

Improving Scientific Capacity

The Department of Fish and Game (DFG) is staffed by some of the foremost fish, wildlife and habitat scientists in the country. These experts are often consulted by natural resource conservation organizations around the globe, and also share their knowledge through published works and presentations. California's exceptional biological diversity presents both challenges and benefits to creating enough capacity to address the broad range of issues it faces.

DFG is the primary public trust steward for fish, wildlife, and habitat resources and this requires a working scientific knowledge of a broad range of technical and policy areas. Although DFG relies upon the academic and non-governmental organization (NGO) community to promote overall scientific capacity to support regulatory and conservation programs, DFG must retain internal expertise to fully meet its mandated resource trust obligations. Over the past several decades, this capacity has been eroded by budget cuts, emphasis on other priority areas, and DFG's changing role in wildlife management and environmental analysis hindering its ability to review and develop listing documents and management plans.

Most of the true science capacity within DFG resides in its Bay Delta ecosystem monitoring and assessment programs, marine region and wildlife programs' management, and monitoring to support catch limits and seasons, and conservation planning within the nongame fish and wildlife functions. In each of these programs, and many others, DFG relies upon third parties, including the university and state college systems and non-profit organizations, for designing and implementing science programs to support management decisions. Some constituents and stakeholders argue that maintaining internal scientific capacity provides a level of independence necessary for unbiased decision making while others argue that DFG's role is now far more regulatory and less science-based, making the need for internal capacity less urgent.

DFG is in the process of further developing strategic initiatives – coupled with changes to program-level accounting and reporting – that will help identify the functional areas most appropriate for more fully developed science programs. Funding through the state wildlife grants program is utilized by DFG as a component in its overall program funding for collecting baseline species population status, threats and vulnerability information. These data are essential for regional and large-scale planning efforts. DFG is also leveraging private funding to support monitoring and assessment efforts through state and NGO partnerships. DFG continues to partner with the federal government, primarily the U.S. Geological Survey, Biological Research Division, to identify and carry out high priority science programs that provide a tangible management benefit. Restructuring may be required to more fully emphasize the importance of DFG's internal science capacity.