

DRIP Collaborative Focus Area: Land Use Planning for Drought Resilience

Materials for DRIP Collaborative Workgroup on Land Use Planning for Drought Resilience

Workgroup Meeting: March 10, 2025 at 3:30PM-5:00PM

Zoom Registration here: <https://ca-water.gov.zoom.us/meeting/register/5899b9sES0eOEjO1i35rPA#/registration>

Event information here: <https://water.ca.gov/News/Events/2025/Mar-25/Meeting-of-the-Drought-Resilience-Interagency-and-Partners-Collaborative-Land-Use-Planning-Workgroup>

Contents

Working Problem Statement	2
Past DRIP Collaborative Member Comments on Land Use Planning	3
Related State Bodies and Ongoing Actions, Programs, Initiatives	5

Working Problem Statement

DRIP Collaborative – Draft Problem Statement for Focus Area 2025 on Land Use Planning for Drought Resilience, October 2024

Land use planning is crucial for guiding development in the State and protecting its economic viability, but it should also promote drought resiliency. As DWR stated in its [Land Use Planning and Management 2016 document](#), land use planning and management cuts across many water related strategies. These resource management strategies include water storage and conservation, watershed restoration, water use efficiency, surface and groundwater quality, flood management, parks and recreation, adaptive management of climate change, and stewardship of agricultural lands.

The importance of well-coordinated land use and water management is particularly urgent as California experiences a hotter and drier climate. As evident in our recent drought periods, hundreds of thousands of acres of California fertile farmland are often fallowed. The [California Water Resilience Portfolio](#) reflects the urgency of land use, as detailed in Action 3.2 (address the economic, environmental, and social impacts of changing land use) and 3.3 (support local planning efforts to address potential land use changes in regions implementing SGMA). From a longer-term perspective, the [USGS has also estimated](#) that, if past patterns of California land-use and water demands continue, projected water needs over time will increase beyond current supply and cause greater stress to California's water resources.

Despite these pressing challenges, current land use planning and practices do not always address the full picture of water supply and demand. To address this, in the upcoming General Plan Guidelines (GPG) Update, guidelines for an “optional Water Element” are proposed. Currently, water-related priorities are spread across a number of elements within a local jurisdiction's general plan. This includes land use, conservation, open space, and most importantly, the safety element, which is statutorily required to address drought-related priorities in the context of hazard and climate change impacts. General plan elements are often not well aligned with Urban Water Management Plans – as required for urban water suppliers serving more than 3,000 connections by CA Water Code §§ 10610-10656 and §10608 – or Groundwater Sustainability Plans that are overseen by Groundwater Sustainability Agencies.

In past DRIP Collaborative meetings, members have expressed an interest in stronger collaboration and connections between land use planners and water managers, in both short-term and long-term planning, to promote more efficient and effective land-use patterns and integrated regional water management (IRWM) practices. Although there are important programs now underway, such as the [Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program \(MLRP\)](#), current efforts are perceived to be lacking and do not address the urgency to respond to a changing climate and its impacts. Improving coordination between land use and water management may necessitate a more holistic planning for the housing and economic development needs of a growing population, while providing for the efficient use of water, protection of water quality, increased production of energy, improved resilience against climate change impacts, and support of other resources.

Past DRIP Collaborative Member Comments on Land Use Planning

A. Comments from early 2024 (before October 2024 in-person meeting)

2025 Focus Area Primers excerpt of Land Use comments:

Ideas previously mentioned by DRIP Members

- Improve how water is considered in short and long-term land use planning
- Further explore potential of MLRP (multibenefit land repurposing program)
- Increase storage in landscapes, via large scale multi-benefit recharge projects; Allocate more land for Flood-MAR (recharge basins, on-farm recharge, etc.)
- Consider new legal restrictions for well permits for agriculture or new housing
- Investigate green infrastructure's role in mitigating the impacts of droughts
- Adjust policies, such as incentives for permeable landscapes and non-functional turf bans
- Prioritize land back proposals (Tribal) to improve land management

Potential Land Use Discussion Questions

- How can zoning be adjusted to promote water-efficient landscaping and development?
- How can urban planning reduce impervious surfaces to enhance groundwater recharge?
- How can agricultural land use be managed to reduce water consumption?
- What collaboration is needed to better coordinate land use and drought mitigation?

