

AEP 2026 State Conference



Sands to Shores

**Pathways to
Thriving Communities**

San Diego, CA: April 23-26, 2026
Sheraton San Diego Hotel and Marina

AEP Conference Program

Sands to Shores - Pathways to Thriving Communities

Sheraton San Diego Hotel & Marina - 1380 Harbor Island Dr, San Diego, CA 92101



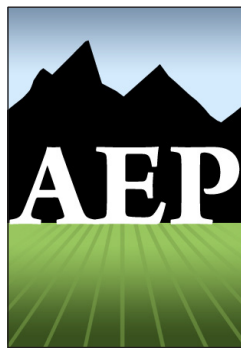
Thank you Sponsors

AEP California State Conference 2026



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Welcome Message from the AEP President

Welcome to the 2026 Association of Environmental Professionals Annual Conference! Please join me in thanking our Conference Chairs, Kelsey Hawkins, Harris and Associates, and Brent Burmeister, ASM Affiliates, and the Conference Committee for their hard work, organization, and leadership in making this Conference a huge success. The 2026 team put forth tremendous effort to make this conference the best to date. They have planned an outstanding schedule of sessions and events to challenge and inspire our thinking, support our professional development, and to allow us to have some fun and expand our networks.



We also cannot forget the tireless efforts of Lynne Bynder, CMP our Executive Director, and Candace Davis, our Operations Director, who makes our conferences a success year after year.

Finally, we all extend our gratitude to our many sponsors. Without their support the conference would not be possible.

We hope you enjoy the conference and make time to experience the City of San Diego and the beautiful San Diego Bay.

Sincerely,

Mindy Fogg
AEP President



AEP 2026 Conference Keynote Speakers



Keynote Speaker

Friday, April 24, 2026

Time: 8:00 am – 8:45 am

Room: Silver Pearl 2 & 3

Ann Moore, 2026 Chair of the Board of Port Commissioners, Port of San Diego

Ann Moore was sworn in to the Board of Port Commissioners on January 13, 2011, after appointment by the Chula Vista City Council. She served as Chula Vista's City Attorney and has practiced law for more than 20 years, with extensive experience in land use, real estate, redevelopment, environmental, and municipal law. Commissioner Moore represents both developers and governmental agencies in processing land use entitlements for large-scale residential, commercial, and industrial projects. Ann's areas of expertise include the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the Subdivision Map Act, eminent domain, inverse condemnation, Endangered Species Act, public infrastructure financing, the Brown Act, and Conflict of Interest laws. She graduated from San Diego State University with a Public Administration degree and she earned her law degree at the University of San Diego law school.



Keynote Speaker

Saturday April 25, 2026

Time: 8:00 am-8:45 am

Room: Silver Pearl 2 & 3

Elyse W. Lowe, Director, Development Services Department, City of San Diego

Elyse Lowe has extensive expertise in San Diego governmental policy, planning, and operations, covering land use, redevelopment, housing, transportation, resource conservation, sustainability, and fiscal management. She transitioned from public service to nonprofit management, merging two 501c3s into the successful think tank Circulate San Diego. Renowned in California for her leadership in sustainable growth and transit-oriented development, she held key city roles, including Mayor's Director of Land Use and Economic Development and City Council Representative. Appointed Development Services Department Director in late 2018, Elyse's team doubled the average annual housing permits issued. She has advised on housing policy reform for over two decades. Academically, she studied Environmental Studies and Earth Science, with postgraduate work in Community Economic Development at San Diego State University. A native San Diegan, she enjoys racing sailboats, being a sports team mom, stand-up paddleboarding, and pickleball. Elyse is married with two teenage boys who play rugby and football.

AEP 2026 Conference Mobile Workshops

1 Old Town Mobile Workshop #1: A Walk Through California's Origins

Thursday, April 23, 2026 | 1:45 – 4:45 pm

Price: \$70, Limited to 25 attendees

Discover Old Town San Diego State Historic Park with a guided experience that brings the region's layered history into focus. The Old Town Mobile Workshop will lead you through original adobe homes, historic gardens, and the spaces where Kumeyaay, Mexican, and early American communities shaped the city's beginnings. With an experienced guide, you'll explore the stories of trade, daily life, military presence, and cultural exchange that defined early San Diego. Bring your camera, wear comfortable shoes, enjoy local shops, and step into the places where California's past is still very much present. At the end of the workshop, attendees may have the option to gather for informal drinks at a nearby restaurant (location to be determined).

2 Balboa Park Mobile Workshop #2: Planning for Preservation in Action

Friday, April 24, 2026 | 2:00 pm – 4:45 pm

Price: \$80, Space Limited to 25 attendees

Step outside the conference room and into living history with this immersive mobile workshop through Balboa Park. Discover how thoughtful rehabilitation is extending the life of San Diego's architectural treasures while preparing them for the future.

Through a guided walking tour, participants will explore historic, recently completed, and active rehabilitation projects that balance preservation mandates with accessibility, resilience, and long-term operational sustainability. You'll see how visionary teams are restoring the park's architectural gems, including the iconic and recently rehabilitated Botanical Building, with insight into funding mechanisms, stakeholder alignment, regulatory navigation, and the implementation challenges behind its transformation.

Join fellow planning professionals to see how vision, policy, and place converge, all while exploring one of the country's most significant historic parks.

3 Mobile Workshop #3: UC San Diego's Campus Transformation

Saturday, April 25, 2026 | 2:00 pm – 5:00 pm

Price: \$60, Space Limited to 25 attendees

Join University of California (UC), San Diego Campus Planning for a 1.5-hour walking tour that explores the campus through the lens of its Long-Range Development Plan (LRDP). Beginning at the Central Campus Trolley station, the tour will move through the university core to illustrate how targeted infill, transit-oriented development, and adaptive planning have enabled UC San Diego to become the nation's largest on-campus housing provider without expanding its footprint. Tour participants will visit key sites within the center of campus that demonstrate the success of CEQA streamlining tools, as Campus Planners share insights on lessons learned from both large and small projects. Stops will include existing and future sites of living and learning neighborhoods, public realm spaces, Stuart Collection art installations, the "Triton Center" project (under construction), examples of micromobility infrastructure, historic buildings such as the Geisel Library, and more.

This interactive field trip session will showcase how UC San Diego is turning bold ideas into real-world places that enhance the student experience. It is complementary to the "Planning with Purpose: Leading Complex CEQA Efforts for Long Range Campus Development" session to be held earlier in the day, though attending the previous session is not a requirement to join the tour.

Learn more about UC San Diego here: <https://univcomms.ucsd.edu/about/campus-profile/>

Thank you to the AEP 2026 Conference Committee

Conference Co-Chairs:

Kelsey Hawkins, Harris & Associates, kelsey.hawkins@weareharris.com

Brent Burmeister, ASM Affiliates, bburmeister@asmaffiliates.com

Track Chairs:

Jordan Werkmeister, PSOMAS, jordan.werkmeister@psomas.com

Weathering the Storm (*Regional Issues and Approaches*)

Melanie Tylke, County of San Diego, melanie.tylke@sdcounty.ca.gov

Sandy Solutions (*Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies*)

Jasmine Osman, Placeworks, josman@placeworks.com

Making Waves: *Future Innovators (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)*

Hannah Arkin, Resolution Enviro, hannah@resolutionenvironmental.com

Building on Solid Ground (*Streamlining, Adaptation, Resiliences, and Environmental Justice*)

Janelle Firoozi, Harris & Associates, janelle.firoozi@weareharris.com

Navigating New Currents (*Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates*)

Mobile Workshop Chairs:

Kennedy Nobriga, ASM Affiliates, knobriga@asmaffiliates.com

Sydney Margallo, Harris & Associates, sydney.margallo@weareharris.com

Student Volunteer Chairs:

Shelby Bocks, Helix Environmental, shelbyb@helixepi.com

Melissa Whitemore, Michael Baker Intl, Melissa.Whitemore@mbakerintl.com

AEP Conference Support Staff:

Lynne C Bynder, CMP, AEP Executive Director, lbynder@califaep.org

Candace Davis, AEP Operations Director, membership@califaep.org

Jaimie Jones, AEP Publications Director, SWCA, jmjones@swca.com,

Grant Reddy, AEP Graphic Designer, PlaceWorks, greddy@placeworks.com



2026 Conference-at-a-Glance



5 Session Tracks:

- » **Navigating New Currents** (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)
- » **Sandy Solutions** (Case Studies, Best Practices and Technical Studies)
- » **Building on Solid Ground** (Streamlining, Adaptation, Resilience, and Environmental Justice)
- » **Weathering the Storm** (Regional Issues and Approaches)
- » **Making Waves: Future Innovators** (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

2026 California State Conference

Conference-at-a-Glance | 1

Thursday, April 23, 2026

2:00 pm – 6:30 pm	Conference Registration – <i>Silver Pearl Foyer</i>				
4:30 pm – 6:00 pm	Exhibitor Set-up – <i>Silver Pearl 1</i>				
1:45 pm – 4:45 pm	Mobile Workshop #1 – <i>Old Town: A Walk through California’s Origins</i>				
2:30 pm – 4:00 pm	<p><u>Navigating New Currents</u></p> <p>Dreading Water in Southern California: Aquatic Resource Permitting Best Practices</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Tidepool 2</p>	<p><u>Sandy Solutions</u></p> <p>Open Space Compass: Navigating AB 1889 and AB 1425 General Plan Compliance</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Tidepool 3</p>	<p><u>Building on Solid Ground</u></p> <p>From Individual Connection to Organizational Excellence: Leadership is Built in the Large and the Small</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Silver Pearl 2</p>	<p><u>Weathering the Storm</u></p> <p>Air Quality & Climate Change Workshop – Part 1</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Silver Pearl 3</p>	<p><u>Making Waves</u></p> <p>Should I Stay or Should I Go? Navigating Career Transitions in Environmental Planning</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Tidepool 1</p>
4:15 pm – 5:45 pm	<p><u>Navigating New Currents</u></p> <p>Looking Back at 10 Years of Lessons Learned in the Regulation of Commercial Cannabis in California</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Tidepool 2</p>	<p><u>Sandy Solutions</u></p> <p>Emerging Endangered Species in So Cal: Project Approaches & Best Practices- A Consulting Biologist’s Perspective</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Tidepool 3</p>	<p><u>Building on Solid Ground</u></p> <p>Riding the Exemption Wave: The Ins and Outs of Common CEQA Exemptions</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Silver Pearl 2</p>	<p><u>Weathering the Storm</u></p> <p>Air Quality & Climate Change Workshop – Part 2</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Silver Pearl 3</p>	<p><u>Making Waves</u></p> <p>Exploring Careers in Environmental Review and CEQA: Pathways, Skills & Perspectives</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Tidepool 1</p>
5:45 pm – 6:15 pm	New Member, 1st Timer – Welcome to AEP Session – <i>Tidepool 1</i>				
6:15 pm – 9:15 pm	Opening Reception – <i>Eventide Gardens</i> – <i>Sponsored by Stantec and Placeworks. Beer and Wine sponsored by SWCA</i>				
6:15 pm – 9:15 pm	AEP Jam Band – <i>Eventide Gardens</i> – <i>Sponsored by Harris and Associates</i>				

Friday, April 24, 2026

7:30 am – 6:00 pm	Registration – <i>Silver Pearl Foyer</i>
7:30 am – 7:00 pm	Exhibits Open – <i>Silver Pearl 1</i>

Friday, April 24, 2026 (Continued)

7:30 am – 8:30 am	Breakfast – <i>Silver Pearl 1</i> – Sponsored by RECON Environmental				
8:00 am – 8:45 am	Opening Keynote Speaker – <i>Ann Moore, 2026 Chair of the Board of Port Commissions of San Diego</i> – <i>Silver Pearl 2/3</i> – Sponsored by Port of San Diego				
9:00 am – 10:30 am	<p><u>Navigating New Currents</u></p> <p>Accelerating Approvals, Safeguarding Resources: Navigating the New Landscape of Wildfire Resilience Regulations</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0 Room: Sandpiper AB</p>	<p><u>Sandy Solutions</u></p> <p>The Fast and the Federal: Steering projects through Section 106 and NEPA Clearance</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0 Room: Sandpiper CD</p>	<p><u>Building on Solid Ground</u></p> <p>Navigating AB 130 and SB 131: Background, Insights, and Lessons Learned</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0 Room: Pelican</p>	<p><u>Weathering the Storm</u></p> <p>Strategies for Weathering San Diego’s Stormwater Challenges</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Shorebreak</p>	<p><u>Making Waves</u></p> <p>‘Yes, And!’: Improv Training for Environmental Planners</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Osprey</p>
10:45 am – 12:15 pm	<p><u>Navigating New Currents</u></p> <p>Banking on Mitigation: Mitigation Banks and Exchanges as CEQA Mitigation</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0 Room: Sandpiper AB</p>	<p><u>Sandy Solutions</u></p> <p>Transforming Midway: CEQA Challenges and Best Practices for a Landmark San Diego Project</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0 Room: Sandpiper CD</p>	<p><u>Building on Solid Ground</u></p> <p>Climate Vulnerability and Adaptation Planning for Sustainable Freight Network in the San Joaquin Valley</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Pelican</p>	<p><u>Weathering the Storm</u></p> <p>Bridging Safety, Mobility, and Ecology: Early Engagement and Wildlife Connectivity in the State Route 67 Highway Operational Improvements Project</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Shorebreak</p>	<p><u>Making Waves</u></p> <p>Measuring the Immeasurable: Objectively Evaluating Subjective Topics</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Osprey</p>
12:15 pm – 1:45 pm	Lunch – <i>Tacos with HELIX at the Park</i> – Location: <i>Spanish Landing Park – East</i> – Sponsored by HELIX Environmental Planning				
2:00 pm – 4:45 pm	Mobile Workshop #2 – <i>Balboa Park - Planning for Preservation in Action</i> – Sponsored by ICF				
2:00 pm – 3:30 pm	<p><u>Navigating New Currents</u></p> <p>Building on Sands, Landing on Shores: The Reality of CEQA Streamlining</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Sandpiper AB</p>	<p><u>Sandy Solutions</u></p> <p>Meeting California’s Climate Goals: How to Mitigation VMT Impacts-A Case Study</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Sandpiper CD</p>	<p><u>Building on Solid Ground</u></p> <p>Reaching, Keeping, and Engaging Your Audience during Big Complex Projects</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Silver Pearl 3</p>	<p><u>Weathering the Storm</u></p> <p>From Ashes to Action: Environmental Planning and Permitting Energy Infrastructure in Post-Wildfire Southern California</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Silver Pearl 2</p>	<p><u>Making Waves</u></p> <p>All the World’s A Stage: The Planner’s Guide to Public Hearing Presentations</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0 Room: Osprey</p>
3:30 pm – 4:00 pm	Take a Sponsor Break – <i>Silver Pearl 1 (Beverages and snacks provided by your sponsors)</i>				
4:00 pm – 5:30 pm	<p><u>Navigating New Currents</u></p> <p>Fire and Floods: What comes after the CEQA Exemption?</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Sandpiper AB</p>	<p><u>Sandy Solutions</u></p> <p>Climate Change Adaptation in Practice - A San Francisco Case Study</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Sandpiper CD</p>	<p><u>Building on Solid Ground</u></p> <p>Setting Yourself Up for Streamlining Success: Tips and Tricks from the Trenches</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Pelican</p>	<p><u>Weathering the Storm</u></p> <p>Pathways to SB 100: Achieving Clean Energy Goals in Shifting Policy and Regulatory Environment</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Shorebreak</p>	<p><u>Making Waves</u></p> <p>AEP Sustainability Plan and Corporate Sustainability Planning for Environmental Planning Firms</p> <p>Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Osprey</p>
5:30 pm – 7:00 pm	Awards Reception – <i>Silver Pearl 1</i> – Sponsored by RECON, Beer and Wine sponsored by Yorke Engineering				

