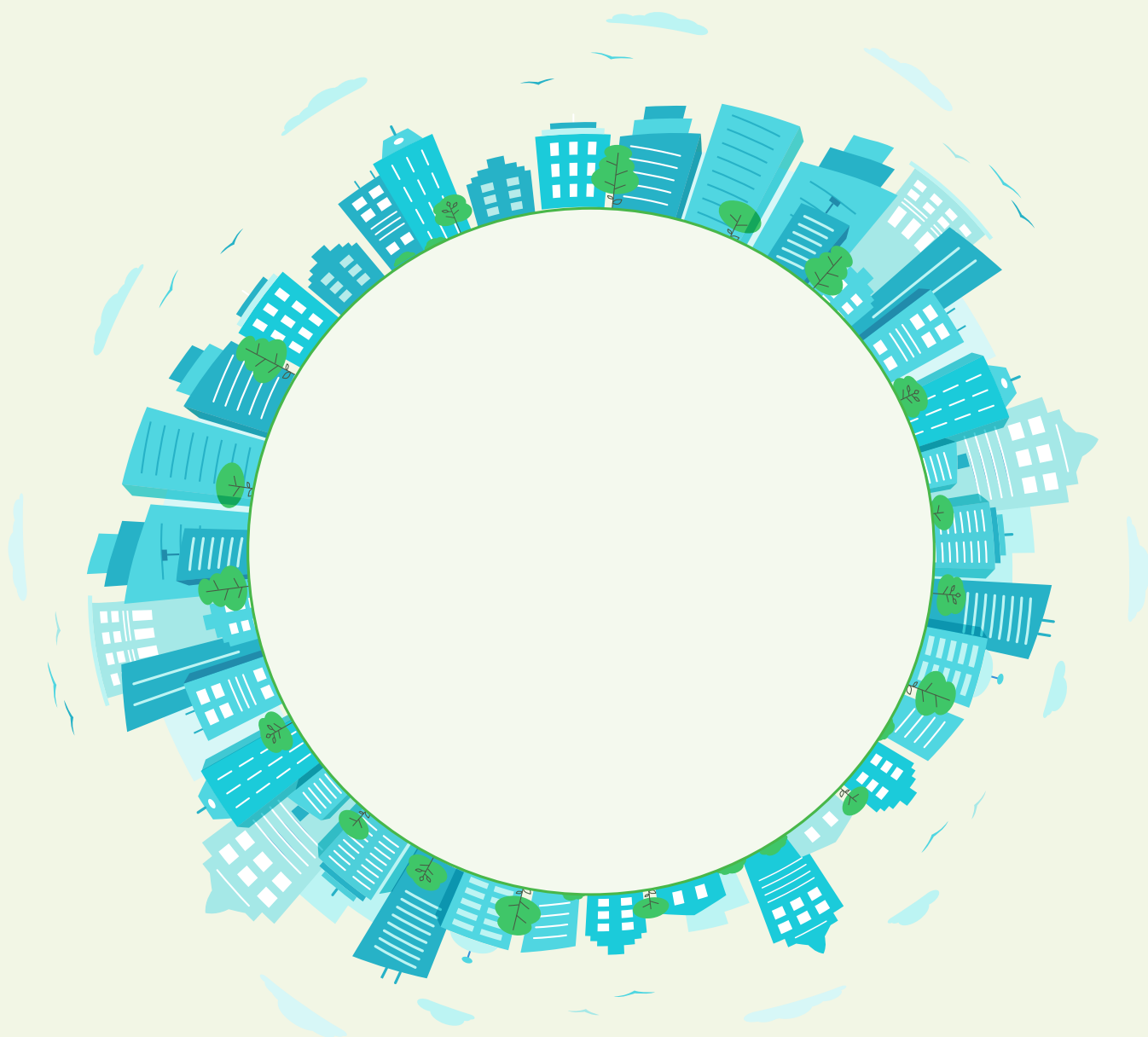


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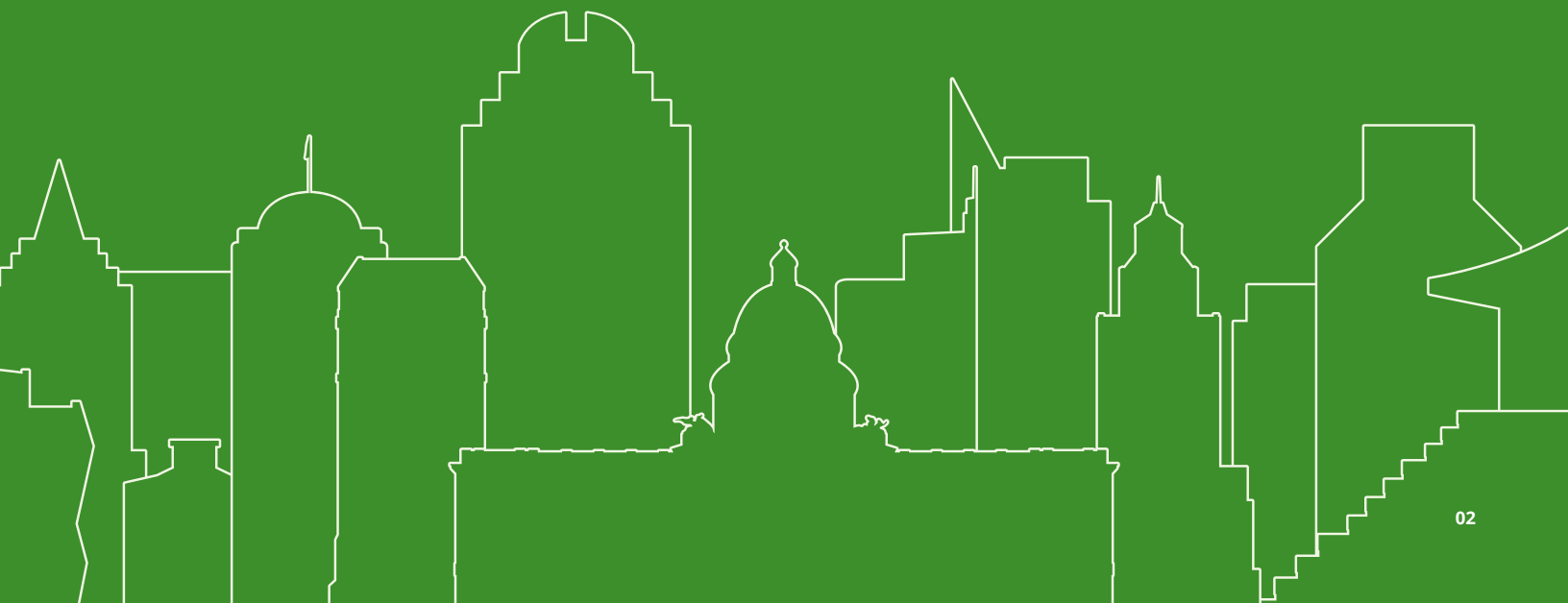
Together makes progress



Streamlining the California environmental permitting processes

**Modernizing permitting through
technology solutions**

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Introduction

The State of California (State, CA or California) faces urgent demand for new housing, renewable energy, and resilient water systems. Yet, breaking ground on any development requires navigating a complex regulatory system, involving multiple agencies, reviews and requirements.

Imagine a permitting process that moves at the pace of California's ambitions. Applicants submit project information once, triggering automatic identification of required permits, pre-populated forms, and real-time project tracking. Agencies collaborate seamlessly across jurisdictions, guided by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and supported by secure data platforms. Reviews remain rigorous, but technology enables efficiency, transparency, and predictability.

This is the vision: a user-centered, digital permitting ecosystem that accelerates the delivery of housing, energy, water, transportation, and other critical infrastructure—strengthening local economies, all while maintaining environmental stewardship. California has already made progress modernizing elements of permitting: the next step is to connect and scale these efforts into an integrated framework that improves coordination, reliability, and the end-to-end applicant experience.

