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**OCEAN
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COUNCIL**

State of California

Ocean Protection Council

Equity Plan Assessment

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Acknowledgments

[California Ocean Protection Council](#) acknowledges and thanks the many partners, grantees, and community leaders who have contributed to advancing OPC's equity priorities and strengthening efforts to maximize community benefits across California's coast and ocean since the adoption of the [Equity Plan](#) in 2022.

This Assessment was collaboratively developed by OPC and [Better World Group](#) (BWG), with valuable input and guidance from the [Environmental Justice Advisory Board for California's Coast and Ocean](#).

OPC also recognizes the dedication of its staff and leadership for their collective effort in developing this assessment and in their continued commitment to the work it reflects.

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Introduction

In October 2022, the [California Ocean Protection Council](#) (OPC) adopted its [Equity Plan](#), a foundational framework to advance equity and environmental justice across California's coast and ocean policies and programs. The Equity Plan has guided OPC in shaping policies, processes, and programs that directly respond to community needs statewide. As a key agency within the [California Natural Resources Agency](#) (CNRA), OPC plays an essential role in strengthening ocean governance, increasing stewardship, and advancing scientific understanding to protect coastal and marine ecosystems and the communities that rely on them.

The Equity Plan has provided a roadmap for OPC to integrate equity throughout its work, from community engagement and public participation to grantmaking, workforce development, and science-based decision making. Since adoption of the Plan, OPC has:

- Improved access to state funding programs by launching new initiatives and tools that reduce barriers and increase participation among under-resourced communities and California Native American tribes, including the Environmental Justice Small Grants Program, Senate Bill 1 Technical Assistance Program, and updated Proposition 68 and General Grant Guidelines.
- Strengthened structures for community and tribal participation in ocean and coastal programs through the establishment of the Environmental Justice Advisory Board and adoption of OPC's first Tribal Engagement Strategy.
- Expanded workforce and stewardship opportunities through initiatives such as the Ocean Corps Pilot Program, OPC Summer Internship Program, integrating workforce development in research funded by OPC, and investments in tribally-led restoration and research through the Tribal Marine Stewards Network.

These accomplishments reflect OPC's continued commitment to advancing programs and investments that strengthen coastal and ocean stewardship while supporting the well-being of all Californians.

Equity Plan Goals

The Equity Plan centers on four goals that reflect OPC's statewide leadership role in ocean and coastal governance: **Engagement, Inclusive Workplace, Policy, and Science**. These goals guide how OPC integrates equity into every aspect of its work, from funding and participation to workplace practices and scientific research.

Goal 1: Equitable Outreach, Engagement, and Funding

Goal 1 focuses on expanding opportunities for community participation in OPC programs, policies, and research, and increasing funding for community-led projects that strengthen coastal and ocean resilience.

Goal 2: Building an Inclusive Workplace and Workforce for California's Coast and Ocean

Goal 2 advances inclusive hiring and retention practices, strengthens partnerships with academic institutions, and aims to build internal capacity to support and sustain OPC's equity priorities.

Goal 3: Designing Equitable Ocean and Coastal Policymaking

Goal 3 outlines strategies that broaden representation in state decision-making by involving environmental justice and tribal communities in OPC's policy development, Council processes, and advisory efforts.

Goal 4: Integrating Equity in Coastal and Ocean Science and Research

Goal 4 promotes interdisciplinary and community-informed science by incorporating diverse knowledge systems, such as including traditional ecological knowledge and local-based community input, into research and investments that inform state priorities.

Assessment Approach

This Assessment is OPC's first formal evaluation of progress for the Equity Plan since its adoption in 2022. It reviews how OPC has advanced Equity Plan goals, identifies implementation outcomes, and establishes a framework for enhanced future progress tracking. The Assessment draws primarily on data from 2022 through 2024 and incorporates insights from ongoing implementation and related efforts through the current year, 2025. It marks the beginning of a consistent process to measure progress, refine metrics, and strengthen accountability over time.

To inform its development, OPC incorporated feedback and data from concurrent initiatives, including:

- **OPC 2026 -2030 Strategic Plan**: In early to mid-2025, OPC launched a statewide public process to inform OPC's 2026-2030 Strategic Plan. The updated plan will guide OPC's work to protect California's coast and ocean over the next five years, building on the

foundation of the [2020-2025 Strategic Plan](#) and informed by lessons learned from Equity Plan implementation.

- [OPC Engagement and Partnerships Survey](#): Between June and July 2025, OPC invited Californians to provide feedback through a public survey to help strengthen coast and ocean protection efforts. This input is reflected in this assessment, and will help guide OPC in improving engagement, enhancing access to resources and grantmaking, and supporting inclusive and community-informed coastal and ocean stewardship statewide.
- [Environmental Justice Advisory Board](#): Through the ongoing partnership between Better World Group and OPC to help inform implementation of the Equity Plan, Better World Group established the Environmental Justice Advisory Board in 2024 and convenes the group quarterly to advise the state in its efforts to better address the ocean and coastal needs of California communities, including California Native American tribes.

Together, these efforts provide a wide-ranging view of OPC's progress and help inform continued progress toward implementation as described in the following sections.

