Protecting Tribal Beneficial Uses

Adriana Renteria
Director, Office of Public Engagement, Equity, and Tribal Affairs
State Water Resources Control Board



CALIFORNIA
Water Boards

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REGIONAL WATER BOARDS

1 | North Coast
2 | San Francisco Bay
3 | Central Coast
4 | Los Angeles
5 | Central Valley
6 | Lahontan
7 | Colorado River Basin
8 | Santa Ana
9 | San Diego

Water Boards Mission

Preserve, enhance, and restore the quality of California's water resources and drinking water for the protection of the environment, public health, and all beneficial uses, and to ensure proper water resource allocation and efficient use, for the benefit of present and future generations.

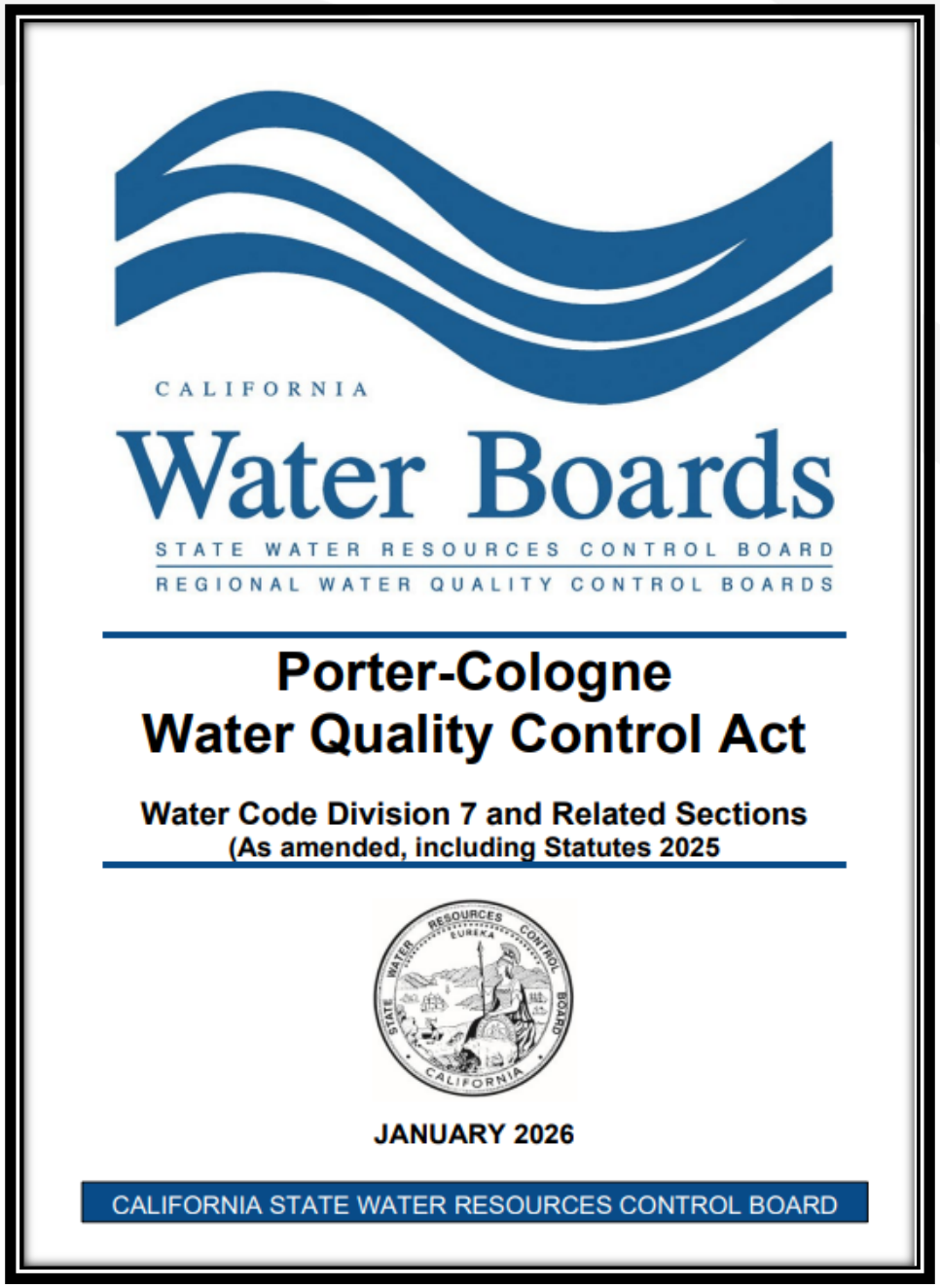
Tribal Uses of Water Since Time Immemorial











Authority to establish Tribal Beneficial Uses

Tribal Beneficial Uses were defined in the final Part 2 of the Water Quality Control Plan for Inland Surface Waters, Enclosed Bays, and Estuaries of California—Tribal and Subsistence Fishing Beneficial Uses and Mercury Provisions.