Friday, April 24, 2026 (Continued)

6:00 pm – 7:00 pm **AEP 2026 Awards Program** – *Silver Pearl 2/3* – *Sponsored by AECOM*

Saturday, April 25, 2026

8:00 am – 6:00 pm **Registration** – *Silver Pearl Foyer*

8:00 am – 6:30 pm **Exhibits Open** – *Silver Pearl 1*

8:00 am – 9:00 am **Breakfast** – *Silver Pearl 1* – *Sponsored by PlaceWorks and Albert A Webb & Associates*

8:00 am – 8:45 am **Keynote Speaker** – *Elyse W. Lowe, Director-Development Services Department City of San Diego* – *Silver Pearl 2/3*
– *Sponsored by Kimley Horn and Associates*

9:00 am – 10:30 am	<u>Navigating New Currents</u> AI in Action: Transforming Environmental Planning Through Innovation and Insight Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Sandpiper AB	<u>Sandy Solutions</u> Proof by Induction: Addressing Induced VMT, Delivering Transportation Projects, and Addressing the Housing Crisis Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Sandpiper CD	<u>Building on Solid Ground</u> Shortcut or Path of Least Resistance? Putting CEQA Exemptions to Work for Public Works and Infrastructure Projects Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Pelican	<u>Weathering the Storm</u> Turning the Tide: Regional Waterborne Trash Solutions in Southern California Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Shorebreak	<u>Making Waves</u> LIVE AEP PODCAST TAPING* The Abundance Agenda: What part does CEQA really play and why we can't have nice things Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Osprey
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10:45 am – 12:15 pm	<u>Navigating New Currents</u> CEQA Law & Ethics Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0, Ethics 1.0 Room: Sandpiper AB	<u>Sandy Solutions</u> Noise Challenges When Permitting BESS Facilities Near Existing Residential Neighborhoods Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Sandpiper CD	<u>Building on Solid Gound</u> Planning with Purpose: Leading Complex CEQA Efforts for Long-Range Campus Development *mobile workshop session also* Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Pelican	<u>Weathering the Storm</u> Leveraging and elevating Regional Capacity and Collaboration across Scales- Case Studies from San Diego Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Silver Pearl 3	<u>Making Waves</u> Making Carbon Count: What's Stored, What's Sequestered, and What It Means for Your Community Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Osprey
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12:15 pm – 1:45 pm **Lunch** – *Burgers with Baker* – *Location: Spanish Landing Park – East* – *Sponsored by Michael Baker & Associates*

2:00 pm – 5:00 pm **Mobile Workshop #3** – *UC San Diego's Campus Transformation*
– *Sponsored by HELIX Environmental and UCSD*

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm	<u>Navigating New Currents</u> Moving Targets: Defensible Strategies for Dynamic Project Descriptions and Baselines Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0 Room: Sandpiper AB	<u>Sandy Solutions</u> Addressing Stormwater Infrastructure Wetland Mitigation Deficit by Building Mitigation for Past and Future Impacts Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Sandpiper CD	<u>Building on Solid Ground</u> CEQA Without Tears: Turning Analysis into Community Understanding Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Pelican	<u>Weathering the Storm</u> Tijuana River Transboundary Flows- Will they ever stop? Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Shorebreak	<u>Making Waves</u> A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: From the Site Plan to a Complete Project Description Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0 Room: Osprey
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3:30 pm – 4:00 pm **Take a Sponsor Break** – *Silver Pearl 1 (Beverages and snacks provided by your sponsors)*

Saturday, April 25, 2026 (Continued)

<p>4:00 pm – 5:30 pm</p>	<p><u>Navigating New Currents</u> Lessons from Litigation: What Koi Nation v. City of Clearlake Means for Environmental Practitioners Doing Consultation Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0 Room: Sandpiper AB</p>	<p><u>Sandy Solutions</u> Creating Safe Shores: Insights into the California Least Tern Maintenance and Monitoring Program at San Dieguito Lagoon Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Sandpiper CD</p>	<p><u>Building on Solid Ground</u> Spotlight on San Diego Infrastructure: CEQA in Action Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Pelican</p>	<p><u>Weathering the Storm</u> Right-Sized Planning: CEQA Qualification and Other Paths to Successful Climate Action Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Shorebreak</p>	<p><u>Making Waves</u> What I Wish I Had Known About CEQA (or things they don't teach in school or CEQA Essentials) Credits: AICP 1.5 Room: Osprey</p>
<p>5:30 pm – 7:00 pm</p>	<p>Wine and Cheese Reception – Silver Pearl 1 – Sponsored by Sapphos Environmental, Beer and Wine, Sponsored by GEI Consultants</p>				
<p>7:00 pm – 8:00 pm</p>	<p>Exhibitor Teardown – Silver Pearl 1</p>				
<p>Sunday, April 26, 2026</p>					
<p>8:30 am – 10:00 am</p>	<p>Registration – Silver Pearl Foyer</p>				
<p>8:30 am – 9:30 am</p>	<p>Breakfast – Sandpiper Foyer – Sponsored by Kimley Horn and Associates</p>				
<p>9:00 am – 12:00 pm</p>	<p>2026 CEQA Update – Sandpiper – Sponsored by PlaceWorks – Credits: AICP 3.0, MCLE 3.0</p>				



Conference Abstracts



Navigating New Currents (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)

Dreading Water in Southern California: Aquatic Resource Permitting Best Practices

Thursday, April 23, 2026

2:30 pm – 4:00 pm | Room: Tidepool 2 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Shanti Santulli, MS, PWS, Regulatory Permitting Director, RECON Environmental

Panelist: Alan Monji, Environmental Scientist, Regional Water Quality Control Board

Panelist: Austin Williams, Regulatory Project Manager, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Abstract:

Shanti Santulli, RECON's Regulatory Permitting Director, will present an overview of aquatic resource permitting and address best practices in Southern California that can help streamline the notoriously challenging process. Staff representatives from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Regulatory Division and San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) will join the discussion and provide clarifications and additional insight during the presentation and question-and-answer (Q&A) session. The presentation will focus on methods to expedite the permitting process with regulatory agencies and will also cover recent regulatory changes, including USACE's current definition of waters of the United States and related guidance; delineation guidance for aquatic resources that may be jurisdictional by the USACE, RWQCB, and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW); and USACE's 2025 delineation reporting standards.

Sandy Solutions (Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies)

Open Space Compass: Navigating AB 1889 and AB 1425 General Plan Compliance

Thursday, April 23, 2026

2:30 pm – 4:00 pm | Room: Tidepool 3 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Asha Bleier, AICP, Practice Director, Planning & Urban Design, Dudek

Panelist: Brock Ortega, Principal and Senior Wildlife Ecologist, Dudek

Panelist: Mari Galloway, California Program Director, Wildlands Network

Panelist: Ben Zdeba, Planning Manager, City of Newport Beach

Abstract:

As General Plan requirements continue to evolve, so must our approach to planning and environmental compliance. At this session, we will discuss the requirements of Senate Bill (SB) 1425 and Assembly Bill (AB) 1889 and how jurisdictions can address wildlife and habitat connections, rewilding, and the cobenefits of open space, climate resilience, and equity. This session will provide tools and case studies on how to meet the new requirements. Attendees will learn how to leverage existing data and resources and collaborate with technical experts—biologists, botanists, landscape architects, and urban foresters—to identify local habitats and species, and develop resourceful, data-driven strategies for both urbanized and open space-rich areas. This session will offer practical knowledge to bridge the gap between traditional planning and specialized environmental expertise, and contributing to resilient, equitable, and ecologically sound communities.

Building on Solid Ground (Streamlining, Adaptation, Resilience, and Environmental Justice)

From Individual Connection to Organizational Excellence: Leadership is Built in the Large and the Small

Thursday, April 23, 2026

2:30 pm – 4:00 pm | Room: Silver Pearl 2 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Panelist: Vanessa Toscano, Principal Planner, HELIX Environmental Planning

Panelist: Chief Esparza, Human Connection Strategist, Association of Environmental Professionals (staff)

Panelist: Marie Campbell, Principal and CEO, Environmental Protection Specialist, Sapphos Environmental

Panelist: Mindy Fogg, Principal Planner, City of Carpinteria

Panelist: Sarah Wickman, Associate Planner, Planwest Partners Inc

Panelist: John Karamitsos, Retired

Abstract:

Misalignment. It is a source of friction when misalignment is present in any part of our connections, policies, and environments. That friction and potential for conflict can make qualified people feel doubt; it can make competent teams look unprepared; it can make organizations look chaotic. Are we aligned with our sense of self and how we navigate life? Are we aligned with our peers and colleagues in that professional space between us? Do our policies, procedures, and organizational culture align with our sense of responsibility to our direct reports, teams, stakeholders, and clients? As AEP moves further into the next phase of our People & Culture work, we want to share the lessons of how to practice and scale our model into any firm or agency. Building off our work of last year—where we discussed Cultural Humility and the practices of every-day human connection—we want to explain how storytelling and alignment are essential for organizations and can grow lasting leadership skills across our field of environmental professionals. You might call it soft skills, but as we all know, concrete pours soft and lasts millennia. The AEP People & Culture Committee looks forward to expanding your leadership toolkit with some concrete lessons to take home with you.

Weathering the Storm (Regional Issues and Approaches)

Air Quality and Climate Change Workshop (Part 1)

Thursday, April 23, 2026

2:30 pm – 4:00 pm | Room: Silver Pearl 3 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Michael Hendrix, Principal/Owner, Michael Hendrix Consulting

Panelist: Pierre Glaze, Senior Air Quality and Climate Change Specialist, ICF

Panelist: Kelsey Bennett, Director, Environmental and Sustainability Planning, Rincon Consultants Inc.

Panelist: Shannon Hatcher, Air Pollution Specialist, California Air Resources Board

Panelist: Paul Phillely, Transportation and Climate Change Program Manager, Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District

Panelist: Brian Schuster, Director Air Quality, Climate, Acoustics, Environmental Science Associates (ESA)

Panelist: Cheryl Laskowski, Principal/Owner, Cheryl Laskowski Consulting

Abstract:

The 2026 Conference Air Quality and Climate Change Workshop is a half-day (three-hour) workshop packed with the latest methods and thresholds related to CEQA/NEPA analysis of air quality, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and climate change. The summary includes recommended methods on the use of EMFAC in light of recent federal challenges to California's ability to regulate vehicle exhaust emissions. We will also provide an overview of legislation, recent Executive Orders, and published court cases with audience discussion of how they affect CEQA analysis of projects, Climate Action Plans, and General Plans. This will include recommendations on how energy efficiency reach codes can be used in climate action planning in light of restrictions within SB 130, and the exceptions allowed. In addition, the workshop will include a deeper dive into vehical miles traveled (VMT) analysis, thresholds, how they relate to GHG emissions, and VMT mitigation banking. Finally, we will continue our discussion of how the State's goal of net carbon neutrality will be achieved and how it will affect GHG thresholds. This last topic is a continuation of the discussion from last year's conference and will include lessons learned.

Making Waves: Future Innovators (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Navigating Career Transitions in Environmental Planning

Thursday, April 23, 2026

2:30 pm – 4:00 pm | Room: Tidepool 1 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Nancy Graham, City of San Diego

Abstract:

Every career is a journey through a series of rooms, some energizing, some challenging, and some that may no longer feel like the right fit. At various inflection points, professionals face the question: should I stay in this role, or is it time to move on? At other times, the choice isn't ours—we may find ourselves unexpectedly in the hallway, between opportunities, trying to discern the right next step. This session explores how to evaluate your career path with more nuance than a simple pros-and-cons list. Drawing inspiration from the work of author Emily P. Freeman, we will focus on asking deeper questions to help clarify direction and make grounded, thoughtful decisions. Together, we will examine the unique career landscape of the environmental and planning fields, including the differences between working in public agencies and private firms, and how organizational

culture shapes professional growth. We will also discuss one of the most critical factors in career satisfaction: your boss. How do you know if you have a good boss? What are the red flags to watch for, and what can you do if you suspect you may not be in the best leadership environment? Designed to be both reflective and practical, this session will provide attendees with a framework for navigating transitions; whether staying, going, or waiting is the best move. Participants will leave with tools to recognize when a career shift might be needed and the confidence to step into their next; room; with clarity and purpose.

