

# Cutting Green Tape Initiative

March 9, 2020

California, an international leader on tackling climate change, can also lead on improving environmental conservation, maintaining biodiversity, and building resiliency by increasing the pace, scale, and quality, of environmental restoration and stewardship. This requires enabling environmentally beneficial projects to happen more quickly and cost effectively across the state.

The Cutting Green Tape initiative will expedite and improve environmental conservation and restoration projects by improving planning and permitting of these projects, expediting their review and approval, enabling financial incentives and implementation support, and improving cross-jurisdictional collaboration.

A White Paper outlining how to achieve these objectives will be released by the Natural Resources Agency and key environmental partners during the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Earth Day in late April.

## The Challenge

California faces grave environmental threats that require bold, immediate action. As our state continues to experience unprecedented environmental change, momentum is building to remove barriers to the essential work of restoring, enhancing, and preserving our natural resources and ecological systems.

California faces three important environmental challenges:

- Climate change: California lost 3% of its landmass in wildfires over the last few years, and faces historic drought, flooding, increased temperatures, coastal erosion, sea-level rise, and other impacts to human health, the economy, and ecosystems.
- Biodiversity crisis: A global hotspot for biological diversity, California is home to more species and ecosystems than anywhere else in our nation. While this biodiversity sustains our health, economy, cultures, and way of life, it is also disappearing at one of the highest rates in the country. Habitat degradation and climate change put our state at grave risk.

- Access and equity: Many Californians do not get to experience and appreciate the natural riches of California and may not ever if we do not protect them for current and future generations.

Currently, we are not restoring and managing our natural resources at a scale and pace sufficient to address these challenges. Environmentally beneficial projects continue to be important to deliver across the state, including stream restoration, floodplain habitat expansion, and reforestation. Currently, these projects can take years to deliver and one-third of the overall project budget can be spent on the planning and permitting of these projects alone.

A significant impediment is that laws and regulations which are essential and effective tools to protect the environment from harmful activities are less suited for environmentally beneficial actions. In fact, they often have the unintended consequence of limiting the amount of environmental restoration that gets done. Projects are often evaluated in terms of risk management- considering their potential impacts- with few tools to consider their long-term benefits or the risk of inaction. The focus on avoiding potential impacts rather than incentivizing environmental improvement projects results in fewer and smaller actions being taken at a slower pace and a greater expense.

An urgent need exists to shift the focus from avoiding risk of action to an imperative to take action. This involves “cutting green tape,” reforming outdated governmental processes or requirements in a way that will enable environmentally beneficial work to happen more quickly, simply, and cost-effectively. The idea that environmental permitting is a barrier to environmental improvements is widely accepted and there is a strong desire for reform among conservation practitioners and advocates.

### **The Opportunity**

Nested within these grave challenges is an invitation to be transformative and drive durable change to increase environmentally beneficial restoration. California, an international leader on tackling climate change and other intractable problems, can also lead on biodiversity, conservation, and resiliency by increasing the pace, scale, quality, and quantity of environmental restoration and stewardship. This requires increasing permitting effectiveness, expediting review and approval, providing financial incentives and funding implementation, improving cross-jurisdictional collaboration, and other appropriate actions.

Cutting Green Tape is an initiative to catalyze new solutions to protect and sustain our natural resources by fostering broad systems change. It will identify and advance significant, measurable actions in the next three years and beyond to:

- create efficiencies in permitting and regulatory compliance for environmentally beneficial projects;
- maintain commitments to California's environmental regulatory safeguards; and
- allow for state agencies to maintain fidelity to statutory requirements while more easily permitting efforts that seek to build resilience.

### **Cutting Green Tape Initiative**

On December 18, 2019, the Secretary of Natural Resources and partners launched Cutting Green Tape, an initiative to increase permitting and other efficiencies for environmentally beneficial projects. Though anchored in the Natural Resources Agency, Cutting Green Tape is an interagency effort with support of Secretary Blumenfeld, Secretary Ross, and Water Board Chair Esquivel. Another key partner in the initiative has been the California Landscape Stewardship: a cross-boundary, landscape scale land stewardship collaborative comprised of local, state and federal agencies, non-profits, academic institutions, private landowners, and more.

The initiative includes five visionary and progressive action-oriented roundtables between December 2019 and April 2020 that cumulatively bring together over 150 leaders across the state from environmental conservation and other NGOs; large landowner groups; public and private land managers; local, state, and federal government agencies; tribes; water utilities; working lands; and others in the private sector. These individuals bring knowledge, insights, experiences, innovative ideas, considerable time, and resources to advance a reform agenda that will yield beneficial natural resource outcomes that build on strong existing work in state agencies and departments.

The process will culminate by Earth Day, April 22, with a set of recommendations for improving permitting and other efficiencies to increase the effectiveness, quality, and quantity of environmental restoration in California. The recommendations will be tangible, discrete, and time-bound and will include specific tactics and mechanisms to advance those recommendations as well as a list of actions the Secretary is committed to taking. Beyond Earth Day, we will have the opportunity to keep the momentum going towards broad systems change, creating new government models to dynamically meet the challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change, and build a resilient California.