ACTION ITEM

Potential Endorsement of the 2026 Delta Science Plan: Strengthening Science in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta

Summary

The Delta Science Plan, recommended in the Delta Plan and produced by the Delta Stewardship Council's (Council) Delta Science Program, provides a framework for conducting, coordinating, and communicating science in the Delta. Developed through extensive engagement with the Delta science community, this iteration includes 24 Actions and eight Resources that collectively address four grand challenges. The 2026 Delta Science Plan calls on the Delta science community to think big and invest in collaborations and relationships that turn shared knowledge into collective action. With the Council's endorsement, the final document would be released in summer 2026.

Requested Action

The Delta Science Program is asking the Council to approve Resolution 2026-04 endorsing the 2026 Delta Science Plan (Attachment A to the resolution) and directing staff to finalize the Plan with any changes approved by the Council at this meeting.

Background

The Delta Science Plan (https://deltascienceplan.deltacouncil.ca.gov/), recommended in the Delta Plan (The Delta Plan, G R1. Development of a Delta Science Plan), provides the vision, principles, and approaches for conducting, coordinating, and communicating science in the Delta. The Delta Science Plan is also the first element of the three-part Delta Science Strategy (https://rebrand.ly/0z4ae52), which establishes a foundation for achieving the vision of One Delta, One Science (https://rebrand.ly/whrmr3s)—an open Delta science community that works together to build a common body of scientific knowledge.

The Delta Science Plan is developed through an open, transparent, and inclusive process with the Delta science community and since its first release in 2013, has been updated twice (in 2019 and now in 2026) to reflect emerging concepts, evolving management needs, and new opportunities for action.

A coordinated, science-based approach is essential for managing the Delta and to furthering the coequal goals in a manner that enhances and protects the Delta as an evolving place. The Delta Science Plan offers Actions and Resources for advancing the coordination and communication of Delta science and the integrity, transparency, and adaptability of science – ensuring that the collective knowledge of the Delta science community can guide decisions in an era of rapid change.

2019 Delta Science Plan successes

Since the release of the 2019 Delta Science Plan, the Council has made substantial progress in implementing and elevating the Actions contained in that Plan. Notable progress includes establishing the Social Science Task Force in 2020, which painted a pathway for integrating social science into Delta management and led to the first Delta Residents Survey in 2023, enhancing understanding of shared values and diverse experiences in the Delta. The first annual crosscut budget, developed in collaboration with State and Federal partners and released in 2020, improved transparency around how funding is allocated across the science enterprise and reveals gaps and opportunities for improvement. In 2023, the Delta Science Program launched the Delta Science Tracker, a web-based system that improves accessibility to information on science activities occurring throughout the Delta. Major progress was seen for both modeling and monitoring, where high-priority model development and collaboration occurred across agencies, such as within Delta Modelling Collaboratory, and reviews by the National Academy of Sciences, Delta Science Program, and Delta Independent Science Board provided key recommendations for enhancing the region's monitoring. Additional implementation successes are noted in the 2026 Delta Science Plan's Appendix 1: *Implementation successes: Status of 2019 Delta Science Plan and relevant outcomes.*

Grand challenges

The Actions within the 2026 Delta Science Plan are organized around four grand challenges to Delta Science. In considering how best to update the Delta Science

Plan, the Delta Science Program proposed a slightly different approach compared to past Delta Science Plans. Rather than documenting what the community already does well, the focus of this updated plan is on specific grand challenges that, when addressed, will help build a Delta science community that's able to advance shared goals and accelerate scientific understanding and decision-making.

- **Grand Challenge 1:** Scientists and managers must anticipate a world in which environmental conditions and regulations may be fundamentally different from those faced today.
- **Grand Challenge 2**: Environmental change is outpacing the traditional pace of science.
- **Grand Challenge 3**: Flows of scientific information remain decentralized and poorly connected to communities and decision-makers.
- **Grand Challenge 4**: Other ways of knowing, especially Traditional Knowledge, remain siloed from decision-making.

The revised approach to developing the Delta Science Plan allowed for new elements such as governance, social science, and Traditional Knowledge to be emphasized more compared to past Delta Science Plans.

Delta Science Plan Development

The 24 Actions within the 2026 Delta Science Plan were developed through an iterative process that began with the Grand Challenges Essay (https://rebrand.ly/pjvndcs) and outreach efforts with the Delta Independent Science Board (ISB), calls for public input, 2024 State of the Estuary Conference, 2024 Bay Delta Science Conference, and February 2025 Delta Science Plan Workshop. The February 2025 Delta Science Plan Workshop, which hosted 99 participants over two days, collected feedback on strategies to address the grand challenges, resulting in a total of 533 individual comments. These comments were merged with 46 actionable items from the Grand Challenges Essay and distilled into 24 draft Actions.

