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

February 21, 2024
Zoom Conference Call

RWMG Entity Attendees:
Jenny Balmagia – Central Coast Wetlands Group
Patrick Breen – Marina Coast Water District
Ross Clark – Central Coast Wetlands Group
Kevin Contreras – Elkhorn Slough Foundation
Beth Febus – Big Sur Land Trust
Elijah Frendberg-Mates – Marina Coast Water District
Bridget Hoover – Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary
Piret Harmon – Salinas Valley Basin Groundwater Sustainability Agency
Mike McCullough – Monterey One Water
John Olson – California State University Monterey Bay
Rebecca Roberts – California Marine Sanctuary Foundation
Paul Robins – Resource Conservation District of Monterey County
Emily Zefferman – Resource Conservation District of Monterey County

Non-RWMG Attendees:
John Bramers – Merrill Farms
Sherry Bryan – Ecology Action
Doug Dowden – Consultant for the City of Marina
Mary Hamilton – Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board
John Hunt – UC Davis
Modibo Keita – Sustainable Conservation
Susan Robinson – Greater Monterey County IRWM Program Director
Lucas Sharkey – Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board
Nicole Woodling – Ecology Action

Meeting Minutes

1. Brief Introductions
Susan thanked Bridget Hoover, who has announced her retirement from the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, for everything she has done to support IRWM. Bridget was instrumental in establishing the Greater Monterey County IRWM region.

2. Status update on IRWM Round 2 projects:

Resource Conservation District (RCD) of Monterey County – Salinas River Habitat Stewardship Program: Emily Zefferman provided an update on the Arundo control program. They're using US Bureau of Reclamation WaterSMART grant as match for IRWM funds.

The year 2022 was extremely dry. Stands went dormant, they couldn't spray. Then there was tremendous flooding in January and March. RCD mowed Arundo both before and after the flooding. They observed a great deal of sediment movement, a levee got washed out. Getting access was a challenge! Nonetheless, they had a productive work season – scouring 1,100 total riparian floodplain

acres for re-sprouts of Arundo (also targeting tamarisk). Most of this work was downstream of Soledad. Sprayed herbicide between King City and Greenfield, new mowing near Chualar. The RCD is letting the areas re-vegetate naturally; they've tried active vegetation but it was mostly unsuccessful, though they had some success with native seeding of milkweed in December 2022. They have now initiated over 1,000 acres of Arundo treatment on over 51 river miles. They estimate approximately 650-700 acres of Arundo remaining. This summer begins the next work season.

Patrick Breen asked about water savings. Emily said they're currently estimating around 1-4 AF/acre/year, but they're working on those numbers now.

Central Coast Wetlands Group (CCWG) – Ag Order 4.0 Surface Water Follow Up Efforts: All irrigated lands are required to submit to the Regional Water Board their plan by 3/1/24 regarding how they intend to meet water quality objectives. CCWG is working with Preservation Inc. and growers in five watersheds to draft Surface Water Follow Up Strategies that describe actions that growers will take to implement on farm and Cooperative treatment projects to move toward water quality compliance by the 2032 deadline. Ross Clark noted that the Surface Water Follow Up work will lead to the selection of water quality treatment projects within various areas of these five watersheds. IRWM funds will be used to fund the design and construction of some of these projects within the Lower Salinas Valley.

The Surface Water Follow Up Strategy consists of three efforts:

1. On-farm practices: Growers implement updated Farm Plans to reduce on-farm pollutant contribution, adopting best management practices (with assistance from RCD).
2. Channel maintenance and operations: Growers discharging to common drainage channels work together to ensure coordinated channel design, operations and maintenance to ensure that flows are not erosive, to avoid sedimentation downstream. CCWG is working with the RCD on channel designs.
3. Downstream cooperative treatment systems: Where on-farm management is not sufficient for controlling pollutants, construction of cooperative treatment systems. CCWG will design and construct downstream water quality treatment wetlands, which are effective at removing nitrate and pesticides.

CCWG is working in the Alisal, Chualar, Moro Cojo and Santa Rita drainages. The growers self-identify opportunity areas. IRWM funds will be used to do initial design and some construction.

