

## COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO

**San Luis Obispo County Desalination Executable Solution and Logistics (DESAL) USBR Feasibility Study**

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**Subject:** Final Stakeholder Engagement Plan for the San Luis Obispo County Desalination Executable Solution and Logistics USBR Feasibility Study

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Context

San Luis Obispo County faces long-term water reliability challenges due to prolonged drought, increased demand, groundwater depletion, and the impacts of climate change. San Luis Obispo County communities understand the value all water sources have in meeting the needs of current and future generations. Throughout the past century, local communities have worked together to develop major water supply sources that the region now relies on, such as the Nacimiento Water Project, Lopez Water Project, recycled water facilities, and more. The San Luis Obispo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (District), in collaboration with regional agencies and interested stakeholders, is currently developing the San Luis Obispo County Master Water Report that identifies the region's current and future water needs and the extent to which existing sources are available to meet those needs, after accounting for water use efficiency efforts and planned projects. The District is also working on opportunities to optimize the use of existing sources such as Salinas Reservoir, State Water, Stormwater, and Nacimiento Water through cooperative programs. As a coastal region, local agencies and their constituents also have the opportunity to explore ocean desalination as a new potential source of next-generation water.

The District and 16 other local agencies initiated the Desalination Executable Solution and Logistics Plan (DESAL Plan) to explore ocean desalination as a viable water supply option using a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) WaterSMART grant to fund a Feasibility Study (USBR Feasibility Study). The DESAL Plan is structured in five phases and aims to identify and advance one or more regionally beneficial, technically feasible, and environmentally responsible ocean desalination projects.

From 2022-2024, the District worked with local agencies to establish participation, develop a planning scope, and launch initial stakeholder outreach. With a strong planning framework in place, the current effort now focuses on developing and screening ocean desalination project alternatives that can meet regional goals. The goal of this USBR Feasibility Study is to identify the **most viable (permittable and executable) ocean desalination alternatives by September 2026** for further consideration and advancement by interested partner agencies. This planning effort includes siting considerations, intake/discharge technologies, potential treatment processes, conveyance options, and conceptual partnership models. Stakeholder engagement is critical to evaluating the alternatives including trade-offs, surfacing local and cultural concerns, and enhancing interested stakeholders' understanding of the options.

Recent ocean desalination projects in California have demonstrated that early and consistent stakeholder engagement and public information is vital to improving the project's likelihood of success when the time comes. As such, this Stakeholder Engagement Plan (SEP) prioritizes proactive outreach from the project's inception, promoting focused and meaningful engagement at key milestones and throughout this phase of the project. The engagement strategies include, but are not limited to, periodic meetings, roundtable discussions, community engagement sessions, surveys, and email subscription updates to promote informed and involved stakeholders. While engagement strategies and tactics are included in this plan, it is important to recognize that a successful engagement process relies on the plan being adaptive and responsive to stakeholders' interests, feedback, and preferred involvement methods throughout the life of the project.

The project team developed and will implement this SEP in close collaboration with the District and DESAL Plan Partners, leveraging their insights and expertise, and where appropriate and advantageous, have both the District and partner agencies lead specific engagement activities.

Through a thoughtful and structured engagement process, the project team will build a shared understanding of regional water supply challenges, help build a network of knowledgeable and interested partners and enhance interested stakeholders' understanding of the most viable ocean desalination opportunities for San Luis Obispo County.

## 1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this SEP is to guide meaningful, strategic and transparent engagement during development of the USBR Feasibility Study. This effort focuses on collaboratively identifying, evaluating, and refining feasible ocean desalination project alternatives for San Luis Obispo County. Engagement will offer opportunities at key milestones to gather community perspectives, agency expertise, and regional needs and consider those in the identification of executable and permittable alternatives. Through building trust and working together, this engagement process helps to foster and maintain the partnerships necessary to advance regional ocean desalination projects successfully.

