



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

LAND USE AGENDA ITEM

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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DATE: October 22, 2025

03

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

AUTHORIZE APPROVAL OF SAN DIEGO INTEGRATED REGIONAL WATER MANAGEMENT GRANT PROGRAM AGREEMENT AND RELATED CEQA EXEMPTION (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

The County of San Diego (County) works to protect and enhance the region's water resources through collaborative planning and strategic investment in multi-benefit water projects. A key strategy in this effort is leveraging grant funding to support projects that improve water quality, water supply resilience, habitat protection, and community health. One avenue for such grant funding is the County's participation in the San Diego Integrated Regional Water Management (IRWM) Program. Established under the Regional Water Management Planning Act (SB 1672) in 2002 and led by the California Department of Water Resources, the IRWM Program fosters collaboration among public agencies, non-profits, and stakeholders to address the region's most pressing water challenges through coordinated planning and implementation. The program encourages efficient use of resources, reduces duplication of efforts, and strengthens the region's ability to obtain grant funds for multi-benefit projects. The return on investment in this program has been high with grant awards to the region through the IRWM far exceeding the collective cost to operate this entity.

In 2005, the County, City of San Diego (City), and San Diego County Water Authority (Water Authority) formed the San Diego IRWM Regional Water Management Group (RWMG) to coordinate regional water planning efforts which have been approved by the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors (Board) on May 11, 2005 (15), January 28, 2009 (18), and October 28, 2020 (8). Since then, the IRWM Program has obtained about \$133 million in grant funding for projects that have provided significant benefits to the San Diego region, including improved watershed and groundwater management, investment in water infrastructure, stronger regional coordination, and expanded engagement with tribal and under-represented communities. This integrated approach supports long-term sustainability of the region's water resources while aligning with State water policy priorities

The current San Diego IRWM MOU expires on December 31, 2025 and requires a new five-year agreement through 2030. A new five-year agreement will extend collaboration through 2030, guiding program administration, project selection, grant coordination, and cost-sharing. It also

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supports outreach and technical assistance for under-represented communities. Program costs are shared equally among the three RWMG agencies. If authorized, the County's share of program costs will most likely not exceed \$333,334 over the five-year period from January 1, 2026, to December 31, 2030. The \$333,334 funding commitment does not include grant administration expenses incurred by the Water Authority, as these expenses have historically been paid from grant funds and have not been billed.

Funding for Fiscal Year 2025-26 (up to \$100,000) is included in the Department of Public Works approved Operational Plan (General Fund, Watershed Protection Program). This covers expenses under the current MOU, which runs through December 31, 2025, and the proposed MOU through June 30, 2026. If approved, funding for future years will be included in subsequent Operational Plans. This request will result in no additional staff years. Today's request is for the Board to approve the County's continued participation in the San Diego IRWM Program.

**RECOMMENDATION(S)
CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER**

1. Find that the proposed action to approve funding and execute an updated Memorandum of Understanding for the County's continued participation in the San Diego Integrated Regional Water Management Program is exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Section 15061(b)(3) of the State CEQA Guidelines because it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment.
2. Authorize the Director, Department of Public Works, to execute a Memorandum of Understanding with the City of San Diego and the San Diego County Water Authority for the San Diego Integrated Regional Water Management Plan and Grant Program for Fiscal Years 2025-26 through 2030-31 and to execute all amendments to the agreement as necessary, with a County cost-share not to exceed \$333,334 for the five-year period from January 1, 2026, to December 31, 2030.

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 the San Diego Integrated Regional Water Management (IRWM) program, efforts to improve water supply reliability, protect natural resources, and reduce pollution to local waterways directly benefit residents across the region, including in the unincorporated area. By prioritizing equity in project planning and implementation, the IRWM program aims to ensure all communities have fair access to clean water and share the benefits of regional investments. 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.