CCWG, together with Preservation Inc. and the RCD, is working with growers in the Alisal Creek watershed on channel maintenance and a drainage network. Next steps are to:

1) assess the current condition of the drainage network and identify high priority areas;
2) identify locations for retention of tailwater to increase efficacy of downstream watershed projects;
3) construct sediment capture basins within the high priority drainage areas; and
4) coordinate channel management and erosion control within key drainage networks.

Aiming to slow the water down so it flows within range that the channels can handle. CCWG will be doing site surveys to identify with growers where to place these sediment basins, and where treatment wetlands can be installed. CCWG is working on developing a standard design for the drainage network. Each farmer is working within a community where everyone is invested. The idea is to work with sediment management upstream so as not to have to treat the entire pollutant load at the bottom of the watershed.

The draft Alisal Surface Water Follow Up Strategy consists of:

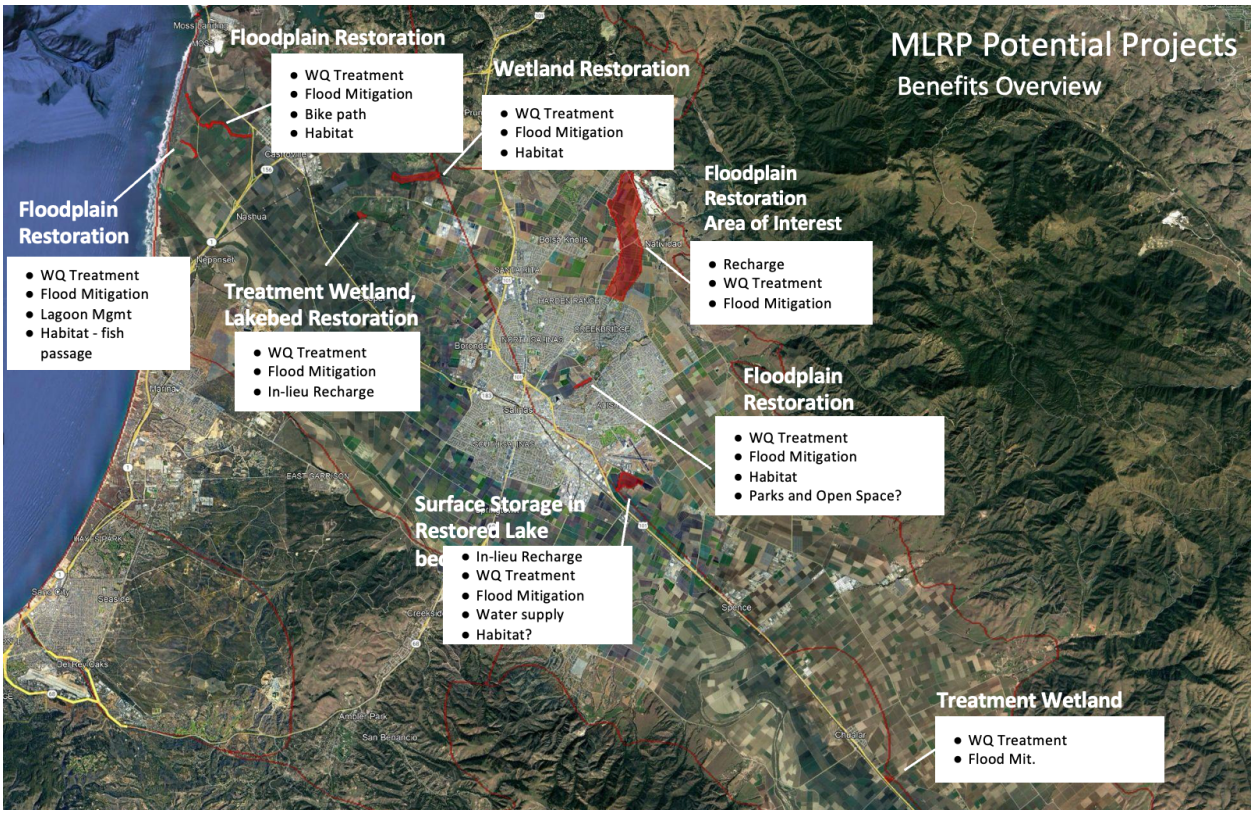
1) Updates to individual farm plans
2) Channel maintenance and management
3) Construction of sediment basins / detention/infiltration basins
4) Downstream capture and treatment systems