Implementation Progress and Metrics

Goal 1: Equitable Engagement, Outreach, and Funding

Between 2022 and 2024, OPC administered approximately \$100 million in grants to advance strategic priorities across climate resilience, biodiversity, equity, and a sustainable blue economy through a range of competitive grant programs, direct partnerships, and other key initiatives. Through these investments, and by centering community benefits and collaboration, OPC supports coast and ocean policies and programs that strengthen stewardship and expand benefits for communities across California.

In 2024, California voters passed Proposition 4, a statewide climate bond which prioritizes investments to disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities and vulnerable populations. Proposition 4 provides \$10 billion in bond funding to support climate resilience and biodiversity conservation— of which, at least 40% must be used to benefit communities that have lower incomes or are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. This funding provides an opportunity for OPC to expand investments that help California Native American tribes, environmental justice communities, and other vulnerable populations access state resources, while improving coast and ocean policies to better reflect community needs and strengthen how OPC tracks progress in meeting them.

Progress to Date:

Indicator 1A: Increased Amount of Funding to Environmental Justice Communities¹

Equity Plan Objectives: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.5

OPC is committed to increasing investments in communities that have faced barriers to accessing state funding and resources. To make funding more accessible, OPC works to improve grant resources and processes and collaborates across CNRA agencies to share best practices and strengthen equitable grantmaking.

¹ The proposed metrics and indicators included in this Assessment support priority communities as listed in Goal 1 strategies of OPC's Equity Plan. These strategies specifically address DACs, Severe DACs, tribal partners, CBOs, and inland communities. The Equity Plan provides specific definitions for: California Native American tribes; environmental justice communities; Disadvantaged, marginalized, underserved communities; Community partners. In addition, the Goal 1 Equity Plan narrative references: People of all abilities; Multilingual populations; Low literacy populations; Low-income communities.

From 2020 to 2024, a significant share of OPC’s funded projects provided direct benefits to tribal, environmental justice, and other priority communities, including investments in habitat restoration, climate adaptation, and community-based stewardship. Although current tracking is based primarily on funding amounts, future efforts will expand to measure project outcomes and community benefits.

The recently approved Climate Bond (Proposition 4) presents an opportunity for OPC to implement a more robust tracking model for community benefits. Through this effort, OPC can aim to collect consistent data on direct and meaningful community benefits from state climate investments, how funding reaches communities across regions, and tangible outcomes to help establish metrics that can be monitored progress over time.

Current Metrics on Available Funding Data

Between 2021 and 2025, OPC awarded the following projects with direct benefits to tribal, EJ, and other priority communities:

- **30.8%** of \$27 million Proposition 1 funds awarded (approximately \$8.4 million) between 2021–2022. *OPC Proposition 1 funds have been fully expended.*
- **6.7%** of \$17.1 million Proposition 68 Chapter 9 funds* awarded (approximately \$1.1 million) in 2023. *A large portion of Proposition 68 Chapter 9 funds are still available for grants.*
- **41.2%** of \$16.3 million Proposition 68 Chapter 10 funds awarded (approximately \$6.7 million) between 2021-2023.
- **84.7%** of \$30.7 million SB 1 program funds awarded, a Sea Level Rise Program, funded through Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (approximately \$26 million) between 2024–2025.

Indicator 1B: Investment in Community Priorities

Equity Plan Objectives: 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5

By supporting projects led by tribal governments and organizations, community-based organizations, local government agencies and more, OPC has leveraged its grant funding to address priorities that benefit environmental justice communities, such as cultural recognition, community science, education and outreach, and workforce development.

Since adoption of the Equity Plan, OPC has intentionally prioritized community priorities and benefits across funding opportunities. A few efforts include:

- [Senate Bill 1 Sea Level Rise Adaption Grant Program](#) (2024-current): Funds planning and implementation projects that address sea level rise and climate resilience, with priority given to projects serving vulnerable coastal communities.
- [Senate Bill Sea Level Rise Tribal Cultural Resources Funding Program](#) (2025-current): Provides flexible funding for California Native American tribes to assess, plan, and develop culturally appropriate strategies to protect tribal cultural resources, lifeways, and ancestral lands from the impacts of sea level rise.
- [SB 1 Technical Assistance Program](#) (2024- current): Offers targeted pre-application support, workshops, and one-on-one guidance to help under-resourced organizations develop competitive proposals for sea level rise adaptation funding.
- [OPC–California Sea Grant Microplastics Research Program](#) (2023): Supported research on microplastics and their impacts, with a strong emphasis on community priorities and inclusive participation. Program goals highlighted diversity and equity across research teams, workforce development, and engagement, ensuring projects reflect the knowledge, experiences, and needs of California’s diverse communities.
- [Sea Grant – Accelerating Kelp Research & Restoration in California](#) (2023): This program funds “solutions-oriented” research and restoration projects for California’s kelp forests, and emphasizes inclusive participation (including tribes, community scientists, and underrepresented students). It is supported by a community-research advisory structure that helps inform priorities, methods, and outcomes.
- [Environmental Justice Small Grants Pilot Program](#) (2024): OPC launched its first-ever Environmental Justice Small Grants Program in partnership with Justice Outside. The \$1 million pilot program supports 24 local projects statewide that advance community-driven coastal and ocean initiatives such as environmental education, art and storytelling, and expanded access to aquatic recreation. The program was designed to reduce barriers for under-resourced organizations through a streamlined application process, technical assistance, and regranting partnership. OPC received \$4.6 million in total requests, underscoring the strong demand and need for continued investment in community-led efforts that strengthen social equity, conservation, and coastal resilience. The program’s outcomes will inform future rounds of small-grant funding as part of OPC’s long-term strategy to make funding more accessible to environmental justice communities and California Native American tribes.
- [Environmental Justice Advisory Board](#) (2024–current): Established to provide ongoing guidance on OPC’s implementation of the Equity Plan. The Environmental Justice Advisory Board brings community and tribal perspectives into state decision-making processes and helps inform coast and ocean programs and policies in a way that reflect the diverse needs of California communities.

