



# COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

## LAND USE AGENDA ITEM

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**DATE:** March 4, 2026

**03**

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

### **SUBJECT**

**APPROVE AND AUTHORIZE EXECUTION OF ASSOCIATE COMMISSION MEMBER AGREEMENT WITH THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA COASTAL WATER RESEARCH PROJECT AUTHORITY AND RELATED CEQA EXEMPTION (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

### **OVERVIEW**

The County of San Diego (County) works to protect and enhance regional water resources through collaborative planning and science-based investments in multi-benefit projects that improve water quality and ecosystem health. A key strategy in this effort is leveraging regional partnerships that advance initiatives supporting water quality, watershed health, and the science needed to protect and restore aquatic ecosystems. Since 2008, the County has been an associate commission member of the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP). SCCWRP is a joint powers authority composed of Southern California's major wastewater and stormwater agencies, along with State and federal regulatory partners. Through this collaboration, SCCWRP conducts objective, science-based research to better understand how wastewater and stormwater discharges affect coastal aquatic ecosystems and public health.

Membership in SCCWRP enables the County to help shape scientific research that informs effective stormwater management and supports compliance with State and federal water quality mandates, including the Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) Permit (Permit). The Permit requires the County and other agencies to eliminate pollution sources entering local waters and has been updated several times since its initial issuance in 1990 to include more rigorous requirements. Since joining SCCWRP in 2008, the County has collaborated with SCCWRP's team of expert scientists on studies that identify and address pollution sources to support regulatory compliance. For example, SCCWRP research has informed strategies for meeting bacteria and nutrient Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) requirements, and investigations such as the Surfer Health Study, Santa Margarita River Nutrient Initiative, San Diego River Investigative Order, and using advanced DNA methods to link Mexican sewage to U.S. beach pollution have provided insight into the most effective approaches for improving water quality. SCCWRP's studies are routinely published in peer-reviewed journals and are widely recognized by regulators and the scientific community. The County's Department of Environmental Health and Quality has also partnered with SCCWRP to develop a faster method for measuring bacteria levels in beach and

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bay waters, enabling more timely public health notifications.

The County's continued participation in SCCWRP ensures access to regionally coordinated, peer-reviewed science that supports Permit compliance and the County's regulatory position. Through shared regional monitoring programs that fulfill MS4 requirements, membership provides a strong return on investment by reducing duplication and distributing technical costs across member agencies. SCCWRP's applied research on Best Management Practice (BMP) performance further ensures that County investments in structural and non-structural controls are guided by sound science and targeted toward solutions that yield the greatest water quality benefit. These efforts have helped keep Permit requirements practical and avoid unnecessary infrastructure costs for the County and private development projects. If the County withdraws from SCCWRP, we would lose access to shared technical expertise and the regional forum where Permit decisions are shaped. That would reduce our influence, increase the risk of stricter or inconsistent requirements, and likely raise compliance costs.

Membership in SCCWRP provides the County with numerous benefits, the most significant of which include:

- Access to high-quality scientific research at a fraction of the cost of conducting independent studies;
  - Greater credibility and influence in shaping regulatory policies grounded in sound science;
  - Direct engagement with State and federal regulators through collaborative forums that support strategic and cost-effective compliance planning.
- Gives the County a seat at the table to shape practical Permit requirements that protect water quality without driving up unnecessary costs for public and private projects.

The current five-year Associate Commission Member Agreement was approved by the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors on September 16, 2020 (11) and expires on June 30, 2026. Today's request is for the Board to approve the County's continued partnership with SCCWRP. A new five-year Associate Commission Member Agreement would allow continued collaboration among SCCWRP, the County, and participating regulatory and regulated agencies. If approved, the new agreement will extend the County's participation from July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2031.

County membership costs would begin at \$150,000 in Fiscal Year 2026–27, with a total not-to-exceed amount of \$796,250 over the five-year term. Funding for Fiscal Year 2026–27 will be requested in the CAO Recommended Operational Plan for the Department of Public Works General Fund. Funding for subsequent fiscal years will be included in future Operational Plans. No additional staff years are required.

