



Community Benefits Interview Report Submitted to the California Department of Water Resources

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Overview

The Department of Water Resources (DWR) is developing a Community Benefits Program. The Program will be a part of the proposed Delta Conveyance Project. The Program will be implemented if the Delta Conveyance Project is permitted. It is common for proponents of large infrastructure projects to develop a set of commitments as part of the project proposal to:

- 1) acknowledge that if the project is approved it could have potential adverse effects that communities may endure due to major capital construction works,
- 2) go beyond what traditional “environmental mitigation” typically affords, and
- 3) create economic, social, and other benefits in and for the local community.

DWR is interested in hearing input from people in the Greater Delta Region on the proposed Delta Conveyance Project’s Community Benefits Program. DWR asked Ag Innovations to interview community members. Ag Innovations facilitates collaboration and public engagement around complex agricultural and natural resources issues. Ag Innovations led a team of interviewers including Ag Innovations staff, project consultants and DWR.

Between February 1, 2021 and March 19, 2021, the interview team talked to 44 people. This team interviewed people who represent different interests in the Delta region and people who participated in scoping meetings. People represented agriculture, state and local government, environmental justice and disadvantaged communities, recreation, community groups, natural resources, and Tribal members. The list of interviewees is confidential to encourage people to contribute.

Numbers of Interviewees by Interest Area							
Agriculture	State Agencies	Local Government	Recreation	Environmental Justice	Natural Resources	Local Communities	Other
7	6	7	5	5	5	4	5

Section One summarizes the responses to questions about the concept of a community benefits program. Section Two summarizes responses to questions about the Delta as Place Fund. Section Three summarizes responses to questions about implementation commitments. Section four summarizes questions about community engagement, Delta needs and other ideas. The selected interview quotes included serve to illustrate common themes among responses.

Section 1: Community Benefits Program Concept

To begin, the interview team asked respondents what they thought about the concept of a community benefits program. Below are responses to questions about the concept, goals, and objectives of the Community Benefit Program.

Understanding the Community Benefits Project

To begin, the interview team reviewed the proposed program with interviewees. Here are some of the themes from the initial discussion:

- Many people asked how much money would be in the fund or could be provided. They worried that it would not be adequate to cover Environmental/CEQA mitigation as well as their understanding of extensive community impacts from the project.
- Several people questioned how the proposed Community Benefits Program would be managed. They noted that it would be inefficient or confusing to develop another Delta state program.
- Many people explained that the program would have to be comprehensive, to provide benefits from construction through operation and maintenance, and would have to cover the whole Delta.
- Several people questioned DWR's commitment to the program. They noted that they had been disappointed by previous DWR programs and commitments.
- The interview team also discussed the differences between Environmental/CEQA mitigation and community benefits with several people. Many people were concerned about mitigation and wanted to ensure that mitigation would sufficiently address impacts.

“How will you mitigate for impacts, and how will you even be able to mitigate for all the impacts? How will we know what the community needs outside of mitigation if we do not know the impact or proposed mitigation?”

Finally, during this initial discussion, many people pointed out that they disapproved of the Delta Conveyance Project but were willing to discuss a community benefits program, if the project were permitted.

Is a Community Benefit Program a Good Idea?

The interview team asked respondents what they thought of the idea of a community benefits program. Most respondents agreed with the concept of a community benefits program.

Agree with Community Benefits Program	
Yes	38
No	6

Many respondents noted that they favored the concept but did not approve of the Delta Conveyance Project. They worry about the environmental, economic, and social impacts of the Delta Conveyance Project. People noted that a community benefit program would be difficult to develop and manage to address impacts. Several people noted that the program, as described in the concept paper, was too vague and that it was hard to see how a community benefits program could address the impacts.

“The Community Benefits approach sounds right; intelligent. There is no local benefit from the project and until now the local community has not heard any interest in compensating the community for the imposition of the project and the pain they will suffer.”