Next steps: Proceed with landowner agreements; identify priority locations; initial designs, and estimate construction and maintenance costs; identify grant funding available, and grower cost allocation; and work on treatment project land use agreements. Waterways Consulting (Matt Weld) has developed initial surveys and is ready to proceed with 30% design. This process takes time; growers aren't necessarily accustomed to working together in this way.

John Hunt asked whether CCWG has run into food safety issues. Ross: "Yes, everyday!" It's a huge problem. Ross noted that a lot of good research shows that the scorched earth approach does not provide better food safety, but there's a great deal of uncertainty on the part of growers. So CCWG is selecting locations that have the least risk of food safety concerns.

Central Coast Wetlands Group – Multi-benefit Water Quality Enhancement Projects in the Salinas Valley: Jenny Balmagia noted that CCWG's IRWM-funded multi-benefit water quality enhancement project work overlaps with its Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program (MLRP) grant work, which is funded by the California Department of Conservation and is being implemented in partnership with the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation (CMSF) and the Salinas Valley Basin Groundwater Sustainability Agency (SVBGSA). The multi-benefit water quality enhancement work also overlaps with the Ag Order 4.0 regulatory compliance-related work.

Jenny showed a map of potential MLRP projects; in some areas CCWG is engaged with discussions with landowners, other areas represent potential opportunities.



- CCWG is working with landowners in Chualar (bottom of map) to take least-viable ag land out of production and construct a treatment wetland.
- Surface Storage in Restored Lake Bed project is just upstream of a Preservation Inc. water quality monitoring site. The project would store water in historic lakebed; can potentially do in lieu recharge, water quality treatment, flood mitigation.
- Habitat enhancement will be part of all projects, as appropriate (while being careful about food safety).

The best overlap between MLRP and IRWM funding are the treatment wetland projects, and floodplain restoration. Challenges to address include:

- Alignment with existing planning efforts (City, County, Ag Easement)
- Channel maintenance (Rec Ditch, others)
- Food safety
- Public access concerns
- ESA, Safe Harbor Agreements
- Long-term O&M – responsible entity, funding source
- Benefit/cost determination and allocation (Preservation Inc. will consider this)

Mike McCullough suggested adding "water rights" to this list of concerns. Jenny agreed, while noting that CCWG is trying to design projects with passive inflow/passive outflow.

Elkhorn Slough Foundation – Ridgeline to Tideline Conservation, Restoration, and Water Protection Project: Kevin Contreras said that ESF received approximately $500K in IRWM grant funds. ESF has identified unsustainable ag lands to potentially acquire, retire, and restore those lands to conservation uses. $500K will cover about 1/5th of the project cost: ~$2M for acquisition + ~$500K to do land stabilization and restoration. Have six parcels that are possible contenders for these funds. There are two farms on Elkhorn Road that washed out Elkhorn Road and Kirby Park Road. ESF has been in contact but has yet to have a willing seller at market rates (ESF can only pay fair market rates).

Kevin announced that ESF has just updated historical aerial photos for the Elkhorn Slough for Google Earth from Pajaro River to the Salinas River. Original photos 1931.

California Marine Sanctuary Foundation (CMSF) – Decision Support Tool to Inform Agricultural Management Practices for Improved Water Quality and Food Safety Protection: Rebecca Roberts provided an update on the decision support tool. The purpose: To inform the decision making process of growers and food distributors by identifying and tracking rodent species movement into crops from different ditch types to build increased understanding of the associated food safety risks.

The idea is to develop a decision support tool that growers can use to manage vegetated ditches. They are hoping to increase buy-in and support for grower adoption of vegetated water treatment systems from food buyers, distribution, and industry representatives based on scientific findings.

Updates: CMSF has pulled together matching funds. They are in the process of confirming growers who are willing to participate in the study. They hope to start the monitoring process this season, March to June. One test site is up and running to test the monitoring equipment, but no rodents are currently being tracked. They have made progress, but are still awaiting confirmation on a few ditches, and have run into some unforeseen issues.