Additional resources to improve transparency, clarity, and elevate community priorities in OPC grant programs include:

- [OPC Prop 68 Grant Guidelines Revision](#) (2024): Updated guidelines to embed equity considerations into eligibility, scoring, and community benefits, making funding more accessible to tribal governments, community-based-organizations (CBOs), and underserved communities.
- [General Grant Guidelines](#) (June 2025): Consolidated grant requirements across funding sources into a single, public-facing document that incorporates OPC's equity commitments and transparency in funding decisions.
- [OPC Budget and Invoice Guide](#) (updated 2023): Streamlines and clarifies grant budgeting, invoicing, and allowable expenses, highlighting where flexibility exists under state law. Serves as a practical tool for grantees to navigate processes and expectations, improving transparency and reducing administrative burdens.
- [OPC Signage and Communications Materials Guide](#) (2024): Provides grantees and applicants with clear best practices and guidance to design culturally inclusive interpretive signage, construction signs, and communication materials, including print, digital, and on-site, that authentically reflect local histories, tribal knowledge, and community input.

Indicator 1C: Improved OPC Grant Application Experience

Equity Plan Objectives: 1.2, 1.4, 1.5

OPC aims to increase investments that benefit more Californians, particularly those in underserved communities, by reducing barriers to its grant opportunities. Through various initiatives, OPC supports prospective applicants and grantees by streamlining grant application processes and providing accessible informational and technical resources. These strategies have included partnerships with re-granting entities, fiscal administrators, and technical assistance providers that bring specialized expertise, capacity, and community relationships. Through these partnerships, OPC extends support to applicants, supplements limited state resources, and helps facilitate more equitable access to funding.

In 2025, OPC conducted a public, statewide [Engagement and Partnerships Survey](#) to gather feedback from current, past, and potential partners about their experiences engaging with OPC and applying for funding. The survey received 147 responses representing a diversity of organization types and California regions.

Diversity of Respondents

- Respondents represented a broad range of organization types, including nonprofit organizations (29%), academic or research institutions (14%), individuals (10%), private sector entities (10%), local governments (7%), state or federal agencies (6%), and tribal governments or organizations (3%), among others.
- Many participants had never received OPC funding but provided valuable insights on barriers, technical assistance needs, and ways to improve outreach and accessibility.

Application Experience

- **Ease of application:** Of respondents who provided a rating, **60%** found it “easy” or “very easy” to learn about and apply for OPC grants, reflecting the impact of OPC’s efforts to streamline the process.
- **Barriers to applying:** About **17%** of respondents reported encountering challenges when applying for OPC funding. The most common barriers cited were:
 - Limited organizational capacity, particularly for smaller or under-resourced groups
 - Complex or time-consuming application processes
 - Eligibility limitations
- **Technical assistance:** Of those who received technical assistance, **82%** rated it as effective or very effective in helping advance their project or application.

Funding Reach and Community Impact

- 56 respondents (38%) indicated they had received OPC funding, either as a lead grantee or as a partner/subrecipient.
- When first funded (among those funded): 54% first received funding in 2023 or later, 25% in 2020–2022, and 21% before 2020.
- Taken together, the **types of organizations** funded shows a mix of community-rooted groups, public agencies, tribal partners, and research and implementation entities:
 - Nonprofit organizations (~29%)
 - Community-based organizations (~14%)
 - Academic or research institutions (~12%)
 - Private businesses or consultants (~8%)
 - Collaborative partnerships (~8%)
 - Tribal governments or organizations (~8%)
 - Individuals/contractors (~7%)
 - Local governments (~5%)

- State or federal agencies (~4%)
- **80%** of funding recipients reported that their OPC-funded projects **served or benefited a state-defined Disadvantaged or Severely Disadvantaged Community**.
- In describing these communities, respondents most often cited:
 - California Native American Tribes and tribal communities
 - Disadvantaged or low-income communities
 - Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities
 - Coastal and shoreline communities
 - Fishing and maritime communities
 - Youth, students, and educators
- Additional mentions included rural communities, Spanish-speaking or limited-English-proficiency communities, and place-based coastal neighborhoods. These narratives reinforce that OPC-funded work is reaching communities with historic and ongoing climate and coastal burdens, as well as those with cultural connections to ocean stewardship.

These metrics may be tracked over time to help OPC assess progress in improving access to grant funding, with future surveys serving as a tool to identify evolving needs and refine strategies to reduce barriers for applicants.

Future Metrics for Consideration

With the passing of Proposition 4, otherwise known as the Climate Bond, OPC has a key opportunity to strengthen how it tracks and evaluates state investments benefiting California Native American tribes, environmental justice communities, and other priority populations. Future tracking could include:

- **Funding Reach and Distribution:** Track the percentage of total OPC Proposition 4 funding awarded to priority communities and the regional distribution of funded projects across California.
- **Community Engagement, Workforce, and Benefits:** Evaluate whether projects include structured community engagement; create measurable local benefits such as jobs, training opportunities, and resilience outcomes; and reflect priorities identified by the communities they serve.
- **Post-Project Evaluation:** Assess completed projects through post-grant surveys and/or reporting to capture outcomes, engagement effectiveness, lessons learned that can inform future funding rounds and impact of state investments.

