

State Water Quality Protection Areas

Phil Crader

Division of Water Quality

State Water Resources Control Board



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State Water Quality Protection Areas

- The Water Boards ensure that the quality of the State's waters is protected
 - set water quality standards,
 - monitor and assess the State's waters,
 - regulate identified pollutant sources, and
 - enforce compliance with regulatory requirements
- Water Quality Control Plans protect water quality by
 - designating beneficial uses (e.g., swimming, fishing, drinking water),
 - setting water quality objectives to protect those uses, and
 - establishing implementation programs to achieve them
- These are the basis for issuing permits, setting cleanup requirements, and managing resources
- They are living documents, regularly updated to address new information and policy changes



State Water Quality Protection Areas

- The California Ocean Plan is the water quality control plan for our coastal waters
- It includes two categories of State Water Quality Protection Areas (SWQPA):
 - **Areas of Special Biological Significance (ASBS)**
 - a designation for unique and valuable biological communities, requiring the highest level of protection through a prohibition on waste discharge
 - many have been designated
 - **General Protection Areas**
 - a subset of SWQPA in addition to ASBSs
 - the same goal as ASBS, but allow for regulated discharges that do not compromise water quality
 - none designated to date, competing workload priorities for staff

State Water Quality Protection Areas

- Areas of Special Biological Significance
 - Between 1974 and 1975, the State Water Board designated 34 ASBS
 - Protected through discharge prohibitions and special conditions under the Ocean Plan



State Water Quality Protection Areas

- What is prohibited in ASBS?
 - Waste discharges directly into ASBS, unless an exception is granted
- What is allowed with an ASBS exception:
 - Limited-term activities (e.g., seawall repair, slope dewatering)
 - Ongoing activities (e.g., marine labs, stormwater) with monitoring and special protections
- Discharges outside the ASBS must be located far enough from ASBS boundaries to maintain natural water quality

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- Are ASBS effective?
 - These areas already have excellent natural water quality
 - The primary goal is to maintain the natural water quality (not necessarily to improve it)
 - ASBS designations minimize anthropogenic impacts and preserve pristine conditions
 - ASBS are effective!



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- Is the Water Board considering any new ASBS?
 - A nomination for Point Sur is under review by the Central Coast Regional Water Board
 - May be considered by the State Water Board in Summer 2026 at the earliest
 - Pending CEQA review.

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- Other tools to improve water quality
 - Planning:
 - Ocean Plan, Thermal Plan, Once-Through Cooling Policy
 - Amendment to the Ocean Plan to address ocean acidification, hypoxia, and nutrient impacts in the Southern California Bight.
 - Implementation:
 - Impairment assessments
 - Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs)
 - Regulation of discharges via permits

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- General Protection Areas
 - In 2012, the Ocean Plan was amended to create General Protection Areas as a subset of SWQPA in addition to ASBSs
 - Due to competing demands with other high-priority work, no General Protection Areas have been designated to date

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- As resources are available, State Water Board staff will solicit stakeholder input and may recommend revisions to the ASBS General Exception or additional requirements to ensure natural water quality

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Questions?