

## **SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT PRODUCING THE 2023 ANNUAL REPORT ON THE ENVIRONMENT**

-- Ken Lanfear

### **BACKGROUND**

EQAC made significant changes for the 2017 ARE. First, we reorganized the chapters to conform to the Board of Supervisors' Environmental Vision. By focusing on the same general issues that the Board saw as important, this change helped ensure the ARE would stay relevant.

The second big change was to organize the chapters around recommendations. No longer would we include a large amount background material that turned the ARE into a tome and required a huge amount of staff resources to produce. The principle was, material included in the ARE should somehow be relevant to the Board's future potential actions. This decision let us condense the full and summary versions into a single report. In 2022, we tried to move the recommendations up to the front of each section, with each recommendation followed by any needed explanations and justifications. Unfortunately, this proved awkward, and was not done for every chapter.

### **Chapters**

While the principle of organizing the chapters to emphasize recommendations still stands, some format changes still may be needed to make for a better presentation. Sometimes, several recommendations may be related, and giving each a separate explanation may be redundant. Critically, not all recommendations are of equal importance. For example, some may be just early warnings of concerning trends, while others may demand action in the coming year to avoid serious consequences. The current format tries to deal with this by calling some things "recommendations" and others "concerns"; the distinction is not always clear, and creates complications for the Scorecard.

#### *Changes Recommended:*

- Chapters (and subchapters) should be organized around one or more "Issues," with each issue incorporating one or more recommendations. Essentially, "Issues" are a way of grouping recommendations that are related. (Example: several recommendations for filling specific positions, each related to a general staffing shortage in an agency.)
- Chapter Authors may identify some recommendations as CRITICAL. This designation is subject to EQAC vote, as explained below.
- Within any Issue, "concerns" should be discussed within ordinary text.

### **Scorecard**

The Scorecard has been around for some time and is a popular feature, a "report card" for the Board. A new format introduced in 2017 more assertively highlights EQAC recommendations. The Scorecard clearly summarizes EQAC's views, including any proposed plans of actions, and gives EQAC a "track record" of advice to the Board.

However, at the same time, the Scorecard presents several significant problems:

- The Scorecard fundamentally is backward-looking, rating actions on the *previous year's* ARE.
- The Scorecard can detract from current and perhaps more urgent new recommendations. The 2022 ARE Introduction tried, with limited success, to make the distinction clearer.
- Many of the items in the Scorecard are either continuing recommendations or recommend actions over several years. This puts a lot of repetition into the document, with the same items appearing every year.
- The 2022 Scorecard included 31 recommendations, all presented equally. (The Introductions tries to identify the most important.) Clearly 31 is more than the Board is likely to act upon. Too many recommendations also place a burden on the Staff in providing their input.

*Changes Recommended:*

- The Scorecard should be limited to a few recommendations deemed critical by EQAC.
- Recommendations should include:
  - Those from the past year's ARE (i.e., those deemed critical in 2022), assessing success of each;
  - Continuing multi-year critical recommendations, assessing progress, and
  - Those newly deemed critical for the present year (with no evaluation, but indicating EQAC's concern).
- A separate table should list all the minor issues mentioned in the chapters. This would help Supervisors interested in specific topics, but not necessarily reading the whole report.

**Review Process**

Each chapter gets a "content review" to ensure consistency. For example, each recommendation must be accompanied by some explanation, and any significant assertions must be supported by data or citations. While this probably catches the most egregious mistakes, the review timing does not allow for extensive rewrites.

Once a draft is completed, EQAC members have an extremely short window to read it and comment. EQAC votes to approve the recommendations in each chapter as a whole, and trusts the Author to complete the text. It is unreasonable to expect all members to have read and understand everything in detail.

*Changes Recommended:*

- EQAC should vote on each Critical Recommendation to be included within the Scorecard.

- Staff should check to make sure chapters and the scorecard agree on what is ultimately designated critical.
- Each Author or Authors will remain responsible for their chapter. Any EQAC member interested in any topic covered in the chapter should let the authors know in advance, so their views may be considered by the authors in writing the draft.
  - Staff should evaluate how to manage reviews within the requirements of open government rules.
- As before, the review vote should not be whether EQAC “approves” a whole chapter as is, but whether EQAC agrees with all the recommendations, both critical and minor, made in the chapter.