

Advancing Ecosystem Restoration with Smarter Permitting

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Highlights

- ▶ Ecosystem health depends on scaling up restoration efforts across California.
- ▶ Smarter permitting efforts can boost the pace and scale of restoration.
- ▶ Coordination across agencies and projects are two key ways to improve permitting.
- ▶ Project proponents and agencies must collaborate to make change happen.

The urgent need for ecosystem restoration

California's ecosystems are vitally important to the state's water supply, agriculture, wildlife, and economy.

Yet many of these ecosystems are in dire health, thanks to a legacy of landscape modifications that have reduced ecosystem functions and fragmented and degraded habitats. Now, climate change and accelerating biodiversity loss threaten to disrupt these natural systems even more.

To preserve critical ecosystem functions, large-scale ecosystem restoration is urgently needed.

Yet restoration projects often find themselves mired in the very regulations that were originally intended to slow or prevent environmental destruction. To restore ecosystems at the pace and scale needed, California must first address the costly, time-consuming permitting process for restoration projects by embracing smarter permitting.

Smarter permitting can help

We researched multiple case studies, focusing particularly on innovative approaches to smarter permitting for ecosystem restoration projects. We found that successful efforts enable better outcomes in key ways. These efforts:

- ▶ Shorten permitting timelines,
- ▶ Lower permitting costs,
- ▶ Increase the acreage of restoration projects, and
- ▶ Promote better ecological outcomes.

How agencies can embrace smarter permitting

Agencies can embrace smarter permitting in three key ways.

1. Coordinate across similar projects

Within an agency, staff can coordinate across similar projects, rather than issuing permits and approvals on a project-by-project basis. Many such programs are known as "programmatics." Programmatic permitting and approvals result in lower costs, a simplified process, and quicker permit approval.

2. Coordinate within and among agencies

Regulatory agencies can coordinate with each other, and with their own internal restoration branches, to improve restoration permitting. Interagency coordination is often sorely lacking; when staff learn about the goals and requirements of other agencies, it allows them to view the process from the perspective of a permittee. This cultural change can help shift the norm from a permit process that inhibits restoration projects to a process that refines them.

3. Advance functional permitting

Permitting at the scale of individual projects is appropriate when the goal is to minimize negative impacts to larger, more intact ecosystems. But given the current state of California's landscapes, where natural processes have been highly altered and ecosystem functions greatly reduced, functional permitting is an indispensable approach for rebuilding ecosystems that provide desired benefits. Agency staff can champion functional permitting, which promotes the restoration of key ecosystem functions across a broad geographical area.

Key Takeaways: Project proponents and agencies all have a role to play

- ▶ **Restoration proponents can drive smarter permitting efforts.** Nearly every successful smarter permitting innovation started as a grassroots endeavor led by restoration proponents, whether they were nonprofit organizations, government agencies, or water users. Restoration proponents can help reform permitting approaches, although it often requires extensive coordination and fundraising, as well as exceptional leadership.
- ▶ **Coordinating at the ecosystem scale helps reconcile multiple objectives.** Coordinating at the ecosystem scale is an effective approach to restoration when there are multiple, often competing objectives. Trading off desired ecosystem functions across locations allows a restoration program to address the needs of most stakeholders, which is critical for unblocking permitting processes.
- ▶ **Early alignment is a wise investment.** Investing early in alignment among the many entities involved in ecosystem restoration promotes successful outcomes, in large part because it creates efficiencies.
- ▶ **Inclusive processes help resolve management conflicts.** The permitting programs we studied brought together many parties involved in restoration projects to jointly understand and address complicated regulatory requirements. The investment of sitting down together, hearing each other, and undertaking collaborative problem-solving can develop buy-in and partnership among the stakeholders. Inclusive processes should do more to involve local communities as stakeholders or partners, especially historically underserved low-income communities and communities of color.
- ▶ **A culture of trust allows for flexibility and change.** Strong leadership, coupled with a commitment to inclusiveness and shared understanding, can help build a culture of trust. Such cultures enable parties to innovate and find flexible solutions for difficult problems. Nearly all the smarter permitting programs we investigated created cultures of teamwork.

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