

SOUTH CENTRAL COAST PRIORITY SECTORS

REGIONAL INVESTMENT FRAMEWORK



Executive Summary

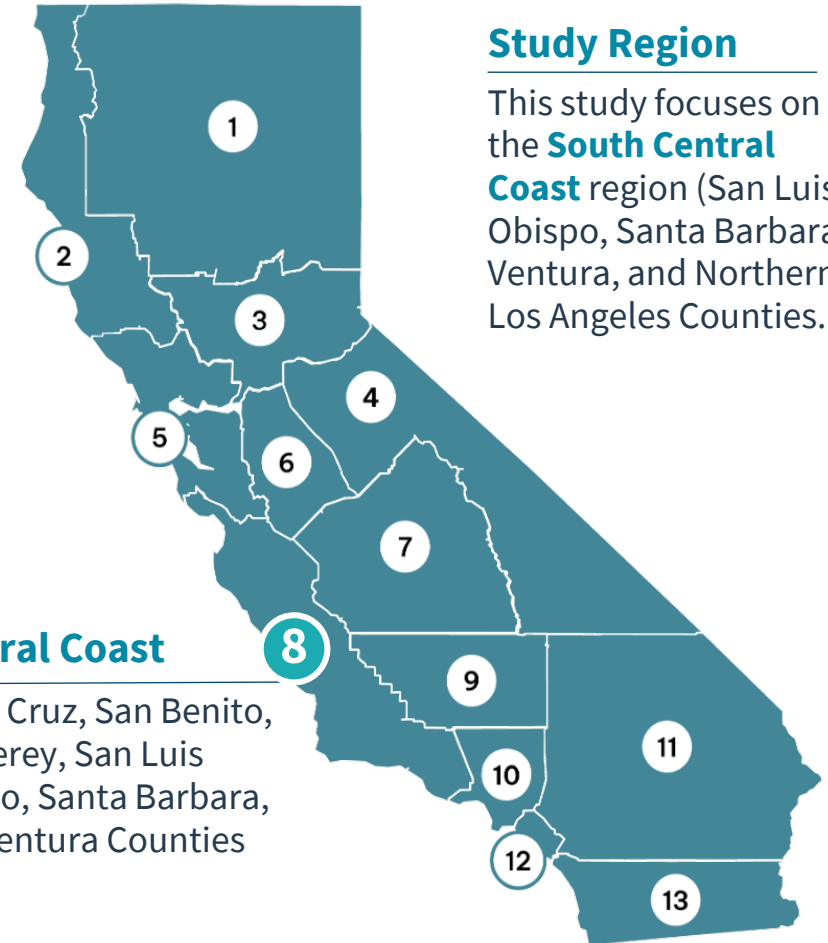
- The State of California defines 13 Jobs First regions based on shared economic ties.
- This analysis focuses on the South Central Coast's five Jobs First priority sectors, which anchor **regional innovation, investment, and workforce opportunity**.
- While not representing the full economy, these priority sectors **share workforce needs** across technician roles and foundational job readiness skills.
- A regional investment framework can align community college capacity with employer demand, **strengthening economic mobility** across the region.

Study Region

This study focuses on the **South Central Coast** region (San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, and Northern Los Angeles Counties).

Central Coast

Santa Cruz, San Benito, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura Counties



Aerospace
& Defense



Working
Lands & Water



Life
Sciences



High-
Tech

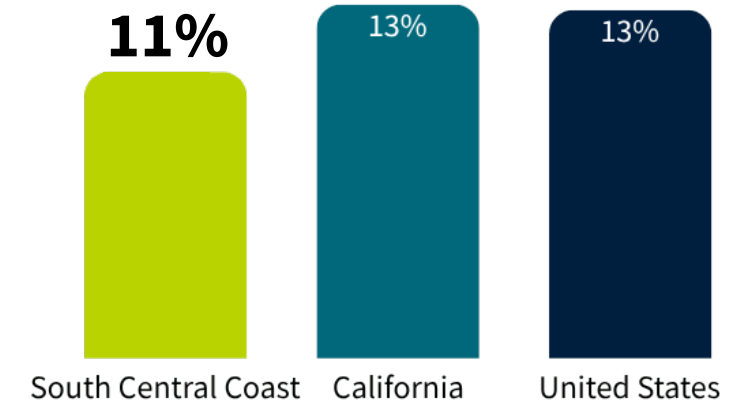


Clean
Economy

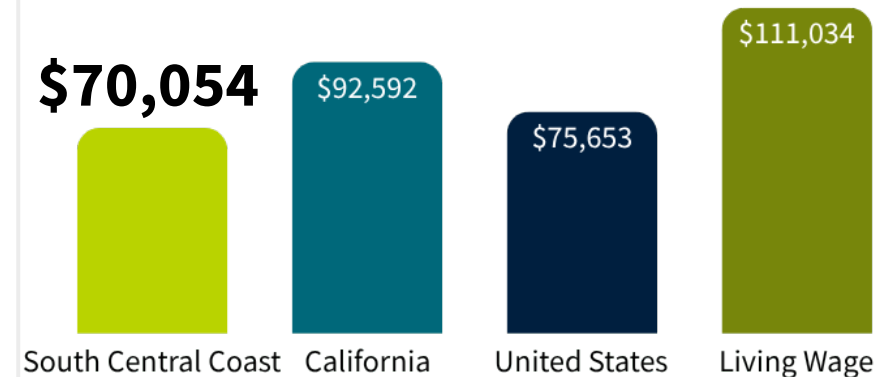
Regional employment, wages, and cost of living diverge from statewide and national averages.