### 1.3 Engagement Outcomes

The primary goals of stakeholder engagement during this planning process are:

- Foster transparency and information sharing.
- Build trust and understanding.
- Create feedback loops to shape aspects of the study such as criteria used to screen for feasibility.
- Understand community concerns including environmental, cultural and social impacts.
- Identify potential risks and conflicts.
- Promote collaboration and partnerships that would be needed if the region were to pursue an ocean desalination project.

## 2.0 KEY STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

Ocean desalination projects often take decades to conceptualize, plan, permit and construct. Success depends on many things, not least of which is interested stakeholder outreach and early engagement at project milestones. Collaboration is key to a successful feasibility study, but also for building and maintaining the partnerships needed to advance regional desalination projects. With the goal of this planning effort to identify the most viable ocean desalination alternatives, this SEP focuses specifically on engaging DESAL Plan Partners and water agencies, regulatory agencies, the region's existing Water Resources Advisory Committee, and interested public organizations, groups and individuals. Figure 1 and Table 1 below include a list of the Key Stakeholder Groups as well as anticipated individuals/agencies within each.



Figure 1 Engagement of Key Stakeholder Groups

Table 1 Key Stakeholder Groups for the USBR Feasibility Study

Stakeholder Group	Individuals/Agencies
DESAL Plan Partners	<p>Each of the following agencies adopted resolutions agreeing to be considered in the DESAL Plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Atascadero Mutual Water Company.</li> <li>Avila Beach Community Services District.</li> <li>Cambria Community Services District.</li> <li>City of Arroyo Grande.</li> <li>City of Grover Beach.</li> <li>City of Morro Bay.</li> <li>City of Paso Robles.</li> <li>City of Pismo Beach.</li> <li>City of San Luis Obispo.</li> <li>Golden State Water Company.</li> <li>Los Osos Community Services District.</li> <li>Nipomo Community Services District.</li> <li>Oceano Community Services District.</li> <li>San Miguel Community Services District.</li> <li>Santa Barbara County.</li> <li>Templeton Community Services District.</li> </ul>
Countywide Water Action Team (CWAT) Working Group	<p>The CWAT is an informal working group of staff from entities across the county with water supply planning responsibilities which meets to provide a staff-level forum for countywide communication and collaboration on water resources issues and objectives in order to maximize agency(ies) efforts, leverage interagency coordination, and identify mutually beneficial opportunities.</p>
Regulatory/Permitting Agencies	<p>The project team identified the following regulatory agencies as potentially being valuable to engage at this feasibility stage of the project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>California State Water Resources Control Board.</li> <li>California Coastal Commission.</li> <li>California SHPO.</li> <li>Central Coast RWQCB.</li> <li>NOAA / NMFS.</li> <li>California State Lands Commission.</li> <li>USFWS.</li> <li>California Department of Fish and Wildlife.</li> <li>California State Parks.</li> <li>Marine Sanctuaries.</li> </ul>
Boards and Advisory Bodies	<p>The District initiated development of the DESAL Plan and is leading this current USBR Feasibility Study planning effort. Boards and Advisory Bodies involved in this stage of DESAL Plan development include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Five-member Board of Supervisors of the County of San Luis Obispo.</li> <li>Five-member Board of Supervisors of the San Luis Obispo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District.</li> <li>33-member WRAC, Table 2 provides a detailed list of representation.</li> </ul> <p>Other boards or councils may be engaged to the extent that DESAL Plan Partner agencies' staff are willing to lead such engagement.</p>

Stakeholder Group	Individuals/Agencies
Regional Special Interest Groups	These stakeholders may include various special interests such as Native American tribal representation, environmental nongovernmental organizations, and business/economic development representatives that may illuminate fatal flaws or identify opportunities to advance permissible ocean desalination projects.
Interested Community Members	These stakeholders include any community members that have an interest in the DESAL Plan or the region's water resources planning in general and want to be informed and/or offer their input at key milestones.