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SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Today's action to authorize approval of the San Diego Integrated Regional Water Management (IRWM) Program agreement aligns with the County's Sustainability Goals. These goals aim to safeguard the environment, promote the health and well-being of residents, and ensure the protection of water in all its forms. Continued participation in the IRWM Program enables regional collaboration and sustained investment in projects that enhance water supply reliability, improve water quality, and protect critical water resources and habitat across San Diego County.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for this request are included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan in the Department of Public Works (DPW), General Fund. If approved, this will result in current fiscal year cost of \$50,000 for the period of January 1, 2026, to June 30, 2026, for the County's share of Integrated Regional Water Management (IRWM) program costs identified in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The funding source is existing DPW Watershed Protection Program General Purpose Revenue. The MOU covers a five-year period, from January 1, 2026, to December 31, 2030, and while total cost for IRWM program management per the MOU may fluctuate annually, it will not exceed \$333,334 over the five-year period. Funds for FY 2026-27 through FY 2030-31 will be included in future years' Operational Plan. The funding source for future years' cost is existing DPW Watershed Protection Program General Purpose Revenue. There will be no change in net General Fund cost 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 the region's water resources through collaborative planning and strategic investment in multi-benefit water projects. A key strategy in this effort is leveraging grant funding to support projects that improve water quality, water supply resilience, habitat protection, and community health.

One avenue for grant funding is County's participation in the San Diego Integrated Regional Water Management (IRWM) Program. Established under the Regional Water Management Planning Act (SB 1672) in 2002 and led by the California Department of Water Resources (DWR), the IRWM Program fosters collaboration among public agencies, non-profit organizations, and stakeholders to address the region's most pressing water challenges through coordinated planning and implementation. The program encourages efficient use of resources, reduces duplication of efforts, and strengthens the region's ability to obtain grant funds for multi-benefit projects.

Since its inception, the IRWM program has received over \$1.5 billion in statewide funding from voter-approved water bonds, including Propositions 1, 50, and 84. While overall funding in future years is uncertain, Proposition 4 will provide nearly \$7 billion for projects related to water quality, stormwater, green infrastructure, and ecosystem restoration, with about \$100 million allocated for

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IRWM. The IRWM, which includes the County, City of San Diego, and San Diego County Water Authority, work to prioritize multi-benefit projects that improve water quality, water supply resilience, habitat protection, and community health in the region.

Funding Successes

By maintaining an up-to-date IRWM Plan approved by DWR, the San Diego region has secured approximately \$133 million in grant funding for water-related projects. IRWM has invested more than \$95.8 million in water supply projects, directly benefiting unincorporated County residents and improving regional water supply resiliency. Of the total funding, the County has directly received or benefitted from approximately \$3.3 million between 2011 to 2023 to support multi-benefit efforts, including:

- **\$1.7 million** to develop science-based water quality objectives and nutrient management strategies for the Santa Margarita Watershed;
- **\$228,305** for a Sustainable Landscapes Project offering rebates to County residents for replacing residential landscapes with drought-tolerant features;
- **\$618,000** for stormwater infiltration and runoff mitigation upgrades at County facilities, including the Southeast Family Resource Center and Central Regional Public Health Center;
- **\$145,500** for a Regional Water Data Management Program to support development of a regional web-based system by assessing current practices, prioritizing needs, and outlining design recommendations.
- **\$149,941** for a San Diego Region, Stormwater Capture and Use Feasibility Study to determine where opportunities exist to capture and use stormwater as a resource.
- **\$452,784** for the Rural Disadvantaged Community Partnership Program Phase III, which included funding for Alter Terra to install trash capture devices within County property in the Tijuana River Valley at Smuggler's Gulch and conduct invasive plant removal at the County's Otay Valley Regional Park.

Regional Water Management Group Memorandum of Understanding

In accordance with the Region Acceptance Process of DWR's IRWM Grant Program Guidelines, the State requires the participation of at least three independent agencies to establish an IRWM planning region. In 2005, following passage of the Regional Water Management Planning Act (SB 1672), the County, City of San Diego (City), and San Diego County Water Authority (Water Authority) formed the San Diego IRWM Regional Water Management Group (RWMG). The San Diego IRWM planning region covers the areas within San Diego County which drain westward from the mountains to the Pacific Ocean. (Eastern portions of the County are covered separately under the Anza Borrego Desert IRWM planning area, managed by the Borrego Water District.)