Community Benefits Program Concerns

The interview team asked people to describe what part of the Community Benefits Program they disagreed with or concerned them. The following chart displays the different concerns:

Concerns about Community Benefits Program	
Complex program concerns	12
DWR commitment concerns	7
Mitigation concerns	11
Benefit timeline concerns	8
Community concerns	6

Complex Program

Many interview respondents worried that the Community Benefits Program would be too complicated. They explained that Delta residents, community organizations, and municipalities did not have staff competent or available to apply for grants, partnerships, or programs. People noted that they did not have time to figure out program eligibility. They did not have staff to develop partnerships or coordinate to apply for funds.

“Delta organizations are under-resourced. There is a low capacity to apply for and manage state grants/contracts, so the fund should coach applicants similar to Prop 68 grants. Some cities have less issue with capacity; but other community led efforts struggle to come together. People will need help to manage projects.”

Many people noted they did not want to compete with other Delta priorities or Delta residents for funds. They also explained that complicated requirements for matching dollars would make it impossible for most Delta communities and organizations.

Finally, people explained there were too many “Delta programs” already. They explained that there were useful programs that were already underfunded to support many of the same kinds of projects. Some people suggested adding any funds to existing programs or to community foundations. develop partnerships with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or established programs.

More Interested in Environmental/CEQA Mitigation

Several people were worried that a community benefits program would dilute the funds or attention away from Environmental/CEQA mitigation. They wanted to make sure that mitigation was fully funded, implemented, and monitored.

“I do not want community benefits to substitute or dilute mitigation dollars. The community benefit effort might end up being competitive with mitigation and that would be a bad outcome. Community benefits cannot substitute for adequate mitigation.”

Benefits Timeline

Several people were concerned about the timeline for community benefits. Respondents explained that they needed to understand project impacts and proposed Environmental/CEQA mitigation before they could evaluate community benefits. People worried that the program would not be flexible or would not address long-term issues.

“Investments in infrastructure are important and some things like walkways and trails may not require as much maintenance but otherwise need continuous funding for operations and maintenance.”

Interview respondents also commented that it would be hard to predict all the community changes from the project and therefore the process might be premature.

“We should wait to develop the community benefits program until after the environmental analysis is done.”

Several people explained that there would need to be benefits before, during construction, and for many years after the project. They wondered how there would be guarantees of community benefits past construction. Several people noted that if the funding were limited or spreading it out meant there would be limits to address wide-ranging impacts. Others noted the fund should be spread out as a revolving fund or evergreen fund so grants can evolve as needs evolve. These people noted that it would be impossible to understand what the Delta needs 10 years from now.

“DWR should think of the fund like adaptive management. There should be funds at construction but should also address issues incrementally. DWR should look at range of implications and impacts, not just a few.”

DWR Commitment

Many people commented that they did not trust DWR to follow through on commitments. They worry that as the state administration changes, commitments could change. Several people suggested that community benefits needed to be included in legislation, as well as signed agreements, MOU's, and contracts. Some interview respondents asked what the consequences would be if DWR did not follow through with funds or make sure the funds went to the communities. Several people asked when the community benefit fund would be negotiated and who would ensure there was a commitment.

“DWR's commitment is a financial commitment. Before we can approve of the concept, we need more information on the fund and the amount. That information is needed to understand the commitment. Everyone feels good when the agreement is signed and then there is no funding for operations.”

Community Engagement

Finally, many people wondered how the community could or should be involved in developing a community benefits program. They worried that by reading the concept paper, there might be too many preconceived ideas about how it should happen. Several people worried that it would be hard to organize people to develop a program to go along with a project that many do not want.

They also worried about engaging people in different languages and from distinct parts of the Delta. Many people stressed that the Community Benefits Program would need to be a grassroots program and different for the three Delta areas. Other people stressed though that, some people will be attracted to the program just because there is funding. But they worried about accountability, equity, and who would control the fund.