## Notes:

CWAT - Countywide Water Action Team; NMFS - National Marine Fisheries Service; NOAA - National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; RWQCB - Regional Water Quality Control Board; SHPO - State Office of Historic Preservation; USFWS - United States Fish and Wildlife Service; WRAC - Water Resources Advisory Committee.

### 3.0 ENGAGEMENT METHODS

The District's intent is to conduct a variety of engagement activities meant to inform, involve and collaborate during development of the USBR Feasibility Study. The following is a list of anticipated engagement methods that were developed based in part on discussions with District staff as well as representatives of the DESAL Plan Partners. In addition, the project team conducted a series of interviews with community opinion leaders to better understand the general community's knowledge of water supply conditions, learn what potential concerns might exist currently, or the District might encounter as they proceed with the project. Just as important, the interviews helped to shed light on trusted sources for receiving information about water resources, which helped to refine this SEP.

The following provides a brief overview of the primary engagement methods planned for this project for each of the stakeholder groups listed in the Table 1. The anticipated timing of the proposed engagement activities is presented in Table 3 and Figure 2.

### 3.1 Water Resources Stakeholders and Partner Agencies Participation

The project team will share current project information at key milestones of the USBR Feasibility Study process to inform the partner agencies and other stakeholders on study approach, progress, outcomes, as well as gather input related to key aspects of the study. Engagement is focused on utilizing existing forums and venues with a close connection to, or interest in, the USBR Feasibility Study and greater DESAL Plan. The project team anticipates engaging in dialogue with the following stakeholder groups:

#### 3.1.1 District Board of Supervisors

The District initiated development of the DESAL Plan, and it is anticipated that, upon completion of the USBR Feasibility Study, the project team and District staff will present the final USBR Feasibility Study and its findings, as well as potential next steps to the Board of Supervisors. These meetings are public<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The agenda and related materials will be posted to County website: <https://www.slocounty.ca.gov/departments/board-of-supervisors/board-meetings-agendas-and-minutes>

### 3.1.2 Water Resources Advisory Committee

The WRAC was formed in the 1950s to advise the County of San Luis Obispo Board of Supervisors concerning all policy decisions relating to the water resources of the San Luis Obispo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District and recommend specific water resource and conservation programs. It includes broad representation of local organizations, agencies and at-large interests that relate to or have an interest in water resources (see Table 2). WRAC members will offer unique insights relevant to this study and meetings are open to the public<sup>2</sup>, allowing broader input as well. Discussions with the WRAC will be the primary method for soliciting public input throughout the development of the USBR Feasibility Study, such as potential siting location, evaluation criteria, draft analysis results, and the draft report as appropriate. The meeting presentations for the WRAC will likely cover topics such as draft SEP, viable alternatives, and the screening process used.

Table 2 WRAC Membership

WRAC Membership Representation		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Agriculture at-large.</li> <li>▪ Atascadero Mutual Water Company.</li> <li>▪ Avila Beach Community Services District.</li> <li>▪ California Men's Colony.</li> <li>▪ Cambria Community Services District.</li> <li>▪ Camp San Luis Obispo.</li> <li>▪ City of Arroyo Grande.</li> <li>▪ City of Atascadero.</li> <li>▪ City of Grover Beach.</li> <li>▪ City of Morro Bay.</li> <li>▪ City of Paso Robles.</li> <li>▪ City of Pismo Beach.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ City of San Luis Obispo.</li> <li>▪ Coastal San Luis Resource Conservation District.</li> <li>▪ County Farm Bureau.</li> <li>▪ County Supervisorial Districts (5).</li> <li>▪ Cuesta College.</li> <li>▪ Development at-large.</li> <li>▪ Environmental at-large.</li> <li>▪ Estrella El Pomar Creston Water District.</li> <li>▪ Golden State Water Company.</li> <li>▪ Heritage Ranch Community Services District.</li> <li>▪ Los Osos Community Services District.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Nipomo Community Services District.</li> <li>▪ Oceano Community Services District.</li> <li>▪ San Miguel Community Services District.</li> <li>▪ San Simeon Community Services District.</li> <li>▪ Shandon-San Juan Water District.</li> <li>▪ Templeton Community Services District.</li> <li>▪ Upper Salinas Las Tablas Resource Conservation District.</li> </ul>

