

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

**February 18, 2026
Zoom Conference Call**

RWMG Entity Attendees:

Rosa Carrillo – San Jerardo Cooperative, Inc.
Shandy Carroll – Monterey County Housing and Community Development
Emily Gardner – Salinas Valley Basin Groundwater Sustainability Agency
Sarah Hardgrave – Salinas Valley Basin Groundwater Sustainability Agency
Brooke Hoffman – Central Coast Wetlands Group
Carla James – City of Soledad
Heidi Niggemeyer – City of Salinas
Kevin O’Connor – Central Coast Wetlands Group
John Olson – California State University Monterey Bay
Erica Parker – Monterey One Water (M1W)
Paul Robins – Resource Conservation District of Monterey County
Rachel Saunders – Big Sur Land Trust
Paige Siegel – NOAA Fellow with Central Coast Wetlands Group
Katie Siegler – California Marine Sanctuary Foundation/Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary
Emily Zefferman – Resource Conservation District of Monterey County

Non-RWMG Attendees:

John Hunt – UC Davis and California Marine Sanctuary Foundation
Modibo Keita – Sustainable Conservation
Sarah Lopez – Central Coast Water Quality Preservation, Inc.
Donna Meyers – Consultant
Susan Robinson – Greater Monterey County IRWM Program Coordinator

Meeting Minutes

1. Brief Introductions

2. Central Coast Water Quality Preservation, Inc.: Sarah Lopez, Executive Director of Preservation Inc, provided an overview of the program and updates, focusing specifically on surface water trend monitoring.

Background: Preservation Inc. is a farmer-directed non-profit that assists Central Coast farmers in complying with regulations related to the Clean Water Act. In 2004, the Central Coast Regional Board adopted a conditional waiver of waste discharge requirements for discharges from irrigated lands within the Central Coast Region. Growers formed a non-profit organization to implement a Cooperative Monitoring Program (CMP) that would perform the surface water monitoring and reporting requirements for enrolled growers. The most recent update for the waiver and the CMP occurred in 2021 (Ag Order 4.0). Preservation Inc. manages the CMP and reports to the Water Board on behalf of the Central Coast grower community; Preservation Inc. does not enforce the Ag Order.

To implement the monitoring requirements, Preservation, Inc. works with a team of independent contractors to perform field sampling, subcontract with analytical laboratories, and perform data validation and reporting services.

About 75% of CMP members farm less than 100 acres, and most farm less than 50 acres. Mainly small farmers. In recent years, there's been a consistent trend: total farmed acres are declining on the order of 2-3%/year. Preservation Inc. offers members support in their efforts to comply with the Ag Order – including assistance in Spanish and Chinese/Cantonese.

Surface Water Trend Monitoring: Preservation Inc. monitors 55 sites, conducts monthly sampling for most parameters, quarterly for toxicity, annual sediment toxicity and riparian rapid assessment at every site. On four-year cycle, Preservation Inc. conducts pesticide study (two events in 2025, two in 2026, report in early 2027). They submit quarterly reporting to CEDEN (statewide database), and release annual narrative report. They submit required Work Plans to the Central Coast Regional Board.

Under Ag Order 4.0, follow-up activities are required for “high priority” sites, primarily in lower Salinas and Santa Maria Valleys. Most exceed limits for all three of nitrate, turbidity, and toxicity to invertebrates; 11 of 19 are showing improvement, none are showing worsening trends. Mostly don't see trends for toxicity. Trends are mixed, but there is some good news:

- Turbidity: 11 sites show significant improving trends, none are worsening
- Nitrate: 8 sites show significant improving trends (three are worsening)
- Toxicity to invertebrates: 6 sites show significant improving trends (1 is worsening)
- Sediment Toxicity: 5 sites show significant improving trends, none are worsening

But none of these are improving fast enough to meet deadlines for Ag Order. So Preservation Inc. developed a “Follow-Up Program.” and Complaint Response (i.e., address complaints filed by the cities and counties). The high priority watersheds (per Ag Order 4.0) are: Santa Maria (8 sites), Lower Salinas (10 sites), and Upper Pajaro (1 site). Focuses on having growers build ranch-level awareness of what's in their tailwater. Preservation Inc. offers response to stormwater/sediment complaints through development of Sediment Erosion Management Plans (SEMPs).