- Over the last five years, regional employment growth has lagged both California and the U.S. across the priority sectors.
- Average annual wages remain below the statewide and national averages.
- The regional living wage requirement is significantly higher than the statewide and national averages.*
- These disparities contribute to ongoing challenges in workforce attraction, retention, and talent mobility.
- Historical employment trends inform the analysis but may not reliably predict the trajectory of future growth.

5-YEAR EMPLOYMENT GROWTH BY REGION, 2020-2025



AVERAGE ANNUAL WAGES PER WORKER BY REGION AND SOUTH CENTRAL COAST LIVING WAGE, 2025



* 2026.Q1 MIT Living Wage for a family of 4 with 2 adults, 1 working; and 2 children. The regional living wage is calculated as the average of the living wages for SB, SLO, Ventura, and L.A. Counties.
South Central Coast Priority Sectors

Cross-Cutting Workforce Challenges

- **Job Quality:** High concentration of low-wage jobs (57% Tier 3 jobs) exacerbates hiring challenges and threatens economic resilience.
- **Job Automation:** AI & automation are reshaping skills needs and curricula must keep pace with change to maintain relevance, particularly in highly automatable industries.
- **Job Advancement:** Entry-level roles lacking clear pathways to higher-paying jobs signal a need to teach transferable skills that help jobseekers access high-wage career pathways and career lattices.



Even despite **significant headwinds** – such as the high cost of doing business, workforce availability challenges, and rapid technological change – employers in the five sectors predict **long-term job growth**.

Cross-Cutting Employer Insights

- While employers across priority sectors report **hiring difficulties** for entry-level and more experienced roles, two in three predict **three-year growth**.
- **Less than half (48%)** of employers have partnered with community colleges to recruit, hire, or train workers.
- However, employers express high levels of interest in partnering on **work-based learning** and **foundational job readiness skills** programs.
- Among the priority sectors, talent shortages are most pronounced in the **Clean Economy** and **Aerospace & Defense** sectors.

38%

Cite hiring challenges as their most pressing concern

67%

Predict 3-year headcount growth

48%

Partner with community colleges to recruit, hire, or train

Over 90%

Want work-based learning and/or job readiness program partnerships

Regional SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- **Strong R&D assets** (UC Santa Barbara, Cal Poly, and applied research centers) for materials science, photonics, and quantum technologies
- **Established industry clusters** in Aerospace & Defense, High-Tech, Life Sciences, and agriculture
- **Vandenberg Space Force Base, Goleta tech corridor**
- **Community colleges** as critical workforce anchors supporting accessible training pathways

WEAKNESSES

- **Employment growth** in priority sectors lagging the state and nation
- **Wage levels** below state and national averages in several key sectors
- **High cost of living** pose challenges for workforce attraction & retention
- Above-average concentration of **low-wage jobs** (57%) relative to the state and nation

