Estuary Summit
Pivots from Science to People
Adapting Climate Policy
The second session of the summit featured two pre-recorded videos. In the first, Congresswoman Jackie Speier, whose district covers most of the San Francisco peninsula, noted federal appropriations for the San Francisco Estuary have lagged behind comparable programs like Puget Sound and Lake Pontchartrain.

“I was extremely disappointed — no, I am indignant — to see that the San Francisco Bay is getting short-changed yet again,” she said. Speier touted the $30 million for the Estuary she helped secure in the current budget bill that is still in negotiations, while acknowledging its fragility. “I have introduced the San Francisco Bay Restoration Act in every Congress since 2010,” she said. “And I am hoping this will be the last time.”

In the second video, California Department of Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot continued the budget thread. “In Governor Newsom’s budget we have $10 billion allocated for climate resilience,” he said, noting how far we’ve come since a year ago when the previous U.S. president debated the existence of climate change.

Crowfoot listed his agency’s other priorities, including looking at how to meet the state’s goal of conserving 30% of California’s land and coastal waters by 2030, and how to streamline restoration project permitting. “One-third of restoration project budgets can be spent on planning and permitting,” he said. “Non-controversial restoration projects can take up to ten years to begin.” Crowfoot gave a shout-out to the San Francisco Bay Restoration Regulatory Integration Team, smiling as he stumbled over the acronym (IBRRT) but naming the group a “powerful model” for his initiative to speed up the implementation of restoration projects.

The Estuary Blueprint
While the State of the Estuary conference and report may be the centerpiece of regular reporting to the public for the San Francisco Estuary Partnership, the Estuary Blueprint is its playbook. The playbook is getting an overhaul this year, and third speaker Caitlin Sweeney talked about how the Blueprint’s themes offered a road map for the rest of the sessions in the day-long summit.

Sweeney is the director of the Partnership, which hosted the summit. The Blueprint is the latest iteration of the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan that the Partnership, a federal-state program, is required to update every five years.

Like the summit, said Sweeney, the Blueprint aims to bring diverse voices together and actively support new partnerships. Also like the summit, the Blueprint crosses geographies and communities, identifies and elevates the highest priority actions, and spotlights the nexus of social and ecological resilience.

“The Blueprint offers both a collaborative regional vision and an actionable strategy,” Sweeney said. “It walks a line between aspirational and feasible.”

She concluded her opening remarks with questions she asked participants to keep in mind throughout the conference, among them: “Where do we want to be in 2050? How do we focus our limited resources on the most urgent areas? And how do we hold ourselves and each other accountable for the future?”

One-third of restoration project budgets can be spent on planning and permitting.

Environmental protection or economic advancement is never compromised by the parallel pursuit of equity.
Rematriation, Revitalization of Native American Infrastructure

As the federal government debates how to address the nation’s aging pub-
lit works, the October Estuary Summit brought refreshing perspectives from
two prominent Native American lead-
ers on ways of thinking about infra-
structure.

Corrina Gould, chair and spokes-
person for the Confederated Vil-
lages of Lisjan, Corrina Gould, chair and spokes-
person for the Confederated Vil-
lages of Lisjan, and Valentin
Lopez, chair of the Amah Mutsun
Tribal Band and president of the Amah
Mutsun Land Trust, shared their
insights. They stressed that only when
we prioritize the abundant natural
resources provided by the land, rather
than roads and the electric grid, will
we end the pattern of seeking to
control and dominate the world around
us. By centering native communities
in environmental restoration efforts,
we can repair both our human connec-
tions and those with the land.

Gould opened her session by com-
menting on the remarkable nature of
the summit bringing people together
to focus on the health of the San Fran-
cisco Estuary. “It’s amazing that we’re
here talking about our traditional
homelands, the estuaries: the lungs of
this part of the world,” she said.