Building on recent progress, California's permitting system presents opportunities to reduce friction and improve outcomes for applicants, agencies, and communities.

However, some key challenges remain, such as:

- **Distributed oversight and multi-permit complexity:** Projects must navigate separate reviews from multiple agencies including state, regional, and local under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and other environmental laws. This fragmented oversight means that major projects can face a patchwork of permitting requirements, with each

agency maintaining its own application, review, and approval process. The lack of an integrated review mechanism can lead to duplicative data requests, inconsistent interpretations, and missed opportunities for coordinated decision-making.¹

- **Time-sensitive, sequential reviews:** Reviews are conducted in a strict sequence rather than in parallel, with limited mechanisms to prioritize based on project complexity or impact. This can extend approval timelines and increase costs for applicants and agencies.²
- **Manual and legacy processes:** Many agencies and local entities continue to use processes that may be time-consuming, opaque, confusing, and favor process over outcomes. This can slow review cycles, limits transparency, and creates barriers to interagency information-sharing.³
- **Limited transparency for applicants:** Applicants may lack clear visibility into permit requirements, review criteria, and approval pathways, as well as how to improve the likelihood of approval or obtain faster responses. This uncertainty can increase rework, complicates multi-agency coordination, and makes project planning and scheduling difficult.⁴
- **Increasing expectations from applicants and industry stakeholders:** State legislative hearings and stakeholder testimony indicate growing expectations from communities, developers, and industry for permitting processes that are more timely, transparent, and predictable to support housing delivery, infrastructure investment and clean energy deployment.⁵

Continued improvements in permitting processes present an opportunity to improve predictability, reduce costs, and support timely delivery of critical projects. More effective permitting directly support the State's ability to:





- Accelerate housing delivery:** California has a 1.3 million shortfall of affordable homes for low-income renters, with approximately 83% of renters in California citing affordability as a problem. Permitting delays can add further cost and uncertainty to housing production.^{6,7}
- Advance energy infrastructure:** Major transmission projects on average require six years or more from initiation to completion, slowing the transition to renewable energy.⁸
- Build climate-resilient water systems:** Delays in water projects, such as the Delta Conveyance Project, have limited California's ability to capture storm flows during high-water events. During last year's atmospheric rivers, the Project had the potential to collect enough water to meet the annual usage of approximately 9.8 million people within that specific period, underscoring the need for timely delivery of large-scale water infrastructure.⁹
- Boost jobs and local economies:** Each project not only addresses critical infrastructure needs but also creates jobs and stimulates economic investment in local communities. Permitting bottlenecks slow the flow of new jobs and delay much-needed funds and opportunities in areas across the state.

In response to these challenges, California has made permitting reform a priority, and recent legislative actions signed by Governor Newsom demonstrate a commitment to accelerating project delivery as shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1.
Examples of CA progress on permitting

State-wide

- Accelerated Energy Permitting (AB 205)
- Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) Cutting the Green Tape
- California's Streamlined Online Permitting for Wildfire Safety Projects

Local

- Los Angeles Wildfire Recovery Uses AI to Check Building Plans for Compliance
- Santa Cruz County's Camino Online Permit Guide

See Appendix for more information.

Technology and permitting solutions

A mix of established and emerging technologies now offer California a powerful tool to tackle permitting challenges at both the agency and interagency levels. Cloud platforms, AI-enabled workflows, and geospatial analytics can be applied in ways that align with the state's housing, infrastructure, and climate goals—while also meeting programs where they are in their modernization journey.

These innovations can deliver measurable results, with Deloitte research estimating that smart technologies can reduce the time spent on core tasks, such as drafting reports or routing documents, by 75–95%.¹⁰

Table 1 provides examples of technology-enabled permitting tools currently used across California.