Guidance: pages 12-15 | The Water Boards's Role in Protecting Water Quality

Tribal Beneficial Uses

Tribal Tradition and Culture (CUL): Uses of water that support the cultural, spiritual, ceremonial, or traditional rights or lifeways of California Native American Tribes, including, but not limited to: navigation, ceremonies, or fishing, gathering, or consumption of natural aquatic resources, including fish, shellfish, vegetation, and materials.

Tribal Subsistence Fishing (T-SUB): Uses of water involving the non-commercial catching or gathering of natural aquatic resources, including fish and shellfish, for consumption by individuals, households, or communities of California Native American Tribes to meet needs for sustenance.

How TBUs Can Affect Water Quality Decisions

- Water quality standards must protect basket-weaving plants and the people who handle them.
- Discharge permits may require stricter limits or additional treatment to protect gathering areas.
- New, more protective water quality objectives may be developed based on tribal exposure and cultural practices.
- Permits may be revised under NPDES/401 to protect TBUs.
- TMDLs may be developed for waters not meeting water quality standards.
- Monitoring and data collection may expand to track impacts on tribal lifeways.



Dixie Rogers, Karuk basketweaver, demonstrating traditional basketweaving methods at California Native American Day.

Do Tribal Beneficial Uses Create Water Rights?

No. Tribal Beneficial Uses are established under California's water quality framework. Tribal Beneficial Uses:

- Do not create a water right
- Do not grant legal permission to use or divert water
- Do not guarantee a specific amount of water

However, Tribal Beneficial Uses can *influence* certain water rights decisions because many TBUs depend on clean water remaining in rivers, lakes, and streams.

Guidance: pages 26-28 | Water Rights and Instream Flows

Can TBUs Protect and Restore Species and Habitats?

TBU Health Focus

- T-SUB and consumption-related activities under CUL address health risks from consuming or harvesting aquatic resources
- Not intended to protect fish populations or habitats directly

Species & Ecosystem Protection

- Other beneficial uses protect fish and habitats
- These uses include COLD, WARM, SPWN, AQUA, EST, and SHELL

Healthy aquatic species support Tribal cultural and subsistence uses, while TBUs reinforce the importance of protecting those species and habitats.

Guidance: page 26 | Relationship to Fish and Ecosystem Protections

Updates to the Bay-Delta Plan

The State Water Board is considering amendments to the Bay-Delta Plan focused on the reasonable protection of fish and wildlife in:

- the Sacramento River and its tributaries,
- Delta eastside tributaries (including the Calaveras, Cosumnes, and Mokelumne Rivers),
- and the Delta.

The proposed amendments would be implemented through two pathways

- (1) a voluntary agreement pathway for specified Healthy Rivers and Landscapes (HRL) water rights, and
- (2) a regulatory pathway for other water rights

Final draft Bay-Delta Plan was released on August 19, 2026 and the State Water Board will consider adoption on October 28–29, 2026.

Tribal Beneficial Uses in the Bay-Delta Plan

If adopted, the Bay-Delta Plan will:

- Incorporate the definitions for both the Tribal Tradition & Culture (CUL) and Tribal Subsistence Fishing (T-SUB) Tribal Beneficial Uses, and
- Formally designate Tribal Tradition & Culture (CUL) as a protected beneficial use throughout the Bay-Delta watershed.

The designation of CUL was requested by Tribes and recognizes the watershed-wide cultural and spiritual connection to fish and wildlife—especially salmon—and the central role these species play in Tribal traditions, ceremonies, and lifeways.

www.waterboards.ca.gov/bay_delta/comp_review.html

www.waterboards.ca.gov/tribal_affairs/beneficial_uses/

TRIBAL AFFAIRS

Home | Tribal Affairs | Beneficial Uses

Tribal Beneficial Uses (TBUs)

Water is life. Since time immemorial, California Native American Tribes have used California's waterbodies to support cultural, spiritual, ceremonial, subsistence and/or traditional practices, lifeways and rights. Tribal Beneficial Uses recognize and honor Tribal Nations' unique and ongoing relationships with water and ensure that these uses are considered and safeguarded in water quality policies, planning, and permitting regulatory processes.

This page provides information about Tribal Beneficial Uses, how they are incorporated into water quality control plans established by the California Water Boards, and how California Native American Tribes and Tribal communities can participate in this process.