Navigating New Currents (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)

Looking Back at 10 Years of Lessons Learned in the Regulation of Commercial Cannabis in California

Thursday, April 23, 2026

4:15 pm – 5:45 pm | Room: Tidepool 2 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Patrick Angell, Principal, Ascent Environmental, Inc.

Panelist: Kevin Pounce, Licensing Program Director, California Department of Cannabis Control

Panelist: Rebbecca Garwood, Environmental Program Manager, California Department of Fish and Wildlife

Panelist: Kirsten Burrowes, Project Manager, Ascent Environmental, Inc.

Abstract:

Since the passage of Proposition 64—the Adult Use of Marijuana Act (AUMA)—in 2016, California’s commercial cannabis industry and its regulation has rapidly evolved, raising important environmental concerns on how to address impacts of current and future cannabis uses. This session will provide an overview of the cannabis industry in California and examine how cultivation and supply-chain permitting processes at the State and local levels intersect with environmental issues such as compatibility with other agricultural uses, odor impacts, health concerns, biological resources, restoration of historic and illegal cannabis uses, federal regulatory compliance, energy use, GHGs, water resource protection, and wildfire. Speakers will highlight successes, challenges, and lessons learned from addressing regulation of a new and evolving industry and what the future may hold.

Sandy Solutions (Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies)

Emerging Endangered Species in So Cal: Project Approaches & Best Practices - A Consulting Biologist’s Perspective

Thursday, April 23, 2026

4:15 pm – 5:45 pm | Room: Tidepool 3 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Cailin Lyons, Director of Biology, RECON Environmental

Panelist: Makela Mangrich, Senior Project Manager, RECON Environmental

Panelist: Wendy Loeffler, Senior Project Manager, RECON Environmental

Panelist: Callie Amoaku, Senior Project Manager, RECON Environmental

Abstract:

Join senior biological resources staff from RECON Environmental to hear about new trends in federal and state endangered species listings affecting projects in southern California. RECON will discuss the challenges and opportunities in analyzing project impacts on monarch butterfly and western spadefoot, recently proposed for listing as threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act, and Crotch’s bumble bee and western burrowing

owl, which are candidate species for listing under the California Endangered Species Act. The panel will discuss the challenges with conducting surveys for species without published survey approaches, how these new pending listings may affect project timelines and budgets for environmental review, and best practices for navigating the changing guidelines around these species listings, many of which are not covered under existing multiple species conservation programs. The panel will consider the following questions: How are these pending listings affecting species permitting strategies for projects, particularly those without a parallel federal listing, such as burrowing owl and Crotch's bumble bee? What are the federal and state wildlife agencies expecting for mitigation approaches on various projects? How are the local jurisdictions managing the uncertainty in pending listings in project entitlements? The panelists have recent project experience and best practices to share, and include two regional experts on Crotch's bumble bee, the lead author on a recent Section 2081 Incidental Take Permit for impacts associated with western burrowing owl, and the lead biologist on a project that recently addressed impacts on a mapped monarch overwintering site. Come join the fun and learn about these intriguing species and the challenges they present to consulting biologists.

Building on Solid Ground (Streamlining, Adaptation, Resilience, and Environmental Justice)

Riding the Exemption Wave: The Ins and Outs of Common CEQA Exemptions

Thursday, April 23, 2026

4:15 pm – 5:45 pm | Room: Silver Pearl 2 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Meaghan Truman, Associate Environmental Planner III, EPD Solutions, Inc

Panelist: Konnie Dobрева, JD, Vice President of Environmental Planning, EPD Solutions, Inc.

Panelist: Alisha Wiinterswyk, Partner, Best Best & Krieger LLP

Panelist: Ali Pezeshkpour, AICP, Executive Director, City of Santa Ana Planning and Building Agency

Abstract:

This won't just be another calm day on the sand, this panel will dive in to exemption case studies and hands on examples for full audience participation. CEQA exemptions represent one of the most powerful yet complex tools in environmental practitioners' arsenal, offering pathways to streamline project approvals while maintaining environmental protection standards. This panel provides an in-depth examination of three critical exemption mechanisms that are reshaping how practitioners approach environmental review: the Class 32 Categorical Exemption for infill development, State CEQA Guidelines Section 15183 for projects consistent with general plans, and the transformative impacts of AB 130 on housing development streamlining. Expert panelists will dissect the nuanced requirements and application strategies for each exemption, sharing real-world case studies that illustrate successful implementation and highlight common pitfalls that can derail projects. The session will provide dual perspectives: guidance for city planners on conducting thorough exemption reviews and approval processes, and step-by-step frameworks for early-career practitioners to systematically evaluate project eligibility. Attendees will gain practical insights into when and how to deploy these exemptions effectively, with a dedicated focus on screening tools and checklists for determining project eligibility from the applicant's perspective, as well as review protocols and decision-making frameworks for municipal planners evaluating exemption requests.

Air Quality and Climate Change Workshop (Part 2)

Thursday, April 23, 2026

4:15 pm – 5:45 pm | Room: Silver Pearl 3 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Michael Hendrix, Principal/Owner, Michael Hendrix Consulting

Panelist: Pierre Glaze, Senior Air Quality and Climate Change Specialist, ICF

Panelist: Kelsey Bennett, Director, Environmental and Sustainability Planning, Rincon Consultants Inc.

Panelist: Shannon Hatcher, Air Pollution Specialist, California Air Resources Board

Panelist: Paul Philley, Transportation and Climate Change Program Manager, Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District

Panelist: Brian Schuster, Director Air Quality, Climate, Acoustics, Environmental Science Associates (ESA)

Panelist: Cheryl Laskowski, Principal/Owner, Cheryl Laskowski Consulting

Abstract:

The 2026 Conference Air Quality and Climate Change Workshop is a half-day (three-hour) workshop packed with the latest methods and thresholds related to CEQA/NEPA analysis of air quality, GHG emissions, and climate change. The summary includes recommended methods on the use of EMFAC in light of recent federal challenges to California's ability to regulate vehicle exhaust emissions. We will also provide an overview of legislation, recent Executive Orders, and published court cases with audience discussion of how they affect CEQA analysis of projects, Climate Action Plans, and General Plans. This will include recommendations on how energy efficiency reach codes can be used in climate action planning in light of restrictions within SB 130, and the exceptions allowed. In addition, the workshop will include a deeper dive into VMT analysis, thresholds, how they relate to GHG emissions, and VMT mitigation banking. Finally, we will continue a discussion of the State goal of net Carbon Neutrality will work and how that will impact GHG thresholds. This last topic is a continuation of the discussion from last year's conference and will include lessons learned.

Making Waves: Future Innovators

(Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

Exploring Careers in Environmental Review and CEQA: Pathways, Skills & Perspectives

Thursday, April 23, 2026

4:15 pm – 5:45 pm | Room: Tidepool 1 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Lori Spar, JD, LLM, Director, CEQA Group, RECON Environmental

Panelist: Morgan Weintraub, Associate Project Manager, RECON Environmental

Panelist: Chelsea Polevy, Associate Biologist, RECON Environmental

Panelist: Jennifer Kazmer, Chief of Long Range Planning, County of San Diego

Panelist: Stephanie Smith, JD, Partner, Grid Legal

Abstract:

The field of environmental review, especially under CEQA, offers diverse career paths for those interested in sustainability, policy, and community development. This session will feature a panel of professionals representing consulting, public agency staff, biology, and law. Attendees will gain insight into each panelist's career path, daily responsibilities, and the challenges they face. The discussion will highlight how various disciplines intersect in CEQA practice and how participants can align their interests and skills with career opportunities. During this session, we will explore the range of CEQA-related careers, demonstrate how different disciplines contribute to

environmental review, identify key skills and qualifications for entering and advancing in the field, and present strategies for networking with professionals and peers. Panelists will share a brief overview of their role, career journey, day in the life, and a key lesson learned. A moderated discussion will address questions such as: What drew you to this field? What skills are most critical in your work? How is CEQA evolving with climate change, housing demands, and equity concerns? To make the session engaging, we'll play a short Jeopardy-style game with categories like Consulting Life, Agency Perspectives, Biology in CEQA, and Law and Land Use. The game will spark conversation and allow panelists to connect their expertise to real-world skills and challenges. Lastly, participants will be invited to ask questions, continue the discussion, and connect with panelists through shared resources such as contact sheets or QR codes linking to professional networks.

Navigating New Currents (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)

Accelerating Approvals, Safeguarding Resources: Navigating the New Landscape of Wildfire Resilience Regulations

Friday, April 24, 2026

9:00 am – 10:30 am | Room: Sandpiper AB | Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0

Moderator: Lara Rachowicz, PhD, Ecological Resilience Director, Ascent Environmental, Inc.

Panelist: Sabrina Teller, Partner, Remy Moose Manley, LLP

Panelist: Andrea Williams, Branch Chief, Environmental Stewardship and Management, Caltrans

Panelist: Katie Flahive, Senior Natural Resource Planner, Ascent Environmental, Inc.

Abstract:

California's escalating wildfire crisis continues to drive unprecedented changes in the regulatory frameworks for vegetation treatment. Federal and state agencies are actively reshaping compliance processes to accelerate project implementation while maintaining environmental protections, creating both opportunities and challenges for practitioners navigating CEQA, NEPA, and related laws.

Governor Newsom's March 1, 2025, Emergency Proclamation promulgated a sweeping suspension of CEQA and related environmental regulations, and established an application program to streamline approvals for qualifying projects. At the same time, the California Vegetation Treatment Program (CalVTP) is undergoing important updates that will influence CEQA streamlining for landscape-scale projects. Legislative changes, including AB 131's new CEQA statutory exemptions, are providing additional efficiency tools, while at the federal level, revised NEPA regulations, particularly for the USDA Forest Service, signal a new era of efficiency for wildfire resilience projects.

This panel will provide a comprehensive overview of these emerging trends, situating them within the broader regulatory landscape of CEQA and NEPA. Presentations will examine future-facing tools, such as the potential for landscape-scale approvals under the updated CalVTP and California Coastal Act, new approaches to federal Endangered Species Act compliance through the anticipated California Forest Conservation Plan, and the continued acceleration of California Endangered Species Act permitting through the Restoration Management Permit and statutory exemptions for restoration projects.

Attendees will leave with practical insights into how to choose the appropriate compliance pathway, apply new exemptions, leverage programmatic permitting models, and balance speed with compliance in an environment of constant regulatory change. This session will equip environmental professionals to better understand, anticipate, and strategically engage with the wave of regulatory evolution that is redefining the pace and scale of wildfire resilience vegetation treatment in California.

Sandy Solutions (Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies)

The Fast and the Federal: Steering Projects through Section 106 and NEPA Clearance

Friday, April 24, 2026

9:00 am – 10:30 am | Room: Sandpiper CD | Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0

Moderator: Emma Haines, Associate, PlaceWorks

Panelist: Jennifer Kelley, Senior Associate, PlaceWorks

Panelist: Bonnie Hulkower, Field Environmental Officer, Department of Housing and Urban Development

Panelist: Andrew Walters, Senior Environmental Planner, Cultural Resource, Caltrans District 11

Panelist: Tiffany Clark, Principal Archaeologist, SWCA

Abstract:

As agencies seek federal funding opportunities to expedite community development and improvement projects, this panel aims to decode the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 process pursuant to NEPA. This panel brings together agency experts and industry professionals to highlight Section 106 best practices, case studies, and regulatory updates that support grant compliance through the timely completion of cultural assessments for environmental reviews. Key topics of discussion will include defining the Area of Potential Effect (APE), understanding NHPA Section 106 timelines, strategies for consultation with agencies, and streamlining by way of programmatic agreements.

Building on Solid Ground (Streamlining, Adaptation, Resilience, and Environmental Justice)

Navigating AB 130 and SB 131: Background, Insights, and Lessons Learned

Friday, April 24, 2026

9:00 am – 10:30 am | Room: Pelican | Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0

Moderator: John Bellas, CEQA Technical Director, Michael Baker International

Panelist: Patrick Angell, Principal, Ascent Environmental, Inc.

Panelist: Stephen Velyvis, Partner, Burke, Williams & Sorensen, LLP

Panelist: Florentina Craciun, AICP, Associate/Environmental Planner, LSA

Abstract:

As CEQA professionals, AB 130 and SB 131 came into our lives on June 30, 2025 like a pair of mischievous gremlins, disrupting our best laid plans and making our CEQA minds spin. Have these two bills lived up to their promise as major CEQA reform, or are they a near miss? Join us for some group therapy and be ready to share your experiences as we explore the lessons learned in the 9 months since the passage of these bills. We'll review the key provisions of the bills, discuss project examples, provide insights from our experience, and talk through the successes and challenges we are facing as we implement these new CEQA tools. Think of it as your survival guide to the new CEQA landscape. We'll laugh, we'll cry, and we'll figure out how to make sense of it all.

Weathering the Storm (Regional Issues and Approaches)

Strategies for Weathering San Diego's Stormwater Challenges

Friday, April 24, 2026

9:00 am – 10:30 am | Room: Shorebreak | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Clint Meyer, HDR Engineering, Inc.

Panelist: Alisha Pena, Senior Planner, City of San Diego

Panelist: Leila Talebi, HDR Engineering, Inc.

