

California Fish and Game Commission
Staff Report on Committee Priorities Decision-Making
December 7, 2020

“Who can define for us with accuracy the difference between the long and short term! Especially whenever our affairs seem to be in crisis, we are almost compelled to give our first attention to the urgent present rather than to the important future.”

– Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1961 address to the Century Association

In recent years the number of topics coming before the three committees of the California Fish and Game Commission (Marine Resources, Tribal, and Wildlife Resources) has increased, contrasted against the reality of diminished staff capacities and increasing biological and administrative challenges. Topics may be an effort to address issues with a short-term need or be of a long-term nature that require years to resolve; add to the mix a continuum of criticality and deciding where to focus valuable, but limited, resources. The sense of importance and urgency is typically magnified when a topic is considered in isolation; yet when regarded together with a full suite of potential topics, different priorities may come into focus.

To help identify the most important workload, staff identified the need for a tool to differentiate between those topics that are most important and urgently needed and those that should be addressed at a later time by applying a series of criteria. Using the identified criteria, committee priorities could be reexamined both during the respective committee meetings and as part of the post-committee meeting update at each Commission meeting.

Essential to note is that a lower priority differentiation does not mean that an issue is unimportant or inconsequential; quite the contrary, all the work of the Commission is important. Differentiation is simply a reflection of increasing demands for the collaborative work of the committees, constrained staff capacities, limited budgets, and increasing time pressures. Periodically evaluating priorities will serve to adjust committee priorities in the face of changing circumstances.

Why Assess Priorities?

Recent research suggests that there is a human tendency to prioritize tasks with a deadline, regardless of long-term benefits and opportunity costs. Referred to as the “mere-urgency effect”, deadlines commonly drive action, even if the value of the outcome is limited. For those who are already feeling a time crunch, there is a higher probability that tasks that keep us focused on the clock or calendar will continue to be prioritized. However, it is possible to temper or even turn around the mere-urgency effect.

The same research found that when participants were required to articulate the consequences of their choices when making them, “urgent” tasks were significantly less likely to be chosen compared to the more important tasks. These findings reinforce the value of regularly reassessing priorities to help ensure that tasks with long-term importance remain a visible priority when compared to the pull of urgent distractions.

Assessment Tool

Issues can be prioritized using an adapted Eisenhower two-by-two matrix of importance versus urgency (see Table 1). Important issues are those that contribute to organizational goals and

values or have significant consequences for fish and wildlife resources if not addressed; these items require planning and thoughtful action. Less important issues are those that may not be central to organizational goals and values and will have limited or reversible impacts on fish and wildlife resources, but perhaps can be tackled with the assistance of others. Urgent issues require immediate action and may have clear deadlines; urgent issues are sometimes unavoidable, but can easily lead to a virtual game of “Whack-A-Mole” if they are allowed to dominate. Less urgent issues can also become more urgent if allowed to simmer too long.

Table 1: A prioritization decision matrix based on the Eisenhower Matrix

	More Urgent	Less Urgent
More Important	High Priority: Do it now!	Medium Priority: Identify a specific time frame
Less Important	Medium Priority: Divide and conquer or find partner to assist	Low Priority: Postpone or find a way to make it a <i>quick</i> win
<i>Adapted from the Eisenhower Matrix</i>		

To address workload prioritization for committees, staff proposes to use a set of criteria to rank importance and urgency and recommend to FGC how it might prioritize issues using a simple delineation of **high**, **medium** or **low**, as shown in Table 1. Meeting topics then would be scheduled for inclusion on the committee agendas based on the assigned priority and available time and resources.

Suggested criteria for determining importance or urgency, in no particular order, include:

- Status of, and risk to, wildlife populations and other natural resources;
- regulatory deadlines, harvesting seasons, or other time-sensitive considerations;
- the prospect of economic harm or benefit to the state, communities, industry sectors and/or individuals;
- the estimated amount of time and work necessary to resolve the issue;
- the probability of success;
- FGC and DFW staff capacities in the subject area;
- overall concern and attention of stakeholders and the public;
- time frame within which the issue must be addressed; and
- consequences or benefits of delaying action.

Next Steps

Staff is seeking FGC and public input on the matrix concept and the proposed criteria for assessing committee priorities. Following the December 2020 FGC meeting, staff will fine-tune the proposed prioritization method and apply it to several issues to ground truth its effectiveness.