Environmental Justice 2.0
for the
Bay-Delta Estuary

**Lessons Learned from
Environmental Justice Expert-Government Agency Partnerships
and Models for the Future**

August 2024

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Table of Contents

About this Report

This report synthesizes the discussions from a three-hour workshop focused on improving collaborations among community-based organizations, environmental justice (EJ) experts, and government agencies to advance EJ in the San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary. The workshop was held in Oakland, Calif., on March 11, 2024, with approximately 70 participants from government agencies, community-based organizations, research or academia, nonprofit organizations, consulting companies, and communities.

The goals for the workshop were to:

1. Gain insights from EJ expert-government partners, and brainstorm ideas for future mutually beneficial collaboration in service of a more environmentally just estuary.

2. Develop potential new models for coordinated EJ expert-agency partnerships across the Bay-Delta Estuary to address challenges such as: limited capacity of community-based organizations (CBOs) and Tribes to engage, repetitive asks from agencies for community and Tribal input, and challenges related to government contracting.

The San Francisco Estuary Partnership prepared this report with support from Little Manila Rising, Rise South City, Ninth Root, Devani Santos, Restore the Delta, and the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC). It reflects synthesis and interpretation of presentations and discussions from the March 2024 workshop but is not intended to be a comprehensive assessment of the opportunities for advancing environmental justice in the Bay-Delta Estuary. Rather, the intent is to spur further consideration, discussion and action.

Photos: Joey Kotfica

Introduction

People of color in the United States are most affected by environmental pollution and most vulnerable to environmental risks.[1] Race also is the top indicator of how vulnerable someone is to climate change in the United States.[2] Yet those who are most affected by environmental injustices have been least represented in environmental planning and decision-making. In the Bay Area, environmental decision-makers and planners are not demographically representative of the population – white people are vastly over-represented in both staff and leadership roles.[3] This is not because white people care more about environmental issues. Despite stereotypes of "Environmentalists" as white, environmental issues are very important to people of color.[4]

In the San Francisco Bay-Delta region, a history of genocide of Indigenous people, exclusionary housing policies, and unfair zoning practices have resulted in a myriad of environmental injustices. These include racial disparities in air quality exposure,[5] proximity to hazardous waste sites,[6] and soil contamination.[7] Numerous community groups and nonprofit organizations representing people of color in marginalized communities have expressed interest in being involved in environmental planning and decision-making. Additionally, government agency staff are interested in bringing less-represented voices into government processes. To further this goal, government agencies around the Bay Area and Delta are investing in building equity and engagement strategies (See Appendix 1).
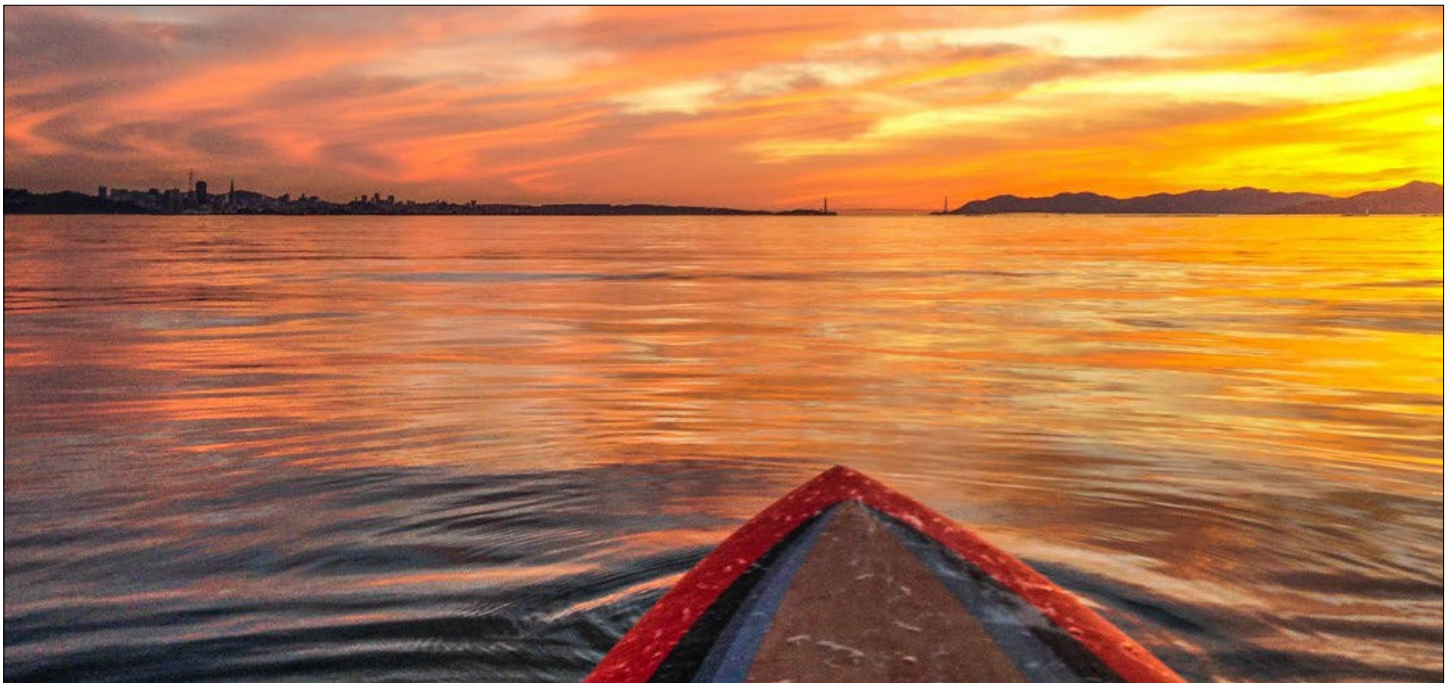

