new. It will consist partly of trend monitoring of irrigation and domestic wells, plus assistance with Total Nitrogen Applied and Nutrient Management Plan reporting, and an Alternative Compliance Pathway for those who have trouble complying. Sarah noted that complying with the limits set in Ag Order 4.0 will be challenging. She suggests a more “whole systems” approach to protecting groundwater, including applying best management practices, and addressing data gaps.

In November, Preservation, Inc. and the Ag Committee will be finalizing plans for 2022, and in December enrollment for 2022 begins. The CMP will remain largely the same for 2022, including conducting RipRAM (Riparian Rapid Assessment Method) on an annual basis and bioassessments every five years. SEMP (sediment/erosion management plan) development is in the planning phases with the berry industry. There will be an “addendum” for ranches that have high percent impervious surfaces.

The Groundwater Trend Monitoring Program will be a big focus for 2022, including planning for a future Alternative Compliance Program. Preservation, Inc. will be posting an RFQ soon for well sampling and labs. They are also starting to work with a hydrogeologist to review existing data, update it, and add trend analysis.

Total Nitrogen Applied (TNA) reporting for 2021 is due to the Central Coast Regional Board by March 1, 2022. TNA requires not just the nitrogen applied but irrigation and soil N-test data; almost no one has been tracking that data. Preservation, Inc. will be offering three assistance options to members in 2022:

1) a spreadsheet tool, 2) a support line/help desk, and 3) a flat-format electronic data deliverable for those who already have Nitrogen data management, so they don't need to re-enter the data.

Preservation, Inc. is partnering with CCWG and Creek Lands Conservancy to offer voluntary collective treatment and watershed collaboratives, utilizing treatment wetlands and biochar and denitrification bioreactors. This effort will probably need *regulatory relief* to incentivize growers – requiring a willingness to cooperate both from the Regional Board and the environmental community.

Paul Robins asked if the NRCS approach for calculating runoff and erosion potential might be helpful for the SEMP work. Sarah responded that she hadn't communicated with the Regional Board about that. There was discussion about complaint notifications and growers' inability at times to meet Regional Board requirements within the specified timeframe due to lag time in receiving permits from the County. Paul noted that the RCD is working on a master permit that will streamline the process and facilitate quicker response. Melanie added, if the master permit isn't the right approach the County is willing to work creatively on this. She is willing to pull a team together at the County.

Ross asked, how does CCWG work with Preservation, Inc. and the Regional Board to define what "regulatory relief" would look like for growers who agree to participate in the voluntary watershed collaborative? Sarah noted that the first TMDLs start to expire in 2032. There is a 10-year period prior to the harshest numeric Limits becoming effective for anyone who thinks they can get into compliance at the ranch level. Sarah noted that there are some highly-effective ranch-level practices, but they are very expensive and do not offer any habitat or other ecological benefits. Meanwhile, collective habitat-based treatments can be effective and cost-efficient, however the exact efficacy and risk-reduction for individual growers are not as certain. The Ag Order disincentivizes growers from investing in anything uncertain.

Heidi Niggemeyer asked about work being done in the Upper Gabilan. Sarah pointed to a pilot watershed project in Santa Rita Creek. Heidi wondered whether sediment/erosion control efforts might help mitigate silt loading in Upper Gabilan, Santa Rita, and Natividad Creeks. Sarah responded, it should!

Kelli McCune asked about groundwater data. Sarah responded that there are about 4,000 irrigation wells being monitored and about 1,000 domestic wells.

**4. Achieving Compliance through Innovative Partnerships:** Ross Clark, Program Director of [Central Coast Wetlands Group](#) (CCWG), described CCWG's partnerships with growers over the past 20 years in Moro Cojo Slough to reduce nutrient loading to surface waters through wetlands restoration and best management practices.

The Moro Cojo Slough Management and Enhancement Plan was developed in 1996. CCWG has been implementing actions identified in the plan. CCWG has to date completed 14 restoration projects – including creating wetlands to treat water – with 80 acres restored and over 110 acres of upland habitat restored. CCWG is working to update the management plan to integrate these projects.

CCWG would now like to replicate what they did in the Moro Cojo to other, larger watersheds. They have evaluated existing data (including CCWG) entered into CEDEN spanning more than 20 years. They have shown the receiving water at the Highway One bridge is now in compliance for nutrient TMDL requirements (the last restoration project was installed in 2016). The Regional Board has confirmed this finding. Because staff at the Water Board have recognized that the Moro Cojo Slough watershed currently achieves the nutrient limits outlined in Ag Order 4.0 for surface water protection, *several Ag Order 4.0 requirements may not apply to growers in this watershed*: Growers may not need to conduct

edge-of-field monitoring for nutrient discharges, reducing costs and potential nutrient discharge limitations; and growers may still be required to report the quantity of nutrients applied to their fields (lb/acre) but potential nutrient application restrictions will be lessened by the amount of nutrients removed by downstream treatment wetlands (lb/acre).