Gould discussed initiatives led
by the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, an
urban, indigenous, women-led land
trust working to return land to indig-
enous people. In the Sodrante Park
neighborhood of East Oakland, the
group is restoring a small parcel
of land, the first to be returned to the
Ohlone people. Planting Justice, a lo-
cal nonprofit working to create per-
maculture gardens and provide work
opportunities to formerly incarcer-
ated people, has partnered with the
Sogorea Te’ Land Trust to facilitate
this land transfer.

“We have created a space that is
not just for indigenous people but
for people from all walks of life, to
come and begin to feel what it is like
to be part of land again,” Gould said.
This includes the planting of native
plants for medicinal use and the
weaving of tule reeds into community
structures.

Valentin Lopez, chairman of the
Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and presi-
dent of the Amah Mutsun Land Trust,
spoke of the key differences between
western and indigenous priorities.
Native American cultures know that
infrastructure encompasses the
mountains, rivers, oceans, plants,
and wildlife, he said. “We don’t need
to create infrastructure, we need to
restore infrastructure given to us by
the Creator.”

This includes cultural burning, which
was used across California for
thousands of years as a tool for land
management. Scientists are studying
the benefits of these low-intensity
controlled burns, which support
native species and help prevent
the raging, destructive wildfires we
increasingly see.

Lopez also emphasized the
importance of thinking about the
long-term consequences and
benefits of our actions. “Whenever
we implement anything new we ask
ourselves if it will still be good seven
generations from now,” he said.

As a final parting call to action,
Lopez asked that members of the
audience “recognize that all restora-
tion efforts must be indigenous-led.”
He continued: “Every morning when
you wake up, you’re putting your
feet on ground stolen from Native
Americans, and we ask you every
day to think about how you benefit from
that, and how you can help the tribes
restore their culture.”

Rematriate: to restore a people to
their rightful place in sacred relationship with their ancestral land.

We as California people have prayers for the salmon, we remember
them as relatives that come to feed and take care of us.

We don’t need to create infrastructure, we need to restore infrastructure given to us by the Creator.

Valentin Lopez
Amah Mutsun Tribal Band

Corrina Gould
Confederated Villages of Lisjan

Reconnecting Mill Creek to its Watershed

For thousands of years, Coho
salmon and steelhead returned to
spawn in the cold waters of Mill
Creek, part of the San Vicente
watershed in the mountains above
Santa Cruz. This ended when
a mining and logging company
dammed the creek in the early
20th century. Now, an ambitious
conservation initiative has succeeded
in removing the dam, bringing people
together across local land trusts,
Native American groups, regional
agencies, and researchers from
multiple universities. Valentin Lopez,
chairman of the Amah Mutsun Tribal
Band, spoke about the dam removal
in his session of the Estuary Summit.

“The San Vicente Redwoods is a
large stretch of forest sitting above
the coastal town of Davenport.
Following its 2011 purchase by a
coalition including the Sempervirens
Fund, Peninsula Open Space Trust,
Save the Redwoods League, and
multiple universities. Valentin Lopez,
chairman of the Amah Mutsun Tribal
Band, spoke about the dam removal
in his session of the Estuary Summit.

“We’re very glad to have worked
on [the dam removal] with other
partners,” said Valentin Lopez of the
Amah Mutsun Land Trust. The
Amah Mutsun Tribal Band are the
descendants of Mutsun and Awas-
was-speaking peoples who occupied
much of the current Monterey Bay
region. Ongoing restoration, monitor-
ing, and research is needed to restore
the watershed’s historical role in the
ecosystem. The creek here is spring-
fed and we’re going to be restoring
it right off the dam,” says Matt Shaf-
fer, communications officer with the
Sempervirens Fund. The replacement
pipeline was moved to a new location,
and the groups got the green light
to take the dam down.

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the watershed’s historical role in the
ecosystem. The creek here is spring-
fed and we’re going to be restoring
salmon) habitat and the spawning
beds. This has to happen at many,
many other dams,” said Lopez.

In the same Estuary Summit
session, Corrina Gould, chair and
spokesperson for the Confederated
Villages of Lisjan, spoke of the
importance of rebuilding the
relationship between salmon and
native people.