### 3.1.3 Countywide Water Action Team (CWAT)

Discussion with the CWAT will be the primary method for soliciting input for the USBR Feasibility Study from the DESAL Plan Partners and local water purveyors. These discussions will cover topics such as: need for supplemental water, criteria used to screen for feasibility, potential sites being analyzed, and viable alternatives.

## 3.2 Targeted Stakeholder Meetings

This early planning stage requires focused attention to evaluate whether concepts can be permitted, funded, and built. The project team will host several virtual meetings or small group discussions with regulatory and permitting agencies and select regional special interest groups, as budget allows, to identify viable desalination projects for the region. The purpose of these meetings is to create a two-way

<sup>2</sup> To sign up for the email list or to access meeting agendas, visit the WRAC website: [https://www.slocounty.ca.gov/departments/public-works/committees-programs/water-resources-advisory-committee-\(wrac\)](https://www.slocounty.ca.gov/departments/public-works/committees-programs/water-resources-advisory-committee-(wrac))

dialogue between the District and project stakeholders about the USBR Feasibility Study, the viability of future ocean desalination projects and best approaches to enhancing water supply resources for the region. Depending on the number of attendees and topics for each meeting, the project team may leverage a variety of tools such as real-time survey tools or sticker exercises in order to best engage attendees.

### 3.3 Interested Community-Focused Engagement

In addition to the presentations given to existing bodies described in Section 3.1, the project team has included the following methods to both inform and gather input from interested community members at key milestones. The purpose of the following activities is to build interested community members' understanding of next-generation water supply reliability and resilience needs.

#### 3.3.1 Community Engagement Sessions

The project team and District staff will hold community engagement sessions to present key information at two stages of the project, ask relevant questions to the interested community members, and simply listen to the perspectives of those participating.

##### 3.3.1.1 Kickoff Virtual Community Engagement Session

The purpose of the first session will be to inform the public about the USBR Feasibility Study, gather input about regional water resources in general, and solicit perspectives on initial desalination feasibility study elements and ocean desalination more broadly. For example, the screening criteria proposed to compare ocean desalination options, and which criteria are of higher interest to community members.

##### 3.3.1.2 Mid-Project Community Engagement Session

The purpose of the second session will be to share the District's progress on the study and receive feedback about alternatives being considered and the preliminary evaluation results. This session could involve breakout sessions where meeting participants rotate between work stations to learn specifics about different potential ocean desalination sites and the initial evaluation results to gather informed input on additional ideas, challenges, and community concerns that could be considered. It is important to hold this session early enough in the project but while sufficient information is already developed to gather meaningful input that can still be incorporated to shape the USBR Feasibility Study report and findings.



*Example Community Engagement Meeting*



### 3.3.2 Web-based Surveys

Web-based surveys will be conducted several times throughout the Feasibility Study and are intended to foster brief interaction with interested community members and gather high level input on ocean desalination, as well as the regional water resources and needs. The project team will draft short lists of questions for the District to send out as surveys via the DESAL Plan website. The District will administer the surveys and responses gathered, which will help to inform the needed information, project website updates, as well as study outcomes.

## 3.4 Informational Resources

The project team will also develop tools to support interested stakeholders' understanding of the project, its progress and how it fits into the larger conversations happening in regional water resources planning. The following tools will be available to support interested stakeholders as they engage in this project.