Photo: Ben Botkin

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[3] Stefanie Johnson, "Leaking Talent: How People of Color Are Pushed Out of Environmental Organizations" (Diverse Green, June 2019)
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[6] Iris T. Stewart, Christopher M. Bacon, and William D. Burke, "The Uneven Distribution of Environmental Burdens and Benefits in Silicon Valley's Backyard," Applied Geography 55 (2014): 266–77.

[7] Nathan McClintock, "Assessing Soil Lead Contamination at Multiple Scales in Oakland, California: Implications for Urban Agriculture and Environmental Justice," Applied Geography 35, no. 1–2 (2012): 460–73.

Mutual Benefits to Community Groups and Government Agencies

Both community groups and government agencies can benefit from successful collaboration with each other:

Benefits to Community Groups

Can provide opportunities for funding for youth development and workforce development.

Can open up opportunities for community-led scientific monitoring and data collection.

Provides opportunities for community members to contribute expertise developed through lived experience and community knowledge.

Incorporates community members' interests and concerns into government projects and programs.

Benefits to Government Agencies

Allows agencies to support projects that better serve the communities they represent.

Enables government agencies to show community members they are being taken seriously.

Helps agencies meet goals of inclusion, equity, and advancing justice.

Community knowledge and lived experiences can provide new, creative insights and solutions to environmental problems.

Photo: Joey Kotfica

Persistent Challenges to Partnering

Workshop participants from government agencies and community groups alike discussed the persistent challenges in partnering together. They highlighted the following four major challenges.

1. **Government agencies are not building enough bridges between marginalized communities and the projects designed to help them.** This may occur because agency staff are reluctant to step out of their comfort zones and interact with people from marginalized communities, and because agency staff are overcommitted with current responsibilities that do not include community engagement. In addition, agency projects often need to move faster than the time required to build meaningful relationships with community groups and to collaborate with them. Even when meaningful relationships are built, turnover among agency and community group staff often results in a loss of personal relationships that are the foundation of effective collaboration.

2. **When government agencies do attempt to engage with communities, the ways they do so are not always meaningful or effective.** Agencies don't always know the right people to include when trying to engage communities, and don't know when and on which topics to engage communities. Additionally, agency staff don't always know how to create meaningful partnerships with community groups and sustain them over time. Some of the ways that agencies try to engage community members, for example through surveys or community advisory roles, can be ineffective. Community advisory roles may not hold actual decision-making power in agencies, resulting in community members feeling like they are part of a 'diversity check-box'. Community members in advisory roles to agencies may bring up major community concerns, but agencies do not always act on these concerns (sometimes due to agencies having limited scope or budget), leading to erosion of trust.