“Everyone likes money, but what are the criteria and how do you ensure equity, so everyone has a chance to access funds? Community benefits should go to all, not just the larger organizations, towns, and farms who have staff to fill out forms.”

Different Approaches to Community Benefits?

The interview team asked respondents if they had a different approach to providing community benefits. If they did not agree with the concept of a community benefit fund, was there a better way to provide measures to offset impacts from the Delta Conveyance Project.

Different Approach to Community Benefits	
Do not build the project	13
Lump sum to existing organizations	9
Infrastructure	10
Other	12

Do Not Build Project

Many respondents answered that the better approach was to not build the project. They acknowledged that the Delta had needs outside of the potential impacts from the project. However, they noted the project would exacerbate Delta issues.

“Do not build the project. And tell us about the impacts and how you plan to mitigate. Because we do not believe that you can mitigate for all the devastation you are going to bring. So little pots of money for little projects here and there will be meaningless because you will destroy agriculture, waterways, and our towns.”

Fund Existing Programs or Recommendations

Many people worried that a new Delta program or funding source would be too complex or would duplicate existing programs. They suggested providing funds to current Delta programs that are underfunded. Many people suggested providing funding for recommendations from the Sacramento San Joaquin Delta National Heritage Area's study, or from the Delta Protection Commission's Delta Community Design Study Recommendations Report and recreation plans, or the Community Action Plans for Clarksburg, Courtland, Hood, or Walnut Grove. Interviewees explained that many other natural resource, recreation, history, culture, and agriculture organizations have recommendations to improve the Delta.

“Fund should link up with Delta Protection Commission and the many planning activities on which they have been working. They include community input and are well supported. The plans include clear recommendations and implementable projects. Look at the four community plans Delta Protection Commission did a few years ago; they might have had more interest if there had been potential funding at the end of the efforts.”

Several interview respondents suggested picking existing organizations, with public support and records of achievement, and providing those organizations with lump sums or endowments to accomplish their goals. People suggested that providing an endowment to those organizations might support programs to monitor and adjust to address resource concerns. They explained that DWR could adopt an adaptive management approach so the community benefits could respond to ongoing Delta changes.

Several interview respondents suggested funding projects that need more funding like the San Francisco Bay Water Trail between Big Break and Stockton, or the Great California Delta Trail.

Fund Expensive Infrastructure

Many interviewees suggested the Community Benefits Program resources could fund large infrastructure programs. For example, people suggested that all the funds could go to levee maintenance or broadband communications. Others wanted to keep levee maintenance separate from a Community Benefits Program.

Other Ideas

Other ideas for different funding strategies included setting up savings accounts for each Delta resident to use for education and job training. Another idea was to use Community Benefits Program funds as incentives for comprehensive projects in legacy towns and Delta cities.

“Along the same lines, figure out a set amount, say \$1m for a community and convene a workshop with county, community, SACOG (or other COG), DWR, Caltrans, Parks, etc. and see what comprehensive project like Isleton's main street revitalization and get other agencies to commit to fund as well.”

Section 2: Delta as Place Fund

After discussions about the concept of a community benefits program, the interviews turned to responses to the Delta as Place Fund implementation commitments.

Delta as Place Fund

In the next part of the interviews, the interview team focused on the Delta as Place Fund. The interview team asked respondents what they thought about a fund to support community driven projects.

Opinion about Delta as Place Fund	
Great idea	24
Might work	5
Here are some concerns	10
Do not think it will work	5

Great Idea

Most people responded that some kind of fund is a good idea. Respondents noted that if the fund addressed impacts, it was a good idea. They also expressed a desire that the fund be locally driven and locally developed ideas. Each community should decide how to invest community benefits funds. People also wanted to make sure the fund would acknowledge the differences between the North, Central and South Delta.

“Yes, a community driven fund may be able to soften the blow on the residents and farmers. But make sure the community gets substantial benefits to offset severe damage and disruption.”