“We as California people have
prayers for the salmon, we remember
them as relatives that come to feed and take care of us,” she said. “We have a responsibility to… welcome them home. We can’t do that work because of the culverted rivers and
dammed creeks. We have this
responsibility, because those salmon
don’t have a voice, but we as human
beings are supposed to make sure that
relationship stays strong. What
can we do? We can open up those
streams and those waterways.”

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Intersectional Partnerships

Leading off the Estuary Summit’s afternoon panel on generating innova- tion, intersectional partnerships to build climate resilience and climate justice, Melissa Jones, executive director of the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative, outlined seven best practices for community engagement. These were developed by a local coalition of public health administrators working to eliminate health inequities that Jones directs, under the rubric “Partner Together.”

With a view to new federal and state funding streams, Jones advocated prioritizing community-supported resilience efforts and valuing local knowledge and expertise. She quoted Roxana Franco of Nuestra Casa: “Don’t hire consultants and then ask us to do the work for free.” There’s room for improvement in the public side, Jones observed: “A lot of Bay Area jurisdictions aren’t using any equity frame at all in competing for federal money. The best tool so far is from Harris County, Texas.”

Wetland ecologist Anthony Khalil, from Bayview Neighborhoods United, said “Learning from Communities & Youth Intersectional Partnerships” as a “confluence of opportunities” for equity and trying to heal some of the trauma of those huge infrastructural projects.

Summing up, Ralston described a “confluence of opportunities” for equitable innovation: “Green, living infrastructure—it’s about connecting the dots between people and the centers that make them alive.”

He saluted another hero, the late Kenya’s Wangari Maathai, Honduran indigenous leader Berta Cáceres, and Bayview activist Marie Harrison—as he linked his personal experience with neighborhood youth in a Candlestick Point restoration project to regional and national currents.

“The crucible of 2020 revealed many social and environmental inequities,” Khalil said, analogizing the impact of the pandemic to impacts of history and climate change; for the latter, there’s no vaccine, no one-shot solution. “In the pandemic, we’re asking the most vulnerable folks to shoulder the heaviest load and carry the most water,” he added.

Khalil praised the Bay Conservation and Development Commission’s recent Bay Plan equity and social justice amendment as a hopeful sign of transformative cultural change within the region’s agencies, and shared a quote that sums up his philosophy: “If peace is made on common ground, equity is made on public land.”

Joining the session summary from his office at the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, senior policy advisor David Ralston made clear he’d rather be outside getting his hands dirty. “The most meaningful work agency folks can do is roll up their sleeves, plant some trees, go on the ground,” he said. “That’s the kind of work that motivates me personally.”

In his presentation “Where the Wetlands Meet the Flatlands,” Ralston showcased pilot projects in East Oakland aimed at restitching the urban fabric by creating or restoring vital connections between disadvantaged communities and the green infrastructure of creeks and shorelines.

Ralston also explored intersections between air and water, agencies and communities, struggling neighborhoods and abused natural waterways. “The Bay Area Regional Collaborative and the Resilient by Design Challenge [RBD] started my agency’s involvement with water and communities,” he recalled. “Living green infrastructure needs air and water quality to survive.”

“We’re at a transformative moment, Ralston observed, with an opportunity to use their infrastructure and break the barriers separating human ecology from the natural environment. Build greenly while avoiding gentrification and the market logic of development will be a challenge.

Three such initiatives are underway in the area around San Leandro Bay. The state of BDE’s Estuary Commons project. The I-880 corridor from High Street to 88th Avenue contains the worst-off disadvantaged communities in the Bay Area in terms of health outcomes, he said. They also subject to sea-level rise and groundwater inundation.

Former wetlands are now filled with gray infrastructure. Hidden urban creeks, like San Leandro/Lisjan Creek, offer a pathway to reconnection: “People will say, ‘We don’t know about this creek; we don’t have access.’ But their grandparents may have fished or played in the creek.”