### 3.4.1 DESAL Email and Website Updates

The project team will draft email content as well as website content for the District to send out to its existing email distribution list(s) and to post to its existing project webpage. These are intended to provide brief updates on study progress to interested stakeholders and make related documents available to the public throughout the USBR Feasibility Study. The District's DESAL Plan webpage can be found at <https://www.slocounty.ca.gov/desal>.

Email updates will only be sent to interested stakeholders that have joined the District's DESAL Plan email list by signing up at the DESAL Plan website. Interested stakeholders can also join the email list by contacting the District at <DESAL@co.slo.ca.us>.

The District's website includes a link to a Public Comment Form that can be used by interested stakeholders to submit comments, concerns or ideas as the USBR Feasibility Study proceeds. These comments will be reviewed, considered, and, where appropriate, integrated into the development of the USBR Feasibility Study.

### 3.4.2 Project Toolkit

The project team will develop a project overview toolkit for interested stakeholders to support having well-founded and consistent conversations about the USBR Feasibility Study as well as the broader DESAL Plan. The purpose of this toolkit is to support the District and interested DESAL Plan Partners in both briefing elected officials and informing their communities as appropriate throughout the USBR Feasibility Study. The toolkit will include one USBR Feasibility Study project overview presentation (approximately 10-15 slides) with up to six updates at the following key milestones of the project:

1. Potential ocean desalination sites.
2. Screened sites.
3. Draft evaluation results, before the mid-project Community Engagement Session.
4. Final evaluation results.
5. Draft USBR Feasibility Study.
6. Final USBR Feasibility Study.



Other elements of the Project Toolkit include talking points and a project fact sheet that will be developed early in the project to serve as foundational information.

### 3.5 SEP Deliverables

Deliverables of the SEP include:

- Key Opinion Leader Audit Summary Report.
- Draft and Final Stakeholder Engagement Plan.
- Up to four Interested Stakeholder Web-based Surveys.
- Up to four Email Updates and Website Content Updates.
- Project Toolkit (see Table 3 for details).

Table 3      **Summary of Engagement Activities**

Engagement Activities	Timing	Open to Public
District & DESAL Plan Partner Kickoff Meetings.	Winter/Spring 2025	No
Key Opinion Leader Interviews.	Spring 2025	No
Four Discussions with WRAC.	Spring 2025 - Summer 2026	Yes
Up to three virtual Meetings - Regulatory/ Permitting Agencies and up to three virtual Meetings with Regional Special Interest Groups.	Summer 2025 - early 2026	No
Two Community Engagement Sessions.	Summer 2025 - early 2026	Yes
Four Discussions with CWAT.	Summer 2025 - Spring 2026	No
Up to four Web-Based Surveys.	Summer 2025 - Summer 2026	Yes
Up to four Emails and Website Updates including FAQs.	Summer 2025 - Fall 2026	Yes
One Presentation to District Board of Supervisors.	Fall 2026	Yes
Project Toolkit including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Project overview presentation (with up to six updates, see Section 3.4.3).</li> <li>▪ Talking points (no updates).</li> <li>▪ Project fact sheet (with up to two updates).</li> </ul>	Summer 2025 - Summer 2026	Yes

### 4.0 KEY MESSAGES

A key message platform is more than talking points. This message platform includes foundational themes around core elements of communication and action to be woven throughout stakeholder engagement efforts moving forward. Once established, these messages will inform the development of content for informational materials, presentations, visuals, and other communication platforms. These messages will serve all project communications and will be tailored to promote consistency and resonance across varied audiences.

**Valuing Every Drop:** Water is at the heart of resilient and thriving communities, promoting environmental stewardship, transforming lives, sustaining local businesses, and building a future we can all rely on.