> **"Community members are surveyed to death."**
> **– Julio Garcia,**
> **Rise South City**
>
> *Even when government agencies seek to solicit community input through surveys, community members often don't see the results of surveys nor their opinions reflected in decision-making.*

Overall, there is a lack of training for agency staff doing engagement work. Agency staff talk about "communities" as if they are not part of them. Instead, agency staff should be clear about which communities they are a part of. There is also a lack of guidance and protocols for how agency staff should work with Tribes.

3. **Community groups do not always know how to, or do not want to, engage with agencies.** Due to long histories of disinvestment, broken promises and neglect, many people from marginalized communities lack trust in government agencies and their staff. Furthermore, a lot of people do not have the background knowledge about the shoreline, climate change, or water quality to engage with agency planning and decision-making processes. Information on these topics is not being disseminated effectively by agencies to community members. Everyday people don't know how to access agencies or have a voice in planning and decision-making.

4. **Funding and logistical constraints provide barriers to effective collaboration.** It is hard for agencies to find funding for community engagement, and complicated logistically for agencies to pay environmental justice advisors and community members. Many community-based organizations (CBOs) want to be paid in advance of doing the work, which is challenging for agencies due to internal regulations. More funding and staff time are needed for both agencies and CBOs to build relationships and work together while also fulfilling other commitments and responsibilities. Finally, grant programs for communities are not accessible due to administrative requirements.

Photo: Laszlo Green

Key Principles of Successful Collaboration

Workshop participants described a set of five key principles that can support successful collaboration between government agencies and community groups.

1. **Ensure community members from underrepresented or marginalized communities lead.** This principle can be summed up by two phrases: "For us, by us," meaning programs, plans or services designed to serve communities should be designed by members of those communities; and "Nothing about us without us,", meaning researchers and planners should ensure that plans or research describing communities comes at the behest of community members with full collaboration on the process and outcomes. This could look like:

   a. Agencies contracting with community liaisons from the communities in which they are working to develop projects, communicate background information, and disseminate project results.

   b. Agencies hiring Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) into positions of power and leadership roles within agencies. For agencies seeking to build educational pathways and pipelines to positions of power within their ranks, workshop participants expressed the importance of involving the people who would be affected by these programs and partnering with high school teachers to develop programming for youth.

   c. Having programmatic content that is curated and led by people of color from the community. Workshop participants highlighted how important this was for the success of the Oakland Shoreline Leadership Academy. For the Bay Conservation and Development Commission's EJ Advisors program, the advisors co-designed the program, helping demonstrate the agency's commitment to the program for the long haul. (See section 'Examples of EJ Expert – Government Agency Collaborations in the Bay-Delta Estuary' for more information on the Oakland Shoreline Leadership Academy and BCDC's EJ Advisors program).

2. **Incentivize and remove barriers to participation and collaboration for both agency staff and community members.** Workshop participants acknowledged that while barriers to collaboration between community groups and agency staff are formidable, they can be overcome with targeted efforts to remove these barriers

and incentivize collaboration. These efforts should include agencies compensating community advisors fairly for their time and participation. The logistics of agencies paying for the time and participation of community advisors can be complicated. To make this work, BCDC partnered with a private foundation, the Resources Legacy Fund, to pay its EJ advisors. Agencies should standardize the compensation provided to community advisors when possible. Government agencies like the San Francisco Estuary Partnership also have contracted with CBOs to work together on collaborative projects.

To develop pathways for community members to gain the necessary background knowledge to advise the work of government agencies, agencies can provide opportunities for people from underrepresented communities working in agency jobs to be paid mentors for youth from underrepresented backgrounds. Agencies and nonprofit organizations can develop "credential" programs to open doors to planning processes and advisory positions on government decision-making bodies, as the Oakland Shoreline Leadership Academy did for participants. Workshop participants also stressed the importance of agencies providing multigenerational opportunities where families can participate together, and community members can forge connections between youth and elders. To build partnerships based on trust, agencies should invest in creating one-to-one relationships with their counterparts at community-based organizations, and then have that agency staff member share information with their colleagues.

To sustain these efforts, agencies should build funds for engagement and participation into their contracts and grant proposals and budgets by explicitly accounting for funding and environmental education needs, including the time needed to get community members up to speed on the issue on which the agency is working. Agencies that manage grant programs should make their proposal processes more accessible to CBOs, including by having fewer reporting requirements, and should be more flexible about grant outcomes.