Goal 2: Building an Inclusive Workplace and Workforce for California's Coast and Ocean

As a state leader in ocean and coastal policy, OPC plays an important role in building an inclusive workforce, both within the agency and across California's broader ocean and coastal sectors. This commitment includes an emphasis on creating career pathways, outreach, and workforce development initiatives that benefit communities statewide.

The indicators outlined below are designed to assess the effectiveness of OPC's internal professional development strategies and external recruitment initiatives, particularly through OPC's Summer Internship Program.

Progress to Date:

Indicator 2A: Strengthened Organizational Capacity to Advance Equity

Equity Plan Objectives: 2.1, 2.3, 2.4

Since 2022, OPC has strengthened its internal capacity to meet emerging needs and better support equity, environmental justice, and community engagement across all program areas. Organizational updates have improved coordination, clarified roles, and created more opportunities for staff growth and leadership development. Ongoing trainings focused on equity, tribal affairs, and inclusive engagement continue to build staff skills and ensure these values are reflected across OPC's work.

- **Every OPC staff member** plays a role in advancing equity and environmental justice. All staff duty statements include language affirming that these priorities are central to OPC's mission, with at least 5% of each staff member's time (equivalent to over 100 hours annually) dedicated towards equity-related work focused on maximizing community benefits. This ensures that environmental justice and tribal priorities are integrated across all programs, not confined to a single team or initiative.
- **Nearly a third of OPC staff** have distinct roles that dedicate at least half their time to equity, environmental justice, and tribal priorities through ocean and coastal cross-cutting efforts. These staff serve as leaders in advancing inclusive practices and maximizing community benefits across policy, science, and funding. They also provide direct support to OPC leadership and staff to ensure that environmental justice and tribal priorities are elevated consistently throughout OPC's work.

To further institutionalize this work, OPC created dedicated positions that advance equity and tribal engagement throughout its programs:

- ***Climate and Environmental Justice Program Manager*** (2022- present): Leads the development and implementation of OPC’s Equity Plan, manages key equity initiatives, and integrates environmental justice and climate resilience across OPC’s policies and programs.
- ***Tribal Liaison*** (2019-current): Serves as the primary point of contact for California Native American tribes, guiding OPC’s government-to-government consultation, Tribal Engagement Strategy, and collaboration on tribal priorities across ocean and coastal policy and programs.
- ***30x30 Program Manager with Community and Tribal Engagement Focus*** (2022-2024): Advanced OPC’s contributions to California’s 30x30 initiative with a specialized focus on inclusive stakeholder engagement, including partnerships with tribal communities and local organizations
- ***Dedicated Tribal Affairs Personnel*** (pending hire): OPC is continuing to strengthen internal capacity for tribal affairs work, including hiring new personnel to support meaningful, equitable, and culturally appropriate engagement with tribes and coastal communities across OPC programs.

For more information about OPC staff, their areas of expertise, and contact, visit OPC’s [Leadership and Staff webpage](#).

Indicator 2B: Expanded Access to Early Ocean Career Pathways Through OPC’s Internship and Fellowship Programs

Equity Plan Objectives: 2.1, 2.2

By offering hands-on experience in the coast and ocean policy sector, OPC’s Summer Internship Program helps build the next generation of professionals in the field. The Summer Internship Program expands OPC’s recruitment reach across California and beyond with a focus on regional representation and academic disciplinary and institutional diversity.

- Since inception of the OPC Summer Internship program in 2021, OPC has hosted over **23 undergraduate summer interns**.
- OPC recruits interns from a broad range of academic institutions, supporting the commitment to inclusive pathways into the coast and ocean workforce:
 - University of California (UC) System **61%**
 - Private California Institutions **17%**

- California State University (CSU) System **13%**
- California Community Colleges **4%**
- Other Institutions **4%**
- Interns bring **strong interdisciplinary environmental science backgrounds**, spanning an estimated 10 broad academic disciplines such as Environmental Sciences, Natural Sciences, Marine Science, Public Policy, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Communication, and others. This interdisciplinary diversity strengthens OPC's pathways into coast and ocean careers, and reflects the multifaceted real-world nature of public policy, climate resilience, and coastal management fields.

OPC additionally hosts post-graduate fellows through annual, year-long fellowships to expand and provide early career experience for recent graduates. Beginning in 2007, OPC has hosted over 30 California State Sea Grant fellows, and two Executive Fellows (since 2024) through the Capital Fellows Program to provide a wide range of experience for early career professionals.

Indicator 2C: Staff Capacity Building Through Equity, Tribal, and Public Engagement Trainings

Equity Plan Objectives: 2.3, 2.4

To support implementation of OPC's Equity Plan and related commitments, OPC invests in ongoing staff development through targeted training and orientation efforts focused on equity, tribal affairs, and inclusive public engagement. These efforts build internal capacity to embed equity across programs and ensure all staff are aligned with OPC's values and responsibilities.