This study involves the monitoring of three ditch types: bare ground, unmanaged vegetation, and managed vegetation. The "managed" category has proven to be the most difficult for finding potential study sites. CMSF has two potential growers who are willing to implement a managed vegetated ditch on their property but this requires ditch management including seeding and irrigation, as well as meeting the water quality standards for a managed ditch. One potential site at the USDA research plots has a great example of a managed vegetated ditch, but it would not work for this study because there is no adjacent crop. Since there is no plan for a crop next to the ditch, they either cannot use the ditch or have to come up with additional funding to plant a crop next to the ditch. ($10,000 per acre, need ~3 acres). They need additional funding!

Ross noted that CCWG worked with CSUMB students to investigate rodents around treatment wetlands ditches; he's willing to share that information.

Ecology Action – Salinas Valley Climate Victory Gardens: Denise Mercado is the Project Manager. Sherry Bryan presented. The project aims to remove and replace 60,000 square feet of turf, with 5.14 AF/year of water conserved collectively over the course of the project. The project locations will have a lot to do with the match funding. Ecology Action has implemented numerous Climate Victory Gardens in the Bay Area but these are the first in the Salinas Valley. They are hoping to leverage rebates, with for example Cal Water and Marina Coast Water District, for enhanced features, such as rain gardens.

This project was submitted to DWR as a DAC project. Ecology Action is willing to implement Climate Victory Gardens anywhere within DAC areas; there may also be some projects outside of DAC areas. IRWM funds will pay for design, which is very expensive for projects like this ($3K - $4K per project). The cost of design is often the hurdle for landowners. Contractors will do the turf replacement work. Ecology Action will be responsible for project management, preliminary site walks, processing rebates. California Conservation Corps will participate as a partner. Showed example of project at Yerba Buena High School.

Ecology Action is currently in the project launch phase, customizing agreements, recruiting contractors, reaching out to water districts and Monterey Bay Master Gardeners and other community members. They'll create a hub landing page. They estimate implementing approximately 40 projects, depending on how many are municipal (they're reaching out to City of Salinas Parks) and how many are residential.

Emily Zefferman asked what Ecology Action will be replacing the turf with, and how they make those decisions. Sherry responded that it depends on the landowner's preferences. All plants must meet a total water use factor (less than 0.4 for species factor). Growing food takes a lot of water! So they wave people toward fruit trees that can withstand drought.

3. Updates:

John Hunt announced that CMSF recently submitted (February 9) the grant application for NOAA Climate Resiliency Regional Challenge, requesting $75M for climate adaptation projects in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties. The application contains about 25 projects, with 22 partners. The projects are bundled into four major activities:

1) **Monterey Bay Climate Adaptation Action Network (MBCAAN):** Standing up a new collaborative for regional planning, grantwriting, coordination, and information sharing. Ecology Action, with Regeneracion and the Climate Justice Collaborative, will be spearheading community engagement. Tribal engagement will be led by two facilitators, one Tribal (Charlene Eigen-Vasquez, Four Directions) and one non-Tribal (Erin Myers-Madeira, Collaborative for Right Relations).

2) **Workforce Development:** Watsonville Wetlands Watch will provide 60 paid internships, Hartnell College will build off of ag technology, CSUMB will develop curricula and provide internships, faculty training, scholarships for masters students, and UCSC through its Agroecology and Climate Resiliency Programs and in partnership with ESF's Coastal Training Program, will provide an array of internships, externships, and professional training opportunities.

3) **Flood Risk Reduction Projects:** Projects will provide accommodation space for flood waters to make coastal communities more resilient to flooding. Most project involve wetlands/floodplain restoration where storm surge, sea level rise, and fluvial flooding is affecting communities.

4) **Wildfire Risk Reduction Projects:** Projects include fuel reduction, shaded fuel breaks, prescribed burns, and cultural burning – from Santa Cruz mountains to the Santa Lucia mountains.

The next RWMG meeting will be held on Wednesday, April 17, 2024.