



Highlight: Delta Science Fellow Sebastian Gonzales, in collaboration with ICF Fish and Aquatic Sciences Team, implants tiny acoustic trackers into Delta smelt. Sebastian's graduate work has focused on developing novel acoustic tagging methods for small, sensitive fish (e.g., Delta smelt and longfin smelt), and understanding the effects of tagging on fish behavior and performance. **Credit:** Peter Aronson.

Delta Science Plan

2026

RESOURCE D

Research funding

Introduction

Increased coordination among funding entities in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and Suisun Marsh (collectively referred to herein as Delta; California Water Code § 85058), the San Francisco Bay-Delta (Bay-Delta) system, and the broader San Francisco Estuary can improve efficiency, reduce redundancy, and yield greater collective impact. The Delta Stewardship Council's (Council) Delta Science Program provides a tested and transparent model for aligning science with management needs – one that other funding entities can adapt or build upon.

The Delta Crosscut Budget Report provides a summary of state, federal, and local investments in science and restoration activities in the Delta

during the State Fiscal Year (FY). In FY 2023–2024, the Delta Crosscut Budget reported that the Council contributed \$8.2 million or 16% of the total \$50.3 million spent on research and synthesis in the Delta. This relatively small share supports high-impact programs, such as the Delta Science Fellows, the Delta Research Awards, and Directed Actions. With the growing need for science and overall funding stagnating, collaboration is no longer optional – it is essential. Working together and leveraging funds creates a larger pool of resources and builds efficiencies to support the research needed to inform decision-making in the Delta. This research funding Resource is primarily intended to inform potential applicants interested in the Delta Science Program's research funding opportunities, but it also serves as a resource for public agencies

and other organizations interested in advancing research in the Delta. It outlines the Delta Science Program's research funding processes and offers guidance for effective and transparent investments in Delta research. By highlighting key considerations for improving coordination among funding entities, strategies for launching or refining funding programs, and a model approach for addressing emerging issues, this Resource promotes strategies to strengthen the pipeline of researchers working in the Delta.

The Delta Science Program's mission

Funding scientific research is one of the primary ways the Council's Delta Science Program fulfills its mission to provide the best possible unbiased scientific information to inform water and environmental decision-making in the Delta (California Water Code § 85280(b)(4)). The Delta Science Program supports research through contracts, such as the Delta Research Awards which are the Delta Science Program's periodic solicitation process for research in the Delta.

The Delta Science Program relies primarily on two pathways to fund research: proposal solicitations and Directed Actions (see sections below for more information). Regular proposal solicitations are generally considered the most robust and transparent way to fund research, providing a predictable source of funds for high-priority research in the Delta. Therefore, the Council's Delta Science Program prioritizes available funding for competitive research. The most appropriate funding pathway will depend on the availability of funds, the urgency of the information needed, and the specificity of the research questions. This flexibility enables the Council's Delta Science Program to address both long-term planning needs and time-sensitive management questions. The chosen pathway must also comply with laws applicable to state contracting.

The Delta lead scientist plays a central role in guiding the competitive research process, including providing scientific advice on:

- The content of solicitations
- Prioritizing proposed Directed Actions
- The selection of expert reviewers and leading review panels
- Awards, based on independent scientific review
- Research funding priorities

All proposals undergo both administrative and scientific peer review, with all reviewers screened for potential conflicts of interest (see Resource E: Conflict of interest considerations for reviewers, advisors, and applicants for details). In the 2025 Delta Research Awards solicitation, all proposals were independently scored with consistent criteria prioritizing scientific merit, relevance to the Science Action Agenda (SAA), and broader impacts and equitable engagement. Other criteria included feasibility, team qualifications, budget reasonableness, data management plan, and whether there was a social science component. This rigorous, transparent process ensures accountability and the integrity of funded research.

In recent years, the Delta Science Program has increasingly emphasized interdisciplinary approaches and the inclusion of social science, Traditional Knowledge, and co-production of knowledge – collaborative processes that involve scientists, managers, and community members in all phases of research. These approaches improve the relevance, credibility, and application of scientific findings.