- Since the adoption of OPC's Equity Plan, OPC has hosted three annual staff-wide equity deep-dive briefings, providing an overview of the Equity Plan, implementation highlights, and space for staff questions. These sessions serve as annual refreshers and onboarding tools for new staff.
- All new OPC staff are oriented to the Equity Plan, Tribal Engagement Strategy, and other foundational policy documents as part of their onboarding process.
- Since 2022, OPC staff have participated in at least two tribal engagement and cultural humility trainings led by OPC's Tribal Liaison, along with additional trainings provided by CNRA's Office of Tribal Affairs.
- Staff have participated in multiple public engagement trainings hosted by the California Department of Conservation's Outreach and Engagement team. Trainings are offered virtually and in-person, with staff participating individually or as part of OPC staff cohorts.

- Prior to adoption of the Equity Plan, OPC staff completed a 10-course diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training series led by a private instructor, which laid the foundation for subsequent equity initiatives.

Future Metrics for Consideration

These metrics will help OPC measure progress in building staff capacity and strengthening workforce pathways.

- **OPC Internship Program Outcomes:** Conduct a post-program survey of former OPC interns and fellows to evaluate long-term career paths and impacts. Track the percentage of interns who report that the internship supported their professional development, post-graduate education, or placement in ocean and coastal career pathways, including fellowships and state service.
- **Staff Surveys:** Implement a periodic internal survey to assess OPC staff confidence and understanding in integrating equity, environmental justice, and tribal engagement best practices into their work. Track the percentage of staff reporting increased ability to apply these practices in program and policy design, decision-making, and public engagement.

Goal 3: Designing Equitable Coastal and Ocean Policy Making

OPC continues to work on strengthening state decision-making by bringing in community perspectives into policies that shape California's coast and ocean. Through inclusive Council processes, public engagement, and collaboration with advisory groups, OPC develops policies and funding decisions that respond to the needs and priorities of communities most affected by climate change and environmental challenges.

The following indicators measure progress in equity and environmental justice within Council communications, public participation, and community involvement in program development.

Progress to Date

Indicator 3A: Elevating Equity and Environmental Justice in Council Leadership and Decision-Making

Equity Plan Objectives: 3.1, 3.2

OPC continues to improve how community perspectives are reflected in Council discussions and decisions. Every staff recommendation brought before the Council, includes an equity consideration section to assess potential benefits for California Native American tribes and environmental justice communities, when relevant to the project.

Through quarterly public meetings, OPC also invites grantees and community partners to share their work directly with the Council. These presentations give Council members and the public firsthand insight into locally-led projects and help shape how OPC designs future funding and engagement efforts.

In OPC's 2025 [Engagement and Partnerships Survey](#), more than half (55%) of respondents rated OPC's efforts to support communities facing environmental, economic, or climate-related challenges as above average, with an overall average score of 3.4 out of 5. This feedback highlights progress in connecting state programs with community priorities while pointing to opportunities for continued improvement.

Indicator 3B: Expanding Public Participation at Council Meetings

Equity Plan Objectives: 3.3, 1.2 (linked to accessible communication and public awareness efforts)

To make its decision-making more accessible statewide, OPC continues to host all Council meetings in a hybrid format, allowing for both in-person and virtual participation. This approach, now authorized under California Government Code §11123.5, has broadened access for individuals and organizations that may not otherwise attend in person.

Since adopting the hybrid meeting structure, OPC has seen steady growth in both live and written public comments and public participation, reflecting increased engagement in the OPC's work. Council agendas, meeting materials, and staff recommendations are posted online in accessible formats to support public participation before, during, and after each meeting. Highlights include:

- Public participation in Council meetings continues to expand and reflect the state's diverse geographies through consistent use of hybrid technology and timely publication of meeting materials.
- Public comments, both live and written, provide valuable feedback that informs Council discussion and strengthens transparency in OPC's work.

Indicator 3C: Strengthening Community and Advisory Engagement and Collaboration

Equity Plan Objectives: 3.1, 3.3

OPC engages with several advisory and community groups that bring diverse perspectives that help inform coast and ocean program priorities. These groups bring together scientific, tribal, and community perspectives on key issues such as [marine protected areas](#) (MPAs), social science, kelp restoration, microplastics, and more.

A central focus since 2024 has been the launch of the [Environmental Justice Advisory Board for California's Coast and Ocean](#), developed in partnership with the [Better World Group](#). Comprised of community and tribal representatives across California, the Environmental Justice Advisory Board provides insight on how OPC can better integrate equity and community priorities into programs, science, and funding decisions. The creation of the Environmental Justice Advisory Board marks an important step toward formalizing community-driven input in state programs. This collaboration strengthens OPC's ability to incorporate lived experience, local knowledge, and tribal perspectives into policy and science initiatives.

The Environmental Justice Advisory Board has contributed valuable input to two major OPC efforts that have the potential to impact ocean programs across the state: the State of the Coast and Ocean Report and the Equity Plan Assessment. As foundational frameworks for evaluating statewide progress on equity, these initiatives benefit greatly from community-informed perspectives that help define meaningful metrics, improve accountability, and strengthen how outcomes are communicated and tracked over time.

Members have also emphasized the importance of continued engagement over a longer period to assess the Board's broader impact and develop measurable outcomes that reflect its role in shaping OPC's work.