When soliciting input from community members, agencies should host hybrid meetings with multiple meeting times and dates, and should provide recaps of previous meetings to bring new participants up to speed. Bilingual materials and meetings should be held as needed to ensure community members can participate. Initial in-person meetings are helpful for building trust between agencies and CBOs when starting a new part-

nership, and agencies must find ways to pay for food, childcare, compensation for community participants' time, and transportation for in-person events.

3. **Agencies should conduct broad outreach efforts to engage with community members.** This could be achieved by agency staff reaching out to community members in the places where they spend time. These may include grocery stores, places of worship, farmers' markets, schools, or on public transportation. Agency staff should ask community representatives who they should talk with, not just consider heads of CBOs as "community". To start, agencies can hold listening sessions to establish relationships with community groups without a set agenda in mind. Agencies can widely share opportunities for advisory boards and opportunities for community members to provide long-term strategic input, and agencies can seek input from more than just the loudest voices. Agencies also should talk to their own employees – is there someone internal (in any role) who can build connections or who lives in the community the agency is working with?

4. **To avoid burnout on the part of community members, agencies should work with each other on engagement with communities in a particular geographic area and share information/learnings with each other, being attentive to not duplicate efforts.** Most importantly, agencies should design their community engagement activities proactively, so that the feedback is actually used. This may entail front-loading community engagement activities to ensure projects directly address community issues. Furthermore, agencies should be sure to communicate back to the communities about changes made according to their input.

5. **Clear communication is foundational to successful collaboration between agencies and community groups.** Agencies from the outset should explain their constraints and areas of most leverage to community advisors and community-based partners. Agency staff should clearly explain projects' rationale ('why do this?') and who will benefit from it. When speaking with members of community groups, agency staff should avoid technical jargon, and instead speak to what is important to people in language they understand. It is very important that agency staff avoid using acronyms in their speech. Once there is mutual interest in collaboration, agencies and community groups can set up Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), being transparent about the roles and time commitments to the partnership. (See the Greenlining Institute's "Inked

with Intent: Crafting Meaningful MOUs for Collaborative Governance" resources for examples). Along with having consistent meetings, community groups and agencies can have mid-way check-ins about how feedback is being incorporated and about the ways the partnership could improve. Finally, it is important for agency staff and community members to document contact information and meeting notes in case of staff turnover.

6. **Invest in community engagement capacity-building for agency staff.** Agency staff need time built into job descriptions for engagement and relationship-building with community groups. Agencies should adequately compensate staff doing this work, and should invest in multiple people who are good at it, dedicated, and enjoy it. Additionally, higher-up staff in agencies should also invest time in building relationships with community groups. Many staff members at agencies could benefit from training about valuing lived experience as expertise, learning to check personal biases, and developing inclusive work environments.

Photo: Karl Nielsen

Models to Pursue in the Future

Workshop participants devised several models for community-agency partnerships to pursue in the future to advance environmental justice. Other programs discussed that could serve as models for partnerships between government agencies and community groups are listed in Appendix 2.

1. **Create relationships:**
   Establish regular (e.g., quarterly) gatherings where agencies and communities can co-define problems, talk more about how to collaborate, answer questions, and overcome jurisdictional boundaries. Community foundations could fund these collaborations, and university research could support them with science to inform decision-making. These gatherings could occur as part of regional/subregional climate collaboratives (some exist in the Delta) and/or regional coordination initiatives. These gatherings also could be a forum for information-sharing between agencies and CBOs, allowing government agencies to hear community concerns and to prioritize actions to address these concerns.

2. **Disseminate and streamline opportunities:**
   Create a program of community organizers for every 5,000 people to communicate all the different government agencies' working in their neighborhoods and to spread the word about opportunities for engagement. Create a centralized location for grant proposal creation that requires simplified grants applications.

3. **Provide training:**
   Provide training for CBOs about how government agencies work and build institutional capacity to collaborate (including how to write invoices, scope projects, create budgets, and write grants). This could include creating more opportunities like the Oakland Shoreline Leadership Academy to provide paid training and a foot in the door for people from under-represented communities to influence agency decision-making and planning. Workshop participants mentioned that one form of reparations for Black and Indigenous people can be government agencies supporting these communities with time, money and resources to be trained and engage in agency processes and projects.