*Together, we honor the vital role of every drop.*

**A Legacy of Water Resilience:** For generations, the San Luis Obispo County region has united to make thoughtful plans and sacrifices, creating the foundation of water resilience our communities cherish today. *This legacy fuels our determination to secure a sustainable tomorrow.*

**Exploring Ocean Desalination:** As a coastal region with the support of the USBR WaterSMART grant, we have a unique opportunity to explore ocean desalination as a reliable and resilient long-term water supply to adapt to climate uncertainties. *The future begins here.*

**Planning for a Sustainable Water Future:** By the end of this study, we will obtain more informed insights in the feasibility of ocean desalination concept options, including identifying potential desalination sites and conveyance configurations. Though no final decisions will be made, these findings will support meaningful dialogue among partner communities as we envision a water-secure future. *Community conversations will help shape our future.*

## 5.0 FEEDBACK MECHANISMS AND DOCUMENTATION

### 5.1 Methods for Collecting and Considering Stakeholder Input

Throughout the engagement activities, the project team will be soliciting and collecting stakeholder input to evaluate and incorporate it where appropriate. Methods for gathering stakeholder input will be through the planned activities described in Section 3. Once gathered, the project team will use the input to help identify fatal flaws; develop screening criteria for comparing viable alternatives; highlight regulatory, environmental and social considerations/concerns; and document issues identified.

### 5.2 Informing Stakeholders on Key Findings and Decisions

Below is a list of project deliverables that will be made available to interested stakeholders and the public. These deliverables will reflect technical analysis, as well as changes made considering stakeholder input as appropriate.

- WRAC Meeting Presentations.
- Draft and Final Screening Methodology.
- Draft and Final Feasibility Study.
- Draft scope of work for the potential next steps in desalination planning.

## 6.0 TIMELINE

Figure 2 lays out the approximate timelines for major lines of engagement activities starting with the District and DESAL Plan Partner kickoff meetings in February 2025 through to the presentation of final USBR Feasibility Study findings to the District Board of Supervisors in September 2026. This compliments Table 3 above, which identifies anticipated number of meetings and/or activities.