Panelist: Alexis White, Senior Planner, City of San Diego

Panelist: Phil Lizzi, City of San Diego

Abstract:

The City of San Diego (City) Stormwater Department's mission is to enhance San Diego's water quality and protect communities from flooding. This session will provide an opportunity to learn about some of the unique, local challenges the City faces in achieving these mandates based on a variety of pre-existing water quality and drainage conditions throughout the city. In many instances, these challenges are structural byproducts of the City's land use development history. The federal, state, and local regulatory framework to protect and fund water quality and flood risk reduction projects has also advanced and presented multiple policy challenges in addressing these pre-existing conditions. These challenges will be discussed in the context of:

- **Planning**—The City works with partners to address water quality and flooding issues. Many of these plans and permits required for advancing these goals require coordination with other local jurisdictions and robust community engagement through Think Blue and Project Clean Water.
- **Capital Improvement Programming**—The City is currently working on over \$733M worth of capital projects to improve water quality and reduce flood risk. The City was able to secure federal funding through the Water Infrastructure Financing, Innovation Act and has successfully implemented multiple pilot projects and planned for the long-term implementation of watershed-focused, water quality, and drainage improvement projects.
- **Operations**—The Municipal Waterways Maintenance Plan (MWMP) and its programmatic EIR have significantly streamlined the City's maintenance operations by replacing the need for individual CEQA and permit approvals at each site. Instead of preparing separate environmental documents and negotiating permits for every location, the MWMP provides a pre-approved, citywide framework that enables faster, more nimble response to maintenance needs; offers predictability and transparency to resource agencies; and reduces administrative burden while maintaining compliance with CEQA and federal/state regulations.

Making Waves: Future Innovators (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

'Yes, And!': Improv Training for Environmental Planners

Friday, April 24, 2026

9:00 am – 10:30 am | Room: Osprey | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Heidi Mekkelson, Senior Managing Director, ICF

Panelist: Matt Goyne, Principal, Fehr & Peers

Panelist: Bri McWhorter, Founder and CEO, Activate to Captivate

Abstract:

Environmental planners are no strangers to curveballs. Whether it's a surprise question at a public meeting, a last-minute client request, or a cold call from the C-suite, we need to know how to be responsive on the fly. What if we told you that the secret to handling all of that with confidence, clarity, and even a little joy is improv? This interactive session introduces planners to the art of improvisation, not for the stage, but for the hearing, the client meeting, and the boardroom. Through playful exercises and real-world scenarios, participants will learn how improv can sharpen communication skills, boost public speaking confidence, and enhance client service. You'll walk away with tools to listen actively, think on your feet, and build trust through authentic engagement. Whether you're interviewing for a new project or navigating a contentious public hearing, improv helps you stay present, responsive, and human. Come laugh, learn, and leave with a new toolkit for planning with purpose (and a little more play).

Navigating New Currents (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)

Banking on Mitigation: Mitigation Banks and Exchanges as CEQA Mitigation

Friday, April 24, 2026

10:45 am – 12:15 pm | Room: Sandpiper AB | Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0

Moderator: Shannon Hatcher, Air Pollution Specialist, California Air Resources Board

Panelist: Ethan Elkind, Climate Program Director, UC Berkeley Law Center for Law, Energy, and the Environment

Panelist: Christopher Calfee, Senior Staff Counsel for CEQA and Land Use, Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation

Panelist: Ted Lamm, Associate Director, UC Berkeley Law Center for Law, Energy, and Environment

Abstract:

In recent years, especially since the enactment of SB 743, there have been increasing calls from project sponsors and lead agencies for additional and novel opportunities to mitigate significant VMT and GHG CEQA impacts beyond those strategies that have traditionally been used. An approach gaining traction as CEQA mitigation is mitigation bank and exchange (MBEx) programs, with several pilot and small MBEx programs having been developed and implemented to date. Most recently, several developments at the state level in this topic area, including Executive Order (EO) N-2-24, AB 130, and other proposed legislation, have sought to address the concurrent housing, equity, and climate crises with directives for the state to develop affordable housing MBEx programs for use as CEQA mitigation. The California Air Resources Board (CARB), the Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI), and an additional state agency (pending); UC Berkeley Law's Center for Law, Energy, and the Environment (CLEE); and a local/regional agency (TBD) are proposing a 60-minute panel presentation and discussion, followed by an audience Q&A session, of efforts being undertaken at the state, regional, and local level with respect to the development of MBEx programs for CEQA mitigation. The panel presentation will discuss state MBEx efforts (including responses to EO N-2-24 and AB 130), including technical and fiscal considerations; findings from current and developing local and regional MBEx programs; and advantages and disadvantages of potential MBEx design concepts. Key takeaways include the technical, policy, equity, and legal considerations (e.g., the need for MBEx program criteria ensuring accountability, monitoring, and enforcement of MBEx reductions, as well as address potential double-counting issues) when developing MBEx programs and potential future pathways for MBEx program development at the state and local/regional levels.

Sandy Solutions (Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies)

Transforming Midway: CEQA Challenges and Best Practices for a Landmark San Diego Project

Friday, April 24, 2026

10:45 am – 12:15 pm | Room: Sandpiper CD | Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0

Moderator: Diane Sandman, SVP, Consulting Division President, Harris & Associates

Panelist: Elizabeth Shearer-Nguyen, Program Manager, City of San Diego, Development Services Department

Panelist: Heather Riley, Partner, Allen Matkins Leck Gamble Mallory & Natsis LLP

Panelist: Shannon Davis, Director of Architectural History, ASM Affiliates

Panelist: Amy Restelli, Transportation Engineer, Kimley-Horn

Abstract:

On October 4, 2021, the City of San Diego (City) issued a Notice of Availability to lease approximately 49 acres of surplus property on the Sports Arena site in the Midway District of the city. Five development teams submitted proposals to redevelop the site. In accordance with the Surplus Land Act, the City led a 90-day good faith negotiating period with each team, which was followed by a robust due diligence and analysis phase of three remaining shortlisted teams conducted by a third-party consultant. On September 12, 2022, the San Diego City Council formally selected Midway Rising, LLC to pursue redevelopment of the Sports Arena site.

The Midway Rising Project would transform the site into a mixed-use community village complete with over 4,200 dwelling units, a multi-purpose 20,000-seat entertainment center, retail, a network of parks and public space, and multimodal pedestrian and transit-oriented transportation improvements on and around the site. The project is one of the most prominent projects in San Diego and the largest affordable housing project in the state. Such a massive and prominent project brings forth both challenges and lessons learned as the City, applicant team, and consultants worked together to bring this project to life. This session will delve into the complex CEQA process this project undertook from navigating the San Diego Sports Arena as a historic resource, analyzing the visual effects of the project in a transit priority area, navigating the intricate transportation analyses in a post-Level of Service (LOS) VMT world, and strategically tiering from the Midway-Pacific Highway Community Plan Update Program EIR. This session will offer best practices and valuable insights into preparing a legally defensible and technically robust document for a highly important project for the City.

Building on Solid Ground (Streamlining, Adaptation, Resilience, and Environmental Justice)

Climate Vulnerability and Adaptation Planning for Sustainable Freight Network In the San Joaquin Valley

Friday, April 24, 2026

10:45 am – 12:15 pm | Room: Pelican | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Kristine Cai, Principal/Director of Mobility, Northern/Central California, LSA Associates

Panelist: Jessica Coria, Director of Air Quality/Climate Change, LSA Associates

Panelist: Holly Torpey, Senior GIS Specialist/Developer, LSA Associates

Panelist: Amber Collins, Transportation Planning Division Manager, Mark Thomas

Panelist: Kasia Poleszczuk, Principal Planner, Tulare County Association of Governments

Abstract:

This session will feature a case study of a climate vulnerability assessment and adaptation project underway to help improve the climate resiliency of current and future regional goods movement networks in the San Joaquin Valley. Led by the Tulare County Association of Governments (TCAG) with consulting support from LSA, this project is a collaborative effort on behalf of all eight Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) in the San Joaquin Valley. The Valley Transport Resiliency Advancement for Neighborhoods Sustainable Freight Movement (VTRANSFRM) Study is assessing climate change vulnerabilities and identifying solutions to strengthen the resilience of the valley's goods movement infrastructure, including key connectivity and resiliency corridors. Project team experts from LSA and Mark Thomas will provide a review of the climate risk and vulnerability assessment conducted, the public outreach, adaptation strategies cost-benefit analysis, and project prioritization process for the project. The session will include an overview of current and upcoming federal and state funding opportunities that can support similar transportation network adaptation planning and design efforts in other regions.

Weathering the Storm (Regional Issues and Approaches)

Bridging Safety, Mobility, and Ecology: Early Engagement and Wildlife Connectivity in the State Route 67 Highway Operational Improvements Project

Friday, April 24, 2026

10:45 am – 12:15 pm | Room: Shorebreak | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Tracey D'Aoust Roberts, Deputy District Direct-Environmental, Caltrans District 11

Panelist: Shay Lynn Harrison, Environmental Program Manager, Caltrans District 11

Panelist: Annika Nabors, Environmental Scientist, Caltrans District 11

Panelist: Karina Cantero-Angel, Design Manager (Civil Engineer), Caltrans District 11

Abstract:

Although California has many protected areas, many species still need room to roam between protected areas to find shelter and food, migrate, mate, and adapt to climate change. Continued development without consideration of connectivity could jeopardize California's biodiversity. Fortunately, legislation such as AB 2344 and AB 1889 ensures planning at the state and local level incorporate wildlife connectivity. So, the question is: how do we move from the planning stage, to assessing connectivity needs, to implementing wildlife connectivity features? This case study demonstrates how roadway safety, ecological permeability, and community resilience can not only co-exist, but advance together.

This case study examines how Caltrans District 11 incorporated meaningful early engagement and wildlife connectivity into the environmental clearance process for the State Route 67 Highway Operational Improvements Project in eastern San Diego County. The study identifies how the team embedded connectivity early in the Purpose and Need, study methodology, biological clearance documents, and alternative screening under CEQA and NEPA; engaged with partners and stakeholders in the decision-making process; and captured the findings to 1) defensible significance determinations and avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures; 2) a connectivity performance framework with measurable objectives; and 3) strategies for incorporating recommendations into the design in a location with hydrological and terrain-related constraints.

This moderator-led panel discussion will walk through the project's controversial history; best practices for early integration of wildlife connectivity; techniques and tools for utilizing existing data, collecting new data, and incorporating all of it into the environmental clearance documents; best practices for engaging diverse stakeholders with competing priorities; and how the team will get creative and incorporating wildlife connectivity solutions into the design. Come with your questions as we brave across the terrain and come out on the other side!

Making Waves: Future Innovators (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

Measuring the Immeasurable: Objectively Evaluating Subjective Topics

Friday, April 24, 2026

10:45 am – 12:15 pm | Room: Osprey | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Rachel Goren, Associate, PlaceWorks

Panelist: Liza Debies, Associate Principal, PlaceWorks

Panelist: Lance Park, Senior Associate, PlaceWorks

Panelist: Alan Loomis, Principal, PlaceWorks

Abstract:

The word substantial, is found in the State CEQA Guidelines Appendix G 28 times in almost every issue area. What does substantial really mean when evaluating environmental impacts? What about wasteful, excessive, adequate, or acceptable? And it is not just in Appendix G—how do we know if something has been substantially mitigated or is consistent with an adopted plan? These are all words used to determine a project’s impact, but none of them are clearly defined. How can we measure something when no obvious quantitative threshold exists? Using multiple choice questions with case studies, we will poll the audience and discuss strategies for evaluating subjective standards. Lessons can be gleaned from how objective design standards are created, as they provide a framework for bringing objectivity to subjective topics, analogous to what may be required under CEQA. The process for creating goals, standards, or thresholds for topics outside of CEQA without clear guiding metrics will be examined, providing examples to help work through these murky CEQA impact questions. In conversation with experts, including an advanced CEQA practitioner, an air quality and energy specialist, and a veteran urban designer, this panel will discuss industry standards, precedent-setting court cases, and resources to provide session attendees with insights, tips, and best practices to tackle measuring the immeasurable.

Navigating New Currents (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)

Building on Sands, Landing on Shores: The Reality of CEQA Streamlining

Friday, April 24, 2026

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm | Room: Sandpiper AB | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Florentina Craciun, Associate, LSA Associates

Panelist: Darcy Kremin, AICP, Senior Principal Planner, Environmental Science Associates (ESA)

Panelist: John Bellas, Environmental Planner, Michael Baker International

Abstract:

CEQA has been reshaped by a steady stream of legislation aimed at streamlining the environmental review process. Beginning with SB 375 (2008), which provided streamlining options for transit priority projects, CEQA reform has increasingly been tied to broader state priorities housing production, transit promotion, climate policy, and infrastructure delivery. This trend continued with SB 226 (2011), which created a streamlining review for infill projects, and SB 743 (2013), which shifted transportation analysis from LOS to VMT. In practice, these reforms have produced a patchwork of new pathways: exemptions, tiering options, and new forms of CEQA documentation. Various other bills sought to make certain projects ministerial (e.g., SB 35 [2017], SB 330 [2019], AB 2011 (2022)), thus eliminating their CEQA obligation entirely. Most recently, AB 130 and SB 131 (2025) provide

a variety of exemptions and streamlining provisions designed to reduce litigation risk and accelerate review timelines. Yet the central question remains: are these new approaches, or are they simply re-packaged versions of tools CEQA practitioners have long had at their disposal? Mechanisms such as tiering under Section 15183, programmatic EIRs, and categorical exemptions have existed for decades, but often remain underutilized due to risk aversion, limited resources, or uncertainty in interpretation.

This session will examine the evolution of CEQA streamlining over the last 10 plus years, and how legislative reform translates into practice. Panelists will evaluate how these tools are working in practice, highlight case studies where streamlining has succeeded or fallen short, and discuss whether the true challenge lies in creating new statutory pathways or in developing the professional practice to apply existing ones more effectively. Attendees will gain insight into the trajectory of CEQA reform, lessons learned, and strategies to leverage both new and old tools.

Sandy Solutions (Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies)

Meeting California's Climate Goals: How to Mitigation VMT Impacts-A Case Study

Friday, April 24, 2026

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm | Room: Sandpiper CD | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Tracey D'Aoust Roberts, Deputy District Director- Environmental, California Department of Transportation

Panelist: Matthew Voss, Senior Environmental Scientist, Caltrans

Panelist: Josh Reese, Design Manager (Senior Transportation Engineer), Caltrans

Panelist: Allan Kosup, Chief Deputy, Caltrans

Abstract:

As California advances toward its climate goals, the development of effective VMT mitigation strategies has become a central challenge for transportation projects. This case study explores how Caltrans approached VMT mitigation for the I-15/SR-78 Managed Lanes Connector and Woodland Interchange Project, a complex regional improvement project designed to enhance mobility, reliability, and safety in North San Diego County.