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**RECOMMENDATION(S)  
CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER**

1. Find that the proposed activity is not subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Sections 15060(c)(3) and 15378. Section 15060(c)(3) specifies that activities which do not cause a direct or reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment are not considered "projects." Because entering into a member agreement with the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP) will have no impact on the environment, it does not meet the definition of a project and is therefore not subject to CEQA review.
2. Authorize the Director, Department of Public Works, or designee, to execute an Associate Commission Member Agreement with the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project Authority for Fiscal Years 2026-27 through 2030-31, and to execute all amendments to the agreement as necessary and take all action necessary to fulfill the County obligations under the agreement.

**EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

Today's action supports the County of San Diego's (County) ongoing commitment to protecting public health, enhancing community well-being, and advancing regional water sustainability. Through membership in the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP), efforts to reduce pollution to local waterways and protect natural resources directly benefit residents across the region, including in the unincorporated area. In particular, the County is committed to addressing water quality challenges in under-represented communities, which have historically experienced greater impacts from environmental stressors. Ensuring the health of our streams and beaches is essential for providing diverse and accessible recreational opportunities for citizens throughout all regions of San Diego County.

**SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

Today's action to authorize an Associate Commission Member Agreement with the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP) contributes to social, health and well-being, and environmental sustainability goals of the County. Continued participation in SCCWRP enables regional collaboration and investment in projects that improve water quality and protect critical habitats across San Diego County. Through SCCWRP, the County contributes to research and initiatives that support regulatory compliance with Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) for pollutants such as bacteria, nitrogen, and phosphorus, while focusing on the most critical contaminants in our local watersheds. These efforts focus on protecting human and aquatic health while preserving recreational benefits for the community.

**FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no fiscal impact associated with today's recommendation in Fiscal Year 2025-26. If approved, funds for this request will be included in the Fiscal Year 2026-27 CAO Recommended Operational Plan in the Department of Public Works (DPW) General Fund - Watershed

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Protection Program. If approved, this request will result in costs and revenue of \$150,000 in the Fiscal Year 2026-27. The total cost over the five-year agreement period will not exceed \$796,250. The funding source is existing General Purpose Revenue allocated to the DPW General Fund – Watershed Protection Program. Funding for subsequent fiscal years will be included in future Operational Plans. There will be no change in net General Fund costs and no additional staff years.

**BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT**

N/A

**ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

N/A

**BACKGROUND**

The County of San Diego (County) works to protect and enhance regional water resources through collaborative planning and science-based investments in multi-benefit projects that improve water quality and ecosystem health. A key strategy in this effort is leveraging regional partnerships that advance initiatives supporting water quality, watershed health, and the science needed to protect and restore aquatic ecosystems. Since 2008, the County has been an active member of the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project Authority (SCCWRP).

SCCWRP, established in 1969, is a joint powers authority composed of Southern California’s major wastewater and stormwater agencies, along with State and federal regulatory partners. Through this collaboration, SCCWRP conducts objective, science-based research to understand how wastewater, stormwater, and other human activities affect coastal aquatic ecosystems and public health. Membership enables the County to help shape research that informs effective stormwater management and supports compliance with State and federal water quality mandates, including the Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) Permit (Permit), which requires elimination of pollution sources entering local waters. This interagency partnership provides impartial, science-based research that informs regional stormwater management programs and helps regulators update requirements based on the latest science.

Since joining SCCWRP, the County has collaborated with expert scientists on studies addressing pollution sources to support regulatory compliance, including research supporting bacteria and nutrient Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) requirements. Notable investigations include the Surfer Health Study, the Santa Margarita River Nutrient Initiative, and the San Diego River Investigative Order. SCCWRP studies are routinely published in peer-reviewed journals and widely recognized by regulators and the scientific community. The County’s Department of Environmental Health and Quality has also partnered with SCCWRP to develop a faster method for measuring bacteria levels in beach and bay waters, enabling more timely public health notifications.

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SCCWRP is governed by a Commission composed of representatives from 14 public agencies responsible for water quality management and protection of aquatic ecosystems in Southern California. Participation in the SCCWRP Commission by member-agency managers ensures research findings are effectively communicated to the region's water management community. The goal of this collaboration is to develop technical information that supports more effective management strategies to protect human and aquatic health and preserve critical habitats.