Concerns

Even when interview respondents supported a community benefits fund, they had significant concerns. Many people emphasized that they worried that Environmental/CEQA mitigation would not address all impacts and that focusing on a community benefits program diluted that focus. Others worried about a community benefit fund taking emphasis away from mitigation.

Complicated Program

Interview respondents emphasized their concerns about equity, that it would be hard to decide which projects to fund. Many people reiterated their concerns about new organizations or complicated grant programs. Respondents explained that the Delta does not have NGOs and Resource Conservation Districts that can write proposals and manage funds. Several respondents suggested providing funds to regional or community foundations to administer. They noted that foundations already had community representatives on their boards, knew community needs, and had clear accountability structures. Other people reiterated their suggestions to add funds to existing programs.

Focus on Unifying Vision

Several people explained that the fund should focus on priorities as Delta as Place or other overarching visions. People suggested health disparities, water quality, or the National Heritage Areas priorities as overarching visions. These respondents noted that the fund would not have as much impact as it would if it were leveraged to help fund some larger vision.

Capacity

Many interview respondents noted that it was unlikely the community fund would have any impact without focusing on programs and investments that work. Several people said the fund needed to support coordination, planning, and return on investments. They noted that Delta municipalities and organizations did not have the capacity to manage funds for efficiency and return on investments. They explained that with such overarching problems and complex dynamics, small project funds would not really make a difference.

List of Categories or Benefit Types

The interview team asked if the Delta as Place fund should include any additional categories or types of benefits.

Land Purchase and Easements

Many people suggested adding land purchase and habitat easements to the list of categories proposed in the concept paper. They explained a concern that the project would cause land values to drop. Providing funds to organizations to buy land to further Delta-wide priorities would help. Without funding, people worried that they would be forced to abandon their lands and their investments. Several other people suggested that funding for habitat easements would help ameliorate the ecological losses from the project. Several people also noted that land purchase and habitat easements might reduce some urban encroachment on the Delta.

Education

Many people suggested adding education as its own category. These respondents noted that schools needed investments in infrastructure, clean water, delayed maintenance, and programs. Some people also said the program should invest in environmental education in schools.

Levee Maintenance

Several people suggested levee maintenance as its own category. They stressed that without levee maintenance any other investments would be wasted. People explained that the reclamation districts understood the Delta system and the risks from flooding and levee failures. Several people noted that levee failures would occur soon, and the Delta was not prepared. Others noted that levee maintenance should be funded in a different way.

Safety

Several people suggested adding safety and fire protection to the list of categories. They explained complex municipal/county safety coordination problems. Respondents noted that there were no funds to coordinate or to create county wide safety and fire responses. Often Delta residents do not have anyone or do not know who to call in emergencies.

Water Quality

Finally, some people recommended adding water quality as its own category. They noted that the Delta is experiencing problems with salinity, algal blooms, and pollution and expressed a concern that the project would exacerbate these problems. They encouraged investments in improving ground water, drinking water, and water throughout the Delta.

Section 3: Delta Conveyance Program Implementation Commitments

As part of the Community Benefits Program, DWR is proposing to include “project implementation commitments”. These commitments could include opportunities to employ or train Delta residents, economic development, purchasing, infrastructure and facilities to leave behind for Delta residents. Respondents agreed with investing in implementation commitments if the project had to go forward.

Implementation Commitment Preferences	
Communication infrastructure	26
Jobs	24
Job training	21
Transportation improvements	17
Local business preferences	13
Other	29

Communications Infrastructure

A majority of people emphasized the need for immediate broadband investments. Respondents noted that schools, libraries, and community facilities often lacked reliable broadband. Several people suggested investing in the program recommendations sponsored by the Delta Protection Commission and developed by Valley Vision.

Jobs

Many people commented on the importance of jobs for the Delta. Other people noted that committing a percentage of jobs to disadvantaged census tracts made sense. However, these respondents emphasized that Delta residents needed jobs that will stay in the area, not just temporary construction. People explained that people in West Sacramento and Stockton might benefit more from construction employment.

