

Association of Bay Area Governments

Executive Board

May 16, 2024

Agenda Item 11.a.

Priority Conservation Area Framework Refresh

Subject:

Report on the recommended reforms for the Priority Conservation Area (PCA) Framework and adoption of ABAG Resolution 7 2024 and direction to proceed with Phase I implementation this summer

Background:

PCAs are a set of geographies aimed to support broad conservation efforts. The PCA planning framework was originally developed in 2007 and received a minor update in 2014. During that time, 185 PCAs were nominated through a voluntary, locally driven process by cities, counties, and park/open space districts, and then designated by ABAG. As the growth framework and Priority Development Areas (PDAs) went through a significant update during Plan Bay Area 2050, many partners and stakeholders articulated a need to revamp the PCA planning framework as part of the Plan Bay Area 2050 Implementation Plan. MTC/ABAG committed in its adopted Implementation Plan to “engage with a variety of stakeholders and partners to provide guidelines and resources to support future conservation work, while also broadening the scope of the PCA program to promote climate resilience and equity.”

In spring 2022, MTC received a \$250,000 Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) Program grant to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the current PCA framework, articulate a vision for next-generation PCAs, establish clear goals and objectives for PCAs, incorporate a wider range of policy concerns into the planning framework, and develop data and mapping tools available to program partners. Since fall 2022, the PCA Refresh has worked with stakeholders to explore how PCAs have functioned to date and better align the PCA Framework with State and regional policy goals. In summer 2023, an [Interim Memo](https://mtc.ca.gov/digital-library/5024449-priority-conservation-area-refresh-interim-memo) (https://mtc.ca.gov/digital-library/5024449-priority-conservation-area-refresh-interim-memo) was published that described the limitations of the existing Framework, as well as goals for the Refresh effort. Since the publishing of the Interim Memo, staff worked with partners in the region to develop reforms to address the limitations of the existing PCAs and create a Framework for PCAs 2.0.

At the March 8th Joint MTC Planning and ABAG Administrative Committee, an action was taken to approve the release of the [Draft PCA Refresh Final Report](https://mtc.ca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-02/PCA_Refresh_Draft_Final_Report.pdf) (https://mtc.ca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-02/PCA_Refresh_Draft_Final_Report.pdf) for public comment and to refer the report to the ABAG Executive Board. During the public comment period between March 8th and March 31st, five comment letters were received. Most comments focused on adding clarity to the report and have resulted in additional language being added to the revised Final Report, but no changes have been made to the reforms proposed at the committee level. The revised PCA Refresh Final Report is included in Attachment B and will be published to the ABAG and MTC PCA webpages if approved by the ABAG Executive Board. In addition to edits focused on clarity, some letters focused on the

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Natural Lands PCA type coverage inside City Limits or Urban Growth Boundaries. Attachment C summarizes the key comments received and an abbreviated staff response to each.

Challenges with the Existing PCA Framework

After analyzing existing PCA mapping and asking stakeholders for their input on the strengths and weaknesses of the existing Framework, several challenges emerged. The key existing challenges are outlined below and are described in greater detail in the Final Report.

1. The existing PCA definition is inconsistent with how PCAs are used and funded.
2. Climate adaptation and equity are not directly incorporated into PCAs.
3. PCAs have poorly defined geographic boundaries.
4. PCA types are inconsistently applied in the region.
5. Existing PCAs have incomplete coverage across the region.
6. Existing PCA funding is too restricted and insufficient to meet the needs.

Proposed PCA Framework Reforms

The proposed reforms aim to address these challenges and add structure to the PCA Framework to enable their use in a greater array of future efforts, while still allowing local flexibility to raise local conservation priorities into the regional conservation framework. While the reforms are described individually, they are reliant on one another to create the desired structure to fully address the identified challenges. The six key reforms are below, which are further described in the Final Report:

1. Refine the PCA definition to be clearer and reflect how they are used in practice.
2. Add climate adaptation as a new PCA type and incorporate equity into each PCA type.
3. Ensure PCAs have accurate and verified geographic boundaries.
4. Ensure PCA type consistency with eligibility maps.
5. Incorporate Regionally-Identified PCAs to complement local nominations.
6. Elevate PCAs for new funding with the refreshed Framework.

Together, these changes add structure to the PCA Framework which will enable ABAG/MTC to incorporate PCAs into regional analysis, planning, and policy as well as provide more targeted technical assistance, including for funding. The PCA Refresh is the first step to reform the Framework. Follow-on activities will be required to implement the identified reforms.

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Proposed Process to Implement the PCA Reforms

Staff requests the ABAG Executive Board approve the PCA Refresh Final Report and direct staff to work throughout the remainder of 2024 to implement the reforms, with two phases of work proposed:

Phase I: Evaluate and Amend Existing PCAs (summer 2024)

Before opening a call for new PCA nominations, MTC/ABAG staff recommend working to bring the existing 185 PCAs into the updated Framework. In some cases, no amendment will be necessary, in many cases limited revisions will be needed to adjust boundaries slightly, and in other cases more significant boundary changes or changes to PCA types will be necessary. At the request of local government partners, MTC/ABAG staff plan to take an active role in identifying reform options for locals to build from, to best assist local jurisdiction staff and reduce burden on their workload. In addition to evaluating all existing PCAs, MTC/ABAG will maintain an online mapping viewer that will support the amendment process. Phase I is anticipated to start following the May 2024 ABAG Executive Board meeting and extend through summer 2024. The ABAG Executive Board would consider and take action on amended PCA designations at the conclusion of this phase of work.

Phase II: Nominate and Designate New PCAs (fall 2024 through early 2025)

After finalizing amendments to existing PCAs in Phase I, MTC/ABAG staff will open a call for new PCA nominations. The same mapping viewer used for amending PCAs will be available to local partners interested in exploring PCA opportunities and submitting nominations. Across both phases, MTC/ABAG staff will vet PCA boundaries and PCA type selections to ensure the underlying data is more robust than in previous cycle. The ABAG Executive Board would consider and take action on new PCA nominations at the conclusion of this phase of work.

Next Steps:

As noted above, staff requests that the ABAG Executive Board adopt the PCA Refresh Final Report, and direct staff to begin work with partners to implement Phase I to evaluate and amend existing PCAs. In parallel to implementing the PCA Refresh reforms, agency staff will continue to process the first round of OBAG Cycle 3 PCA grant proposals. This round of grants is not directly tied to the process to implement the PCA Refresh and will use the existing PCAs.

Issues:

None identified.

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Recommended Action:

The ABAG Executive Board is requested to adopt ABAG Resolution 7 2024, approval of the Priority Conservation Area Refresh Final Report, and to direct staff to advance Phase I Implementation.

Attachment:

- A. Presentation
- B. PCA Refresh Final Report
- C. Public Comment Letter Matrix
- D. ABAG Resolution 7 2024

Reviewed:



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