Table 1. CA Permitting Technology Examples

Agency	Objective	Result
State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB)	Created California's Water, Accounting, Tracking, and Reporting System (CalWATRS), replacing multiple legacy permitting systems with a single platform	Improved management and oversight of water ownership, allocation, and allowable use
California Energy Commission (CEC) ¹¹	Developed the AB 525 Offshore Wind Energy Permitting Roadmap to coordinate permitting for offshore wind projects	Improved transparency and predictability for renewable energy permitting
Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety ¹²	Expanded use of online systems (ePlanLA, PermitLA) to support electronic plan submissions, review, and permitting	Improved efficiency and reduced in-person requirements for applicants
Sacramento County ¹³	Provides an online permitting portal to submit applications, schedule inspections, and track project status	Increased accessibility and convenience for applicants



Evolving tools and techniques to improve permitting

Public agencies across California are at different stages of modernizing their permitting processes. Some continue to rely on manual and paper-based systems, while others have digitized application intake, automated parts of review workflows, or connected data across programs.

As shown in **Table 2**, technologies can be introduced incrementally to improve efficiency, coordination, and transparency across the permitting lifecycle. Early stages typically involve replacing manual submissions with digital forms, centralized tracking, and standardized data entry. These foundational changes can reduce paper handling, improve record accuracy, and allow applicants and staff to monitor project status in real time. As agencies progress, automation and analytics can be incorporated to streamline reviews. At more advanced stages, integrated data platforms and shared systems can connect multiple programs or jurisdictions, allowing agencies to exchange information securely, coordinate concurrent reviews, and generate performance insights across portfolios.

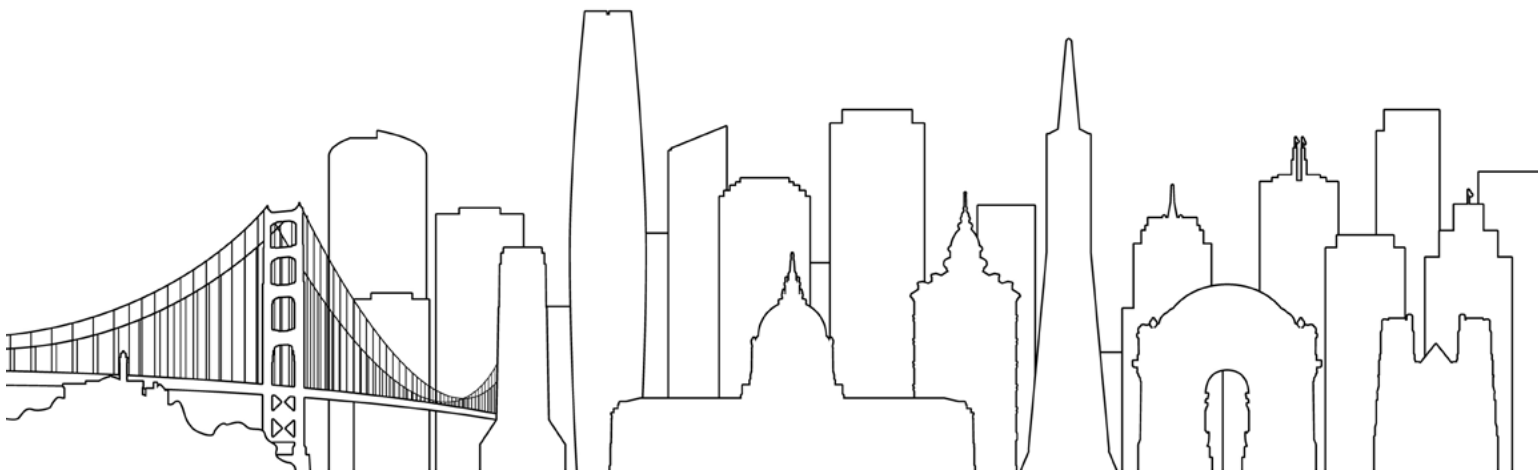




Table 2.
From paperwork to progress: Building a harmonized, digital permitting future