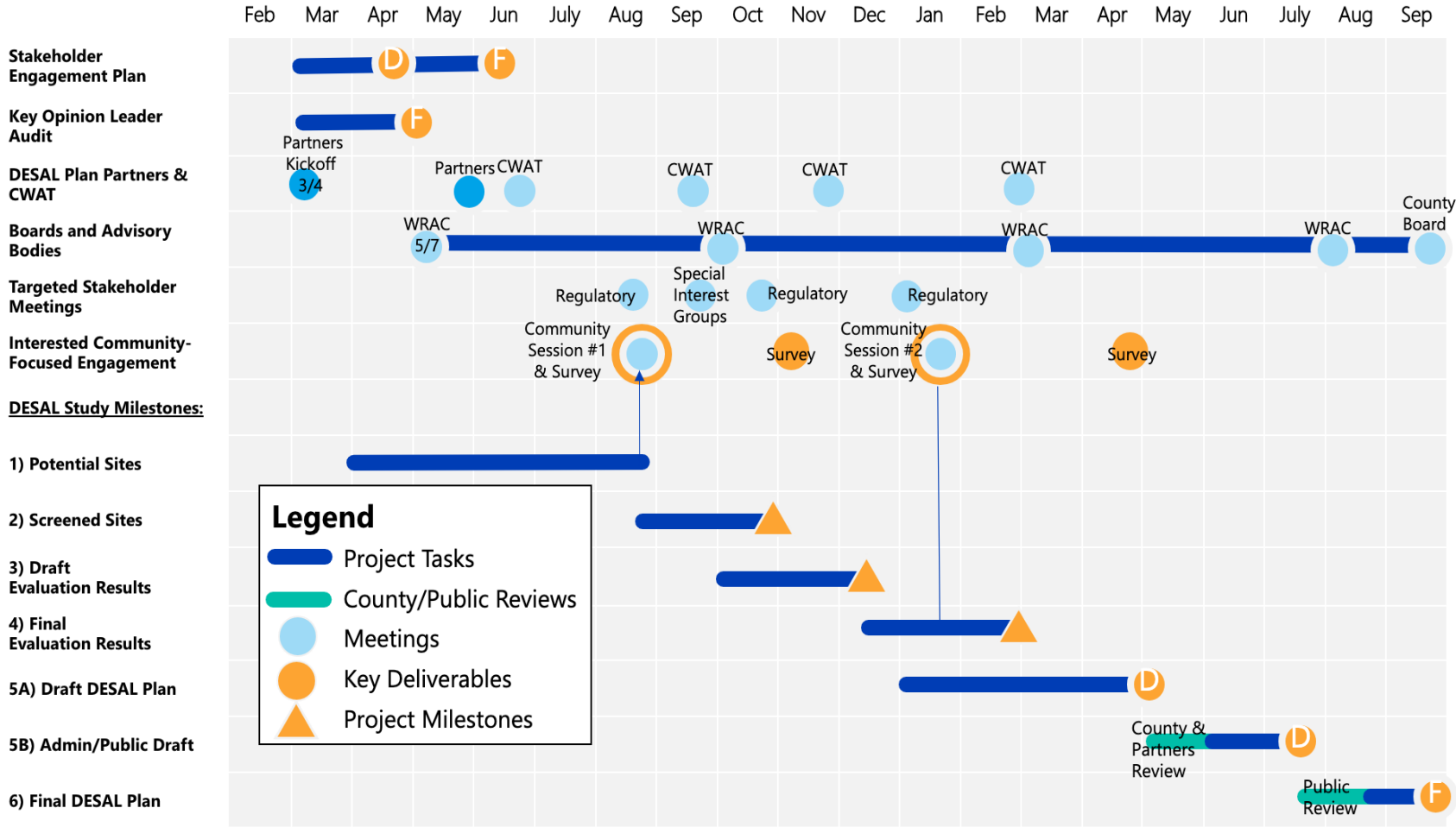


Figure 2 Stakeholder Engagement Plan Adaptive Timeline

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

This SEP has been developed to promote meaningful, strategic and transparent engagement with key stakeholders during the USBR Feasibility Study development. By offering engagement opportunities to gather community perspectives, agency expertise, and regional needs, the District and DESAL Plan Partners will be poised to consider those perspectives in the identification of executable and permissible desalination alternatives. By fostering transparency and collaboration, this engagement process helps to build and maintain the partnerships necessary to advance regional ocean desalination projects successfully.

This is a stakeholder-driven plan, meaning that the activities outlined are tailored to the various audiences the District has identified as stakeholders of the USBR Feasibility Study. This plan is also a “living” document that may benefit from revisiting as stakeholder feedback is received through this process.

The project team and the District will evaluate engagement strategies throughout the study and determine whether any adjustment is needed, to the extent that schedule and budget allow. If major shifts are made to the SEP, the District will provide verbal updates at a subsequent WRAC meeting.

These engagement activities are collaborative efforts - mostly led by the project team, working in coordination with the District and the DESAL Plan Partners, while some activities will be led by the District and willing DESAL Plan Partners. Figure 3 briefly notes on which agency(ies) are anticipated to lead and/or engage on each activity.

	Project Team	County	DESAL Plan Partners
Key Opinion Leader Audit	LEAD	SUPPORT	
Stakeholder Engagement Plan	LEAD	SUPPORT	
Water Resources Stakeholder & Partner Agencies Participation	LEAD	SUPPORT	ATTEND
Targeted Stakeholder Input	LEAD	SUPPORT	
Community Engagement Sessions	CO-LEAD	CO-LEAD	SUPPORT
Web-based Surveys	SUPPORT	LEAD	DISTRIBUTE
Email and Website Updates	SUPPORT	LEAD	DISTRIBUTE
Public Comment Form		LEAD	
Project Toolkit	LEAD	SUPPORT	SUPPORT

Figure 3 Stakeholder Engagement Implementation Roles