Examples of EJ Expert – Government Agency Collaborations in the Bay-Delta Estuary

BCDC EJ Advisors Program

BCDC recognizes that historic and current discriminatory and unfair policies implemented at all levels of government have resulted in generations of communities of color facing persistent poverty; poor public health; inadequate public services and infrastructure; disproportionate exposure to polluted air, water, and soil; and underrepresentation in policymaking. To remedy this, BCDC strives to work with communities facing such burdens to learn from place-based and circumstantial expertise and experience to elevate the issues of greatest concern and to help the Commission build resilience and equity in frontline communities.

BCDC's EJ Advisors bring unique perspectives from CBOs that serve socially vulnerable, underrepresented, and EJ populations within the nine-county Bay Area. The EJ Advisors engage with BCDC staff and appear at the Commission's bi-monthly Environmental Justice Working Group meetings to provide guidance and recommendations. The EJ Advisors help BCDC implement its environmental justice and social equity policies. They also help BCDC consider how potential projects on the Bay shoreline should best engage with CBOs to have "meaningful community engagement" or assessments of "disproportionate adverse impacts" within the scope of BCDC's regulatory authority for Bay Area shoreline communities. More broadly, the EJ Advisors are intended to help BCDC build relationships with community leaders and to bring community leaders' expert insights and perspectives to the agency's EJ-related conversations. The EJ Advisors do not constitute a formal committee established by the Commission, do not work on individual project permits, and do not have regulatory authority.

Photo: Karl Nielsen

Delta Stewardship Council Environmental Justice Expert Group

Incorporating Tribal and EJ concerns into the Delta Stewardship Council's work requires understanding, acknowledging and working in partnership to address historic wrongs that have resulted in inequitable distributions of environmental harms and benefits today; confirming there is a fair and open governance process that all community members can participate in going forward; and ensuring that those most burdened and historically marginalized are represented in environmental decision-making in the Delta.

The Tribal and Environmental Justice (TEJ) Issue Paper is a multi-year initiative resulting from the Council's 2019 Five-Year Review of the Delta Plan. The paper will inform potential actions to address environmental justice issues in and related to the Delta and the Council's work. Specifically, the paper aims to:

- Build a network of community leaders and organizations to inform and support the Council's EJ work;

- Identify EJ issues in and around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta; and

- Identify options to address those issues.

One of the main objectives of the TEJ initiative is to build a network of community leaders and organizations that can inform how the Council does business more equitably. To do this, Council staff formed an EJ Expert Group that represented a diverse set of community interests and expertise, and met from June 2021 to June 2024. The group:

- Provided expert knowledge, guidance and recommendations regarding TEJ considerations in the Delta to Council staff;

- Interfaced with each division of the agency;

- Brought community insights and perspectives to the agency;

- Built a strong relationship with Council staff, other Expert Group representatives, and other community groups and leaders.

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Oakland Shoreline Leadership Academy (OSLA)

As sea levels rise and climate change continues its march, West Oakland's communities face imminent risk from flooding, toxic and hazardous waste, and other issues affecting the Oakland shoreline. The Oakland Shoreline Leadership Academy, conducted in 2021 and led by the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project, put the power of shoreline planning into the hands of the people. This program trained local change-makers of all ages from communities living on or near the Oakland shoreline. Over the course of six months, resident planners conducted asset mapping, developed a community engagement plan, and co-developed shoreline improvement projects. Several graduates of OSLA went on to leadership roles in shoreline planning and monitoring efforts, including with the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority, the Wetlands Regional Monitoring Program (WRMP)'s People and Wetlands Workgroup, and starting their own shoreline restoration projects. BCDC plans to replicate this program at several sites around the Estuary to develop the capacity of communities to lead and engage with shoreline planning processes.

Photo: Laszlo Green

Science for Communities

The Delta Stewardship Council's Science for Communities (SFC) program builds inclusive partnerships between scientists, community-based organizations and members of the public. Through this program, Council staff connects CBOs with science partners to address social-environmental issues that impact communities in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The goal for SFC is to create partnerships between CBOs with specific research needs and pair them with members of the scientific community who have experience, interests and resources to address those needs. The program culminates in a workshop that is open to the public in which science and community partners share the work they've done together, promoting awareness on some of the issues impacting Delta communities.

