

Salinas River Long-Term Management Plan Stakeholder Issue Assessment

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Summary of Findings

In spring 2018, the Consensus Building Institute, an impartial nonprofit that helps groups collaborate, conducted a stakeholder issue assessment on developing a Long-Term Management Plan for the Salinas River. CBI's role is to *help facilitate* local decision-making, recommending and leading a process that brings together all affected parties in productive dialogue to develop the Long-Term Management Plan (LTMP).

To understand and reflect the range of perspectives and to develop recommendations for the process to develop a LTMP, CBI conducted 17 in-depth interviews with 25 individuals from a range of stakeholder interests in the Salinas Valley, including agencies, agriculture, community representatives, environmental, lagoon and stream maintenance specialists, landowners, and water resources managers. Interviews were confidential (to foster candor) and were conducted either in-person or by phone. A list of those interviewed as part of the formal assessment process, as well as the interview protocol, is in the appendix.

Given the importance of the Salinas River to the region's environment and economy, CBI's methodology is grounded in three core principles: (1) being comprehensive in soliciting input from the range of potentially impacted stakeholders; (2) being transparent in the feedback and recommendations provided; and (3) drawing on CBI's experience and best practices to recommend an approach likely to foster effective and inclusive deliberations. This document presents CBI's assessment findings and recommendations for a transparent, inclusive process to develop a LTMP for the Salinas River.

Please note that CBI did not attempt to independently validate the claims or concerns of the interviewees. Rather, this document seeks to summarize the range of views, ideas, and concerns expressed. Additionally, this brief document cannot do justice to the deep knowledge, experience, and nuances of ideas and concepts that stakeholders shared. Rather, the document tries to reflect back key themes and concerns that help shape the way forward. CBI has sought to present these findings, in its role as an impartial facilitator, as accurately and fairly as possible. Any errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of CBI.

Findings

The following summarizes findings from interviews conducted by the Consensus Building Institute. Findings reflect a range of feedback on LTMP development, the process, challenges and critical issues.

Key Issues

The Salinas River is the lifeblood of the Valley. As one interviewee observed, “The river is essential to everyone but in different forms.” The people of the Salinas Valley depend on the Salinas River for a variety of economic and ecological benefits. **Stakeholders suggest that** effective management of the Salinas River depends on establishing a shared understanding of the broad range of benefits and risks to be addressed through the LTMP, as well as a shared vision of a sustainable future for the Salinas River and the Salinas River Valley.

“The river is essential to everyone but in different forms.”

It is important to expand the scale of river maintenance and engage all property owners in implementation. Interviewees noted that a piecemeal approach to river management and stream maintenance is inadequate, as landowners that do not conduct river management work undermine the efforts of property owners who do. To support full landowner participation in river management, it may be important to streamline permitting processes and to simplify and incorporate incentives into regulations.

Some interviewees note a valuable opportunity to link LTMP development with local groundwater sustainability planning efforts. Stakeholders emphasize the need to look at all water in the Salinas Valley as part of a single system. Many encourage expanding the conversation around the Salinas River to consider how the river and groundwater interact as part of the same system, with hydrogeology that links river flows and groundwater recharge.

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“We need a model for our future that creates a path forward, a success story from elsewhere that is applicable to this context.” Interviewees remarked that landowners may come to the process with the perspective that the LTMP creates more work and negative impacts for them. “We need to disrupt that mentality by presenting a much broader, united vision,” observed an interviewee. Some interviewees suggest beginning with a success story from elsewhere or from one of the existing river management units and from there establishing a shared vision of future possibilities for the river. With a shared vision, local stakeholders believe they can shift away from making decisions based solely on personal self-interest and toward collectively beneficial resource decisions.

Sound, accessible scientific and technical information is key to building a shared path forward and dissuading misconceptions as they arise. Many interviewees spoke to the importance of working with scientific and technical information that is both robust and accessible. One interviewee noted, “We need good information that is presented in a very user-friendly way but not dumbed down.” Interviewees suggest that the planning process begin with educating interested parties, thereby establishing a shared baseline vocabulary and technical and spatial understanding. An interviewee observed that when establishing the stream maintenance program, “Once people had maps in their hands and a list of terms, it completely changed the conversation to one that was far more productive.” Some interviewees also note the importance of utilizing and validating local knowledge by asking growers to provide feedback on models and visuals. Further, an interviewee advises utilizing data to politely correct misconceptions among the broader public.