OPC projects across program areas also include community-level advisory groups that complement the Environmental Justice Advisory Board's work, such as:

- [MPA Small Grants Round 3](#) (2023) – Grant Review Committee, led by grantee Coastal Quest: Supported outreach and education projects in California's MPAs, with priority for underserved communities, tribes and fishing users.
- [MPA Collaborative for Signage](#) (2022-2023) through the [California Marine Sanctuary Foundation](#) (CMSF): Partnered with OPC to develop inclusive interpretive signage across MPAs, compensating tribes and community partners for input, and improving public awareness and compliance.
- [California Beach Resiliency Plan](#) (2024-2027): A three-year initiative funded by OPC to assess vulnerability of California's beaches to sea level rise and erosion, incorporate environmental justice and community access considerations, and develop adaptation guidance and tools.
- [Sea Grant – Accelerating Kelp Research & Restoration in California](#) (2023-ongoing): In partnership with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and Sea Grant, this program funds "solutions-oriented" research and restoration projects for California's kelp forests. It emphasizes inclusive participation (including tribes, community scientists, and underrepresented students) and is supported by a community-research advisory structure that helps guide priorities, methods, and outcomes.
- [Kelp Restoration & Management Plan](#) (2023- ongoing): This effort, led by OPC and CDFW, is developing a statewide adaptive plan for giant and bull kelp. A Community Working Group composed of tribes, stakeholders, fishermen, and community members is formally advising on the plan's design, ensuring community perspectives, cultural knowledge, and local priorities shape the management framework.

Future Metrics for Consideration

To strengthen evaluation, OPC will continue refining how it measures participation and community impact through metrics such as:

- **Council and Public Participation:** Track attendance and participation trends at Council meetings using in-person sign-in sheets and virtual attendance records to measure statewide reach and accessibility.
- **Community and Advisory Group Engagement:** Track how advisory input, particularly from community and tribal partners, is reflected in OPC policies, initiatives, and funding programs. Document active advisory groups, examples of collaboration, and instances where advisory input influenced project design, implementation, or outcomes.
- **Evaluating Equity and Environmental Justice in Projects:** Evaluate equity and environmental justice outcomes across OPC-funded projects using existing reporting mechanisms to identify direct and indirect community benefits.

Goal 4: Integrating Equity in Coastal and Ocean Science and Research

OPC prioritizes evidence-based policies and funding decisions that incorporate interdisciplinary expertise and culturally diverse perspectives from communities across California. This approach includes engaging with environmental justice communities and California Native American tribes through grant-funded research, partnerships, and trust-based relationship-building.

OPC's tribal affairs work is guided by its [Tribal Engagement Strategy](#), a framework for enhanced partnership between OPC and tribes developed through tribal consultation and adopted in 2023. The Tribal Engagement Strategy outlines specific actions that OPC will undertake to enhance tribal engagement in all aspects of its work, including supporting tribally-led research and monitoring, fostering meaningful and equitable partnerships between tribes and academic researchers, and elevating tribally-led science in policy development. Additionally, the Tribal Engagement Strategy commits OPC to considering Traditional Knowledges (TK) in inclusive ways that recognize each tribe's protocols for the study, sharing, and use of TK. This approach ensures that tribally-led science and Traditional Knowledges are meaningfully included alongside non-indigenous science in OPC's decision-making.

The following indicators highlight progress in expanding tribal and community representation across OPC's science programs and research initiatives.

Progress to Date

Indicator 4A: Expanding Tribal and Community Representation in Research

Equity Plan Objectives: 4.1, 4.2

Since 2022, OPC has increased opportunities for California Native American tribes and broader community partners to participate in research from project design through implementation. These collaborations help integrate community- and tribally-led science, as well as local knowledge and TK, into the outcomes of research projects, ultimately supporting community and tribal priorities and informing more inclusive approaches to ocean and coastal management.

Recent efforts include expanding partnerships with tribal governments, tribal-serving institutions, and community-based organizations as co-investigators, advisors, and collaborators in research and science initiatives through early, consistent, and meaningful

engagement. For example, OPC's recent [\\$10 million request for proposals for projects to advance 30x30](#) includes a \$4 million set-aside for tribally-led research and restoration projects.

To recognize the expertise and time of community and tribal participants, OPC research projects intentionally scope and budget for partner engagement and compensation. Through extensive conversation with tribes and non-tribal scientists, OPC interns have supported the development of guidance and best practices for non-tribal researchers to meaningfully and equitably engage with tribes; these guidance documents are under development and are anticipated to be shared publicly next year.

These efforts reflect a growing recognition that community and tribal partnerships strengthen the scientific foundation for community-centered coastal policies.

Indicator 4B: Expanding Tribal and Community Expertise to inform OPC Science and Monitoring

Equity Plan Objectives: 4.1, 4.2, 4.3

The OPC Science Advisory Team (SAT) has historically been composed of over 20 interdisciplinary science experts who provide foundational guidance to advance OPC's policy and funding decisions. Currently, several SAT working groups, such as the Equity Working Group and MPA Social Science Working Group, include members with expertise in community engagement, environmental justice, and Traditional Knowledges.

Recognizing the value of diverse knowledge systems and the need for a broader suite of experts to inform the breadth of issues facing California's coast and ocean, OPC, in partnership with California Ocean Science Trust, which serves as the Secretariat for the OPC SAT, are working to update the SAT to better reflect diverse cultural, regional, and experiential expertise. This involves establishing a new membership structure of networked representatives (rather than subject matter experts) that can connect to a larger range of perspectives and expertise, including tribal science and Traditional Knowledges.