ANNOUNCEMENT: Feedback Requested on Draft Guidance on Designating Tribal Beneficial Uses

- **August 31, 2026**: Deadline to submit written comments and to conclude Tribal consultations
- **July 22, 2026**: State Water Board workshop

To learn more, visit **Requesting Feedback on Draft Guidance on Designating Tribal Beneficial Uses**

Traditional Salmon Bake (banner image), is courtesy of Marla Bennett, Quartz Valley Indian Reservation, Environmental Program Manager

Tribal Beneficial Uses Defintions

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Learn More About TBUs

Provide Feedback on the Draft Guidance

TBU Progress Across the State

Maps, Tools, and Resources

TRIBAL AFFAIRS

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Tribal Beneficial Uses Progress Updates Across the Water Boards

All ten Water Boards are at different stages in their processes to designate Tribal Beneficial Uses in their water quality control plans (basin plans). To initiate a Tribal Beneficial Uses designation request, please contact the point of contacts below.

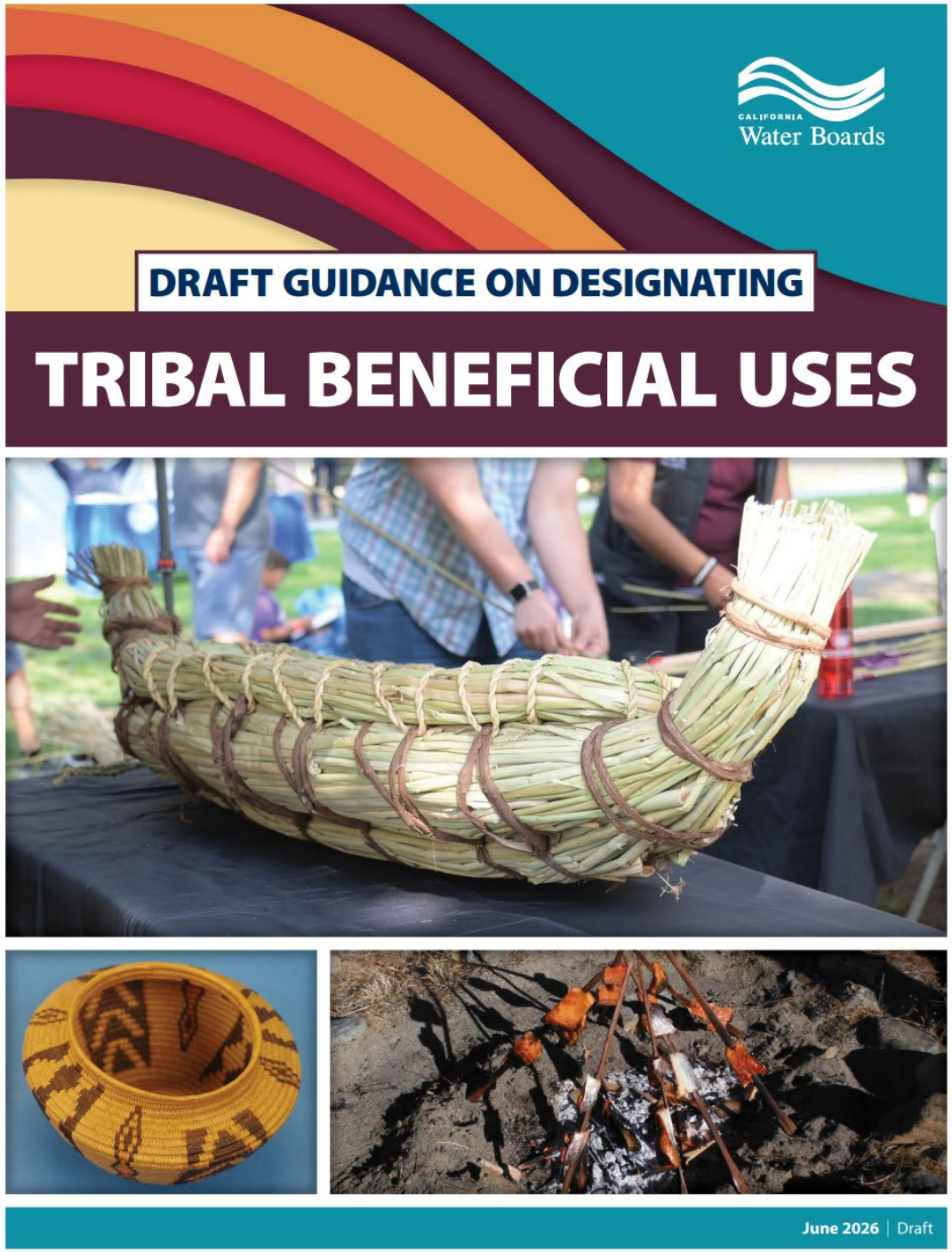
Regional Water Boards Progress Updates

- (Region 1) North Coast Regional Water Board
- (Region 2) San Francisco Regional Water Board
- (Region 3) Central Coast Regional Water Board
- (Region 4) Los Angeles Regional Water Board
- (Region 5) Central Valley Regional Water Board
- (Region 6) Lahontan Regional Water Board
- (Region 7) Colorado River Basin Regional Water Board
- (Region 8) Santa Ana Regional Water Board
- (Region 9) San Diego Regional Water Board