The big picture of the Follow-Up approach: The Farm Water Quality Management Plan is intended to consist of three management plan sections: SEMP, Irrigation & Nutrient Management Plan (INMP), and Pesticide Management Plan (PMP). Farmers are supposed to be looking at their discharges (self-assessment) and updating the plans/BMPs themselves, which should in turn improve future self-assessment results. It's unclear whether or not this is occurring to a sufficient degree. Since Preservation Inc. focused so much on SEMP in past years, this year they are building out the other two sections. Need to circle back to 300 lagging high priority ranches. And iterate with over 600 high priority ranches. And then phase in about 1,000 medium priority ranches later this year...

Watershed and Collaborative Approaches: Started out with a large focus here, in partnership with Central Coast Wetlands Group (CCWG), California Marine Sanctuary Foundation (CMSF), and the Resource Conservation District of Monterey County (RCDMC). The idea was to implement 1) channel maintenance and operations, 2) on-farm practices, and 3) downstream cooperative treatment systems. But they soon realized that more changes were needed on the farms – so that drove focus toward on-farm practices.

Question from Heidi Niggemeyer: Are farmers looking at building sediment basins along City of Salinas? The City of Salinas is receiving their sediment! Sarah: Preservation Inc. deals mostly with ranch-level sediment containment, but has also worked with CCWG, RCD and CMSF to create a framework for community-scale systems. The Ag Order had focused attention on checklists of management practices – but there’s a big gap between that and effective stormwater management. So Preservation Inc. set a completeness standard and self-assessment standard, and they had every ranch on eastside of Salinas fill this out. They have sent back to all of them areas for improvement... They are now seeing a lot of sediment basins constructed. Working with Adrienne at RCD. If Heidi is interested in community-scale sediment basins, Sarah suggested that she join CCWG and Sarah – meet every Monday to discuss.

Question from John Hunt: Can we translate the sediment monitoring into basin-wide results? Sarah: Preservation Inc. has load-based trends. They are also monitoring TSS. They do monthly grab samples. They would need to take those 12 data points and extrapolate between the seasons (dry season and storms); maybe Dane Hardin (Applied Marine Sciences) can do that? John: Does it look like reductions are happening in storm as well as dry weather? Sarah: Trends are being driven mostly by dry weather. Furrow irrigation is just about gone. It is more common now to use overhead when growers establish crops, then switch over to drip. So there’s less runoff – and therefore reduced dry season stream flows. It’s not clear what the case is (with trends) in the storms. The Follow-Up Program is stimulating a lot of interest in retainment and sediment retention.

3. Monterey Bay Area Stewardship Authority: Donna Meyers, Conservation Collaborative (a consultant hired by the Trust for Public Land (TPL)), provided an update on the Monterey Bay Area Stewardship Authority (MBASA). This proposed tri-county entity, covering Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz counties, is intended as a regional entity to secure and allocate funding to enhance land stewardship, restoration, and conservation efforts that address climate adaptation and resilience across the three counties. This legislative effort is being led and sponsored by Assemblymember Gail Pellerin. Placeholder language has been added to the current draft and will be revised by February 20, 2026, to reflect finalized Bill Text for CA [AB1548](#). See also: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260AB1548

This planning effort started about three years ago, associated with planning work that TPL was engaged in across San Benito, Monterey and Santa Cruz counties. There was a recognized need for enduring funding to sustain stewardship across the three counties. The “Durable Funding Work Group” was formed. In late 2024, a piece of legislation had been “configured,” but hadn’t gone anywhere. The working group aimed to produce a bill, with equity being a central tenet. They landed on this purpose

Something that...