Many respondents recommended support for summer jobs for youth. They argued that there are few opportunities for youth. Transportation to job sites is a major problem for youth. Also, people commented that these jobs could provide job readiness skills such as showing up to work, learning to take directions, asking questions, and meeting deadlines. Many people wondered if investments in water quality, water tourism, and environment jobs could support the long-term economy of the region.

Job Training

Respondents also agreed that investments in job training could be useful. Of these respondents, many people suggested training for environmental jobs and water quality jobs. They noted that the Delta already had a water economy and investing in environmental jobs – marina operators, water quality technicians, maintenance, water engineers, monitoring, water planning, etc. – made sense if the project went forward.

However, most people explained that typical job training programs that accompany large infrastructure projects will not help in the Delta. Many respondents stressed the need to provide comprehensive job training in different languages. Several people explained that people did not have job readiness skills and did not have any support

systems. They explained that a comprehensive program also needed to provide transportation, childcare, health care, and substance abuse support.

Other people commented before spending any funds on job training the programs should research what kinds of jobs might be available in 25 years. Those predictions could target funding to high schools, trade programs, and community colleges to prepare for that economy.

Local Business Preferences

Many people commented that it was unlikely that there would be enough providers in the Delta to prioritize purchasing supplies and materials from the Delta. However, several people thought it was worth research and investment if the project went forward.

Transportation Improvements

The interview team asked respondents to comment on improvements to transportation infrastructure if the project went forward. Several people noted that there were recommendations from CalTrans on how to improve roads in the Delta. They suggested working with CalTrans to develop funding priorities for road improvements.

Several people suggested that any investments in roads would just increase traffic and congestion. They wondered if DWR could invest in shuttle systems, water taxis, or increased bus routes. Interview respondents noted that there was no dependable or affordable transportation for people to go work, health appointments, or school. A few people wondered if investments in an Uber economy would help the Delta.

Finally, under transportation people urged the fund to support sidewalks and parking in legacy communities and municipalities. Respondents also encouraged adding bike and walking trails wherever possible.

Section Four: Other Questions and Project Examples

Community Engagement

The interview team asked interview respondents how to include community residents in developing the program. Many respondents explained that it was difficult to involve the community in a program that will develop in conjunction with a project they do not support.

As stated previously, several people suggested waiting to develop the program until project impacts and Environmental/CEQA mitigation are better understood. Other people noted that the community benefits program would seem like a bribe, so people were unlikely to associate with it.

Many people stressed that local communities should develop the programs. They stressed again that it would make more sense to provide funds to community foundations or existing programs.

Other comments explained that it would be important to meet with people face to face in the Delta. They encouraged DWR to wait until the COVID-19 pandemic has eased so

residents, municipal leaders, local organizations, and groups could discuss the program. Many people also stressed conducting any outreach in many languages.

“Need to meet with people locally. Ensure you meet with all language groups especially Spanish. It can be tough to get the word out although there are networks within each community, you need to develop relationships to help groups develop the program. In some communities like Locke, it is hard to find a trusted organization that everyone likes.”

Proposed Project Examples

Although it is too early to develop project concepts and ideas in terms of what is a reasonably foreseeable future project supported by the Community Benefits Program, DWR will benefit from learning what kinds of projects people are thinking about. Respondents directed the interview team to reports, recommendations, and plans from California State and Delta organizations. These reports contain program and project recommendations to sustain the Delta’s unique ecology, economy, history, and culture.

The interview team also asked people to share what kinds of projects they think would meet Delta needs. Respondents shared many ideas with the interview team.

Agriculture

Several people suggested funding projects that would help agriculture reverse subsidence. Others suggested providing incentives to farms to move to sustainable crops and wildlife friendly crops. Still others suggested providing funds for farmers to easements.

“Farmers are interested in putting some part of their farm into habitat, could the program pay for easements? There is a model in the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) program, formerly the Wetland Reserve Program, NRCS holds the easement for at least 20 years but often in perpetuity. There are restrictions but the owner keeps fee title.”