Despite the strengths of the Delta Science Program's research funding, gaps remain. The Delta Science Program does not currently offer grants, which can be a more flexible and efficient mechanism for research. There is also limited capacity to respond rapidly to emerging issues due to limited funds and the time required to create contracts. Additional funds are needed to support adaptive management, synthesize existing research, communicate findings,

and coordinate science investments across agencies. Establishing regular funding coordination meetings and expanding convening roles could strengthen system-wide collaboration and improve strategic alignment of research funding in the Delta.

Proposal solicitations

The Council’s Delta Science Program favors using a competitive process to distribute research funding when science needs are broad and crosscutting, as identified in the SAA. The SAA acts as the unifying framework, or the “glue”, that brings together efforts across the Delta by identifying and prioritizing management-relevant science needs. The Delta Science Program leverages the SAA to strategically fill critical science gaps that other funding programs may overlook.

Funding may originate from various sources, including federal and state agencies, as well as other public entities. Each source often comes with unique constraints, such as indirect cost caps, specific focus areas, and eligibility requirements that must be considered during solicitation development and implementation.

To ensure alignment with funding priorities and to expand support for high-quality research, funding partners are actively engaged during both the planning and selection phases. **The Delta Science Program solicitations always receive more proposals than can be funded, so funding partners are encouraged to support proposals that align with their specific priorities within the SAA and financial capabilities.** This approach increases the total number of funded projects and streamlines the solicitation process by reducing the

How much has been spent implementing the SAA already?

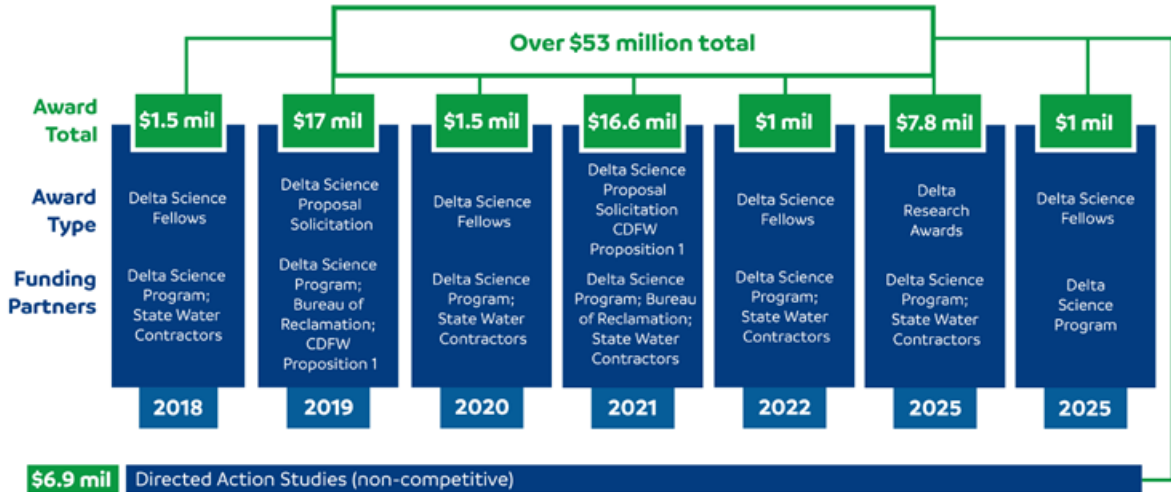


Figure D-1 | Dollars spent implementing the SAA across two iterations (2017-2021 and 2022-2026). The SAA forms the foundation for competitive and non-competitive funding decisions by the Delta Science Program and its funding partners. Adapted from [A Researcher’s Guide to Funding & Tracking Priority Science](https://scienceactionagenda.deltacouncil.ca.gov/pdf/2023-02-13-a%20researchers-guide-to-funding-and-tracking-priority-science.pdf)¹.