- Assists with accomplishing local priority projects and smooths the peaks and valleys of state and federal funding. Demonstrates to the state that the three counties are a proactive stewardship collective
- Purpose is to “raise and allocate public and private funds for the restoration, enhancement, protection, long term stewardship, and improved access for the enjoyment of open space, watersheds, and natural and working lands, in the Monterey Bay Region and along its shoreline”
- Benefits – advocates for designated funding; facilitates block grant models; distribute funds quickly; addresses pressing needs (i.e., water quality)

statement:

The bill advocates for designated funding from bonds; could be a facilitator of block grant models, would be able to distribute funds quickly and efficiently, and would be addressing pressing needs. The Working Group looked at the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority as a model. This is the only authority of its type in the State right now, a stand-alone authority recognized under state law, approved in 2008 and approved by the state legislature. Serves nine counties, has governing board representing all of those jurisdictions. The

Authority has been able to bring in bond funding because of its structure (\$105M directly as a line item from Prop 68 and Prop 4, \$50M from US EPA! So the intent is to create a structure that can also obtain line item funding. This authority has taxing authority. In 2016, they went to voters and passed Measure AA – parcel tax, creating \$25M/year for a grant program facilitated across the nine counties. A sustainable funding source for flood risk reduction, fish and wildlife habitat, etc.

In May 2025, TPL re-convened the Working Group members + others, including about 27 organizations inclusive of the three-county area. A subgroup worked to draft legislation. They held an all-day workshop with 28 organizations attending. Provided Assemblymember Gail Pellerin field trips. The Working Group has taken the bill to the point where it's in draft language now: the AB 1548 Intent Bill was submitted January 7, 2026. Gail Pellerin has agreed to sponsor the Monterey Bay Area Stewardship Authority legislation. The team is continuing to work with counties, give presentations to the elected officials at all levels, and industries – explain to people what the bill is and isn't.

Bills are due Friday of this week. The process will run through end of August: will go to the Natural Resources and Local Government Committees. If approved by Assembly, will go to the Senate for approval. Then ultimately, signature by the governor.

Substantiative language will be made public in February with opportunity for engagement, including amendments through early August 2026. Should be able to distribute that language early March.

Q&A:

Kevin O'Connor asked whether letters of support would be helpful. Donna: Yes! Donna is available to present for city councils, boards, etc. – just let her know.

Rachel Saunders asked if there were any issues that Donna might be anticipating that we should be aware of. Donna: Local governments tend to have trouble seeing the larger connection/landscape across the three counties. We can help convey the importance of the benefits/impacts across the larger region: "Our shared conservation goals are bigger and better as a region." "We'll need the *practitioners* to talk about their work in the 'conservation commons.'"

John Hunt asked whether LAFCO will be involved in setting up boundaries. Donna: No, we're not creating a new boundary.

4. Climate Resilient Monterey Bay Regional Monitoring Plan: The Climate Resilient Monterey Bay Regional Monitoring Program (CRMB RMP) is a coordinated monitoring effort designed to assess the resilience and condition of coastal wetlands and dunes. Funded through the NOAA Climate Resilience Regional Challenge grant that was awarded to the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation (CMSF), the program brings together partners across Monterey Bay to implement standardized monitoring that addresses shared regional goals and key questions. Paige Siegel, NOAA Coastal Resilience Fellow working with Central Coast Wetlands Group (CCWG), presented on the CRMB RMP.

Background: CMSF was awarded a \$71M grant through NOAA's Climate Resilience Regional Challenge. Funded through IRA to build climate-ready regions throughout the US. This five-year grant ends September 30, 2029. CRMB is incredibly collaborative – over 30 partners, agencies, networks, nonprofits, tribes, government agencies – and implements four different strategies:

1. Regional Collaboration and Capacity Building

2. Workforce Development
3. Wildfire Risk Reduction
4. Flood Risk Reduction

Flood Risk Reduction: There are 10 projects around the Monterey Bay, from Año Nuevo to Garrapata, across estuarine wetlands, floodplains, and dunes. CCWG is working to develop a regional monitoring program to assess these projects. They are collecting standardized data before and after restoration activities occur, and are partnering with individuals across the area to develop this regional monitoring program.