The 2022 SFC post evaluation workshop survey confirmed the need to more closely connect scientists with local CBOs to gain a better grasp of the types of challenges communities encounter and understand what would benefit those communities. Therefore, the 2024 SFC effort was encouraged. The 2024 SFC partnership focuses on:

- Growing the connections between communities and scientists

- Promoting partnership groups to showcase their projects

- Improving access to environmental data by promoting knowledge-sharing and tools that meet community needs

- Exploring internship opportunities and training to support longer-term development of participatory research

Long-term, there is a desire to make SFC a biennial event and to broaden its efforts into a larger program event. Eventually, the aim is for it to promote funding opportunities for future research projects and facilitate ongoing training for CBOs and participatory research projects.

Wetlands Regional Monitoring Program People and Wetlands Workgroup

The Wetlands Regional Monitoring Program (WRMP), which is co-managed by the San Francisco Estuary Partnership and the San Francisco Estuary Institute (SFEI), established the People and Wetlands Workgroup to develop indicators to measure the benefits and impacts of wetland restoration on people and evaluate their distribution among different communities and demographic groups. The People and Wetlands Workgroup identifies priority management and monitoring questions that guide the selection of indicators, determines metrics and data collection protocols and/or standards for monitoring the priority indicators, increases the inclusion of different forms and sources of knowledge into wetland monitoring, and identifies ways to serve the information needs of different groups. The People and Wetlands Workgroup focuses on frontline communities and Tribes, and is comprised of experts in environmental justice, environmental education, regulatory agencies, social science, and more. Data on human-wetland connections can support advocacy for additional regional funding, inform design and adaptive management of wetland projects, provide new perspective on the effectiveness of efforts to sustain healthy aquatic habitats and resources, and more.

Conclusions

Both government agencies and communities have a lot of interest and energy for improving collaborations and building partnerships to advance environmental justice. By acknowledging the challenges that impede successful collaboration and building on the key principles that form a strong foundation for collaborative partnerships, we can actively work to remove barriers and incentivize participation in partnerships between public agencies and the communities they serve. Workshop participants identified characteristics of what works to promote these collaborations. To advance environmental justice, agencies and community groups should continue what is working as well as innovate and try new models for creating relationships, disseminating and streamlining opportunities for community engagement in government planning and decision-making, and providing training to ensure community groups are able to effectively participate.

Photo: Laszlo Green

Appendix 1.
Key Recommendations for Government Agencies to Have More Equitable Engagement with Communities

Government agencies should:

- Contract with community-based organizations (CBOs) that have built trust with communities.

- Engage with Tribes to make sure native communities' concerns are heard, including about traditional ecological knowledge and tribal stewardship.

- Join existing meetings within communities to avoid community members themselves from having to attend agency meetings.

  - Meet communities where they are — both physically and in terms of priorities — to foster relationships and interactions.

- Support community capacity to influence government so communities have more decision-making power.

- Establish long-term funding to support CBOs and community leaders as full partners and leaders. This can be done by:

  - Identifying grants from established partners that have approachable eligibility requirements to lower barriers to accessing funds.

  - Identifying and creating workforce development opportunities.

  - Allocating resources for technical assistance and training programs to help smaller CBOs and tribal organizations navigate funding processes and build their capacity.

- Provide ongoing training and support for agency staff to enhance their partnership development skills, especially in working with historically underrepresented groups and tribes.