In partnership with the [California Department of Fish and Wildlife](#) and the [Marine Protected Area Statewide Leadership team](#), OPC is developing a Community Science Strategy to set guidelines and expectations for collaborative work between managers, academic researchers, and community science organizations that enable effective, equitable coordination and engagement opportunities in MPA monitoring and management. Through a series of listening sessions with state, federal, and community science practitioners, these early goals for the Community Science Strategy were identified:

- **Enhanced Coordination:** Clarify roles of community science organizations in monitoring and management and facilitate collaboration among partners.
- **Building Capacity:** Support the growth and impact of community science organizations and expand opportunities for public participation through enhanced outreach and engagement.

Next steps include continued outreach to key partners and communities to shape the strategy's scope and to co-design its development and implementation process. A public process is anticipated to take place in early 2026, with an anticipated release date of June 2026.

These initiatives build the foundation for science that values both empirical and place-based knowledge.

Indicator 4C: Advancing Tribally-led and Community-driven Stewardship

Equity Plan Objectives: 4.1, 4.3

OPC supports tribally-led and community-driven environmental stewardship across California's coast. Such initiatives, including ancestral land return, tribally- and community-led restoration projects, and nature-based solutions, honor the leadership of tribes and under-represented communities in managing marine and coastal resources.

- In 2022, funding through OPC's Proposition 1 Coastal Environmental Justice grant solicitation supported the [Wiyot Tribe's coastal land return](#) of a 46-acre property known as *Mouralherwaqh* (meaning "wolf's house") in Humboldt County. The project advances the Tribe's long-term stewardship vision to restore wetlands, enhance habitat, and preserve an area of cultural and environmental importance while strengthening cultural connections to the land.
- In 2022, OPC supported the expansion of the [Tribal Marine Stewards Network](#) (TMSN), an alliance of coastal tribes working to monitor and manage their ancestral lands and waters, with a \$3.6 million investment. The TMSN has grown to include six tribes across the state and is supporting tribal management priorities as well as tribal workforce development.
- [OPC's \\$1 million contribution](#) to [CNRA's Tribal Nature-Based Solutions Program](#) funded tribally-led research to restore culturally important habitats, improve tribal access to the coast and ocean, and strengthen coastal resilience. The investment supported two projects: Blues Beach Management Project, Kai Poma (Tribal nonprofit representing [Coyote Valley Tribe Band of Pomo Indians](#), [Sherwood Valley Band of Pomo Indians](#), and [Round Valley Indian Tribes](#)) to develop a management plan for the 136-acre Blues Beach property near Mendocino, integrating Traditional Ecological Knowledge into land

stewardship; and the yat Spasini yak Tspu Conservancy, [yak titʻu titʻu yak tiłhini Northern Chumash Tribe](#)’s project to advance estuarine restoration and sustainable aquaculture planning in San Luis Obispo County.

- Cross-program collaboration, such as the Ocean Corps Pilot Program, also advances community-based stewardship and workforce development, connecting research and learning opportunities with career pathways for the next generation of coastal leaders.

Future Metrics for Consideration

To strengthen tracking and accountability across OPC’s science programs, future metrics will focus on capturing how research and partnerships reflect community and tribal leadership, build inclusive participation, and improve public communication of science outcomes.

- **Tribal and Community Partnerships in Research:** Track how many OPC-funded research projects include California Native American tribes or community-based organizations as leads or meaningful partners.
- **Partner Engagement and Support:** Measure how OPC-funded research includes funding to support tribal and community participation and collaboration throughout project planning and implementation.
- **Inclusion of diverse expertise in OPC advisory bodies:** Track the representation of OPC advisory bodies or working groups to assess the extent to which these groups meaningfully include expertise beyond non-tribal academic science, including local knowledge, lived experience, tribally-led science, and TK.
- **Public Communication of Research:** Evaluate how OPC-funded research projects share findings through plain-language, translations, and community presentations.

Looking Ahead— Future Equity Plan Priorities

Over the past two years, OPC has made significant progress embedding equity, environmental justice, and tribal priorities across its programs, funding, and science initiatives. This Equity Plan Assessment demonstrates that [OPC's Equity Plan](#) has established a strong and lasting foundation for action, advancing transparency, collaboration, and long-term commitments that deliver meaningful benefits for California communities.

Building on this progress, OPC will continue to integrate lessons learned and deepen the impact of its work by sustaining progress, strengthening accountability, and aligning more closely with the 2026–2030 OPC Strategic Plan. Looking ahead, future Equity Plan assessments will occur concurrently with annual reporting on the Strategic Plan to create a more coordinated and efficient approach to tracking progress across OPC programs. The following priorities, grounded in the Equity Plan, highlight where focused attention and coordination over the next two to five years can achieve the greatest impact.

Goal 1: Equitable Engagement, Outreach, and Funding

1. Improve access to OPC funding by making grant processes clear and more user-friendly, including refining guidelines, timelines, grant resources, and reporting requirements to reduce barriers for small organizations or first-time applicants.
2. Expand technical assistance and outreach across all OPC funding programs to provide early, consistent, and culturally responsive support for underserved communities and California Native American tribes.
3. Support a range of project types and partnerships that reflect community and tribal priorities while advancing statewide coastal and ocean resilience. Track and share equity outcomes across funding programs and projects to better understand how OPC investments reach and benefit diverse communities across California.

