



MEMORANDUM

TO: Marin County Board of Supervisors
FROM: Talia Smith, Deputy County Executive, Office of the County Executive
Nadia Seeteram, Chief Climate Officer, Office of the County Executive
DATE: July 14, 2026
RE: Synthesis of Collaborative Governance Research: AECOM Study and Coastal Quest Assessment

Purpose

This memo synthesizes the findings of two research efforts examining the governance landscape for sea level rise (SLR) adaptation and broader climate resilience in Marin County:

- (1) The AECOM-led Countywide SLR Collaborative Governance Study, commissioned by the County in March 2024 and completed May 2025; and
- (2) The Coastal Quest assessment commissioned by the Marin Community Foundation (MCF) through its Building Resilient Communities Initiative (2025).

The two efforts provide a robust, independently validated picture of where Marin stands on climate, sea level rise and offer recommendations for the County to consider to strengthen efforts moving forward.

Background

The AECOM study assessed how Marin County jurisdictions and agencies could work together on sea level rise adaptation, and what shared priorities, governance arrangements, and resources would be needed to make that collaboration succeed. The study drew on a literature review, 12 case studies of comparable regional entities, extensive stakeholder engagement including one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and engagement at 10 BayWAVE meetings.

The Coastal Quest assessed the Marin climate resilience landscape more broadly across jurisdictions, sectors, and hazards in addition to sea level rise, and to assess opportunities and best approaches to advance climate resilience across the county. Coastal Quest interviewed 37 key stakeholders across nonprofits, County and city staff, elected officials, and academia, and conducted in-depth case study research on climate collaboratives at differing scales. While SLR was a central concern, the assessment also examined wildfire, extreme heat, and clean energy.

Where the Two Studies Converge

Despite their different scopes, commissioning entities, and methodologies, the AECOM study and the Coastal Quest assessment reach consistent conclusions across **four core themes**.

1. Governance Is Fragmented and Needs a Backbone Organization

Both studies found that Marin's climate resilience efforts, and SLR adaptation specifically, are driven by individual jurisdictions and organizations rather than shared, cross-jurisdictional goals. This fragmentation produces siloed planning, uneven progress, and missed opportunities for economies of scale. Both studies found that stakeholders widely agree that the County of Marin is best positioned to serve as the coordinating organization, given its countywide reach and convening authority.

2. Capacity Constraints Are Pervasive, Especially for Smaller Jurisdictions

AECOM and Coastal Quest identified limited staff capacity as one of the most consistent barriers to effective action. Most municipalities and special districts lack the resources to pursue competitive grants, navigate complex regulatory requirements, manage multi-jurisdictional projects, or maintain SLR as a consistent priority alongside competing demands. Both studies point to shared technical assistance, centralized grant strategy support, and coordinated grant administration as high-value, near-term opportunities that a coordinating organization could deliver immediately.

3. Funding Must Be Coordinated

AECOM's findings stress that governance and financing must be designed together and that early project delivery and visible collaboration are prerequisites for building public support for future revenue measures. Coastal Quest's case study research corroborates that successful collaboratives had multiple, diversified funding sources. However, because the costs of adaptation are so great, their ability to achieve full impact was most often limited by the absence of sustained public and private funding commitments secured early.

4. A Phased Approach Is the Right Starting Point

Neither study recommends moving immediately to a formalized governance authority. AECOM concludes that designing a formal collaborative today would be premature, and that a phased path focused on trust-building, shared priorities, and demonstrated value is more likely to succeed. Coastal Quest found that nearly all stakeholders were in favor of a countywide collaborative but cautioned that existing efforts must be recognized and integrated, and that a cross-sector leadership body should guide the design process before a formal entity is established.

Where the Two Studies Differ

While convergent in their core conclusions, the two studies differ in important ways.

Scope: SLR-Focused vs. Multi-Hazard

The AECOM study is specifically focused on sea level rise governance, examining how Marin jurisdictions can plan and implement SLR adaptation more effectively together, with attention to BCDC's RSAP framework, SB 272 compliance, and the distinct governance needs of West Marin versus bayside communities. The Coastal Quest assessment takes a multi-hazard view, encompassing wildfire, extreme heat, and clean energy alongside SLR.

Role of Philanthropic Capital

Coastal Quest's work, commissioned and resourced by MCF, more explicitly develops the role of philanthropic capital as a near-term catalyst, including MCF's direct grant funding through the Building Resilient Communities Initiative and its potential to provide blended finance instruments. The public-private partnership already initiated between the County Climate Office and MCF in early 2026 represents a direct operationalization of these findings.

Implications for the County Climate Office

The AECOM and Coastal Quest research efforts provide strong, independently validated justification for the following near-term priorities for the County Climate Office:

- Establish the Climate Office as the countywide backbone organization for SLR adaptation or climate resilience coordination.
- Prioritize shared grant strategy and technical assistance as the highest near-term value-add, particularly for smaller jurisdictions and special districts with limited capacity.

- Advance the SB 272 / SB 1 multijurisdictional RSAP proposal as an early, concrete demonstration of the value of working together and as a practical test of what collaborative governance looks like in practice.
- Pursue a multi-jurisdictional collaborative structure in the near-term focused on securing early wins, while actively building the relationships, trust, and demonstrated track record that may lead to a regulatory entity over time.