The 2026 Draft Delta Science Plan was posted for public review and comment for 72 days, circulated for tribal consultation for 90 days, and provided directly to the Delta ISB for review on November 19, 2025. In total, four comment letters, 22 emails, 15 survey responses, and a publicly available review by the Delta ISB

(https://rebrand.ly/1dytd02) were received. Combined, this included more than 200 individual comments that were each considered in the revision process.

Final Actions and Resources

Actions

The final 24 actions in the 2026 Delta Science Plan reflect the Delta science community's collective priorities for addressing the four grand challenges.

Grand challenge 1:

- Action 1.1: Support the ongoing shift from single species to holistic monitoring and management of ecosystems
- Action 1.2: Support horizon scanning to detect and understand emerging signals
- Action 1.3: Strengthen links between models and data for more streamlined and informed decision-making
- Action 1.4: Focus on regional resilience to climate change
- Action 1.5: Improve connectivity between executive, management, and staff/scientist levels
- Action 1.6: Build stronger science and management goal alignment

Grand challenge 2:

- Action 2.1: Expand support for adaptive management and monitoring to inform decision-making in a changing Delta
- Action 2.2: Invest in enhanced tools and expertise in cutting-edge technology to anticipate near-future conditions
- Action 2.3: Support scenario-based models that allow us to test management interventions that consider radically different future conditions
- Action 2.4: Support actions to cut green tape and streamline decision-making practices
- Action 2.5: Utilize mechanisms of sharing information more efficiently and effectively
- Action 2.6: Implement more responsive and targeted funding structures

Grand challenge 3:

- Action 3.1: Support free and open data
- Action 3.2: Support collaborative venues for efficient flow of information
- Action 3.3: Increase research coordination at the watershed and estuary scale through systems thinking
- Action 3.4: Improve social science literacy
- Action 3.5: Incorporate social science data and disciplines in management decision frameworks
- Action 3.6: Proactively identify opportunities to leverage independent scientific peer review processes to enhance the rigor, transparency, and credibility of science underpinning management and policy decisions
- Action 3.7: Increase funding opportunities and capacity for social science research and collaborations

Grand challenge 4:

- Action 4.1: Respect tribal data ownership and confidentiality
- Action 4.2: Support more co-produced and community-engaged science
- Action 4.3: Explore ways to expand funding that supports and engages community and tribal expertise
- Action 4.4: Build trust through intentional and reciprocal working relationships
- Action 4.5: Embrace more ways of knowing

Action Examples

Each Action has an associated example of ongoing efforts coined “Action Example”. The Action Example sections are meant to showcase existing or planned initiatives that are making progress in addressing the Action. For instance, for Action 4.5: *Embrace more ways of knowing*, the Action Example is the Ecocultural Working Group for Webb Tract restoration which has served as the official voice for tribal partners throughout the Webb Tract wetland restoration process. These examples are by no means a comprehensive review of ongoing or planned activities in the Delta, but Action Examples are intended to inspire future work, identify partners, and build collaborations.

Resources

The 2026 Delta Science Plan includes eight Resources that provide practical and useful information for the Delta science community and are responsive to the Actions included within this plan. The intention is that these Resources will become stand-alone living documents that will be accessible online, outside of the Delta Science Plan.

- Resource A: Data governance, portals, and online resources
- Resource B: Making science whole: Embedding social science in natural science workflows
- Resource C: Science communication
- Resource D: Research funding
- Resource E: Conflict of interest considerations for reviewers, advisors, and applicants
- Resource F: Science governance and the collaborative Delta science-scape
- Resource G: Delta Science Program services for independent scientific review and scientific advice
- Resource H: Guidance for science workshops

Public Review

Overall, feedback on the 2026 Draft Delta Science Plan was supportive of the updated grand challenges framework and the Actions and Resources included within the draft, while highlighting several areas for improvement. Feedback requested a more nuanced discussion of the social sciences, a more explicit discussion of the use of decision-making frameworks, and more details on future tracking of the Delta Science Plan. This feedback substantially strengthened the 2026 Delta Science Plan, and we are grateful to all who provided feedback during the review process.

Timeline

With Council endorsement, the final 2026 Delta Science Plan is intended to be released to the public in summer 2026.

Fiscal Information

Not applicable.

List of Attachments

Attachment 1: Resolution 2026-04 and Draft 2026 Delta Science Plan (Attachment A to Resolution 2026-04 and available here: https://rebrand.ly/hljdu60)

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A recording of the presentation will be available on the Delta Council's YouTube page at https://www.youtube.com/@DeltaCouncil.