



# County of Santa Cruz

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## COMMISSION ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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February 9, 2018

The Honorable Zach Friend, Chair  
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors  
701 Ocean Street, Fifth Floor  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

**Subject: Climate Change Adaptation in Santa Cruz County**

Dear Chair Friend and Members of the Board:

The Commission on the Environment (COE) wishes to express our appreciation to the Board of Supervisors (Board) for your attention to climate change issues, particularly in implementing community choice energy, the top emissions mitigation initiative in the County's Climate Action Strategy. Monterey Bay Community Power will enable all of its member jurisdictions to reach their climate goals within a year of its launch. With this major feat in regional emission reduction accomplished, it is now time to turn our attention to climate change adaptation; we appreciate the opportunity to respond to the Board's request for advice from the COE on this issue.

As you know, the COE participated in a joint commission meeting with the Water Advisory Commission and Fish and Wildlife Advisory Commission in late 2017 that focused on climate change adaptation. An outcome of that meeting was for each commission to develop a set of priority recommendations to forward to the Board. The COE has reviewed and discussed the set of climate change adaptation strategies detailed in the County's Climate Action Strategy Table 7-1. Of the 56 strategies identified, staff indicates that about one third are currently being addressed in some way and the remainder are either being addressed partially or not at all.

We are encouraged by the efforts to date on climate change adaptation. However, the scale of the problem is unprecedented and it is important to focus now on preemptive actions to address climate change impacts. While all strategies in Table 7-1 are valid, we write to recommend the nine most timely and highest priority strategies to be integrated with the current Vision Santa Cruz County strategic planning process and subsequent implementation. These generalized priority recommendations each include the estimated time horizon and brief notes on the COE's rationale for each's priority status.

**Increase Infrastructure Resiliency:**

1. Review every capital improvements project decision through a climate lens by requiring analysis of climate change impacts, referencing climate hazard maps and addressing how each project addresses climate hazards. Consider designing and siting all future County projects and infrastructure to account for sea level rise projections, stream flooding and fire vulnerability, considering the projected life span of projects. Include education briefing for staff to instruct how to provide this information.

Time to action: 1 to 2 years

Justification: With explicit information on the location, timing and handling of climate change impacts, the Board will be better prepared to consider climate change in its decision making. Moreover, prevention is better and less expensive than repairing after damage.

2. Develop a detailed priority list for addressing public infrastructure that has been identified as vulnerable, and consider developing retreat or retrofit plans for high priority infrastructure subject to future damage. Initiate knowledge sharing and coordination with other jurisdictions specifically on minimizing vulnerabilities at shared high priority infrastructure, e.g., the Wastewater Treatment Facility at Neary Lagoon.

Time to action: 1 to 2 years

Justification: Critical and highly vulnerable infrastructure must be protected. A priority list will assist the County in prioritizing capital improvement projects aimed at improving protection of these assets. By increasing adaptation-focused attention toward high priority infrastructure and collaboration across jurisdictions, the County can better prevent damage at a lesser cost than responsive repair.

3. Consider a program to identify the key transportation infrastructure, communication infrastructure, utilities, beaches and other amenities that support tourism, agriculture and commercial activity in general, and prioritize them for protection or retrofit.

Time to action: 3 to 5 years

Justification: Critical and vulnerable infrastructure for economic vitality must be protected.

4. Continue to work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, County of Monterey, and City of Watsonville to develop a feasible flood control alternative to reduce the potential overtopping of the Pajaro River levees within both Santa Cruz and Monterey counties, including widening or construction of setback levees to reclaim a portion of the floodplain while increasing the flood capacity.

Time to action: 5 to 10 years

Justification: Critical and highly vulnerable farmland and infrastructure must be protected.

**Improve and Expand Climate Change Adaptation Planning:**

1. Consider how climate-related goals and strategies can be incorporated into an amendment of the General Plan and its Safety Element, as required by SB 379. This may be coordinated with policies that flow from the Sustainable Santa Cruz County Plan and the Disaster Recovery Initiative-funded update of the Safety Element (underway).

Time to action: 1 to 5 years

Justification: Efficient and coordinated planning facilitates implementation of all adaptation strategies.

2. Develop a forum for ongoing engagement with coastal private property owners and the California Coastal Commission to discuss frameworks for land use policies that respond to expected future losses. Topics would include post-disaster reconstruction, policies regarding engineered protective structures and legal instruments that would allow property owners to acknowledge and accept responsibility for future losses. Similar forums should be considered for fire and flood prone areas.  
Time to action: 1 to 5 years

Justification: Community interaction is important for cooperative action and to avoid legal barriers. Property owners should be aware that insurance companies are ahead of the game on climate change disaster costs, and will likely begin withdrawing coverages in the near future.

3. Continue engagement with other agencies to develop fuel reduction approaches for fire protection in all areas, with special approaches for sensitive habitat areas.  
Time to action: 3 to 5 years

Justification: Increased intensity of fire events threatens lives, property and watersheds.

4. Consider protecting, and/or assisting non-profit organizations that protect habitat that is essential to facilitating species adaptation to changing climate. This would include protecting potential refuge areas and large, interconnected habitat patches that achieve multiple conservation benefits, including riparian areas. Areas to consider include buffer areas around existing protected habitat, areas that facilitate connectivity between populations, representative areas of the County's diverse local climates, and areas that are more likely to be climatically stable or support species in the predicted hotter and drier climate, including streams, ponds, lakes, wetlands, springs, and north-facing slopes.

Time to action: 3 to 5 years

Justification: Increased intensity of weather events threatens environment, tourism, water supplies.

5. Support efforts aimed at effective use of groundwater storage through increased groundwater recharge and conjunctive use among agencies (Ongoing).  
Time to action: 1 to 5 years

Justification: Water supply is critical and threatened by climate change.

We acknowledge the strain on the Public Works Department from recent storm damage and applaud their tireless efforts. These recommendations are submitted in part to help avoid such costly repair work in the uncertain future. Lastly, we are mindful of staff time and budget limits, and staffing challenges related to procuring and administering grant funds to help implement these climate change adaptation projects. We recommend that staff time be leveraged through cooperation with partners to identify and pursue grant opportunities and manage grant projects. Moreover, it is vital that the Climate Action Strategy and its climate change adaptation strategies be integrated into the County's strategic planning process and budget cycle for staff and resources. We urge the Board to frame every decision through a climate lens in order to achieve a climate resilient county, ensure public safety, and minimize extreme costs and damages over the coming decades.

Adapting to regional climate change will require coordinated action among the cities and counties of the Monterey Bay area. Please feel free to share these recommendations with supervisors and city councils as you feel most appropriate.

Thank you for considering these recommendations as part of the County Strategic Planning Process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Hunt", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr. John Hunt, Chair  
Santa Cruz County Commission on the Environment

Cc: Water Advisory Commission  
Fish and Wildlife Advisory Commission  
County Administrative Officer