The project faced the dual challenge of addressing significant congestion and operational deficiencies while complying with CEQA's emphasis on VMT as the primary metric of transportation impact significance. The team evaluated a suite of strategies, from demand management and transit-supportive infrastructure to active transportation and land-use based approaches. Scenario modeling and sensitivity testing were conducted to assess how measures, including, but not limited to, expanded express bus service, managed lane pricing, bicycle and pedestrian connections, and telecommute incentives, could offset induced VMT and reduce GHG. Collaboration across disciplines was critical—traffic operations staff, environmental analysts, air quality and climate specialists, and local planning agencies worked together to balance feasibility, enforceability, and long-term effectiveness. The case study also highlights how early engagement with partners allowed mitigation to be aligned with broader sustainable goals.

The moderator-led panel discussion will discuss the VMT evaluation process, its integration into the CEQA EIR, risk assessments, and lessons learned and best practices for crafting mitigation measures that are defensible and implementable over the project's lifecycle. We will underscore the importance of interagency coordination and linking VMT mitigation to broader community benefits such as improved mobility options, reduced emissions, and enhanced equity demonstrating how transportation projects can advance both regional mobility and California climate commitments.

Building on Solid Ground (Streamlining, Adaptation, Resilience, and Environmental Justice)

Reaching, Keeping, and Engaging Your Audience during Big Complex Projects

Friday, April 24, 2026

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm | Room: Pelican | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Gina Sawaya, Lead Planner, WSP

Panelist: Nick Meisinger, Project Manager, WSP

Panelist: Fernando Nieto, Program Chief, Office of Cannabis Management, County of Los Angeles

Panelist: Theresa Dickerson, Environmental Planning Director, WSP

Panelist: Hannah Thomas, Senior Planner, County of Santa Barbara

Panelist: Amanda Fagan, Ventura County Transportation Commission, Ventura County Transportation Commission

Abstract:

What is the best way to reach the public when your project spans an entire county? How can you keep communities engaged when a project continues over multiple years? What do you do when an important stakeholder group has an issue with your project? Complex projects and programmatic EIRs may impact hundreds of thousands of people and can evolve throughout the planning process, which is why large-scale environmental analysis such as Programmatic EIRs calls for authentic, meaningful buy-in from the communities they affect. Although public outreach and scoping under CEQA are often treated as a formality, robust public outreach can help explain project complexities, combat misinformation, and reduce the likelihood of future litigation. The public, stakeholders, and special interest groups often have lots of ideas on how to make a project better, making the art of reaching, keeping, and engaging your audience on large, complex projects even more important. Our panelists have experience drafting and managing environmental documents for large-scale, long-lasting, and complex projects. Using examples from across southern California, this panel will dive into the strategies panelists have used to connect, build trust, and form projects that everyone can get excited about. We will discuss effective methods to reach targeted audiences when there is a large and diverse geographic extent of the project area while balancing the budgetary and schedule constraints of the planning and CEQA processes. Panelists will share their best methods, resources, and tools for engaging your audiences when projects span multiple years. Finally, the panelists will tackle how to address and integrate important stakeholder feedback into projects. Come with ideas and questions! Audience members should be prepared to discuss strategies and best practices with each other and will walk away with strategic tools for engaging groups with specific concerns.

Weathering the Storm (Regional Issues and Approaches)

From Ashes to Action: Environmental Planning and Permitting Energy Infrastructure in Post-Wildfire Southern California

Friday, April 24, 2026

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm | Room: Silver Pearl 2 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Brianna Pilkinton, Senior Principal Business Center Operations Leader, Stantec

Panelist: Robert LeMoine, Southern California Edison

Panelist: Katie Basinski, San Diego Gas & Electric

Abstract:

Southern California's wildfire-prone landscapes pose significant challenges for infrastructure resilience, environmental permitting, and community engagement. This session will examine innovative strategies employed by investor-owned utilities in post-wildfire restoration efforts, with a focus on case studies from Pacific Palisades and Altadena. Panelists will share insights into navigating complex permitting pathways, utilizing Executive Orders to expedite emergency response, and fostering transparent communication with communities affected by wildfire events.

The session will feature a moderated panel discussion with representatives from our local investor-owned utilities (San Diego Gas & Electric and Southern California Edison). Environmental planning and permitting experts from these organizations will present real-world examples of their efforts, challenges, and solutions. The format includes a brief overview of permitting frameworks, followed by a facilitated Q&A and an interactive breakout discussion that encourage collaborative problem-solving among attendees.

Designed to be interactive, the session will allow environmental professionals to engage directly with panelists, share experiences, and explore practical solutions to common challenges. Attendees will gain a deeper understanding of how regulatory flexibility, cross-sector collaboration, and proactive outreach can accelerate recovery and build long-term resilience in wildfire-impacted areas.

Learning outcomes will include understanding the permitting and planning complexities in post-wildfire environments, exploring how EOs can streamline emergency response efforts, gaining insights into community outreach strategies that foster trust and transparency, and learn from real-world examples of infrastructure restoration and environmental compliance. This session is ideal for professionals working in environmental planning, permitting, compliance, wildfire recovery, energy infrastructure, and community engagement.

Making Waves: Future Innovators (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

All the World's A Stage: The Planner's Guide to Public Hearing Presentations

Friday, April 24, 2026

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm | Room: Osprey | Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0

Moderator: Rachel Struglia, AICP, PhD, CEQA/NEPA Senior Project Manager, Dudek

Panelist: Eric Lardy, AICP, Principal Planner and City Planner, City of Carlsbad

Panelist: June Powells-Mays, JD, Supervising Deputy, Sacramento Office of County Counsel

Panelist: Andy Pendoley, CEO + Founder, Pendoley Strategies + Communications

Abstract:

Public hearings are a critical forum where planners must effectively communicate complex ideas to decision-making bodies such as city councils, commissions, or boards. Unlike traditional public speaking, this setting demands a unique blend of clarity, adaptability, and strategic thinking. This session equips planners with the essential skills to navigate these high-stakes environments with confidence and precision.

Participants will learn how to tailor their presentations to the specific concerns and priorities of their audience, whether it's a council focused on budget impacts or a commission concerned with community feedback. The session will explore how to distill technical information into accessible language, anticipate and respond to challenging questions, and maintain composure under political pressure and public scrutiny.

Through practical tips and real-world examples, attendees will gain insight into the do's and don'ts of presenting at public hearings. Topics include identifying key experts and city staff to support your case, understanding the decision-makers pain points, and crafting fact-based conclusions that facilitate resolution. Emphasis will be placed on fostering productive dialogue and helping decision-makers reach informed outcomes.

By the end of the session, planners will be better prepared to deliver compelling, concise, and impactful presentations that resonate with diverse stakeholders and drive effective decision-making. Whether you're new to public hearings or looking to refine your approach, this session offers actionable strategies to elevate your public speaking skills in the planning profession.

Navigating New Currents (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)

Fire and Floods: What Comes After the CEQA Exemption?

Friday, April 24, 2026

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm | Room: Sandpiper AB | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Joan Valle, Chief of Regulatory, Riverside County Flood Control and Water Conservation District

Panelist: Margaret Bornyasz, Senior Flood Control Planner, Riverside County Flood Control and Water Conservation District

Panelist: Jerry Aguirre, Senior Flood Control Planner, Riverside County Flood Control and Water Conservation District

Panelist: Carly Beck, Senior Environmental Scientist Supervisor, California Department of Fish and Wildlife

Panelist: Jim Mace, Lead, Orange & Riverside Counties Team, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Abstract:

California is home to diverse climates and landscapes that support a variety of ecological communities, species, and vegetation. This diversity creates unique challenges for communities across the state when responding to emergency situations, making a one-size-fits-all solution ineffective when faced with the unpredictability of extreme weather, wildfires, and other catastrophic events. A unique approach, timely response, and a clear understanding of emergency permitting regulations is critical to saving lives and property.

While CEQA emergency procedures may be well understood, other environmental regulations, such as Section 1600 of the California Fish and Game Code and Sections 401 and 404 of the federal Clean Water Act, are not. This panel brings together experts in flood control, emergency response, and federal and state environmental regulations to share emergency procedures, best management practices (BMPs), and lessons learned to help educate environmental professionals on how to navigate the complex web of environmental regulations.

Join the Riverside County Flood Control and Water Conservation District and federal and state regulatory experts as we discuss best practices for successful emergency response and regulatory compliance, opportunities to improve interagency communication, explore creative approaches to natural disaster response and address emergency conditions affecting our communities.

During this session, the panel moderator will introduce the topic and panelists, then guide the presentation and Q&A discussion. The panel will discuss applicability and requirements for applying a CEQA Exemption, and the CDFW and USACE regulators will explain the specific pathways and requirements for obtaining emergency permits. The agencies and Flood Control and Water Conservation District will present real-world case studies to illustrate emergency permitting successes and lessons learned and highlight best practices. During an open discussion, the panel will lead a Q&A session on how to responsibly and effectively process emergency permits.

Sandy Solutions (Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies)

Climate Change Adaptation in Practice - A San Francisco Case Study

Friday, April 24, 2026

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm | Room: Sandpiper CD | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Allison Chan, Senior Environmental Project Manager, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission

Panelist: Julie Moore, Principal Environmental Planner, San Francisco Planning Department

Panelist: Luke Henningsen, Coastal Planner II, California Coastal Commission

Panelist: Eli Davidian, AICP, Principal, Environmental Planner, Environmental Science Associates (ESA)

Panelist: Karen Lancelle, Planner IV, Environmental Science Associates (ESA)

Abstract:

Coastal erosion, which is expected to accelerate with climate change and sea level rise, is threatening hundreds of millions of dollars worth of critical infrastructure upon which the City and County of San Francisco (City) relies to treat nearly one-third of its wastewater. In response, the City is undertaking the Ocean Beach Climate Change Adaptation Project, which will transform an approximately 0.75-mile stretch of the city's iconic coastline by removing revetment rock, rubble, and debris from the beach; removing a four-lane highway and vulnerable parking and restroom facilities; constructing a 3,200-foot buried seawall to protect threatened wastewater infrastructure; constructing new parking, restroom, and trail facilities; and restoring approximately 9 acres of coastal dunes. As one of the first major climate change adaptation and managed retreat projects along the California coast, the project serves as a useful case study for understanding the types of unique challenges environmental planners will face in evaluating such projects. In this session, panelists will share their experiences guiding the project through the planning, CEQA, NEPA, and environmental permitting processes, highlighting innovative approaches developed to address public and regulatory agency concerns. These concerns include potential effects of seawalls on shoreline processes (e.g., adjacent bluffs, beaches, sandbars used for surfing); on state-listed bank swallows that have colonized the bluffs stabilized by the temporary shoreline protection structure (revetment rocks); on disturbed dune habitat characterized by the California Coastal Commission as environmentally sensitive; and effects of beach nourishment on benthic communities. Panelists will also share their experiences collaborating among diverse stakeholders with sometimes competing objectives, as well as their perspectives as current and former regulators regarding the challenges agency staff face in balancing these types of impacts with those that might otherwise occur in the absence of such projects.

Building on Solid Ground (Streamlining, Adaptation, Resilience, and Environmental Justice)

Setting Yourself Up for Streamlining Success: Tips and Tricks from the Trenches

Friday, April 24, 2026

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm | Room: Pelican | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Vivian Kha, Associate, Placeworks

Panelist: Liza Debies, Associate Principal, PlaceWorks

Panelist: Kimberly Ruddins, AICP, Assistant Planning Director, City of Ontario

Panelist: Jennifer Nakamura, CNU-A, Planning Director, City of Rancho Cucamonga

Panelist: Melanie Tylke, AICP, Project Manager, County of San Diego

Abstract:

With the passage of AB 130 and SB 131, the legislature has prioritized streamlined environmental review, created new exemptions, and provided additional tools to facilitate streamlining, with a focus on addressing the housing crisis. These tools join an existing toolbox that is already cluttered. The number of provisions, definitions, exceptions, and cross references is head spinning. And what do you do about those darned burrowing owls, a special-status species with habitat all over California. In this session, we will provide a practical primer to help you rifle through the toolbox to find the right fit for your project. We'll cover exemptions (categorical and statutory), supplemental documents (e.g. addenda), tiered documents, streamlining options (e.g., Section 15183 documents), and the various options for infill projects. Our panel will include planners from the County of San Diego and Cities of Ontario and Rancho Cucamonga who have been in the trenches. We'll walk through case studies with audience participation to highlight pitfalls to be wary of and provide concrete examples of winning strategies.

Weathering the Storm (Regional Issues and Approaches)

Pathways to SB 100: Achieving Clean Energy Goals in Shifting Policy and Regulatory Environment

Friday, April 24, 2026

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm | Room: Shorebreak | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Susan Lee, Senior Executive Vice President, Aspen Environmental Group

Panelist: Vida Strong, Executive Vice President, Aspen Environmental Group

Panelist: Amardeep Dhanju, Senior Associate, Aspen Environmental Group

Abstract:

Our panel of experts is supporting multiple agencies and developers with contracts that advance clean energy development in California, an essential component for meeting the state's SB 100 renewable energy target.

Panelists will discuss California's current energy mix and explore pathways to achieving AB 100's interim and final goals within the context of evolving federal policies and regulations. The discussion will highlight projected demand growth in the state driven by transportation and residential load electrification, industrial growth, and data center expansion. It will also address key challenges to deploying onshore wind, solar, and offshore wind resources, while identifying emerging opportunities in utility-scale storage, Virtual Power Plants (VPPs), enhanced geothermal, and other innovative technologies. In addition, the panel will examine constraints such as transmission capacity; land-use and local ordinances, particularly those affecting storage; and other factors that could limit clean energy build-out.