There are various monitoring programs within the region – but not one specifically focused on extent, condition, resilience, and socio-economic conditions of both estuarine wetlands and dunes. Monitoring data are inconsistently collected, and the data is not generally accessible. Therefore, a regional synthesis of monitoring data is not currently possible.

The RMP is a coordinated multi-partner program that outlines a framework for consistent, region-wide monitoring, establishes standardized data collection and storage, and addresses current wetland and dune mapping/monitoring limitations.

RMP components:

- Up to date map of coastal wetlands and dunes
- Creating the monitoring plan
- Creating a data management plan and data management system
- Developing a document outlining implementation guidelines.

All of these are currently under development.

Other similar programs:

- San Francisco Estuary Wetland RMP
- Estuary Marine Protected Area (EMPA) Monitoring Program
- Southern California Wetland Recovery Project (SCWRP)

CCWG wants to pull from these programs and also be able to connect to these larger programs that are being implemented across the state.

CCWG convened a Technical Advisory Committee – to provide expertise and feedback on RMP, support implementation of the program, and to encourage adoption of the RMP by groups outside of CRMB partners.

Goals:

1. Establish a network of monitoring partners and align with other state monitoring efforts
2. Develop standardized framework for monitoring the extent, condition, and resilience of coastal estuarine wetlands and dunes in the Monterey Bay region
3. Advance scientific knowledge
4. Inform state and local climate resilience grant, management, and regulatory programs
5. Evaluate regional socio-economic benefits and impacts resulting from coastal restoration/mitigation activities

The RMP monitoring questions focus on: extent, condition, resilience, and human dimensions:

Category	Monitoring Questions
Extent	1. What is the extent of the region’s estuarine wetlands and dunes? 2. What changes in ecosystem area and distribution are occurring? 3. Where do estuarine wetlands and dunes have space to migrate?
Condition	4. What is the condition of the region’s coastal wetlands and dunes? 5. What are the major stressors to the region’s coastal wetlands and dunes?
Resilience	6. How does ecosystem response vary under differing-land use pressures and climatic scenarios? 7. To what extent do <u>restored</u> coastal wetland and dune ecosystems mitigate climate-related risks?
Human dimensions	8. How do restored estuarine wetlands and dunes influence adjacent human communities? 9. How are human communities utilizing these natural and restored habitats? 10. How is public access to estuarine wetlands and dunes changing?

Monitoring framework: Will use USEPA Tiered Assessment framework –

- Level 1 – utilize maps derived from the California Aquatic Resource Inventory (CARI) through EcoAtlas and collecting imagery through drones or satellite imagery
- Level 2 – rapid assessment: CRAM for wetlands (typically takes just 2-3 hours, just 2-3 people), and Monterey Bay Living Shoreline Program for dunes (under development – developing a rapid assessment tool similar to CRAM)
- Level 3 – more intensive field surveys: for example, fish seines, feldspar plots, vegetation transects. Level 3 indicators for dunes are under development.

They are planning a phased development approach. Would like to eventually spread this program to entire Central Coast.

- Phase 1: For wetlands, the goal is to create network of partners, habitat maps, sentinel site network, select indicators for Levels 1 and 3, create a data management plan (DMP) and reporting template. For dunes: create network of partners, habitat maps, Level 1 indicators, develop Level 2 rapid assessment, track those indicators, data management infrastructure, reporting template.
- Phase 2: Will need more funding. For wetlands: add more Level 1 and 3 indicators, update maps. Dunes: Level 3 indicators, link to ecological function, sentinel site network, Level 2 with validation assessment.
- Phase 3: Hoping this program will get adopted by regulatory programs and expand along Central Coast. Hoping to link dunes and wetlands monitoring.

Always interested in collaborating! Any components you’d like to see, let them know (key management questions, etc.). See the [Climate Resilient Monterey Bay RMP storymap here!](#)

- **Kevin O’Connor**, Director of Central Coast Wetlands Group, kevin.oconnor@sjsu.edu
- **Paige Siegel**, NOAA Coastal Resilience Fellow, paige.siegel@sjsu.edu

5. Other News and Updates: There was no other news or updates.