Merritt College students, the Indigenous-woman-led Sogorea’te Land Trust, and others are working to reclaim the creek as a sanctuary. However, the vision of a riparian greenway trail is threatened by plans for a high-speed Capitol Corridor rail line through the neighborhood. The railroad is refusing to allow a path to go underneat to connect the schools and the neighborhood to the front. If we can’t get people to the waterfront, it’s not doing us any good,” said Ralston.

In East Oakland’s Columbia Gardens neighborhood, Brookfield Elementary School sits next to the freeway, with a power transmission line over its playground. Groups like Higher Ground are planting a vegetation buffer along a 400-foot stretch of freeway to mitigate air and water pollution.

A third project envisions pedestrian and bike bridges over I-880, providing access to the Martin Luther King Regional Shoreline. That, Ralston said, will require “We’re trying for state and federal funds to make it happen.” It will also require working with CalTrans, an agency that he says is “taking a new tack on realizing equity and trying to heal some of the trauma of those huge infrastructure projects.”

“Don’t hire consultants and then ask us to do the work for free.” There’s room for improvement in the public side, Jones observed: “A lot of Bay Area jurisdictions aren’t using any equity frame at all in competing for federal money. The best tool so far is from Harris County, Texas.”

At the 21-year-old may be better considered an expert when it comes to witnessing environmental degradation. “People will say, ‘We don’t know about this creek; we don’t have access.’ But their grandparents may have fished or played in the creek.”

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Summing up, Ralston described a “confluence of opportunities” for equitable innovation: “Green, living infrastructure—it’s about connecting the dots between people and the centers that make them alive.”

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A lot of the environmental racism and environmental justice obstacles are not due to a lack of awareness... [but] to the lack of value our leaders place on the affected communities and the affected resources.

most affected and least included in the shoreline planning process,” noted Armenta in their presentation.

Young people who are systematically excluded from planning their own future are more likely to feel overwhelmed by the climate crisis, said Lil Henriquez. However, through Mycelium’s high school programs, she’s seen the benefit that engagement can bring to young people’s outlook on the future.

“Take the overwhelming thing and break it down into two to four immediately implementable actions to address adaptation or mitigation,” she said, describing the approach the program teaches to participating youth. “When people feel they can do something, it helps lessen the anxiety and doomism.”

Young people need to be included in planning our response to climate change, added Phoenix Armenta, reflecting on the essential role youth play in effecting meaningful change. “We can’t just pile our hopes onto their shoulders and not give them the tools to make sense of what is happening in the world.”

Team Tackles Homelessness

“Homelessness is an experience, not an identity,” said Romie Nottage at the Summit’s afternoon session. Her organization seeks to “provide a path to recovery from homelessness” rather than treating homelessness as an end-state of being. The “teams” of Downtown Streets Team are unhoused volunteers that work beautification shifts (cleaning streets and alleyways, for example) for a basic needs stipend (food or transportation assistance) and access to case management.

Since 2005, when the program began, team members have on average spent about six months before finding housing and stable employment. By working towards community beautification and building a roadmap to stable, housed living, Downtown Streets Team is “changing the way the unhoused are perceived in the public eye,” says Nottage.

Closing Thought

At one late-in-the-day final breakout session of the summit, participant Deborah Moore, and environmental advocate, had this to say: “I’ve been to this conference many times, and this year was really different: it elevated the importance of ceremony, sacredness, and spirituality, emphasized for us the need to yield power, change decision-making, avoid exclusionary expertise. It gave all of us a sense of how if we slow down we can go farther with more people.”

Contributing writers: Ariel Okamoto, Isaac Pearlman, Elyse DeFranco, Joe Eaton, Michael Hunter Adamson & Sierra Garcia. Art: Veronica Chan (p.9), Afsoon Razavi (pp.10-16 summit networks).

DEEPER DIVE

Summit Recordings

- Morning Session: https://bit.ly/3pwj8Jw