Making Waves: Future Innovators (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

AEP Sustainability Plan and Corporate Sustainability Planning for Environmental Planning Firms

Friday, April 24, 2026

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm | Room: Osprey | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Michael Hendrix, Michael Hendrix Consulting

Panelist: Rich Walter, Vice President, ICF

Panelist: Tammey Seale, Principal, Placeworks

Abstract:

AEP is in the process of drafting the AEP Sustainability Plan. Sustainability planning for AEP and environmental consulting firms is a challenging task that requires careful consideration in developing the baseline inventory and crafting sustainability measures that will provide meaningful GHG reductions based on the activities of the organization. This session will provide insights into how to develop sustainability plans for non-profit organizations and environmental planning firms. AEP also wants your input during the development of the AEP Sustainability Plan. Join this session if you want to know more about the AEP Sustainability Plan, including the GHG baseline inventory and proposed strategies to reduce GHG emissions from activities associated with AEP. There will be interactive brainstorming events as we go through the various proposed sustainability measures.

Navigating New Currents (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)

AI in Action: Transforming Environmental Planning Through Innovation and Insight

Saturday, April 25, 2026

9:00 am – 10:30 pm | Room: Sandpiper AB | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Brian Schuster, Director of Air Quality, Climate, and Acoustics, Environmental Science Associates

Panelist: Mike Parker, AICP, Principal, Ascent Environmental, Inc.

Panelist: Mike Leech, Vice President, Technology Services Practice Leader, Environmental Science Associates

Abstract:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer a future concept, it's transforming environmental planning today, streamlining CEQA/NEPA workflows, enhancing technical analyses, and unlocking new possibilities across disciplines. This forward-looking panel session will explore how AI is being applied across the industry to tackle complex challenges in air quality, GHG analysis, acoustics, biological resources, climate adaptation, and more. Attendees will gain insights into how AI is streamlining workflows, enhancing technical accuracy, and unlocking new possibilities for environmental professionals.

This session features experts from leading firms, including Ascent and Environmental Science Associates (ESA), with insights from ESA's Data Technology & Innovation team. Panelists will share practical examples of how AI tools, such as generative models, predictive analytics, and intelligent QA/QC systems are being used to improve accuracy, reduce turnaround times, and support data-driven decision-making. We will highlight our own innovation and technical excellence through several case studies, illustrating how AI has been successfully integrated into real-world environmental workflows. For example, ESA is developing AI for Environmental Review, a set of lightweight custom GPTs to streamline project descriptions for NEPA/CEQA, with ongoing work to scale these into more robust tools that include integrations with other document repositories (like PermitAI).

Attendees will engage in interactive components including Slido polling, small group brainstorming, and a role-playing exercise where participants will evaluate AI-generated outputs and make planning decisions in real time. These activities are designed to spark dialogue, share lessons learned, and explore ethical and professional considerations around AI adoption including accountability frameworks for AI-assisted decision-making and the importance of maintaining human oversight and professional judgment.

Whether you're an AI skeptic or an early adopter, this session will provide actionable strategies and a collaborative space to explore how AI can elevate your work and the environmental industry.

Sandy Solutions (Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies)

Proof by Induction: Addressing Induced VMT, Delivering Transportation Projects, and Addressing the Housing Crisis

Saturday, April 25, 2026

9:00 am – 10:30 pm | Room: Sandpiper CD | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Ian Barnes, PE, Principal, Fehr & Peers

Panelist: Paul Herrmann, PE, Senior Associate, Fehr & Peers

Panelist: Brian Calvert, Vice President, Transportation, ICF

Panelist: Antonia Toledo, MCRP, Interim Chief of Environmental, Caltrans District 8

Abstract:

The first 5 years of delivering transportation projects under SB 743 have been characterized by finding ways to tier from previously completed environmental documents, and attempting to screen out of VMT analysis by carefully developing project concepts that avoid VMT induction and mitigation. While this method has been successful to date, the number of pre-2020 EIRs to tier from is dwindling, and the *Cleveland National Forest Foundation v. County of San Diego* (2025) decision indicated that screening criteria are subject to challenge-absent substantial evidence, the screening criteria used to presume a finding of a less-than-significant induced VMT impact for a transportation project may be subject to increased scrutiny. In the same time frame, a number of novel induced VMT analysis and mitigation methods have been developed to address the CEQA-induced VMT question in a manner that minimizes the mitigation burden while still adequately disclosing VMT impacts. Mitigation measures such as providing affordable housing in transit priority areas continue to emerge as an option to mitigate induced VMT and address the state's housing crisis. These analyses and mitigation measures also strengthen other CEQA topic areas, such as Air Quality, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Noise, and Energy that rely on VMT and traffic metrics as inputs—these inputs have been called into question by CARB on projects that did not fully address induced VMT. This session will bring together experts in traffic engineering and environmental analysis and Caltrans staff to discuss the latest developments in transportation project delivery, focused on navigating induced VMT and mitigation, while supporting the development of affordable housing throughout the State and supporting Safe Systems implementation, design goals (DIB 94), and methodology changes (ISOAP). Interactive components such as audience polling around case studies will be included to aid in attendee's understanding of this evolving topic area.

Shortcut or Path of Least Resistance? Putting CEQA Exemptions to Work for Public Works and Infrastructure Projects

Saturday, April 25, 2026

9:00 am – 10:30 pm | Room: Pelican | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Vanessa Villanueva, Senior Environmental Planner, Rincon Consultants, Inc.

Panelist: Jennifer Guenther, Esq., Legal Counsel, Rincon Consultants, Inc.

Panelist: Lauren Rhodes, Environmental Supervisor, Environmental Management Division, Bureau of Engineering, Department of Public Works

Panelist: Maryanne Cronin, Zoning Administration Officer, Planning Bureau, Community Development Department

Abstract:

In a year of swelling developments for CEQA practitioners throughout the state, including the recent passage of new legislation, the creative use of exemptions to enable public works and infrastructure projects to flow seamlessly from vision to implementation is building into a wave, finding greater support in communities and the courts to help expediently process and build vital infrastructure, enhance and provide essential public works and services to disadvantaged communities, and ensure growth and development are adequately supported. This session will explore both the new exemption opportunities presented by AB 130 and SB 131 as well as the innovative use of established statutory and categorical exemptions for public works and infrastructure projects. The focus will be on how exemptions can not only facilitate development of public facilities but also provide a cost-effective and time-saving mechanism for agencies stretched thin by the many and often competing demands placed on them. Real-world case studies will be leveraged throughout the session to demonstrate the successes, limitations, risks, and practical applications of these exemptions, and perspectives from practicing consultants, a CEQA attorney, and public agency staff will be shared.

This session will highlight new and existing exemptions that specifically pertain to disadvantaged communities (e.g., PRC Section 21080.47 for Small Water Facilities), the requirements of certain exemptions to use a skilled and trained workforce and/or prevailing wage, and the cost-saving benefits that exemptions offer to disadvantaged communities with constrained funding availability for implementing critical public works and infrastructure projects.

Through this interactive session, participants will be challenged to work in small groups to identify and apply exemption possibilities to unique real-world scenarios and compete in exemption BINGO to see how many exemptions they can identify as applicable to specific hypothetical public works and infrastructure projects.

Weathering the Storm (Regional Issues and Approaches)

Turning the Tide: Regional Waterborne Trash Solutions in Southern California

Saturday, April 25, 2026

9:00 am – 10:30 pm | Room: Shorebreak | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Lindsay Anshen, Senior Principal Environmental Planner, Stantec Consulting Services

Panelist: Shane Silsby, CEO & Founder, Silsby Strategic Advisors

Panelist: Meredith McCarthy, Director of Operations, Heal the Bay

Panelist: Michael Weber, Senior Principal, Business Center Practice Leader, Stantec Consulting Services

Panelist: Ed Othmer, PE, CPESC, CPSWQ, QSP/D ToR, QISP ToR, ENV SP, PMP, Vice President, North America Wet Weather Flow Sec, Stantec Consulting Services Inc.

Abstract:

California's diverse geography, large population, and shifting climate create complex environmental challenges, especially for Southern California's waterways and coastlines. Trash and pollution degrade water quality, harm ecosystems, and impacts public and recreational uses.

While there are regulations in place to minimize trash pollution, the volume of trash impacting coastal communities has increased and requires innovative solutions. This panel will spotlight regional issues and collaborative strategies to address waterborne trash, focusing on Southern California's unique context. Recent regional initiatives—such as the San Diego RWQCoard South Bay Tijuana River floating trash boom Pilot Project, Los Angeles County's and The Ocean Cleanup's Trash Interceptor™ in Ballona Creek, and the City of Newport Beach's Newport Bay Trash Interceptor—demonstrate innovative, effective solutions. Several other Southern California coastal municipalities have recently prepared feasibility studies to evaluate implementing similar projects, including but not limited to the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers, and are currently advancing innovative trash capture projects.

Panelists will discuss key challenges such as the reliability of trash generation data, adapting to climate change impacts, and designing resilient systems. Emphasis will be placed on best practices and collaborative approaches involving municipalities, other involved regulatory agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community groups.

To foster interactive dialogue, the session will use a real-time audience engagement tool. Attendees will have the opportunity to ask questions, respond to polling prompts, and help shape the discussion and offer actionable insights into how regional trash capture technologies can support compliance and contribute to long-term water quality improvement.

Making Waves: Future Innovators (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

LIVE AEP PODCAST TAPING* The Abundance Agenda: What part does CEQA really play and why we can't have nice things

Saturday, April 25, 2026

9:00 am – 10:30 pm | Room: Osprey | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Corinne Lytle Bonine, AES Clean Energy

Panelist: Jessa Spainhower, Founder, A Stellar Co, AEP Podcast Chair

Abstract:

Sweeping the nation, and especially the attention of the political elite in Sacramento, *Abundance* (2025) written by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson offers an explanation of how to solve today's societal problems by overcoming systemic barriers and building progress. With a focus on the administrative burdens that government places on building nice things, it's no surprise that environmental regulations like CEQA and NEPA are discussed within the framework of the impact of regulatory environments on Innovation and Progress, the role of government in fostering a culture of abundance, and the intersection of policy and technology in shaping the future.

As environmental professionals know far better than most, it's easy to cherry pick CEQA horror stories or salacious "are bees fish?" headlines. Our panelists and hosts will leverage their unique experiences working in government, lobbying, development, and consulting, and, with the help of audience discussion, will look to put a finer point on the Abundance Agenda and ask "What part does CEQA really play in why we can't have nice things"?

Please note that this will be recorded and presented in AEP's Environmental Leadership Chronicles. Audience participation is highly encouraged and will be recorded and distributed as part of the podcast. While not required, please review AEP's website (<https://www.califaep.org/podcast.php>) for a list of suggested reading and listening materials.

Navigating New Currents (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)

CEQA Law & Ethics

Saturday, April 25, 2026

10:45 am – 12:15 pm | Room: Sandpiper AB

Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0, Ethics 1.0

Panelist: Ian Michael Forrest, Founder & Managing Partner, Forrest Environmental Law

Sandy Solutions (Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies)

Noise Challenges When Permitting BESS Facilities Near Existing Residential Neighborhoods

Saturday, April 25, 2026

10:45 am – 12:15 pm | Room: Sandpiper CD | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Mark Storm, INCE Bd. Cert, Acoustic Services Manager, Dudek

Panelist: Andrew Holtz, Land Use / Environmental Planner, County of San Diego Planning & Development Services

Panelist: Victoria Boyd, Permitting Project Manager, AES

Panelist: Deandra Cass, Manager, Environmental Permitting AZ, CA, CO, NM, Clearway

Panelist: Nick Segovia, Environmental Acoustician, Dudek

Abstract:

Proper siting of battery energy storage system (BESS) facilities considers many factors, including proximity to loads or energy generation, grid stability support, the right land on which to build, interconnection with existing infrastructure, policy incentives, space for future expansion, life cycle costs, safety, and environmental requirements. The last of these include noise, especially when properties surrounding a proposed project site are residential land uses. While the batteries of such BESS facilities may represent state-of-the-art technology and be relatively quiet sources of sound emission, their containers featuring mission-critical thermal management systems involve operation of outdoor-exposed ventilation fans and/or refrigeration system components that represent traditional but often initially underestimated noise control and sound abatement challenges. Then comes the balancing of mitigation efforts, ordinance compliance, design regulations, and equipment specifications that affects or is affected by noise, directly or indirectly, such as the utilization of walls versus design and aesthetic elements. The collected panel of experts, comprising representatives from jurisdictional agencies, private developers, and acoustical consulting, share their insights and learned lessons on handling BESS facility noise emission in ways that enhance project siting success and minimize undue noise impacts to the community.

Building on Solid Ground (Streamlining, Adaptation, Resilience, and Environmental Justice)

Planning with Purpose: Leading Complex CEQA Efforts for Long-Range Campus Development

Saturday, April 25, 2026

10:45 am – 12:15 pm | Room: Pelican | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Joanne Dramko, AICP, CARB GHG Verifier, Environmental Planning Discipline Leader, HELIX Environmental Planning, Inc.

Panelist: Vanessa Toscano, Principal Planner, HELIX Environmental Planning

Panelist: Brian Harrington, Director, Physical and Environmental Planning, University of California, Office of the President

Panelist: Lauren Kahal Lievers, Principal Environmental Planner, UC San Diego Campus Planning

Panelist: Victor Ortiz, CARB GHG Verifier, HELIX Environmental Planning

Abstract:

What does it take to plan for 20 years of growth at one of the nation's top research universities, while meeting California's most stringent environmental standards? UC San Diego faced this challenge head-on with its Update to the 2018 Long Range Development Plan (LRDP) and Subsequent Environmental Impact Report (SEIR). After a decade of unprecedented growth and over \$6.5 billion of capital project investment, the Update to the 2018 LRDP sets the policy framework for the next phase of growth. With more than two decades of development potential on the table, the SEIR required careful alignment between institutional priorities, technical analyses, and strategizing for streamlined approval of future projects, all while navigating evolving regulatory expectations and guidance on climate change, sustainability, transportation, tribal cultural resources, and wildfire. Panelists will share how the team approached this complexity with intentionality—building internal and external alignment, managing moving parts, and translating a bold campus vision into defensible, future-focused CEQA documentation.