Delta Heritage

Several people emphasized projects that connected the unique cultures and outdoors in the Delta. People suggested funding recommendations from the Sacramento San Joaquin Natural Heritage Areas study. They also suggested improving history and culture markers and sites throughout the Delta.

“Create a history, culture, walking trail along Mormon Slough from Scotts Ave to the river. Connect green space at Reyes Park to the boat launch. Work with youth to plant

trees and community gardens all along the slough. Put up history and culture interpretative signs to connect to MiWok and other history. Make sure area stays safe and clean and provides benches and shade.”

Some people also noted that the Delta Protection Commission had clear recommendations for how to protect heritage and plans for several legacy towns. They urged funds for technical design support as well as planning, architecture, and engineering.

“Implement the Delta Protection Commission Community Design Study Recommendations. You do not need to recreate the wheel, the ideas are "ours" and they have been vetted.”

Recreation and Tourism

Many people referenced projects to improve the recreation and tourism experiences in the Delta. People explained that the investments in outdoor recreation would reinforce the local economy and culture. Respondents suggested developing fishing, walking, biking, and picnic places throughout the Delta. Several people suggested completing urban to rural bike trails. They stressed that all these places should be regularly monitored for safety and trash.

Several people noted that recreation and outdoor jobs made the most sense in the Delta. Many people suggested providing incentive funds for marinas repair and modernization. They also noted that marinas could use funds to provide more boating experiences, rent smaller craft, and enforce environmental regulations.

“Everywhere possible, install boat launches for all kinds of craft, fishing docks, fish cleaning stations, bathrooms, car and boat parking lots. Ensure that walking and picnicking places are shady and safe. These places and waters need to be regularly. Patrolled, maintained, and protected. Please hire local people and youth from the Delta for these projects.”

Many people suggested providing incentives for people to develop or expand agricultural tourism, such as Delta product brands, wine tours, pick your own fruit farms, and agricultural fairs.

Other Project Ideas

Many people suggested providing funds to strengthen levees. They recommended providing funds to reclamation districts so they could decide on priorities and restore those priority levees.

Several people also suggested training and paying youth and unemployed people to remove invasive species. Some people also suggested providing funds to dredge important waterways.

Delta Community Needs and Learning

After discussing the Community Benefits Program, the interviews turned to what the Delta needed and how to learn more. Interviewees provided a comprehensive list of Delta needs. People also suggested reports for DWR to review, organizations to consult with, and suggested other people to include in outreach and engagement. This section reviews proposed project examples about agriculture, Delta heritage, recreation and tourism, and other ideas.

Section 5: Next Steps

The interview team is grateful for the time and thought that interview respondents provided. Information from the interview will be used to refine the Community Benefits Program. There will be also be four workshops to provide input on the program. The workshops are on April 14, May 6, and May 25. The Tribal Workshop, by invitation only is on May 17.

Interview Questions

1. The Framework Outline describes a community benefits program as a defined set of commitments made by project proponents and created in coordination with the local community. One objective is to, in part, provide a mechanism for the Delta community to identify opportunities for local benefits.
 - a. Do you agree with this concept?
 - b. What would you add or change?
2. The Framework Outline describes two kinds of benefits, the first is a fund to implement community-driven projects and the second would be implementation commitments -- things like jobs, job training, local business preferences, and leave-behinds.
 - a. What do you think about these benefit objectives?
 - b. Would you add or change anything?
3. Thinking about the idea of a Delta Fund, the Framework Outline proposes several categories or benefit types, including agriculture, recreation, economic, legacy communities, tribal and environmental justice.
 - a. Would you change any of those categories or benefit types?
 - b. Would you add any benefit types?
4. Are there any existing plans or visions that the community benefits program should build on?
 - a. How should the program build on those plans?
5. Is there anything else you want to tell me about the concept we have for a community benefits program?
6. Are there others that we should try to include in this learning process?