CCWG is aiming to replicate this work in the Salinas Valley, building off regional planning efforts (IRWMP and SWRP) to implement multi-benefit projects. First step: identify projects; then estimate the load that can be removed.

Ross then described the Castroville to the Coast project as proof of concept for the larger Salinas Valley. Problems: highly degraded water bodies (pollutants), flooding exacerbated by King Tides and sea level rise, significant loss of creek and wetland habitat, limited access to coast and open space for the underserved community of Castroville. CCWG has been working on this project for several years.

Step 1 (completed): CCWG worked with community members in Castroville to obtain input. Concept designs were completed, and there is now substantial stakeholder support.

Step 2 (current): CCWG is working with agencies, including Transportation Agency of Monterey County, Monterey County Water Resources Agency, North County Parks District, and Castroville Community Services District to determine the best location of the bike path, design flood conveyance, and ongoing maintenance. CCWG is also coordinating with landowners. The biggest challenge is gaining access to the land. CCWG hopes to establish easements with at least two landowners. They are willing, but hesitant to commit. Ross emphasized that getting regulatory compliance credits is key to getting access to ag lands. CCWG will design off-site pretreatment wetland systems to improve water quality of side drainage water, while integrating food safety and no-trespassing design elements, and working out floodway maintenance responsibilities.

Step 3 (next step): CCWG will assess the baseline habitat and water quality condition of the project area, quantify nitrogen/pesticide removal potential of off-channel treatment systems, and then consider these results for potential projects in the larger Salinas Valley watershed.

Having high-resolution data is critical. CCWG recently launched an online portal for real-time water quality sampling at Tembladero Slough (<http://pubdata.mlml.calstate.edu/osr/index.php>). It shows total nitrogen load on an hourly basis for the entire Gabilan watershed. This sort of high-resolution data is key to understanding what a project – or a set of projects implemented incrementally over time – can do to achieve water quality benefits. Ross credited the RCD with helping obtain funding for the real-time monitoring system. An additional sampling system is installed at Moro Cojo Slough, and CCWG plans to install a similar system in the Pajaro and Old Salinas River soon.

Step 4 (next steps): CCWG will develop 30% plans for the floodplain enhancement and off-channel water quality treatment systems, ensure that the design meets stakeholder and regulatory needs, and then will complete CEQA.

Horacio Amezcuita asked whether CCWG is planning to work in other areas, such as Salinas and Gonzales. Ross responded that they would like to, but aren't ready to yet.

Sarah wondered how the purchase of ag land for Carr Lake might be considered as a potential template for Third Party projects. Beth Febus discussed how the Big Sur Land Trust has been working closely with their agricultural neighbors on issues such as fencing and food safety. Susan pointed out that the landowners were paid a fair price for their land, something that Ross has been working to ensure for the

ag landowners in the Castroville to the Coast project area. Horacio pointed out the potential for creating retention basins to slow and recharge water near Carr Lake. Paul Robins remarked this is what the GSA has in mind for East Side basin, and Jenny Balmagia added that as Watershed Coordinator she will be working on identifying managed aquifer recharge (MAR) sites for the GSA.

## **5. News Updates from the Group**

Paul Robins provided some additional information regarding the master permit application for conservation projects. The program is modeled after the Santa Cruz County master permit program. It will be presented for consideration at the November 2 Board of Supervisors meeting. Monterey County Housing and Community Development Department will be the lead agency on CEQA.

Paul added that the RCD is embarking on a Public Works Program (PWP) that will be modeled after Santa Cruz and San Mateo Counties for vegetation treatment work in the Coastal Zone. The PWP will enable vegetation management projects to be exempted under the Coastal Commission's Vegetation Treatment Program. This will be a big benefit especially for the Big Sur area, with significant vegetation management work needed there for fire risk reduction.

Finally, the bioreactor on Blanco Drain that the RCD has been working on with Tanimura & Antle is almost ready to run. The bioreactor will handle one-tenth of the low flow. The RCD will soon be looking for a second bioreactor location with Preservation, Inc.

*The next RWMG meeting will be held on December 15, 2021, 1:30PM – 3:30PM.*