Weathering the Storm (Regional Issues and Approaches)

Leveraging and Elevating Regional Capacity and Collaboration Across Scales - Case Studies from San Diego

Saturday, April 25, 2026

10:45 am – 12:15 pm | Room: Silver Pearl 3 | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Poonam Boparai, Principal, Ascent Environmental, Inc.

Panelist: Darbi Berry, Director, The San Diego Regional Climate Collaborative

Panelist: Katie Hentrich, Climate Action Plan Administrator, City of Carlsbad

Panelist: Julia Chase, Chief Resilience Officer, City of San Diego

Panelist: Anna Bettis, MSUS, PMP, Senior Climate Planner, San Diego Association of Governments

Panelist: Ricky Williams, AICP, LUEG Program Manager, County of San Diego

Abstract:

San Diego is at the forefront of developing collaborative and cross-jurisdictional strategies to address climate change and strengthen community resilience. The region's diverse communities face unique climate challenges and are often tasked with handling these issues with limited staff and resources. However, regional collaboration has proven to offer a powerful pathway to building resilience and streamlining action. The San Diego Regional Climate Collaborative brings together local governments, agencies, academia, non-profit organizations, and business and community leaders to accelerate climate action across the region. This session will highlight how regional collaboration can enhance local capacity, foster deep partnerships, and embed resilience planning into regional policy and infrastructure.

Moderator Poonam Boparai will guide an interactive discussion of regional leaders who are applying innovative approaches to strengthen climate resilience. Darbi Berry will highlight how the San Diego Regional Climate Collaborative (SDRCC) supports member agencies with technical expertise, peer learning, and regional coordination. Katie Hentrich will discuss local implementation strategies like the South Carlsbad Boulevard Coastline Project, and how participation in SDRCC strengthens smaller cities' ability to act. Julia Chase will highlight the City of San Diego's extreme heat and coastal resilience work and discuss how larger cities can support neighboring jurisdictions with more limited resources. Anna Bettis will bring a regional perspective on climate, transportation, and resilience planning while pointing to lessons learned through the San Diego Regional Climate Action Roadmap. Ricky Williams will share how the Regional Decarbonization Framework co-creates initiatives with communities and governmental organizations to work towards a zero-carbon emissions future with a strong social justice lens. Panelists will reflect on resilience challenges and wins in their jurisdictions, and through interactive polling and discussion, attendees will gather practical lessons on advancing climate action through partnerships, embedding resilience into projects, and leveraging regional forums to achieve broader community and climate outcomes.

Making Waves: Future Innovators (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

Making Carbon Count: What's Stored, What's Sequestered, and What It Means for Your Community

Saturday, April 25, 2026

10:45 am – 12:15 pm | Room: Osprey | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Eli Krispi, Senior Associate, Climate Action and Resilience, PlaceWorks

Panelist: Hannah Kornfeld, Climate Practice Leader, Ascent Environmental, Inc.

Panelist: Sarah Halterman, Climate Action Planning Manager, Dudek

Abstract:

Carbon storage and sequestration are increasingly recognized as critical components of climate action planning, yet practitioners face significant uncertainty and a lack of guidance in how to address these issues in plans and technical analyses. This interactive session invites participants to explore the nuances between two types of analyses through a dynamic, hands-on group activity that simulates real-world planning scenarios.

After a short presentation, participants will collaborate in small groups, each representing a unique community context, and take on various stakeholder roles to evaluate nature-based solutions for carbon storage and sequestration. Through guided decision-making and resource allocation exercises, attendees will explore how existing carbon stocks and potential sequestration opportunities vary across landscapes, influence climate planning choices for greenhouse gas reduction and increased resilience, and provide a range of benefits to communities.

This engaging format sets the stage for a deeper understanding of how carbon storage (what is already captured in ecosystems and land) differs from carbon sequestration (the ongoing process of capturing additional carbon), and how both are measured, modeled, and applied in climate action planning. The panel will then present real-world examples of how jurisdictions are incorporating these analyses into their plans, highlighting tools, methods, and key considerations (such as equity, workforce development, public health, and a thriving economy) for implementation. Designed for emerging professionals and seasoned planners alike, this session builds technical proficiency while fostering collaboration and systems thinking. Attendees will leave with a clearer grasp of carbon accounting fundamentals and practical insights for integrating these approaches into their own work.

Navigating New Currents (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)

Moving Targets: Defensible Strategies for Dynamic Project Descriptions and Baselines

Saturday, April 25, 2026

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm | Room: Sandpiper AB | Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0

Moderator: Nicole Morse, Esq., Principal, T&B Planning, Inc.

Panelist: Tracy Zinn, AICP, Principal, T&B Planning, Inc.

Panelist: Emilie Colwell, Senior Project Manager, T&B Planning, Inc.

Panelist: Michael Vigliotta, City Attorney, City of Huntington Beach

Panelist: Charlene So, PE, Principal, Urban Crossroads, Inc.

Abstract:

CEQA is never dull when projects refuse to sit still. While project descriptions and environmental baselines may be straightforward for static developments, things get much more complicated and interesting when operations are dynamic, seasonal, or constantly evolving. Recent litigation has shown that these moving target projects often become ground zero for CEQA challenges, making them both high-stakes and high-interest.

This lively panel will dig into real-world examples where defining the project and setting the baseline is anything but simple—mining operations that expand and contract, health care and education facilities in constant modernization mode, sports and entertainment venues with wildly fluctuating attendance, or even once-a-year events like air shows and races. Panelists will share stories from the field, debate tricky scenarios, and highlight both pitfalls and successful strategies for aligning operational realities with CEQA's legal framework.

Attendees will leave with more than just theory—they'll gain practical tools for crafting project descriptions that capture the complexity of operations, establishing defensible baselines when normal conditions don't exist, tackling technical impact analyses (traffic, noise, air, GHGs) when activity levels are anything but predictable, and anticipating and avoiding the arguments that most often lead to litigation. Whether you're a consultant, planner, or attorney, this session promises candid discussion, real case insights, and interactive Q&A on one of CEQA's most challenging (and litigated) topics.

Sandy Solutions (Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies)

Addressing Stormwater Infrastructure Wetland Mitigation Deficit by Building Mitigation for Past and Future Impacts

Saturday, April 25, 2026

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm | Room: Sandpiper CD | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Anastasia Brewster, Senior Planner, City of San Diego Stormwater Department

Panelist: Christine Rothman, AICP, Development Project Manager III, City of San Diego Stormwater Department

Panelist: Emma Moan, Associate Planner, City of San Diego Stormwater Department

Panelist: Jasmine Bakker, Senior Biologist, Artemis Environmental

Panelist: Cody Schaaf, Habitat Restoration Ecologist, Dudek

Abstract:

The City of San Diego (City) Stormwater Department (SWD) Mitigation Team is tasked with meeting compensatory mitigation requirements (primarily wetlands) that stem from maintenance of SWD's infrastructure. Compensatory mitigation has been required for select stormwater maintenance projects beginning in the late 1990s. Increases in regulatory oversight have resulted in a need to develop compensatory mitigation prior to conducting maintenance of extensive portions of the City's inventory of stormwater infrastructure, resulting in a maintenance backlog. The SWD Mitigation Team, faced with increased regulatory challenges and the desire to deliver more cost-effective compensatory mitigation, is advancing multiple mitigation sites that are designed and permitted to offset both past impacts and anticipated future impacts. This workshop will provide an overview of the City's strategy and then explore the design, permitting, and construction approaches of three wetland creation compensatory mitigation sites (ranging from 2 to 16 acres) along the Otay River in San Diego's South Bay, which are at various stages of development. The panel will use these case studies to share stories about the hurdles the City had to overcome to advance these projects. SWD Senior Planner Anastasia Brewster will facilitate a panel conversation alongside SWD Mitigation Team lead Christine Rothman, SWD Project Manager Emma Moan, Artemis Environmental Consultant Jasmine Bakker, and Dudek Consultant Cody Schaaf. The presentation will elicit audience participation via prepared prompts, online surveys, and a voluntary contest.

Building on Solid Ground (Streamlining, Adaptation, Resilience, and Environmental Justice)

CEQA Without Tears: Turning Analysis into Community Understanding

Saturday, April 25, 2026

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm | Room: Pelican | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Travis Randel, Deputy City Manager, Development Services, City of San Jacinto

Panelist: Amanda Tropiano, Principal, De Novo Planning Group

Panelist: Tim Erney, Senior Principal Planner, Kittleson & Associates, Inc.

Abstract:

For many practitioners, the technical rigor of CEQA is only half the challenge. The other half is helping decision-makers and communities understand what the findings actually mean. Lengthy documents, specialized acronyms, and technical modeling often fail to connect with community experiences, leaving planners, consultants, and environmental professionals in the difficult position of bridging technical detail with public perception.

This session will focus on strategies for turning CEQA analysis into clear, meaningful narratives that resonate with diverse audiences, while maintaining legal and technical accuracy. Panelists will use practical experience and scenarios to demonstrate how practitioners can engage communities without slowing projects down or creating unnecessary complications. The discussion will cover how to frame exemptions, mitigated negative declarations (MNDs), and EIRs as part of a project's broader story, giving professionals tools to explain choices, tradeoffs, and mitigation in ways that foster understanding rather than confusion.

A key focus will be outreach before, during, and after the CEQA process, ensuring that communities feel informed and included from the outset, that feedback is gathered productively during hearings, and that clear communication continues after decisions are made. Panelists will highlight strategies for balancing transparency with efficiency, ensuring that community engagement supports project progress rather than creating new barriers.

The session will also explore how these practices must adapt in California's varied contexts, from multilingual and ethnically diverse neighborhoods to communities divided by freeways, watercourses, or economic disparities. The emphasis will be on building trust across differences in education, culture, and lived experience, while maintaining a clear and defensible environmental record. By the end of the session, attendees will gain a deeper appreciation for the role of storytelling in CEQA practice, practical approaches for reframing technical content, and strategies for connecting with communities across California's many divides.

Weathering the Storm (Regional Issues and Approaches)

Tijuana River Transboundary Flows — Will they ever stop?

Saturday, April 25, 2026

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm | Room: Shorebreak | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Ben Stewart, PE, Managing Consultant, Water, Stantec

Panelist: David Gibson, Executive Officer, San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board

Panelist: Gilbert Anaya, Ph.D., Chief of Environmental Management Division, U.S. Section - International Boundary and Water Commission

Abstract:

The Tijuana River sewage, trash, and sediment crisis has been raging for decades. It's one of the most pressing environmental emergencies in our region. Southern California beaches are forced to close regularly due to pollution from the river; local residents suffer from the odor and quality of water; and Tijuana residents suffer the consequences of poor sewage and water infrastructure that puts their health at risk. It's an ongoing, complicated problem.

The three primary entryways of these transboundary flows into the United States are in coastal waters of the Pacific Ocean, the Tijuana River, and tributaries flowing north through canyons to the Tijuana River Valley and Estuary. Collectively, these polluted transboundary flows impact the environment and public health in communities along the border and the coast, public access to beaches and recreational opportunities in southern California, and the personnel and activities of U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the U.S. Navy.

The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) Implementation Act, signed in January 2020, appropriated funds to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for implementation of wastewater infrastructure projects at the U.S.-Mexico border and authorized the EPA, in coordination with eligible public entities, to plan, design, and construct wastewater (including stormwater) treatment projects in the Tijuana River area. The EPA established the Eligible Public Entities Coordinating Group (EPECG), consisting of federal, state, and local stakeholders, and solicited their input on the set of project options to be considered for evaluation. During this session, you will hear from the top two officials who are impassioned and committed to solving this problem. You will hear the history, geography, and politics at play in this binational environmental crisis. You will also hear that we are on the cusp of series of solutions being put forward to help fix the problem.

Making Waves: Future Innovators (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: From the Site Plan to a Complete Project Description

Saturday, April 25, 2026

2:00 pm – 3:30 pm | Room: Osprey | Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0

Moderator: Kristen Stoner, Senior Project Manager/ CEQA Specialist, Dudek

Panelist: Casey Shorrock, JD, Attorney, Somach Simmons & Dunn

Panelist: Jen Reed, Air Quality Services Manager, Dudek

Panelist: Claudia Garcia, Assistant Director of Community Development, City of Vacaville

Abstract:

A complete and legally defensible project description is essential for CEQA compliance and environmental review, but how can a sufficient project description be prepared when there is only a site plan to go on? This nuts-and-bolts session will equip planners and consultants with the tools to review site plans and then write project descriptions that meet State CEQA Guidelines Section 15124 and withstand legal scrutiny. Through an interactive walkthrough of a sample site plan, attendees will learn how to identify and interpret critical project elements such as building size and location, access, grading, landscaping, and design features, as well as information that may be missing, including construction phasing, number of workers, equipment, operations, etc., but that should be included in a project description to ensure its adequacy.

The session will also explore how to assess circulation, sensitive receptors, and off-site improvements using aerial imagery and site contours. Participants will gain practical strategies for building flexibility into project descriptions, distinguishing between design features and mitigation measures, and understanding the whole of the action to avoid impermissible segmentation under CEQA.

Additional focus will be placed on achieving consensus with lead agencies and applicants, considering regulatory approvals, and designing project descriptions to allow for adequate review of environmental impacts. By the end of the session, planners and consultants will be better prepared to write thorough, adaptable, and legally sound project descriptions that support effective CEQA analysis and decision-making.

Navigating New Currents (Emerging Trends in CEQA and Regulatory Updates)

Lessons from Litigation: What Koi Nation v. City of Clearlake Means for Environmental Practitioners Doing Consultation

Saturday, April 25, 2026

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm | Room: Sandpiper AB | Credits: AICP 1.5, MCLE 1.0

Moderator: Holly Roberson, Shareholder, Kronick Moskowitz Tiedemann & Girard

Panelist: Merri Lopez-Keifer, Executive Director, Center for Indigenous Law and Justice, UC Berkeley Law

Panelist: Lisa Westwood, Vice President and Director of Cultural Resources, ECORP Consulting, Inc.