	Manual and disparate processes Permitting handled separately by each program, often relying on paper-based and manual processes with limited data-driven insights or coordination.	Digital integration Digital tools replace paper processes, allowing electronic submissions and centralized tracking, but many workflows still require manual intervention.	Advanced automation and intelligence Automation and AI streamline workflows, automate routine tasks, and use data to inform decisions, reducing manual effort and increasing efficiency.	Harmonization Applicants centrally enter project information that's shared across agencies. Systems integrate enabling seamless collaboration and a unified, user-friendly experience.
User experience 	<i>Applicants:</i> Face confusing, paper-heavy steps, inconsistent communication, and long waits with little visibility into status. <i>Staff:</i> Must review applications manually across fragmented systems, increasing errors and slowing approvals.	<i>Applicants:</i> Can submit forms online, receive timely responses, and track progress with transparency, though automation is still limited. <i>Staff:</i> Use digital tools to organize and review applications efficiently, reducing rework and improving coordination across departments.	<i>Applicants:</i> Experience faster and more predictable approvals, as AI checks applications, reduces errors, and flags potential issues. <i>Staff:</i> Rely on AI to handle routine tasks and risk screening, cutting manual effort and freeing capacity to focus on complex reviews.	<i>Applicants:</i> Interact with a single, user-friendly interface where AI-enabled forms auto-populate across agencies, creating a seamless and consistent experience. <i>Staff:</i> Access shared project data across systems and advanced AI tools, reducing the need for duplicate reviews and enabling coordinated, real-time decision-making.
Technology 	Aging systems that often rely on paper or manually digitizing documents	Modern technologies that allow for digital data collection/reviews, workflow orchestration, enterprise data management, and integration capabilities.	Integration of AI and machine learning technologies to predict outcomes, enhance workflows, and provide real-time analytics.	Centralized platform that integrates various permitting systems and leverages advanced AI, enabling seamless data flow and reducing technological silos.
Processes 	Fragmented processes with multiple manual checkpoints and approvals, leading to delays and inefficiencies.	Streamlined linear processes with digital workflows, reducing manual steps and improving coordination across departments.	Implementation of intelligent process automation that dynamically adjusts workflows based on data inputs and historical trends.	Harmonized processes that work in parallel, systematically triggering necessary approvals and actions across departments and agencies, reducing delays and improving efficiency.
Data 	Siloed data, inconsistently formatted, and underutilized for decision-making.	Enhanced data management with centralized databases, improved data accessibility, and effective data quality control.	Bolster data management with improved management of unstructured data/ documents to enable AI.	Unified data architecture across permitting programs and agencies that enable effective information sharing cross-agency collaboration.



Transforming government with new permitting solutions

Permitting authority in California is distributed across numerous State, regional, and local entities, each operating under distinct statutory mandates and administrative procedures. This decentralized structure can make coordination across agencies challenging, particularly when projects require multiple approvals or draw on overlapping data.

Targeted technology investments can improve coordination and efficiency. Agencies can modernize incrementally, beginning with digitized forms, automated document routing, and online tracking dashboards that provide visibility into project status and responsible offices. As capabilities mature, agencies can adopt shared data standards and secure interfaces to exchange information across jurisdictions, reducing redundant reviews and improving overall process consistency.

AI can support both applicants and reviewers by checking application completeness, identifying errors, and linking submissions to applicable regulatory requirements. Geographic information systems (GIS) can contextualize applications by mapping project locations against environmental resources, land-use constraints, and existing permits. Shared data platforms can integrate information from different programs, and automated decision-support tools can triage straightforward applications while routing complex cases for detailed review. Collaboration tools that allow simultaneous commenting and editing can further streamline multi-agency review. Together, these capabilities enable more transparent, consistent, and data-driven permitting.

Table 3 summarizes opportunities across four dimensions—user experience, technology, processes, and data—illustrating how digital modernization can enhance coordination and predictability in California's permitting environment.