1. <https://scienceactionagenda.deltacouncil.ca.gov/pdf/2023-02-13-a%20researchers-guide-to-funding-and-tracking-priority-science.pdf>



Figure D-2 | Five-step process for the Delta Research Awards:

(1) Call for proposals based on the Science Action Agenda, (2) Individual reviews by multiple subject matter experts, (3) Panel review led by the Delta lead scientist, (4) Award consultation with the Delta lead scientist, and (5) Final award selection by the Delta Stewardship Council.

need for separate efforts by each funding partner. Figure D-1 shows how the Delta Science Program and partners are funding implementation of the SAA. Interested funding partners are encouraged to visit our [Research Funding and Fellowships web page](#)² or email researchfunding@deltacouncil.ca.gov.

All proposals must be submitted in accordance with the official solicitation instructions. Each proposal undergoes independent external scientific review to ensure transparency, rigor, and merit-based selection.

A critical component of this process is the partnership with third-party academic institutions, such as California Sea Grant. These partners can provide significant support and enhanced efficiency by leveraging existing online application portals, administering awards, and facilitating a more robust and independent review process.

Review of proposals

The Council's Delta Science Program typically posts a draft solicitation notice online for public comment, engages in related outreach, and may offer some assistance in facilitating research collaborations where permissible. To facilitate the review process, the Council's Delta Science Program typically requires a Letter of Intent before the full proposal stage. Eligible proposals are distributed to subject matter experts for scientific review. See Figure D-2 for an overview of the process for the Delta Research Awards.

2. <https://deltacouncil.ca.gov/delta-science-program/research-funding-and-fellowships>



Highlight: US Geological Survey (USGS) scientists collect water quality data during a Delta-wide boat survey in May 2022. Early support for this broader research effort, known as “Operation Baseline,” came through the Delta Science Program’s Directed Action process. **Credit:** Biogeochemistry Group, USGS California Water Science Center.

Directed Actions

Directed Actions are appropriate when one individual or team is qualified to do the work, scientific research or advice is needed quickly, and when an important opportunity would be lost if the proposal had to wait for the standard competitive proposal solicitation. This approach is similar to the National Science Foundation’s “Rapid Response Grants” process. They may be procured on a non-competitive basis, as permitted by law.

Because Directed Actions are time-sensitive, approved proposals will be funded as quickly as possible when funds are available. Projects should be low-cost, high-impact, and typically last less than two years.

Directed Actions are generally categorized into the following groups based on the needs they address:

- **Rapid Response:** Urgent investigations launched in response to unusual or extreme events to quickly gather data and enhance understanding for timely decision-making in the Delta
- **Collaborative Science:** Science efforts that address pressing needs identified by interagency and collaborative groups, often outside the typical solicitation timeline
- **Novel Technology or Expertise:** Critical research that leverages unique or exclusive expertise or technology to explore innovative solutions
- **Broadening Opportunity:** Aims to improve equity in research funding by supporting underrepresented organizations or individuals through targeted projects, internships, or scholarships

Review and decision process

Council staff consult with the Delta lead scientist to determine whether a project idea aligns with the SAA and fits into one of the Directed Action categories. The Delta lead scientist determines whether, based on scientific considerations, the urgency and topic of the proposed research merit further consideration. Directed Action proposals are evaluated based on several criteria, including:

- Availability of funds
- Urgency and uniqueness of the project
- Scientific and technical merit
- Improvement to Bay-Delta knowledge
- Relevance to management or policy
- Collaborative and transparent proposal process with broad participation

The proposal will be reviewed according to the above criteria by a group that typically includes:

- One discipline-relevant external academic subject matter expert
- A federal, state, or public agency subject matter expert with direct knowledge of the relevance of the activity
- One or more of the Council's Delta Science Program subject matter expert(s)
- One of the Council's Planning & Performance Measures Division subject matter experts

Based on independent reviews, the Delta lead scientist may request revisions to the proposal. If the requested revisions are significant, the revised proposal may undergo a second round of review, generally with the same reviewers if they are available.

Suggested citation

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