California State Lands Commission Jurisdiction

The State of California acquired sovereign ownership of all tidelands and submerged lands and the beds of navigable lakes and waterways upon its admission to the United States in 1850. The California State Lands Commission (Commission) has jurisdiction and management authority over these sovereign lands. These lands include the beds of more than 120 navigable rivers and sloughs, nearly 40 navigable lakes, and the 3-mile-wide band of tide and submerged lands adjacent to California’s 1,100 mile coast and offshore islands, totaling nearly 4 million acres. The Commission also has certain residual and review authority for tidelands and submerged lands legislatively granted in trust to local jurisdictions. The protections of the common law Public Trust Doctrine apply to all these lands.

The State holds these lands in trust for the benefit of all people of the State for statewide Public Trust purposes including waterborne commerce, navigation, fisheries, water-related recreation, habitat preservation, and open space, among others. On tidal waterways, the State's sovereign fee ownership extends landward to the mean high-tide line, except for areas of fill or artificial accretion or where the boundary has been fixed by agreement or a court decision. On navigable non-tidal waterways, including lakes, the State holds fee ownership of the bed of the waterway landward to the ordinary low-water mark and a Public Trust easement landward to the ordinary high-water mark, except where the boundary has been fixed by agreement or a court decision. These boundaries may not be readily apparent from present day site inspections.

The Commission also manages State-owned school lands granted to the State in 1853 by the federal government to support public schools. Today, the Commission manages approximately 459,000 acres of school lands held in fee ownership by the State and reserved mineral interests on approximately 790,000 acres of school lands where the surface estate was sold.