Table 3. Key dimensions of permitting transformation and targeted enhancements

Key dimensions of permitting transformation	Enhancement
 <p>Processes</p>  <p>Data</p>  <p>User experience</p>	<p>Applicant experience redesign with AI-enabled insights: Create a centralized applicant portal with single-sign-on that auto-populates forms across agencies from a single data entry and provides a visual project tracker showing review stage, responsible agency, and estimated completion date. AI capabilities can also be applied to explore user journeys across different permittee personas, identify pain points in the application process, and deliver targeted guidance to clarify requirements and outline next steps. By integrating AI-driven insights with a unified applicant experience, California can enhance applicant experience, improve transparency, and accelerate permitting decisions.</p>
 <p>Technology</p>  <p>Processes</p>  <p>Data</p>	<p>Digital modernization and enterprise consolidation: Leverage enterprise-scale permitting technologies to modernize agency platforms, digitize workflows, and consolidate data and systems across permitting programs. Interoperable, cloud-based platforms streamline user interactions, reduce redundancies, and improve transparency while offering easy configuration of permitting forms and workflows. These platforms can integrate with existing financial, data, and document systems to support role-based access and real time dashboards. By reducing duplicative systems and embedding geospatial analytics and AI-driven insights, agencies benefit from stronger coordination, improved data integrity, and greater operational efficiency over time.</p>
 <p>Technology</p>  <p>Data</p>	<p>Location intelligence: Integrate advanced GIS tools to support permitting across the project lifecycle. These tools define aspects of a project’s location for review, use current and historical GIS data to identify location-based constraints and sensitivities, and automatically analyze permit compliance. Interactive dashboards provide applicants and reviewers with layered data on constraints, historical project records, and permitting timelines, directly linking geospatial outputs to risk-tier assignment systems for early-stage decision-making.</p>
 <p>Technology</p>  <p>Processes</p>	<p>AI-enabled decision support: Apply natural language processing and machine learning to review applications, compare them against regulatory requirements, and recommend next steps. Systems can triage projects based on potential environmental impact, allowing projects with limited anticipated effects to advance while higher impact projects proceed through environmental review. Automated checks and predictive insights reduce manual effort, confirm required elements, and allow staff to focus on higher-priority reviews.</p>
 <p>Processes</p>  <p>Data</p>  <p>User experience</p>	<p>Interagency policy review and coordination: Enhance collaboration and decision-making among agencies by implementing shared intake systems with standardized data schemas and formats. These systems enable real-time cross-agency commenting and document co-editing, supporting collaborative workflows and limiting sequential hand-offs. Agencies can jointly review applications, share feedback instantly, and coordinate permitting decisions for greater consistency and speed.</p>

California’s permitting system is constrained by fragmented governance, sequential reviews, and ineffective data integration. The proposed reforms are technically feasible and operationally scalable. By implementing these reforms, California can establish a permitting framework that reliably delivers housing and infrastructure more quickly, supports energy deployment, and enables a predictable, transparent, and effective system for Californians well into the future.



Appendix

Progress on permitting

California statewide solutions: Policy reforms and departmental innovations

California has enacted a series of policy and programmatic reforms to improve permitting efficiency. These reforms aim to reduce duplication, shorten timelines, and modernize review processes while maintaining environmental protections:

- **Accelerated Energy Permitting (AB 205):** To address lengthy and fragmented permitting processes, AB 205 centralizes permitting for large-scale renewable energy with the California Energy Commission, imposing a 270-day environmental review limit.¹⁴
- **Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) Cutting the Green Tape:** Recognizing that complex, duplicative environmental permitting and grant processes have slowed habitat restoration, CDFW's Cutting the Green Tape program is a statewide effort to accelerate habitat restoration by streamlining environmental permitting and grant processes. Through regulatory mechanisms like the Statutory Exemption for Restoration Projects (SERP), the Restoration Management Permit (RMP), and Consistency Determinations (CD), CDFW coordinates with agencies and project proponents to consolidate approvals, reduce duplicative reviews, and expedite beneficial projects, enabling hundreds of restoration efforts to advance more quickly across California. CDFW estimates that the program has saved \$10 million in permitting costs and allowed for 500 restoration projects to be fast-tracked.^{15,16}
- **California's Streamlined Online Permitting for Wildfire Safety Projects:** To address the urgent need for rapid rebuilding and recovery following devastating wildfires, California launched an online fast-track permitting process that enables critical forest and vegetation management projects to secure state-level approvals in as little as 30 days, compared to traditional timelines that often stretched for months. This process, supported by the Statewide Fuels Reduction Environmental Protection Plan (EPP), accelerates wildfire safety efforts while maintaining environmental safeguards, and is part of broader statewide

