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Delta Mercury Exposure Reduction Program Update

Staff Report

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Delta Mercury Exposure Reduction Program (Delta MERP) is a collaborative multi agency effort to reduce human exposure to mercury from consuming fish from the Delta. The Conservancy is working with the State Water Board, California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) to implement the Delta MERP. While fish is a highly nutritious food and an important part of a healthy diet, many types of fish caught in the Delta and other California water bodies contain mercury at harmful levels. To protect public health, fish consumption advisories have been issued by the OEHHA for the Delta. These advisories provide guidance on the specific types and amounts of Delta fish that can be safely eaten.

The objective of the Delta MERP is to work with affected communities to design and implement culturally-relevant activities that raise awareness and understanding to reduce risks of harm from consuming mercury in fish. Due to the fact that it will take many years to lower mercury levels in fish, the Delta MERP encourages actions that will reduce mercury exposure to people.

In October 2013, the Central Valley Regional Water Board approved a work plan for the Delta MERP. The Delta MERP is funded by State Water Board's Cleanup and Abatement Account (CAA Project 368), and by individual agencies and other entities participating in the program. The Conservancy, under an agreement with the State Water Board, received \$370,000 to implement the Delta MERP in 2014. The project was completed at the end of June 2017.

To continue the widely recognized value of the Delta MERP, a new agreement with the State Water Board for \$154,000 is in progress and is expected to be executed in December 2017. With these funds the Conservancy expects to hire a project coordinator to continue the community outreach and to manage a small grants program.

The Delta MERP activities include:

1) **Development and Distribution of Multilingual Educational Materials:**

OEHHA developed and field tested fish consumption advisories. These advisories provide information on how to make safe choices when eating fish caught in the Delta. The advisories are in English, but are largely picture-based to convey key messages. The Delta Conservancy led

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the advisory sign posting activities, which included: outreach to entities that would assist with posting, identifying appropriate sign-posting locations, coordinating sign posting with partners, and developing a database to track locations where signs will be posted in the future. Over the past nine months, 20 advisory signs have been posted in the Delta. The Conservancy intends to monitor the condition of the signs and replace damaged signs as needed. The Delta MERP also created tri-fold brochures and kiosk flyers. The brochures and flyers have been translated into 8 languages. They are being distributed widely by Small Grant Program partners, and agencies and organizations in the Delta at community events, workshops, doctor's offices and other locations.

2) Education, Outreach and Training:

CDPH conducted a Needs Assessment to identify community-based organizations and tribes that serve populations who may be catching and eating fish from the Delta. Several common themes and methodologies emerged from the discussion during the Need Assessment including involving community leaders and youth in the development of outreach strategies. While input from the community regarding the strategies for conducting outreach varied, the groups generally agreed that the message should be simple, accurate, and positive. Educational materials emphasizing the importance of photos and visual images, and culturally-specific messages and representations (e.g. educational materials featuring individuals that represent their ethnicity) were universally supported. Delta MERP applied these strategies in developing a Small Grant Program, brochures and advisories, and on-going outreach and training.

3) Small Grants Program:

The goal of the Small Grants Program is to provide opportunity for small community groups to implement Delta MERP within affected populations. To date, two solicitation rounds have been completed. In 2015 three non-profit community groups received \$15,000 each and in 2016, two non-profit community groups received \$20,000 each to implement community education projects. These community organizations have reached out to at risk populations and used various channels for educating their target audience, and have provided training to health clinic providers and Women, Infant and Children (WIC) clinic staff. They have conducted direct public education activities in impacted communities at multiple cultural and community events, educational workshops, and through meetings with individual community members. They developed blogs targeted at youth, and assisted with Delta advisory sign development activities.

4) Coordination with Delta Agencies and Organizations:

This activity focuses on collaboration with other organizations to incorporate mercury exposure reduction and safe consumption information into existing programs. Delta MERP staff worked with Department of Fish and Wildlife to incorporate messages into CDFW training for wardens and biologists, and into the current curricula of CDFW youth environmental education programs.

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5) Convene Community Stakeholder Group Meetings:

The purpose of the Community Stakeholder Group is to provide a forum for a broad range of stakeholders, leaders of community-based organizations, tribes and fishing communities, and local agencies to keep informed and provide input regarding implementation of Delta MERP. To date, Delta MERP has conducted eight Stakeholder Community Group Meetings during 2015-2017.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Delta and the San Francisco Bay have been identified through the Federal Clean Water Act as impaired due to elevated concentrations of methylmercury in fish, which pose a human health threat. In 2005, the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) adopted Resolution 2005-0060, which directed the Central Valley Water Board and the San Francisco Bay Water Quality Control Board to “investigate ways, consistent with their regulatory authority, to address public health impacts of mercury in San Francisco Bay and Delta fish.” In response, the Central Valley Water Board and the San Francisco Water Board separately adopted mercury control programs that require development and implementation of exposure reduction activities geared toward people who consume fish in those areas.

The Delta Reform Act of 2009 established the Conservancy and includes three relevant mandates; (1) Protect and improve water quality; (2) Protect, conserve, and restore the region’s physical, agricultural, cultural, historical, and living resources; and (3) Promote environmental education. These efforts are consistent with the Conservancy’s 2017-2022 Strategic Plan, Goal 2, Delta Ecosystem Viability, Objective 2, Strengthen the coordination of water quality monitoring, data integration, and implementation of best management practices in partnership with existing Delta watershed efforts.

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