The SCCWRP Commission includes representatives from the following 14 public agencies:

- Orange County Sanitation District
- County Sanitation District No. 2 of Los Angeles County
- City of Los Angeles
- City of San Diego
- California Ocean Protection Council
- Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board
- Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board
- San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board
- CA State Water Resources Control Board
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 9
- County of San Diego\*
- Ventura County Watershed Protection District\*
- Los Angeles County Flood Control District\*
- Orange County Public Works \*

\*Associate Commission Members

Associate Commission members, such as the County, participate fully in Commission meetings and share the same responsibilities as full members, including contributing to decisions on research priorities, budgets, and policies. They have a one-quarter vote on all Commission business, reflecting their proportional role in decision-making, and pay roughly one-quarter of the annual membership costs of non-regulatory full commission members. State and federal regulatory agencies serving as full commission members do not pay membership costs.

The Commission appoints an executive director and oversees SCCWRP's scientific staff, who develop strategies, tools, and technologies relied upon by the region's water quality management community. SCCWRP's work has informed municipal stormwater permits, watershed basin plans, runoff requirements for development and redevelopment, biological objectives for aquatic life, sediment quality criteria, and microbial contamination detection methods. SCCWRP also develops and facilitates long-term regional monitoring programs, promotes data stewardship, and informs regional planning and regulatory compliance strategies. Its scientific staff serve in leadership roles across professional societies, advisory committees, and peer-reviewed journals, helping build broad consensus on emerging research and integrate findings into management and policy decisions.

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SCCWRP membership enables the County to participate in regional monitoring frameworks that satisfy Permit requirements while leveraging standardized methodologies, shared data systems, and independent scientific review. This coordinated approach improves cost efficiency, strengthens defensibility with regulators, and ensures alignment with regional co-permittees implementing the same Permit conditions.

In addition, SCCWRP conducts applied research on stormwater Best Management Practice (BMP) effectiveness and emerging monitoring tools that directly inform capital planning and watershed management decisions. This work helps ensure County investments are prioritized based on demonstrated performance and measurable water quality outcomes, reducing the risk of misdirected expenditures and strengthening the County's ability to document compliance progress.

Absent continued membership, the County would incur higher independent costs to obtain comparable scientific support, risk fragmentation from regional partners in implementing Permit requirements and diminish an important collaborative forum that supports alignment and credibility with regulators.

Membership in SCCWRP provides the County with numerous benefits, the most significant of which include:

- Access to high-quality scientific research at a fraction of the cost of conducting independent studies;
- Greater credibility and influence in shaping regulatory policies grounded in sound science; and
- Direct engagement with State and federal regulators through collaborative forums that support strategic and cost-effective compliance planning.

Today's request will authorize the Director of the Department of Public Works to enter into a five-year Associate Member Agreement with SCCWRP. If authorized, the County's share of membership costs will not exceed \$796,250 over the five-year period from July 1, 2026, to June 30, 2031. Funding for Fiscal Year 2026–27 will be requested in the CAO Recommended Operational Plan for the Department of Public Works General Fund. Funding for subsequent fiscal years will be included in future Operational Plans.

**ENVIRONMENTAL STATEMENT**

Sections 15060(c)(3) and 15378 of the CEQA Guidelines provide that an activity is not subject to CEQA review where it can be determined that the action will not result in a direct or reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment. The proposed action would authorize the Associate Membership Agreement for Membership in the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project Authority. These activities are purely administrative in nature allowing the County to participate in regional research projects and would have no potential to cause a physical change in the environment; therefore, the action does not meet the definition of

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a “project” and is not subject to CEQA pursuant to Sections 15060(c)(3) and 15378 of the State CEQA Guidelines.

**LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN**

Today's proposed action to authorize an Associate Membership Agreement with Southern California Coastal Water Research Project Authority (SCCWRP) supports the Sustainability (Environment) and Community (Partnership) Initiatives in the County of San Diego 2026-2031 Strategic Plan by working collaboratively with our partners to protect and enhance our environmental resources. Establishing this agreement will improve the County’s understanding of impacts to local waterways from stormwater runoff and help the County to meet regulatory compliance as cost effectively as possible. This will help to promote an environment where communities can prosper, and residents can enjoy clean water and other outdoor experiences. Also, by coordinating efforts with other regional partners, it ensures that the County strategy is aligned with those of other agencies and organizations.

Respectfully submitted,



DAHVIA LYNCH

Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

- A. Associate Commission Member Agreement of the County of San Diego with Southern California Coastal Water Research Project Authority
- B. Eleventh Amended Joint Powers Agreement Confirming the Creation of an Agency Known as Southern California Coastal Waters Research Project Authority