Panelist: Andrea Ruiz Esquide, Deputy City Attorney, San Francisco City Attorney's Office

Abstract:

In March 2025, the California First District Court of Appeal issued a published decision in Koi Nation of Northern California v. City of Clearlake, finding the City of Clearlake failed to meet CEQA's Tribal consultation requirements regarding tribal cultural resources. As the first published case interpreting AB 52 (Gatto 2014), the ruling has major implications for lead agencies, consultants, project applicants, and Tribal governments navigating tribal cultural resources issues as part of the CEQA process.

This panel will unpack the facts and findings of the case, provide a practical framework for what meaningful consultation looks like, and share concrete takeaways for practitioners. Attendees will hear from legal, agency, and consultant perspectives about how the consultation process can be strengthened to improve project defensibility, avoid costly litigation, and build more collaborative relationships with California Native American tribes.

Rather than focusing solely on legal theory, this session will emphasize how to implement AB 52 consultation in ways that are timely, culturally respectful, and CEQA compliant. Topics will include legally adequate consultation, cultural awareness, how to structure consultation for success, and document confidentiality. Panelists will also reflect on emerging best practices and key pitfalls from both agency and consultant experiences.

This session is forward-looking and solution-oriented, designed to help the environmental planning community apply these lessons in their day-to-day CEQA work.

Sandy Solutions (Case Studies, Best Practices, and Technical Studies)

Creating Safe Shores: Insights into the California Least Tern Maintenance and Monitoring Program at the San Dieguito Lagoon

Saturday, April 25, 2026

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm | Room: Sandpiper CD | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Emily Mastrelli, Natural Resources Director, Harris & Associates

Panelist: Kevin Clark, SDNHM

Abstract:

Since their creation in 2010, the 22nd District Agricultural Association (22nd DAA, also known as the Del Mar Fairgrounds) has monitored and maintained nesting habitat at four sites within San Dieguito Lagoon as part of mitigation and ongoing efforts to conserve, protect, and recover federal and state listed endangered California least tern populations. The California least tern breeds along the Pacific coast, with discontinuous nesting colonies occurring from Baja California, Mexico, to the San Francisco Bay, California. The California least tern is a ground-nesting migratory shorebird that prefers open sandy coastlines, estuaries, lagoons, and bays where the species has minimal disturbance and access to foraging for small fish. Loss of habitat as a result of coastline development, increased anthropogenic disturbance, and higher predation pressures around suitable nesting sites led to large population declines. Due to the preparation, monitoring, predator control, and resource management planning by Harris & Associates and the San Diego Natural History Museum to date, actions and decisions for the 22nd DAA's nesting site have resulted in drastic improvement of occupation of the site, and the most successful fledge numbers and the least amount of egg, chick, and adult deaths compared to other created sites in Southern California and throughout the state. This session will provide a look at key environmental design and management choices, lessons learned, insights, and reporting that can inform current and future mitigation and monitoring programs for the species.

Building on Solid Ground (Streamlining, Adaptation, Resilience, and Environmental Justice)

Spotlight on San Diego Infrastructure: CEQA in Action

Saturday, April 25, 2026

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm | Room: Pelican | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Carrie Purcell, Deputy Director, City of San Diego

Panelist: Nancy Graham, AICP, Program Manager, City of San Diego

Panelist: Kristy Forburger, Program Manager, City of San Diego

Panelist: Gail Getz, LUEG Program Manager, County of San Diego

Panelist: Kelsey Dix, Land Use/Environmental Planner III, County of San Diego

Panelist: Masha Landau, Land Use/Environmental Planner III, County of San Diego

Panelist: Ted Anasis, Manager, Airport Planning, San Diego County Regional Airport Authority

Abstract:

San Diego is in the midst of transformative infrastructure investment, and each major project brings the challenge and opportunity of navigating CEQA. This panel brings together representatives from the City of San Diego (City), County of San Diego (County), and San Diego County Regional Airport Authority to highlight high-profile projects and lessons learned.

The City will showcase projects under the Mission Bay Park Improvement Program, which uses a programmatic environmental evaluation with 30% engineering design to guide phased implementation. The program includes wetland and shoreline restoration, habitat expansion, seawall rehabilitation, and active transportation upgrades. The City will also highlight the La Media Road Improvements, a major upgrade to a key cross-border trade corridor serving the Otay Mesa Port of Entry. The CEQA process balanced protection of sensitive habitats, including burrowing owls, vernal pools, and wetlands, while creating a safer, more reliable corridor for thousands of vehicles.

The County will discuss biological avoidance for the Riverford Road Roundabouts Project, a reconfiguration to improve a key interchange with State Route 67. The County will also discuss progress on a vital advance permittee-responsible wetland mitigation site providing mitigation for maintenance and capital projects.

The San Diego County Regional Airport Authority will provide an inside look at Terminal 1, featuring 30 gates, expanded concessions, a high-capacity baggage system, and a new access road—designed to meet growing passenger demand while balancing environmental review and community concerns.

Attendees won't just hear about CEQA challenges—they'll test instincts through an interactive prediction game, anticipating issues before panelists reveal results.

Whether you're an environmental professional, planner, or legal practitioner, this session offers an engaging way to deepen CEQA understanding in real-world projects and gain practical takeaways from San Diego's recent infrastructure investments.

Weathering the Storm (Regional Issues and Approaches)

Right-Sized Planning: CEQA Qualification and Other Paths to Successful Climate Action

Saturday, April 25, 2026

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm | Room: Shorebreak | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Kelly Bray, Principal Land Use and Climate Planner, Dudek

Panelist: Poonam Boparai, Principal, Ascent Environmental, Inc.

Panelist: Tammy L. Seale, Principal, Climate Action & Resiliency Services, PlaceWorks

Panelist: Sarah Halterman, Climate Action Planning Manager, Dudek

Abstract:

As California jurisdictions strive to meet ambitious climate goals, the choice between pursuing a CEQA-qualified Climate Action Plan (CAP) versus a non-qualified plan has significant implications for implementation, legal defensibility, and efficient use of limited resources. This panel will explore the strategic value of both approaches, highlighting when CEQA qualification enhances a plan's utility, such as streamlining environmental review for future projects, and when a non-qualified CAP may offer greater flexibility or better alignment with local priorities.

Agency representatives and consultants will share firsthand experiences developing and implementing both types of plans, with a focus on San Diego jurisdictions. The City of San Diego's CEQA-qualified CAP and checklist will be featured as a regional case study, illustrating how CEQA integration can support project-level consistency and climate accountability. The panel will also spotlight a non-qualified CAP example from the region, showcasing how jurisdictions have successfully advanced climate goals outside the CEQA framework.

The discussion will center on key decision points in choosing a CEQA-qualified versus non-qualified CAP, the legal, procedural, and strategic trade-offs involved, and how regional priorities such as resiliency and new development shape CAP design and implementation. This session will provide practical guidance for planners, policymakers, and stakeholders navigating the complex landscape of climate planning in California’s diverse regions.

Making Waves: Future Innovators (Students, Emerging Professionals, and Technical Skills Development)

What I Wish I Had Known About CEQA (or Things They Don’t Teach in School or CEQA Essentials)

Saturday, April 25, 2026

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm | Room: Osprey | Credits: AICP 1.5

Moderator: Bob Brown, AICP, Senior Project Manager, SHN

Panelist: Pat Angell, Principal, Ascent Environmental, Inc.

Panelist: Mindy Fogg, Principal Planner, City of Carpinteria

Panelist: Bob Brown, Senior Project Manager, SHN

Panelist: Cody T. Sargeant, Associate Land Use Attorney

Abstract:

What I Wish I Had Known About CEQA . . . This session hopes to recruit seasoned CEQA practitioners as well as students to join in an interactive session to share insight on aspects of CEQA not taught in schools or at CEQA Essential workshops. Get an insider perspective, whether interested in the private or public sectors, from seasoned CEQA practitioners. What do you know now that you wished you knew when you started your CEQA career? What are new hires expected to know about CEQA? What needs to be “unlearned” about CEQA? What’s your least favorite CEQA checklist question? Biggest surprise learned in your CEQA practice? Favorite public comment experience? Blunders, bleeps and regrets (best practices). Our panel provides a range of perspectives from an environmental consultant, lead agency, attorney, and educator, as well as the valued perspective from the audience.

2026 CEQA Update Panel

Sunday, April 26, 2026

9:00 am – 12:00 pm | Room: Sandpiper | Credits: AICP 3.0, MCLE 3.0

Panelist: Bill Halligan Esq., Harris and Associates

Panelist: Christopher Calfee, Governor’s Office-Land Use and Climate Innovation

Panelist: Mark Teague, Placeworks

Panelist: Kristin Blackson, Blackson and Associates

Abstract:

2026 CEQA Update: This session will provide an update discussing some of the most critical issues to daily implementation of CEQA including an update from LCI, Legislative Update, and a Case Law Update.

2026 Conference Exhibitor Map

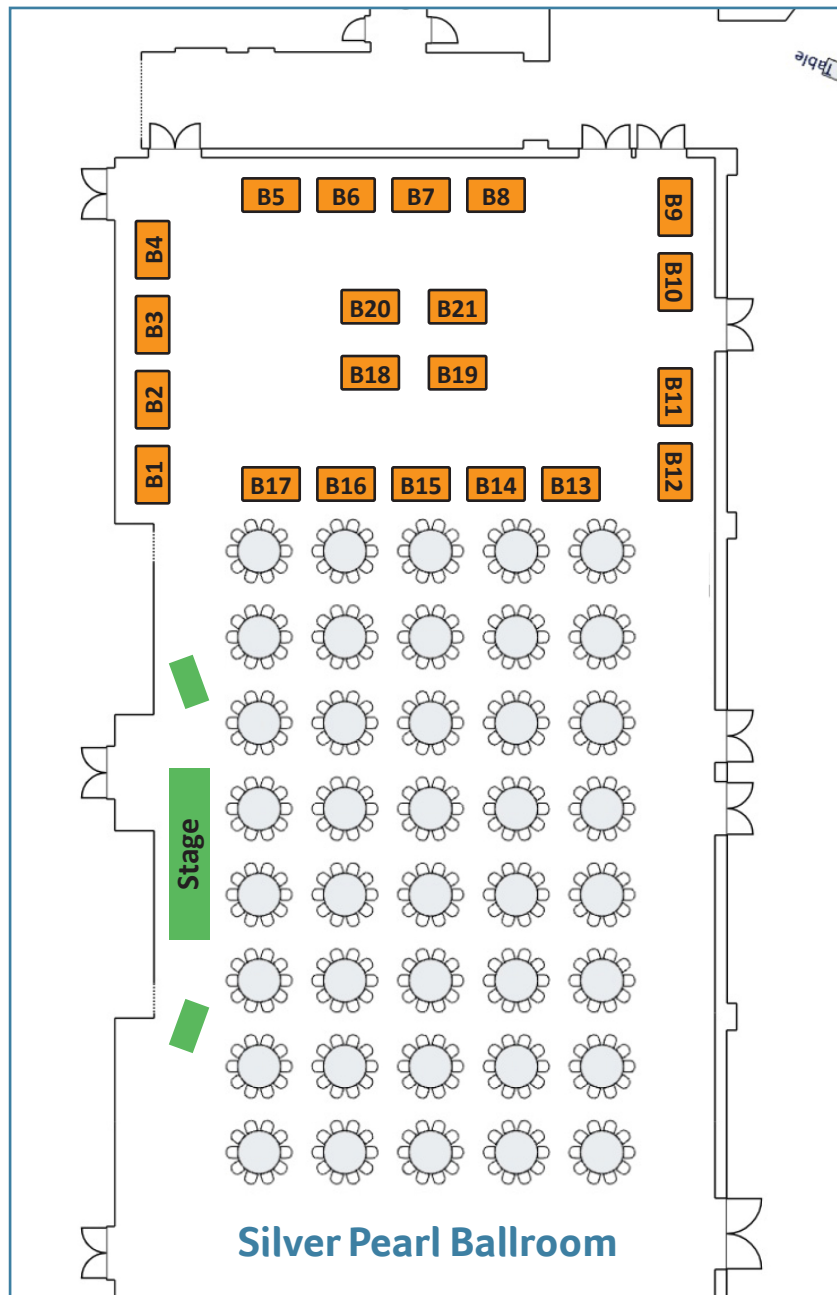
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Sheraton San Diego Hotel & Marina | April 23-26, 2026: Silver Pearl Ballroom

Table/booth sizes: **Booth Space:** 8 ft long x 6 feet deep. **Tabletop Space:** 6ft long x 6 feet deep.

For more information, please contact: **Lynne Bynder**, AEP Executive Director: lbynder@califaep.org



Booth

B#

- Booth 1:** Rincon Consultants, Inc.
- Booth 2:** Provost & Pritchard Consulting Group
- Booth 3:** WRA
- Booth 4:** Riverside County Flood Control & Water Conservation District
- Booth 5:** PlaceWorks
- Booth 6:** Psomas
- Booth 7:** Caltrans Division of Environmental Analysis
- Booth 8:** Kimley-Horn & Associates, Inc.
- Booth 9:** Aspen Environmental Group
- Booth 10:** E|P|D Solutions, Inc.
- Booth 11:** ASM Affiliates, Inc.
- Booth 12:** Resource Environmental Solutions
- Booth 13:** RECON Environmental, Inc.
- Booth 14:** Sapphos Environmental
- Booth 15:** GTS
- Booth 16:** ECORP Consulting, Inc.
- Booth 17:** Helix Environmental Planning
- Booth 18:** Ascent
- Booth 19:** Westervelt
- Booth 20:** AECOM
- Booth 21:** Stantec

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Save the Date: April 25-28, 2027

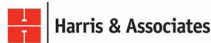
Location: Hyatt Sonoma Wine Country, Santa Rosa

For the most current information: www.califaep.org



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