To formalize collaboration, the RWMG developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was approved by each RWMG agency's governing board. The County Board of Supervisors authorized the initial MOU on May 11, 2005 (15), followed by an amendment on July 25, 2007 (7), and a new agreement on January 28, 2009 (18). Subsequent amendments extended the January 28, 2009, agreement until 2020. The current MOU, approved on October 28, 2020, (8), is set to expire on December 31, 2025.

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To access designated IRWM grant funds, regions must develop and maintain IRWM Plans that meet guidelines set by DWR. These plans guide investments in sustainable, multi-benefit projects that protect local water resources and promote equitable outcomes for all communities. Under the MOU, the three San Diego RWMG agencies jointly developed the first local IRWM Plan, approved by the County Board of Supervisors on November 7, 2007 (7). Updates to the IRWM Plan were subsequently approved by the Board of Supervisors on October 9, 2013 (3) and September 25, 2019 (7) to incorporate new data, reflect evolving regional priorities, and align with updated State IRWM guidelines, ensuring eligibility for future grant funding.

A new MOU agreement is needed to extend coordination of RWMG efforts and support for ongoing collaboration. The new MOU will provide additional time to complete projects funded under the 2007, 2013, and 2019 IRWM Plans, and continue grant administration required by the Proposition 84 and Proposition 1 programs. It will also serve as a framework for regional collaboration should new funding opportunities, such as Proposition 4, become available.

Under the proposed MOU, each agency is responsible for:

- Participating in updates to the San Diego IRWM Plan.
- Sharing the costs of grant administration, which is performed by Water Authority staff.
- Sharing the costs of consultant services, including development of regional grant applications, public outreach, plan revisions, and program website maintenance.
- Participating in the Regional Advisory Committee (RAC), which is comprised of stakeholders from a variety of sectors that advise the RWMG on IRWM-related matters.

IRWM Program costs are shared equally among the three RWMG agencies. If authorized, the County's share of program costs will most likely not exceed \$333,334 over the five-year period from January 1, 2026, to December 31, 2030. The \$333,334 funding commitment does not include costs incurred by the Water Authority to administer grant funded programs, but these costs have historically been paid from grant funds and were not billed by the Water Authority. Each party has flexibility to terminate the MOU for any reason as long as a 30-day notice is given to each party. If funding is approved, it would be requested in each Fiscal Year's Operational Plan request for the next five Fiscal Years.

The County's long-standing participation in the IRWM program has supported regional collaboration and resulted in significant grant funding for local water projects. These efforts have advanced water quality, supply reliability, and resource stewardship across the region, while ensuring continued eligibility for future funding opportunities.

ENVIRONMENTAL STATEMENT

Section 15061(b)(3) of the CEQA Guidelines provides a general exemption from CEQA review for a project "where it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment...". The proposed action would approve funding and execute an updated Memorandum of Understanding for the County's continued participation in the San Diego Integrated Regional Water Management Program and associated administrative activities. This action is purely administrative; therefore, the proposed action would not have any

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impacts on the environment and is exempt from CEQA review pursuant to CEQA guidelines section 15061 (b)(3).

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's action to authorize approval of San Diego Integrated Regional Water Management Memorandum of Understanding supports the Sustainability (Environment) and Community (Partnership) Initiatives in the 2025-30 County of San Diego Strategic Plan. The Integrated Regional Water Management program's stated goals of improving local water supply reliability and protecting water quality and natural resources 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,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Dahvia Lynch', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

DAHVIA LYNCH

Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENT(S)

- A. Memorandum of Understanding Between City of San Diego, County of San Diego, and San Diego County Water Authority for the San Diego Integrated Regional Water Management Plan and Grant Program for Fiscal Years 2026-31