Goal 2: Building an Inclusive Workplace and Workforce for California's Coast and Ocean

1. Sustain and expand OPC's internship, mentorship, and career programs to cultivate a diverse ocean and coastal workforce reflective of California's communities. To achieve this, strengthen OPC's partnerships with tribes, universities, community colleges, and community-based organizations, and better integrate job training and workforce development in OPC-funded projects.
2. Invest in staff learning and professional growth by providing regular training in environmental justice, cultural humility, public engagement, and California Native

American tribal relations, histories, and governance, while fostering a workplace culture grounded in collaboration, inclusion, and respect.

3. Strengthen recruitment and hiring to build an OPC workforce that reflects the diversity of California's geographic regions, backgrounds, and experiences. This includes expanding outreach through partnerships with universities, tribes, and community organizations, and recognizing a broader range of skills and lived experience when evaluating candidates.

Goal 3: Designing Equitable Coastal and Ocean Policy Making

1. Continue collaboration with OPC advisory groups, including the Environmental Justice Advisory Board, to integrate community and tribal perspectives into OPC programs and policies, and strengthen how input from these groups is tracked and reflected in decision-making and policy development.
2. Track participation at OPC's quarterly hybrid Council meetings by collecting attendance data and community feedback to understand who is engaging and use this information to strengthen outreach, improve how information is shared, and increase participation over time.
3. Conduct early, consistent, and meaningful outreach to better understand and align community and tribal priorities with state goals, using these insights and data to inform OPC's policy work and strengthen coast and ocean management and decision-making.

Goal 4: Integrating Equity in Coastal and Ocean Science and Research

1. Expand tribally-led and community-driven research, stewardship and restoration through OPC-funded projects and programs, such as the Tribal Marine Stewards Network, Indigenous Marine Stewardship Areas, and community science initiatives in marine and coastal monitoring, to strengthen collaboration, knowledge exchange, and shared stewardship of California's coast and ocean. OPC will prioritize research approaches that are community-centered, such as community-based participatory research models, that strengthen collaboration among scientists, tribes, and communities.
2. Strengthen the inclusion of Traditional Knowledges, community perspectives, and local expertise in OPC-supported science, monitoring, and decision-making to better connect research with lived experiences and community priorities. This includes opportunities for tribal members and local community leaders to contribute through OPC advisory bodies, partnerships, and tribally- and/or community-led projects.

3. Increase public access to scientific data and research findings through plain-language and translated materials that share results in ways that are relevant and useful to California communities.

This Assessment serves as both reflection and roadmap, marking the next chapter in OPC's equity and environmental justice work. Moving forward, OPC will focus on sustaining progress, strengthening partnerships with tribes and communities, and turning lessons learned into measurable, lasting change across the state. Through continued action, accountability, and collaboration, OPC will advance science, policy, and investments that create lasting benefits for California's coast, ocean, and the communities that depend on them.

Appendix A: Key Terms

The Assessment uses the following key terms and definitions. Definitions are derived from state agency sources unless otherwise noted.

- **California Native American tribes:** California Native American tribe means a federally recognized California Native American tribe or a non-federally recognized California Native American tribe that is on the contact list maintained by the Native American Heritage Commission.²
- **California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA):** The California Natural Resources Agency oversees and supports more than 26 distinct departments, conservancies, and commissions. Over 21,000 Californians work within CNRA to “restore, protect and manage the state's natural, historical and cultural resources for current and future generations using creative approaches and solutions based on science, collaboration, and respect for all the communities and interests involved.” OPC is one department within CNRA.
- **Community engagement:** In the context of the OPC Equity Plan, community engagement entails conducting outreach to, collaborating with, and co-creating with communities to achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes, relationships, and decision-making processes. It also includes the process of working collaboratively with groups of people who are affiliated by geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations with respect to issues affecting their well-being.³
- **Disadvantaged, Marginalized, Underserved:** SB 1000 (Leyva) (Ch. 587, Stats. 2016) added Government Code Section 65302(h)(4)(A), expanding the definition of “disadvantaged communities” for the purpose of general plans to mean “an area identified by the California Environmental Protection Agency pursuant to Section 39711 of the Health and Safety Code or an area that is a low-income area that is disproportionately affected by environmental pollution and other hazards that can lead to negative health effects, exposure, or environmental degradation.” The Equity Plan uses the terms “disadvantaged”, “marginalized” and “underserved” interchangeably; it intends to encompass not only the definitions outlined by SB 1000, but also to include

² CA Assembly Bill No. 2225 Resource conservation: traditional ecological knowledge: land management plans. 2021-2022.

³ National Institutes of Health. 2011. [Principles of Community Engagement: Second Edition](#).

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

other low-income and minority populations that are disproportionately burdened by or less able to prevent, respond, and recover from adverse environmental impacts.

- **Environmental Justice Communities:** Communities that are environmentally- and economically-stressed that experience environmental health inequities which contribute to persistent environmental health disparities.⁴
- **Tribal expertise, Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), Traditional Knowledges:** The knowledge held by indigenous cultures about their immediate environment and the cultural practices that build on that knowledge. Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) includes an intimate and detailed knowledge of plants, animals, and natural phenomena, the development and use of appropriate technologies for hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture, and forestry, and a holistic knowledge, or “world view” that parallels the scientific discipline of ecology.

⁴ Based on conversations with the OPC Environmental Justice Advisory Group during Equity Plan development.