Models and other scientific information can help define areas of planned flooding and habitat along the river. Interviewees point to the following information needs:

- Hydrogeological models to understand recharge and how the river behaves under certain circumstances
- Data on the positive impacts of the stream maintenance program to-date
- Species: What have we learned about species to-date, what are key considerations and what species might no longer need to be listed as threatened or endangered
- Study the best approach to water releases
- Wetland development
- A high resolution digital image of the river corridor may be useful

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Interviewees highlight a range of issues to be addressed in the Salinas River Long-Term Management Plan. Key issues include:

- Flow management (systems for dam releases, timing of river maintenance work, and opportunities to better align the two), with a primary focus of improving flow conditions on key tributaries
- Water storage and transfer
- Water quality management
- Sediment management and gravel mining
- Opportunities to utilize bursts from Arroyo Seco and headwaters
- Clarity around biological opinion requirements
- Lagoon management
- Flooding
- Invasive species
- Habitat management, including managing habitat for fish and endangered species
- Fisheries and riparian corridor protection
- Food safety (related to wildlife in agricultural areas)

- Vegetation management
- Fish passage
- Saltwater intrusion

For some stakeholders, the health of steelhead populations serves as an indicator of the environmental health of the broader river system; however, issues related to releases and timing for steelhead may figure more centrally in future development of a Habit Conservation Plan.

Some interviewees warn that maintaining a focused planning effort may prove challenging, given the range of issues and interests. Key to success is clarity around objectives for management plan development.

Many stakeholders seek a long-term balance between environmental and agricultural interests. Interviewees express the importance of managing for a healthy river system that protects clean water, fish, and wildlife while simultaneously streamlining the regulatory landscape for agriculturalists.

Varied perspectives exist on how best to manage for flooding and other impacts to landowners adjacent to the river. Some stakeholders point to a need for the river to flood more than it has been allowed to in recent years while other stakeholders prefer to minimize or closely manage flooding. Given that some degree of flooding will continue to be a part of the system, many find it important to designate areas where flooding should occur, particularly wetland areas. Several interviewees express concern that flooding disperses pesticide rich soil and other chemicals throughout the system at significant cost to the environment and growers.

Some believe that costs associated with LTMP implementation should be carried regionally rather than by individual property owners. Given that the environmental and economic benefits of effective river management are regional and substantial, interviewees suggest finding creative approaches to regionally share the costs of implementation.

Stakeholders articulate the following keys to success:

- Interviewees readily talk about historic tensions and sources of distrust in the region that the process must manage. For example, some environmentalists lack trust in the process and program.
- Take time to understand needs from a range of perspectives, including environmental and agricultural. Encourage agency staff to listen deeply to the range of perspectives and concerns.
- Critical to engage private property owner representatives that have influence, enthusiasm, and hesitation at the table.
- Build trust by focusing on areas where there is some agreement (win/wins) before turning to areas of disagreement.
- Use a scientific approach to identify key management areas.
- Clarify objectives and set ground rules.

- Important to manage varied scales of expectations among stakeholders; some are concerned about specific flood areas and lagoon management while others are focused on the big picture.

Consensus Building Institute Process Recommendations

Create a Transparent, Inclusive Collaborative Process for LTMP development

Stakeholders are broadly unified on several core aspects related to a process for developing a LTMP. It must be transparent. It must be inclusive. It must be accompanied by broad outreach. And it should draw on the best available data.

Many stakeholders are looking to CBI to draw on its expertise and experience elsewhere, while also drawing lessons from successful local collaborative planning efforts, to put forward a recommended approach. With this in mind, CBI has crafted recommendations structured to achieve the following:

- Ensure ongoing opportunities for meaningful public input and dialogue
- Balance the need for broad participation with the imperative for focused and effective technical conversations
- Foster cross-interest group discussions on all aspects of LTMP development and implementation to ensure participants understand and integrate each other's interests and concerns
- Provide sufficient time for thoughtful deliberations without exhausting people's time and resources
- Achieve agreements and reach outcomes in a timely manner

Closely coordinate with existing efforts, including development of the Salinas Valley Basin Groundwater Sustainability Plan, reservoir operations (Salinas Valley Water Project), and the Stream Management Program.

Convene a Stakeholder Planning Group

CBI recommends that the Monterey County Water Resources Agency convene a broad planning group that shapes the overall Long-Term Management Plan, including its goals and key components. The planning group would have a set membership, with broad representation of interests. The goal of the planning group would be to contribute substantially to the LTMP content while building support and understanding for the LTMP and its implementation. The planning group would meet several times over the next six months to guide LTMP development. Meetings would be open to the public. CBI would work with the Water Resources Agency and stakeholders to develop recommendation on the planning group composition. CBI advises active inclusion of the following stakeholder interest groups in the planning group:

- Agriculture
- Environmental interests focused on birds, fish or aquatic species, habitat, and plants
- Landowners along different reaches of the river
- Regulatory agencies
- Scientific community

- Stream maintenance and lagoon management expertise
- Water operations and groundwater

Convene a Small Technical Design Team

Based on stakeholder input, CBI recommends establishing a small and nimble technical design team to guide the planning effort. The technical design team would provide detailed input on the technical and scientific information going into the plan and recommend when scientific experts might need to meet to inform the planning effort. The technical design team would identify permitting needs and coordinate with landowners. The technical design team would help prepare materials for the planning group, identifying key questions for planning group consideration. CBI would suggest that experts on the following engage in the technical design team:

- MCWRA staff
- Invasive species / plants
- Lagoon management
- Stream maintenance and landowner engagement
- Groundwater planning
- Specialists on endangered or threatened species
- Permitting

Design and Implement a Public Engagement Plan

Given the importance and level of interest in the future of the Salinas River, CBI recommends designing and implementing a public engagement plan and suite of activities to create transparency and information about LTMP development for the general public, including Spanish-language materials to reach Spanish-speaking communities. Translating technical information such that it is clear and accessible to the general public is of critical importance to deepening understanding of the importance and role of long-term river management.

