March 8, 2024   **Agenda Item 7a**

Priority Conservation Area Framework Refresh

Subject:

Update on the recommended path forward for the Priority Conservation Area (PCA) Framework, informed by a yearlong PCA Refresh effort, prior to consideration by the ABAG Executive Board in May 2024.

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 have 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.

Challenges with the Existing PCA Framework

After analyzing existing PCAs and asking stakeholders for their input on the strengths and weaknesses of the existing Framework several challenges emerged. Analysis of the existing PCA mapping exposed four challenges:

- **PCAs have poorly defined geographic boundaries.** The limited clarity on geographic boundaries makes it difficult to incorporate the lands into analysis, planning, and advocacy efforts.

- **PCA types are inconsistently applied in the region.** Many PCAs were designated as all four PCA types: Natural Lands, Working Lands, Regional Recreation, and Urban Greening. In some cases, this comprehensive designation may have been appropriate, but when explored regionally, the PCA types led to a regional network of lands that did not hold together, particularly when compared with relevant scientific datasets.

- **The existing PCA definition is inconsistent with how PCAs are used and funded.** How PCAs had been designated and funded over the past decade-plus was not fully aligned with a protect-only definition for the program. There was also confusion about what it meant for a PCA to overlap with existing communities or growth geographies.

In workshops and surveys stakeholders shared additional weaknesses of the existing PCA Framework:

- **Climate adaptation and equity are not directly incorporated into PCAs.** Starting as feedback during the Plan Bay Area 2050 Implementation Plan, stakeholders desired a PCA Refresh that would emphasize equity and climate adaptation along with biodiversity.

- **Existing PCAs have incomplete coverage across the region.** Stakeholders recognized that not all communities in the region had been a part of the four prior nomination cycles and that there was inconsistent PCA coverage across the region.

- **Existing PCA funding is too restricted and insufficient to meet the needs.** The amount and flexibility of existing PCA grant funds was shared as a barrier to the implementation of PCAs.

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 efforts, while still allowing local flexibility to raise local conservation priorities into the regional conservation fabric. 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 delineated in the draft Final Report:

- **Refine the PCA definition to be clearer and reflect how they are used in practice.** The revised definition broadens PCAs from a protection-only framework to one that allows enhancement activities as well. This change removes any perceived conflict between PCAs within an existing community or Priority Development Area. It also ensures farm-to-market access, habitat restoration, or trail improvement enhancement projects continue to be covered by the PCA definition.

- **Add climate adaptation as a new PCA type and incorporate equity into each PCA type.** Climate adaptation and equity were key policy priorities raised from the beginning of the process. They are directly incorporated into the framework to complement biodiversity which has existed since the first PCA Framework.

- **Ensure PCAs have accurate and verified geographic boundaries.** One of the greatest challenges with existing PCAs is their poorly defined and overlapping boundaries. Having accurate and adjoining boundaries will enable their greater use in regional analysis and planning going forward.

- **Ensure consistency with minimum data standards for PCA types.** Likely the most significant change is the inclusion of minimum data standards within each PCA type. These minimum data standards are not intended to reduce the coverage of PCAs regionwide, but instead are included to ensure PCAs hold together when used regionally. The minimum data standards aim to strike a balance between adding sufficient structure to make the PCAs more useable for planning, technical assistance and funding, while also allowing for

local flexibility to raise key local conservation priorities. Over 30 datasets relevant to PCA type objectives are used to set minimum data standards. Examples of the datasets used are the Conservation Land Network Essential Lands, Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, Regional Trail Network, National Land Cover Tree Canopy, and Fire Hazard Severity Zones.

- **Incorporate regionally-identified PCAs to complement local nominations.** Similar to approaches taken in Plan Bay Area 2050 to broaden the Priority Development Area program to a set of growth geographies that include regionally-identified areas, regionally-identified PCAs will help ensure that regionally-significant and regionally-connective conservation opportunities are incorporated into the Framework. Regionally-identified PCAs are designed to complement locally-nominated PCAs with both sharing the same use and importance.

- **Elevate PCAs for new funding with refreshed Framework.** While there is not a specific funding reform within the Framework, we anticipate the structured and consistent approach that leverages more defensible data will potentially improve competitiveness for federal, state, and other regional funds.

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, but follow-on activities will be required to implement the identified reforms.

Proposed Process to Implement the PCA Reforms:

Staff is first requesting that the ABAG Administrative Committee approve the release of the draft Final PCA Refresh Report for a public comment period through the end of March; the draft Final Report is available on the PCA webpage: https://mtc.ca.gov/digital-library/5026939-priority-conservation-area-refresh-final-report-draft. Once the proposed reforms receive a final approval from the ABAG Executive Board, staff will work throughout the remainder of 2024 to implement the changes, with two phases of work proposed:

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

Before opening a call for new PCAs, MTC/ABAG staff recommend working to bring the existing 185 PCAs into the updated Framework. In some cases, no amendment will be necessary, in other 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. MTC/ABAG staff plan to take an active role in identifying the needed reforms, as well as identifying options for how locals can choose to amend a PCA, to best assist local jurisdiction staff. In addition to evaluating all existing PCAs, MTC/ABAG will have an online data tool that will support with identifying issues and recommending amendments. Phase I is anticipated to start in late spring 2024 and extend through summer 2024.

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 data tool used for amending PCAs will be used to support local partners in exploring PCA opportunities and submitting nominations. Across both phases, MTC/ABAG staff will vet PCA boundaries and PCA Type selections to ensure our 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 is requesting that the ABAG Administrative Committee release the draft Final Report for public comment through the end of March. After incorporating feedback and finalizing the Report, staff will present and seek approval to implement the proposed reforms at the ABAG Executive Board in May 2024. If approved, MTC/ABAG staff will begin work with partners to implement Phase I and develop a process to evaluate and amend existing PCAs. In parallel to implementing the PCA Refresh reforms, MTC anticipates announcing a call for OBAG3 PCA grant projects in March. 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.

Recommendations:

ABAG Administrative Committee Approval / Release Report for Public Comment

Attachments:

- Attachment A: PowerPoint

Andrew Fremier