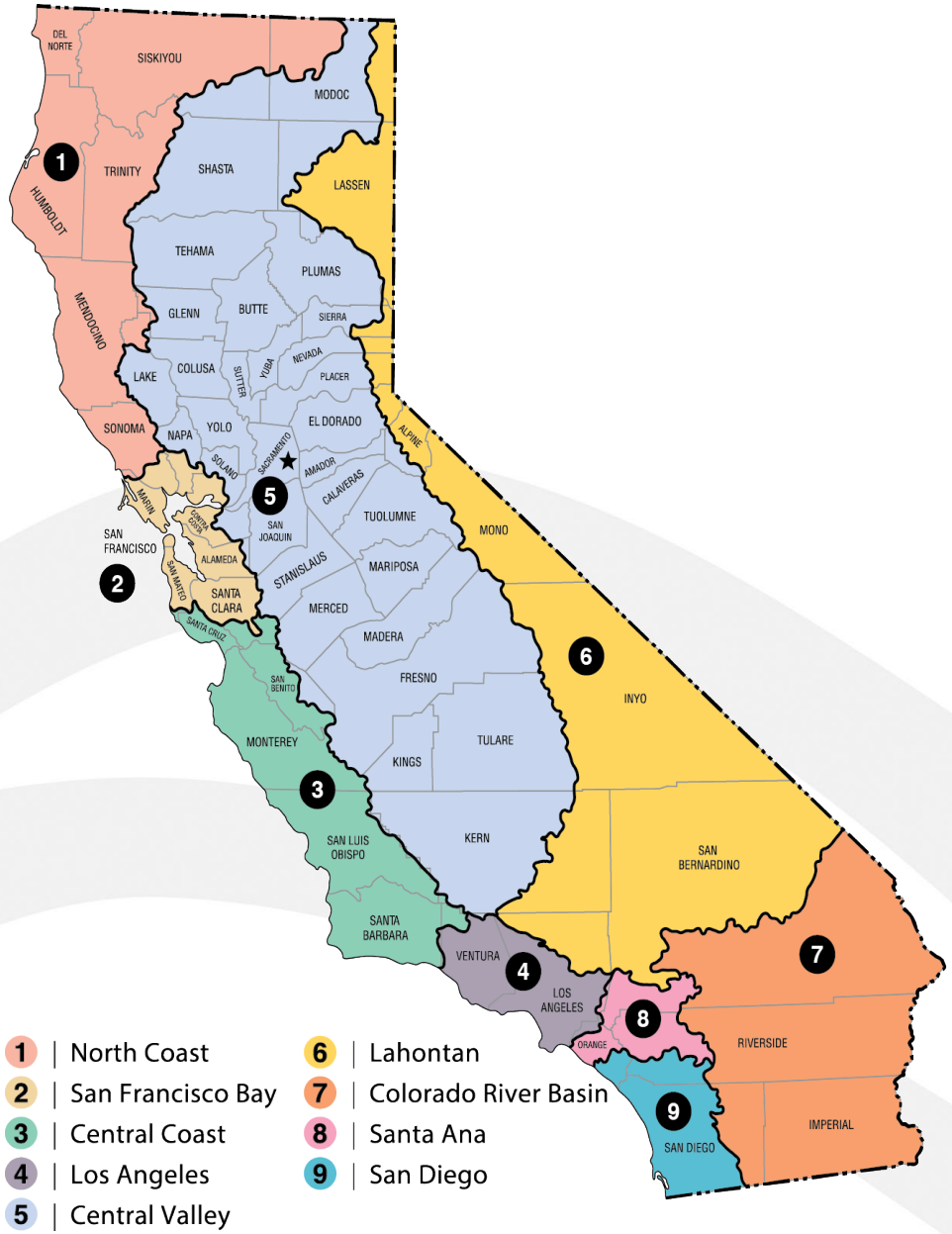
Regional Water Boards Map



(click to view larger image)



bit.ly/draftTBUguidance



Resources and Contacts

Tribal Affairs:
waterboards.ca.gov/tribal_affairs

Tribal Beneficial Uses:
waterboards.ca.gov/tribal_affairs/beneficial_uses.html

Tribal Coordinators Contact Information:
bit.ly/SWB-Tribal

Adriana Renteria, Tribal Liaison & OPEETA Director
Adriana.Renteria@waterboards.ca.gov (916) 341-5501