Conclusion

The overarching goal of this effort is to reach widespread support on developing a Long-Term Management Plan for the Salinas River. The keys to success are creating a transparent, inclusive process that engages interested stakeholders while simultaneously forming a nimble technical work group that can efficiently and effectively address a range of issues and balance interests. A viable and broadly supported LTMP is the essential first step toward a future Salinas River that supports robust ecosystems and a vibrant economy.

About the Consensus Building Institute

Founded in 1993, the Consensus Building Institute improves the way that community and organizational leaders collaborate to make decisions, achieve agreements, and manage multi-party conflicts and planning efforts. A nationally and internationally recognized not-for-profit organization, CBI provides collaborative problem solving, mediation and highly-skilled facilitation for state and federal agencies, non-profits, communities, and international development agencies around the world. CBI senior staff are affiliated with the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program and the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning. Learn more about CBI at: www.cbi.org

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Appendix A: List of Persons Interviewed

Interviews alphabetized by last name of interviewee.

1. John Ballie, Landowner
2. Devin Best, Upper Salinas/Las Tablas Resource Conservation District
3. Don Bullard and Phil Humphrey, Nacimiento Regional Water Management Advisory Committee
4. Ross Clark and Kevin O'Connor, Central Coast Wetlands Group at Moss Landing Marine Laboratories
5. Darlene Din, Salinas River Channel Coalition
6. Melissa Duflock, Landowner
7. Ken Ekeland, Monterey County Water Resources Agency Board of Directors
8. Tim Frahm, Trout Unlimited
9. Norm Groot, Monterey County Farm Bureau
10. Dale Huss, Ocean Mist and Sea Mist Farms
11. Jerry Lohr, Eric Morgan, Allan, Roger Maitoso, Michael Griva, Curtis Weeks and Steve McIntyre, Salinas Valley Water Coalition
12. Donna Meyers, Salinas River Management Unit Association
13. Gary Petersen, Salinas Valley Basin Groundwater Sustainability Agency
14. Deidre Sullivan, Monterey County Water Resources Agency Board of Directors
15. Steve Shimek, Monterey Coast Keeper and The Otter Project
16. Dennis Sites, Salinas Valley Sustainable Water Group
17. Abby Taylor Silva, Grower-Shipper Association

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Assessment Questions

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May 1, 2018

The Monterey County Water Resources Agency is developing a long-term management plan for the Salinas River this year. The plan will address a range of issues and projects on the river, including stream maintenance, lagoon management, steelhead habitat and population, and associated regulatory compliance. The Consensus Building Institute is conducting a series of interviews to better understand stakeholder perspectives on issues and concerns and the best way to shape the planning process to benefit from stakeholder expertise and ultimately create an effective long-term management plan.

Introductions

Confidentiality: CBI Facilitators will use what we discuss to report back findings without attributing it to interviewee personally; anything that interviewee wishes to stay confidential will remain between the facilitator and interviewee.

Please tell us about your history of involvement and interests related to the Salinas River.

Salinas River and Planning

When you look ahead 10, 25, or 50 years from now, how would you like to be able to describe the Salinas River?

What key issues or concerns would you like to see the plan address?

What issues do you anticipate others might raise?

What value does the Salinas River provide to you individually and to the Valley?

What conflicts would you envision might emerge when developing the plan? And, how might you envision resolving those issues? Where do you see opportunities for mutual gain?

What is the best way to take advantage of the strong interest in the river (among different landowners and stakeholders) during implementation?

Given that much of the Salinas River is privately owned, what are some options for funding projects? What role might private landowners play during plan implementation?

What kinds of information might be needed to support development of the long term management plan?

Who would have credibility to provide that technical information?

Stakeholder Engagement

CBI has been hired to facilitate a small technical team and a planning group to help guide development of the management plan and to organize a broader public outreach process.

- What composition might you recommend for the small technical team or planning group (interests, # of people, etc.)?
- Who might you recommend serve on the planning group?
- Who might be able to represent your interests?

- As the stakeholder engagement process comes together to work on developing the long-term management plan, how would you like to be involved?

Conclusion

Is there anything else that you haven't mentioned? What advice would you offer or what else would you recommend to move this effort forward?

Who else, if anyone, would you recommend that I interview on these issues?

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