

Inside California's 2050 State of the Soil Address

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Illustrations by Spherical, as prepared for the Living Infrastructure Field Kit

Sacramento - Standing before a joint session of the State Legislature on Tuesday, Governor Nadia Singh delivered the 20th Annual State of the Soil address, marking two decades since California began to measure the economic and social health of the state against the health of its soils.

The governor told lawmakers, "Californians understand: If you want to know the state of your community, look no further than the state of your soils." She used the podium to highlight how her administration has worked to transform the quality of California's soils to deliver a host of benefits to Californians.

In her remarks, Gov. Singh announced, "I am proud to report that California's healthy soils have laid a foundation from which an abundance of outcomes can be achieved - delivering massive economic savings, a net carbon-negative water system, biodiversity recovery, high-road local jobs, resilient water supply, and improved public health."

In pursuit of those priorities, Singh's administration came to realize that the soil itself could inspire a new philosophy of governance, modeled after soil systems, that would better facilitate the desired outcomes.

She added, "We have reconfigured California's government to work more efficiently and economically for its people and ecosystems by using soil as a model for how we operate. Just as hyphal networks connect trees in a forest, allowing plants to share nutrients, our California ecosystem of governmental agencies no longer has impermeable walls of agency silos, but instead works from collective intelligence to resource California's diverse communities."

Under this collaborative model, agency silos are broken down and goals and budgets are aligned to foster collaboration instead of competition. Budgets for water, housing, parks, transit, schools, and other priorities all work in close collaboration for the public good to meet multi-benefit needs of Californians and ecosystems.

The governor used the State of the Soil address to unveil her latest policy change: State resources will only fund projects and programs that bring multiple-benefits, with costs shared proportionally among benefitting agencies. Under the new policy, project proponents will no longer have to stitch together a patchwork of diverse state funding opportunities to make their projects work. Instead, state agencies will pool their resources on the back end so that applicants only have to apply once, provided their proposal aligns with the governor's multi-benefit mandate.



An illustration of a stormwater park: Living Infrastructure Field Kit

A Pivot in Water Policy

The administration's structural changes are most pronounced in water policy. Gov. Singh highlighted California's move away from large, centralized water supply projects to prioritize local, distributed, nature-based solutions, resulting in a water system that no longer uses energy to pump water thousands of miles.

"This extractive mindset brought cascading consequences to our source watersheds, including dewatering, degradation of nature, loss of Indigenous cultural practices, and the decimation of jobs. It left all of them literally in the dust," said Singh.

Instead, water agencies now prioritize local capture and conservation, marshalling local water resources necessary for the second half of the 21st century. The governor also touted the economic efficiencies stemming from this change, including avoiding massive capital costs to maintain outdated aqueducts, creating a water system with net carbon-negativity, and providing tens of thousands of high-road jobs in stormwater capture, conservation, greywater, watershed restoration, and water recycling.

Urban Resiliency

Taking a victory lap around her last eight years in office, Gov. Singh told lawmakers that as of 2050, California's public institutions, such as libraries, schools, and parks, are all designed to capture and store stormwater in underground cisterns for water supply and fire suppression. They also double as cooling centers, with solar micro-grids to keep electricity and water running when emergencies occur.

According to the governor, housing policy has followed the same logic, with the majority of homes now outfitted to contribute to healthy soil and water resiliency. Under Singh's administration, every home and apartment building in California must capture rainwater runoff from their roofs, meet their water-budget, and utilize water-conscious landscaping requirements that maximize soil health on each parcel.

Singh praised the state's incentive programs for making these changes affordable for Californians. Recent reports back her up: communities that were historically underinvested in are among the biggest beneficiaries today. Research shows a direct correlation between funding nature-based solutions in the neighborhoods with the greatest need and measurable improvements in public health metrics. Through generous incentives, those neighborhoods now have healthy soils and vegetation, cooler summer temperatures, inviting parks, and access to high-road jobs in the work of building and maintaining this living infrastructure.

While the administration's popular landscaping incentives have delivered measurable quality-of-life improvements in urban heat islands, critics point out that the state's broader housing affordability crisis continues to price families out of the communities they love. When asked for comment, a representative of the administration said, "We've proven that collaborative governance can have a transformational effect on neighborhood infrastructure. We have been working on integrating this multi-agency strategy to address housing supply and affordability, but there is more work to be done."



An illustration of residential landscape transformation: Living Infrastructure Field Kit

Businesses have also taken their cue from consumer demand and government incentives, helping turn once sleepy commercial corridors into bustling, walkable green streets, co-located with frequent transit stops. Gov. Singh credited these changes with boosting economic activity and contributing to California's thriving business environment.

Transformation of the state's urban landscapes were further aided by the governor's robust depaving initiative, which has gained national attention for its benefits to public health.

"I'm proud to say that we have eliminated pavement that is not functionally needed for roads, essential parking spaces, or sidewalks and replaced it with verdant, native, and climate appropriate trees and vegetation, helping to regenerate healthy soils. This has allowed California to restore relationships with these beautiful lands and give them room to breathe," said Singh.

The statistics back up the governor's claim. Research from UCLA and the National Institutes of Health, monitoring thousands of landscapes planted densely with diverse, native, and climate-appropriate species ensuring at least 80% canopy coverage at maturity, suggest the change has helped restore the small water cycle. Restoring this local loop of evaporation and rainfall has helped deliver needed urban cooling to the 95% of Californians living in urban areas.

Gov. Singh's depaving initiative has been lauded for helping the state achieve ambitious urban forestry goals while simultaneously addressing food insecurity. Food forests have been planted throughout California's cities, reducing the number of food deserts that prevent residents from accessing healthy food.

Removing concrete in urban areas also gave rise to regenerating open space in less dense areas of the state. The state has surpassed the prior 2030 goal of 30% conserved lands, and has now successfully achieved 40% open space, including needed wetlands up and down the coast, and widened floodplains acting as riparian buffers.

As a birder herself, the governor took great pride in announcing that the biodiversity crisis has been turned around, saying, "We are immensely lucky to live in a state with all six of the major biomes. The removal of concrete and tending to healthy soils has allowed biodiversity to return, which anyone can witness, whether at a wetland, school, park, or in their front yard."

Schools as the Proving Ground

The Healthy Schools Program, Gov. Singh also noted, was the initiative that first proved the model worked. A quarter century ago, the average California schoolyard was roughly 40% covered in pavement. Today, that figure has been cut in half, replaced by permeable outdoor classrooms, shaded play structures, and student-maintained food orchards that supply nutritious cafeteria produce. Indoor/outdoor classroom design is now the gold standard in new construction, and campus gardens flourish now that lead-contaminated soils have been remediated. Academic achievement has been on the rise since the program launched, with schools reporting fewer student absences, higher test scores, and better teacher retention rates.

Gov. Singh closed the joint session where she began, with the state of the soil. "Once you see the hyphal network, it's impossible to unsee it. I'm heartened to report that Californians and the

state's ecological health are thriving, in large part from the sweeping restructuring of state governance that mirrored the hyphal network. We decided to govern like the soil taught us, and we have since become a model for the entire nation. Today, I can assure you, California's future is on fertile ground."



An illustration of a green schoolyard: Living Infrastructure Field Kit

Deborah Bloome helps communities and ecosystems get ready for a changing climate. With 25+ years in environmental and climate policy, from local to international levels, she uses science and data to turn siloed challenges into solutions that work for people and nature alike. A Presidential Management Fellow with a Master's in Public Policy from UCLA, Deborah collaborates across sectors to build policies, programs, and funding strategies that deliver lasting, equitable outcomes for the places and people hit hardest by climate change.

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