

Stream and Wetlands System Protection Policy North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board

Summary of Project Scope

November 2006

Staff of the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (Regional Water Board) is developing an amendment to the Water Quality Control Plan (Basin Plan)¹ for the North Coast Region to protect stream and wetland systems, which include stream channels, wetlands, floodplains, and riparian areas. The amendment will protect and restore the physical characteristics of these systems, including their connectivity and natural hydrologic regimes, in order to protect beneficial uses. This document summarizes the anticipated scope of the amendment as envisioned by Regional Water Board staff.

1. The amendment will protect *beneficial uses* associated with stream and wetland systems

Beneficial uses describe the resources, services, and qualities of the aquatic system and serve as a basis for establishing water quality objectives and discharge prohibitions. Beneficial uses of the North Coast Region are found in Chapter 2 of the Basin Plan.

The amendment will protect previously adopted beneficial uses associated with stream and wetland systems, including Flood Peak Attenuation/Flood Water Storage (FLD), Water Quality Enhancement (WQE), and Wetland Habitat (WET), through an implementation plan and potential new water quality objectives. No new beneficial uses are being proposed for the North Coast Region as part of the amendment.

2. The amendment may establish new *water quality objectives* for the North Coast Region

Water quality objectives define appropriate levels of environmental quality that protect beneficial uses and control activities that can adversely affect aquatic ecosystems. They may be either narrative or numeric. Water quality objectives of the North Coast Region are found in Chapter 3 of the Basin Plan.

¹ The Basin Plan is available online at <http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/programs/basinplan/basin.html> or by contacting the Regional Water Board at (707) 576-2220.

The amendment may establish new narrative water quality objectives to:

- Manage or maintain watershed infiltration capacity, and increase where possible, to reduce flood peak flows, increase stream base flows, and provide hydrologic conditions that support wetlands and riparian areas (**Hydrology**);
- Manage or maintain active channel shapes, slopes, and planforms to protect the dynamic balance between water discharge, valley slope, and sediment load that prevents excessive erosion and deposition of sediment (**Active Channel**);
- Protect floodplain functions, such as storage and conveyance of high flows; sediment storage; nutrient cycling; pollutant filtration; wildlife habitat; recharge of wetland and riparian areas; reduction of erosive forces; adequate space for natural adjustments of the active channel; and groundwater recharge (**Floodplain**);
- Establish, manage, or maintain riparian vegetation to the degree necessary to moderate stream temperatures; provide cover, food, and habitat for aquatic and terrestrial communities; filter pollutants; store sediment; and prevent destabilizing erosion (**Riparian Vegetation**); and
- Manage or maintain in-stream habitat to provide migration corridors, substrate characteristics, reproductive and rearing habitat, and water levels that support aquatic organisms (**Instream Habitat**)

3. The amendment will include an *implementation plan* to protect stream and wetland systems in the North Coast Region

Implementation plans describe the Regional Water Board's programs and specific plans of action for meeting water quality objectives and protecting beneficial uses. Implementation plans for the North Coast Region are found in Chapter 4 of the Basin Plan.

The amendment will include an implementation plan to protect the beneficial uses of stream and wetland systems. The plan will include actions necessary to achieve water quality objectives associated with these beneficial uses.

The implementation plan will provide:

- A general framework to avoid, minimize, and mitigate water quality impacts from activities that discharge to the stream and wetlands system;
- Flexibility to account for a wide range of watershed conditions (e.g. degree of urbanization, size of watershed, surrounding land uses, etc.);

The implementation plan may include:

- Guidance for permit applicants and Regional Water Board staff on how to protect the water quality functions of stream and wetland systems, including methodology to identify and assess the condition of wetlands, riparian areas, and stream channels;
- Prohibitions on certain types of discharges to stream and wetland systems, such as stormwater discharges that lead to destabilizing erosion or removal of riparian vegetation that leads to increased stream temperatures as a result of greater energy input from direct solar radiation;
- Performance criteria (e.g. establish a functioning riparian corridor, prevent excessive erosion and deposition in stream channels, etc.) that can be integrated into existing Regional Water Board permits and programs (e.g. 401 water quality certifications, waste discharge requirements, NPDES stormwater permits, timber harvest plans, CEQA review, etc.);
- Potential management measures (e.g. floodplain and vegetation management standards, stormwater detention and infiltration, soil bioengineering, buffer establishment, etc.) that can be used to meet performance criteria and monitoring requirements to ensure that management measures are effective;
- A framework for implementing stream and wetlands system protection goals through locally developed watershed plans by providing conditional waivers of waste discharge requirements to activities that comply with plans approved by the Regional Water Board;
- A framework for developing new region-specific general waste discharge requirements for classes of activities, such as restoration projects or flood control maintenance, to protect stream and wetland systems; and
- Other implementation actions that are necessary to protect stream and wetland system beneficial uses and achieve their associated water quality objectives.

For more information on the proposed amendment, please contact Bruce Ho at (707) 576-2460 or BHo@waterboards.ca.gov. Additional information can also be found online at: <http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/programs/basinplan/swspp.html> or by calling the Regional Water Board at (707) 576-2220.

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