B. Comments during Oct 2024

DRIP Collaborative Fall 2024 Meeting Summary excerpt of Land Use comments:

Scope

- In favor of including both urban and agricultural land use, particularly agriculture given it's a major water user and the projected changes in agricultural land use.
- This focus area needs to include urban, agricultural, natural open space. There is going to be significant overlap between this and the Reducing Ecosystems Impacts of Drought discussion.
- There are many questions from my community, about converting agricultural land to high density housing. What's the water impact?
- Would like to particularly focus on long-term solutions, how we get there, and identify opportunities to help streamline. For example, we're working on drinking water consolidations and we have a special district that does drinking water and wastewater. Even though we have the Water Board order to consolidate, we need to go through LAFCO to get the system dissolved. These and other governance issues should be discussed.

- I'm concerned about development of the agricultural land around the area I live. There are plans for dense housing development despite no public infrastructure for water and sewer.
- We need housing and we need that housing to be sustainable, and part of that is making sure that it's planned in such a way that it's resilient for climate change and drought.

Setting Expectations:

- Joining the working group for this topic means navigating intense challenges and opposition; expect tough negotiations and conflict.
- Land use planning definitely falls into the category of harder challenges; it's a charged and complicated topic.
- I could see how it would be really contentious, however, thinking back to the opening remarks, resilience work has to be place-based and that's what this is.
- This work could be a very contentious topic, and I think that we need to be very mindful of all of the great things that were already mentioned here about what can be done, but also a serious recognition about what cannot be dictated to local government.

Support:

- I am ready to dive into this. This is like what I live and breathe all the time.
- This is where the rubber meets the road, this is how you ultimately decide what to do on what land with what water.
- As a former land use attorney, I'm really excited about this and ready to dive in, although with the more collaborative hat.
- As a public member, land use planning is really what brought me to water.

C. July 2024 DRIP Collaborative in-person meeting

Presentation by Eric Chu (pages 126-132): [July 12 2024 DRIP Collaborative meeting slides](#)

Related State Bodies and Ongoing Actions, Programs, Initiatives

- [CDFA – State Water Efficiency & Enhancement Program](#): Provides financial assistance in the form of grants to implement irrigation systems that reduce greenhouse gases and save water on California agricultural operations. Eligible system components include (among others) soil moisture monitoring, drip systems, switching to low-pressure irrigation systems, pump retrofits, variable frequency drives, and installation of renewable energy to reduce on-farm water use and energy.
- [CDFA – Pollinator Habitat Program](#): works directly with farmers and ranchers to install habitat and implement management practices that support pollinators.
- [CDFA – Healthy Soils Initiative](#): this initiative is a collaboration of State agencies and departments to promote the development of healthy soils.
- [Department of Conservation – Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program](#): supports regions in adapting land uses to improve sustainability of groundwater basins. Regions are supported to increase capacity to repurpose agricultural land, thereby reducing reliance on groundwater and increasing groundwater sustainability.
- [DWR – LandFlex Grant Program](#): created to provide immediate drought relief to drinking water wells in drought-stricken communities and limit unsustainable groundwater pumping in critically overdrafted (COD) basins
- [DWR – Model Water Efficient Landscape Ordinance](#): the purpose of water efficient landscape ordinances is to not only increase water efficiency but to improve environmental conditions in the built environment. Landscaping should be valued beyond the esthetic because landscapes replace habitat lost to development and provide many other related benefits such as improvements to public health and quality of life, climate change mitigation, energy and materials conservation and increased property values.
- [CDFW - Landscape Conversation Planning Program](#): proactively identifies priority mitigation and conservation areas before impacts occur, with the goal of preserving larger areas of higher habitat quality and increasing wildlife connectivity.
- [CNRA – Natural and Working Lands Climate Smart Strategy](#): helps implement the governor’s EO N-82-20 and expand climate action in this sector, which has been called for in California’s Climate Change Scoping Plan and California’s recently updated Climate Adaptation Strategy. The Climate Adaptation Strategy also identifies priorities for areas of near-term State focus to increase climate action on California’s natural and working land.
- [SGC – Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation](#): facilitates the purchase of agricultural conservation easements, development of agricultural land strategy plans, and other mechanisms that result in greenhouse gas reductions and a more resilient agricultural sector.
- [Tahoe Conservancy – Land Resilience Program](#): convenes and collaboratively leads multiple landscape-wide partnerships that create efficiencies of scope and scale.
- [California Rice Commission - Bid4Birds Program](#): incentivizes habitat for early migrating waterbirds this late summer and early fall.