

Two state agencies take far different approaches on how to manage sea level rise

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What a difference 14 miles can make when it comes to how the state expects local jurisdictions to address sea level rise.

In San Francisco, the Army Corps of Engineers is developing a \$13.5 billion plan to radically reshape the city's bayfront by raising the Embarcadero by as much as 7.5 feet, "floodproofing" Fisherman's Wharf and adding numerous protective systems in the southern part of the city.

This range of methods is welcomed by officials at the Bay Conservation Development Commission, the state agency that must approve all projects around the bay. "We recognize there's no one-size-fits-all response to sea level rise," Jessica Fain, director of planning for the Commission, told the San Francisco Chronicle.

Smart Coast California, a nonprofit established in 2019 to educate the public about the importance of smart land use policies affecting California's 1,100 miles of coastline, couldn't agree more. California's coastal communities need to be protected for residents and visitors alike, and there is a wide range of possible solutions. These include artificial reefs, man-made barrier sand dunes (living shorelines), kelp forests and beach replenishment — as well as armoring when absolutely necessary.

But along those 1,100 miles of coastline, another state agency sees things much differently. The California Coastal Commission, which holds immense power over land use up and down the Pacific coast, believes the best solution in most instances is simply to let the ocean take over — euphemistically referred to as "managed retreat."

That makes sense in many areas. But there are many important coastline developments that can and must be protected.

For example, Pacifica – just 14 miles as the crow flies from the Embarcadero – has been locked into a struggle with the Coastal Commission for over a decade because the city rejects wholesale managed retreat and seeks to respect existing neighborhoods through the adoption of “special resiliency areas” that would include maintaining existing armoring.

Fortunately, there are glimmers of hope that the Coastal Commission may be taking a second look at its position. It has approved some Local Coastal Plan updates that allow protection of vital areas like Morro Bay’s Embarcadero. And at the Smart Coast California Policy Summit in Orange County last year, a senior Coastal Commission executive acknowledged that a mix of strategies are needed.

“We’re going to need combinations of strategies over time to effectively carry out the goals and objectives of the Coastal Act and appropriately protect our coastline,” said Coastal Commission’s Chief Deputy Director Madeline Cavalieri. “So, if we accept that there has to be a mix of strategies in different areas over the next decades, from shoreline armoring to managed retreat and everything in between, then the challenge becomes how can we work proactively to ensure that the mix of strategies adequately meets the needs of the community and protects coastal resources over time.”

There are other factors to consider as well. Since statehood, Californians have had the inalienable right to protect their property. If local governments follow the Coastal Commission’s guidance and block property owners from protecting their structures, they would have the right to compensation at fair market value – a right enshrined in the state Constitution. Plans that prohibit protection efforts need to address who would pay and where the money would come from. After all, the total value of coastal property at risk from sea level rise would be in the trillions of dollars.

Uncertainty about how extensive sea level rise might be 75 years from now is another consideration. The latest state guidance finds that sea levels should rise by about 0.8 feet by 2050, but that a broader range of between 1.6 feet and 3.1 feet is likely by 2100, although higher amounts cannot be ruled out. Because of that uncertainty, we believe a “tiered response” approach makes sense, triggering actions in the future based on what actually occurs.

Sea levels are rising and must be addressed, but a mix of science-based strategies rather than a “one size fits all” approach is what communities up and down the coast are looking for. It’s time for the Coastal Commission to adapt the same pragmatic approach as its sister state agency when it comes to how to address sea level rise.

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