investments and strategies to reduce wildfire risk and build community resilience. While this expedited process is temporary—linked to the Governor's emergency proclamation and goals for 2025—it demonstrates how targeted streamlining measures can significantly improve approval timelines and may inform future efforts to enhance permitting efficiency.¹⁷

California local leadership: City and county innovations

Local governments often serve as laboratories for innovation, piloting permitting technologies and processes that can be scaled statewide. By working at a smaller scale, they can identify workable models, refine solutions, and accelerate adoption across jurisdictions:

- **Los Angeles wildfire recovery uses AI to check building plans for compliance:** To overcome slow, manual permit reviews and compliance checks that hindered rebuilding after the destruction of over 16,000 homes in recent Los Angeles wildfires, California partnered with Archistar to implement an AI-powered tool that streamlines building permit approvals. The software uses machine learning and computer vision to automatically assess plans for compliance with zoning and safety codes, enabling faster, code-compliant submissions and significantly reducing permit turnaround times. By implementing AI tools such as this, other similar permitting authorities such as the Honolulu Department of Planning and Permitting, were able to cut residential permit completion time by 70%.¹⁸
- **Santa Cruz County's Camino Online Permit Guide:** Addressing the confusion and delays caused by unclear requirements in residential permitting, Santa Cruz County launched a pilot program in July 2025—the Camino Online Permit Guide. It is an interactive, user-friendly tool that streamlines the residential permitting process by providing applicants with a personalized checklist of required forms and documents based on project specifics. By requiring residential development applicants to use Camino before submitting applications, the County improves transparency, supports consistent information, and supports faster, more efficient permit reviews.¹⁹



Appendix

Learning from other states

Other states have implemented similar reforms that may provide useful models for California:

- State Client—AI-enabled environmental permitting:** Deloitte supported a state environmental regulator on a proof-of-concept to implement agent-based AI to support internal environmental permit review. The work included configuring a secure cloud environment within the agency's existing infrastructure; developing AI agents to perform automated checks for application completeness, data validation, and regulatory alignment; and delivering a web-based user interface plus API endpoints for internal evaluator use. The implementation is designed to reduce manual review effort for routine checks, improve consistency in permit application screening, and increase transparency through system logging of AI outputs and user interactions. The solution operates with required human review, with agency staff retaining final permitting authority, and integrates with existing permitting processes.
- New York—accelerated renewable energy permitting:** To reduce the long delays caused by multi-agency reviews for renewable energy projects, in 2020 The State of New York established the Office of Renewable Energy Siting, (ORES) which provides a consolidated, one-stop permitting process for large-scale renewable energy projects. The office must issue a final decision within one year of a completed

application, reducing timelines compared to previous multi-agency reviews. Prior to ORES, the permitting process averaged 4–5 years according to ORES personnel, and afterwards the average permitting process time was 3.7 years.^{20,21}

- Pennsylvania—Fast-Track permitting and licensing:** To address long wait times and uncertainty in permitting and licensing, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Permit Fast Track Program and modernization initiatives like the PAYback platform, have reduced permit and license processing times—cutting some business filings from eight weeks to one day and reducing the Department of Environmental Protection's permit backlog by 94%. These efforts, which include new online tracking tools, statutory processing deadlines, and increased staffing, have increased transparency and efficiency, helping Pennsylvania secure major investments such as Amazon's \$20 billion data center investment.²²

These examples demonstrate that targeted statutory changes, process redesign, and technology modernization can significantly improve permitting timelines without undermining environmental safeguards. While California has begun implementing similar reforms, scaling these efforts and embedding them into standard practice will be essential to achieving lasting impact.





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