- Promote increased representation of tribes and community representatives at various levels within agencies, including staff, advisory committees, oversight committees and governing boards, to ensure their perspectives are included in decision-making processes.
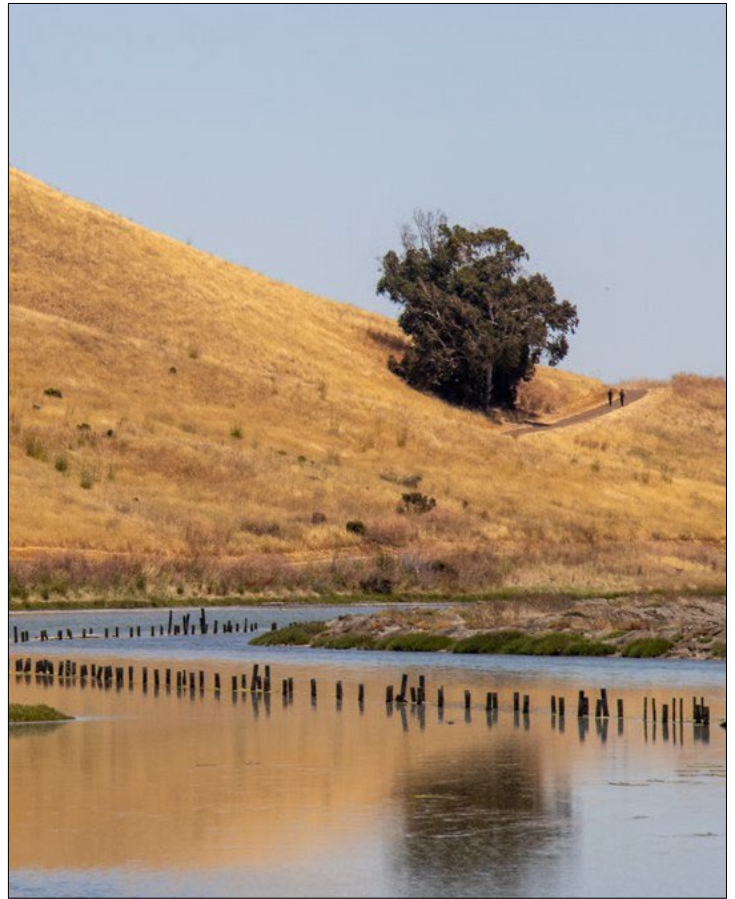
Photo: Laszlo Green

These recommendations were developed by Outreach By Design, in collaboration with the San Francisco Estuary Partnership, based on a synthesis of ideas from nine Bay Area community engagement and equity planning initiatives, including: Regional Water Needs Assessment Report by the Disadvantaged Community Involvement (DACTI) Program; Summary of Delta Environmental Justice Interviews by the California Delta Stewardship Council; Plan Bay Area 2050's Equity, Public Engagement and Tribal Engagement Reports; Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) and Association of Bay Area Governments' (ABAG) Bay Trail Equity Strategy; Adapting to Rising Tides Community Vulnerability for Current and Future Flood Risk User Guide by the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC); Power the People by East Oakland Initiative; Regional Strategy for Rising Bay Joint Platform by the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC); Establishing an Equity and Community Engagement Program that Benefits Economically Disadvantaged Communities: Final Recommendations for the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority by EcoEquity Consulting; Equity Guidelines and Tribal Engagement Recommendations Reports by the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority.

Appendix 2.
Other Models of Government Agency – Community Group Partnerships

Canal Alliance, San Rafael

The Canal Alliance is a nonprofit community-based social services organization that held a community assembly in June 2024 to prepare for sea level rise. The event included presentations and interactive activities about the risk of sea level rise and options for adaptation, in order to guide a team of consultants in creating initial adaptation plan designs for San Rafael.

Metropolitan Transportation Commission - Community Action Resource and Empowerment (MTC-CARE)

MTC-CARE provides funding and technical assistance to develop equity-based partnerships and provide resources and support for transportation and mobility access projects in the Bay Area, especially with and for underserved communities.

Santa Clara Climate Collaborative:

The Santa Clara Climate Collaborative is a multi-sector network and community of practice for public agencies, academia, nonprofit and community-based organizations, and business and community leaders to advance regional solutions to climate change through resource and expertise sharing, joint-funding opportunities, and partnership development. They work together to develop a county-wide Climate Roadmap of adaptation and resilience strategies, including a multi-benefit assessment tool for project planning.

Sierra Club Bay Alive

Sierra Club's "Bay Alive" Campaign focuses on influencing regional agencies and local entities around San Francisco Bay to develop a collaborative and united approach to mitigating the damage to come from rising sea levels due to global climate change. They develop region-wide policy positions and work with scientists, agencies and others around the Bay on issues of equitable adaptation to sea level rise.

Washington Department of Ecology Tribal Consultation Grants

The Washington Department of Ecology provides non-competitive funding to Tribes through the Tribal Consultation Grants program. This funding supports Tribes to engage in decision-making about clean energy siting, carbon accounting, and other climate mitigation and adaptation measures. These grants emerged from a legislative requirement that government agencies working on climate or ecology "must offer early, meaningful and individual consultation with any affected federally recognized tribe on all funding decisions and funding programs that may impact tribal resources, including tribal cultural resources, archaeological sites, sacred sites, fisheries, or other rights and interests in tribal lands and lands within which a tribe or tribes possess rights reserved or protected by federal treaty, statute, or executive order."

Photo: Joey Kotfica

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