

Why BCDC amended the San Francisco Bay Plan to address sea level rise

Is sea level rise is really happening or is it just a theory?

Sea level rise from global warming is a fact. Water levels in San Francisco Bay have risen nearly eight inches over the past century, and scientists agree that the rate of sea level rise is accelerating. In October 2011, the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) approved a final report summarizing the latest scientific research on climate change. While exact future increases in sea level rise are uncertain, scientists believe it is likely that the Bay will rise 10 to 17 inches by 2050, 17 to 32 inches by 2070, and 31 to 69 inches at the end of the century.

Will sea level rise have a big impact on the Bay Area?

Yes, sea level rise is a particularly acute problem for the Bay Area. Between 1850 and 1960 about a third of the Bay (240 square miles) was filled high enough to be above current sea level, but not above future sea level. Also, large portions of the South Bay are below current sea level. The BCDC report contains maps showing that 330 square miles of low-lying land around the Bay may be vulnerable to sea level rise over the next century.

What did BCDC do to address this problem?

In October 2011, the Commission amended its San Francisco Bay Plan to update the 22-year-old sea level rise findings and policies in the Plan and to add a new section dealing more broadly with climate change and adapting to sea level rise.

What is the Bay Plan and how is it used?

The San Francisco Bay Plan contains the policies that the BCDC uses to determine whether permit applications can be approved for projects within the Commission's jurisdiction, which consists of the Bay, salt ponds, managed wetlands, certain waterways and land within 100 feet of the Bay. The California Legislature directed BCDC to keep the Plan up to date by amending it to deal with new information and new issues.

How do the new policies change the way BCDC evaluates proposed projects?

The Commission will continue to evaluate each project on a case-by-case basis. However, the policies in the San Francisco Bay Plan that generally discourage building in shoreline areas that are vulnerable to current or future flooding have been modified. The new policies encourage development in suitable low-lying areas provided that flood risks are addressed, and encourage habitat preservation and enhancement in suitable areas.

Do the Bay Plan amendments increase BCDC's regulatory jurisdiction?

No. State law would have to be changed to give the Commission jurisdiction over a larger area, and the Commission has not asked that its jurisdiction be expanded.

Do the new climate change policies broaden BCDC's authority?

No. The new climate change policies will be applied by the Commission within its existing jurisdiction using its current regulatory authority. State law explicitly states that the policies are advisory only beyond the Commission's regulatory jurisdiction. The Commission's policies can be used outside the Commission's jurisdiction by local governments and others, or not.

Do BCDC's new policies conflict with other regional initiatives aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions?

No. The Bay region must comply with state laws that require a significant reduction in the greenhouse gas emissions that are changing the world's climate. In California, many of these emissions come from vehicles. Therefore, along with the rest of the state, the Bay Area is doing its best to reduce driving by

encouraging the development of more compact, mixed-use communities near transit where people can walk, bicycle or use transit. Unfortunately, some of the areas that are ideal for this type of development may also be vulnerable to flooding from sea level rise. Therefore, the Bay Plan policies that broadly discouraged building in low-lying areas were modified to support the type of development that is needed to reduce greenhouse gases, provided flood risks are addressed. The Bay Area does not have the luxury of choosing to either cut greenhouse gases or adapt to sea level rise. We must do both. The new policies also call for the formulation of a regional sea level rise adaptation strategy to protect critical shoreline development and natural ecosystems.

Do the new Bay Plan policies create a moratorium on development in low-lying areas?

No. The new policies support protection of existing and planned development, and encourage the redevelopment of closed military bases, remediation of contaminated sites, construction of critical infrastructure, small and interim projects, and adaptive use of low-lying areas planned in a manner that addresses the dangers of accelerated sea level rise. At the same time, the new policies do not relax the level of protection that Bay resources have enjoyed over the last half-century.

Did BCDC receive input on the policies from the public, local governments and others?

Yes. During the 26-month process of considering the Bay Plan climate change amendments, the Commission held 36 public hearings, workshops and stakeholder meetings; met with local governments; and extended the public comment period for several months. Throughout this process, BCDC's staff revised and refined the amendments to respond to the excellent ideas advanced by stakeholders, local governments and the general public. In the end, the amended policies were supported by the business community, developers, labor, environmental organizations and local government, and the Commission unanimously approved the amendments.

When will the new policies go into effect?

The amendments have to be approved by the State Office of Administrative Law and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The policies are likely to go into effect by early 2012.

Will these new policies hurt the Bay Area economy?

Around the world investors and insurers are watching what the Bay Area and other low-lying regions are doing to deal with climate change. The Bay Area is in competition with other metropolitan areas around the world. Capital will be invested in those places that recognize the reality of climate change and take concrete steps to adapt to sea level rise. At the same time, insurers will likely abandon places where risks are too high. In order to win this contest, the Bay region cannot ignore the threats posed by climate change and sea level rise simply because the challenges are too difficult or current economic times are hard.

The Bay Area is famous for building coalitions between diverse interests, embracing innovation, and looking at challenges as opportunities. This is the spirit that BCDC embraced when it chose to address climate change. The broad support for the Bay Plan climate change amendments demonstrate that our region has decided to join the Commission in seizing this opportunity.