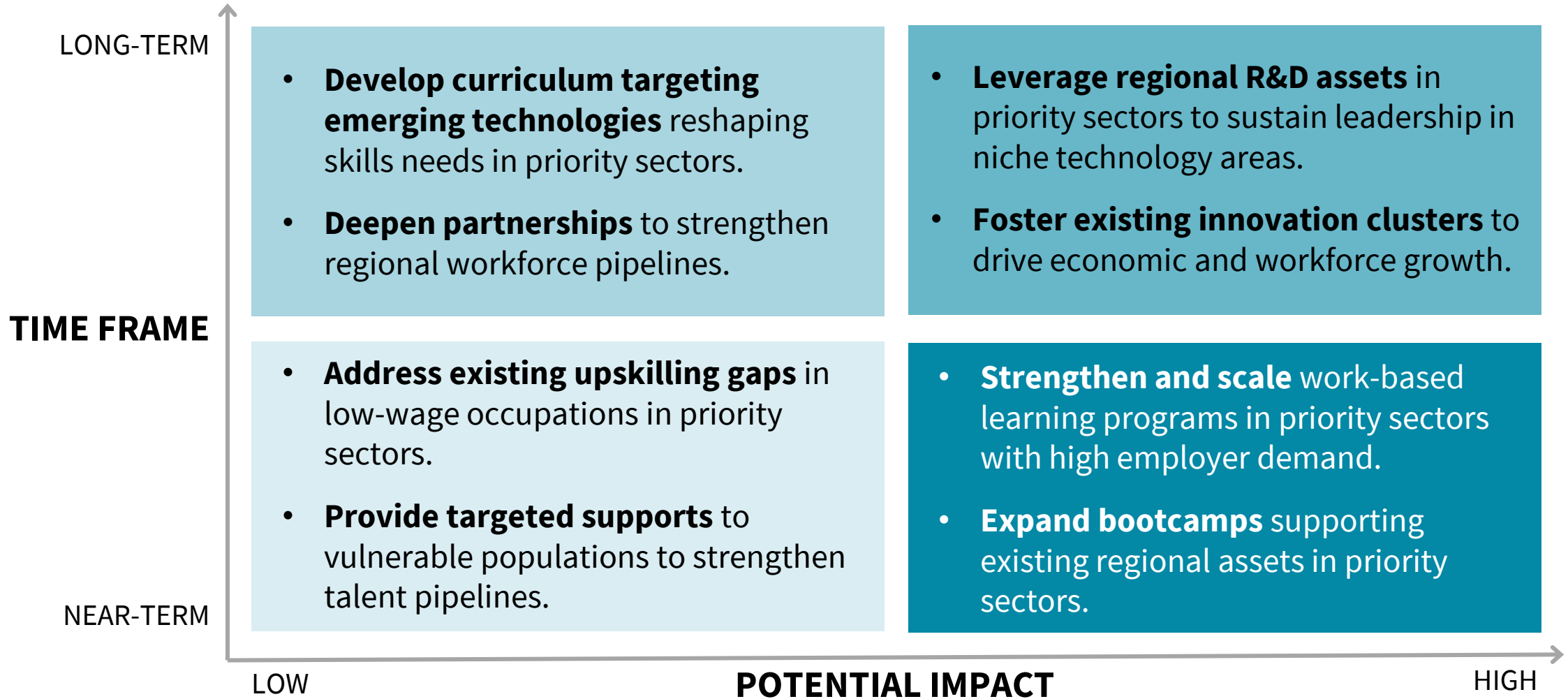
OPPORTUNITIES

- **Federal and/or state investments** in advanced manufacturing, aerospace, and clean energy can be leveraged to upskill workers
- **Workforce Pell grants** can expand access to short-term training aligned with employer needs across priority sectors
- Priority sectors offer opportunities to expand **apprenticeships and work-based learning**

THREATS

- **Competition with larger regions**, including Los Angeles and the Bay Area, for R&D investment and skilled workers
- **Declining K-12 enrollments** shrinking the regional talent pipeline
- **High cost of living** exerting pressures on employers in priority sectors

Regional Workforce Strategy Framework



Regional Workforce Strategy Implications



- **Strengthen regional coordination** to minimize overlaps in program design, create shared talent pipelines, and ensure curriculum relevance amidst rapid technological change.
- **Develop cross-regional pathways** with Silicon Valley, Monterey Bay, and Los Angeles R&D hubs to support apprenticeships, internships, and shared training facilities.
- **Invest in training programs that build cross-cutting skills and support emerging technologies** to maximize investment impact and build regional capacity.
- **Expand access to opportunity** through targeted supports to underserved populations to strengthen access to higher-wage career pathways.
- **Strengthen regional workforce intelligence** to regularly monitor and update assessments of the needs of the changing world of work.



Community College Priorities

- **Strengthen programs** supporting pathways with clear career progression.
- **Support job quality** through intentional program design, such as certifications tied to wage tiers.
- **Develop flexible, accessible training programs** incorporating wraparound supports and flexible delivery models.
- **Future-proof the workforce** by incorporating AI literacy and cross-cutting foundational skills into existing programs.
- **Scale high-value programs in the trades and technical occupations** where employer demand, advancement potential, and existing training capacity are high.
- **Offer a foundational job readiness course** as a prerequisite for work-based learning.
- **Facilitate regional advisory structures** to streamline and unify employer outreach and engagement.

Cross-Cutting Occupational Needs

Occupation	Priority Sectors Supported	Advancement Potential*	Total Regional Employment**
Electrical and Electronic Equipment Assemblers	- Aerospace & Defense (high priority) - High-Tech (medium priority) - Life Sciences	Moderate	1,864
Industrial Machinery Mechanics	- Aerospace & Defense (medium priority) - Clean Economy (medium priority) - Working Lands & Water (medium priority)	Moderate	1,431
Welders, Cutters, Solderers, and Brazers	- Aerospace & Defense (medium priority) - Clean Economy (medium priority) - Working Lands & Water	Moderate	1,769

Notes:

* BW's Job Advancement Index measures workers' potential to advance to higher-paying job opportunities. Advancement potential is not applicable for occupations that already pay high wages.

** Total regional employment includes, but is not limited to, occupational employment within the five Jobs First priority sectors.

*** This table only presents cross-cutting occupational needs identified as high or medium priority by stakeholders and does not display sector-specific high-priority occupations.

Electrical Technicians were also identified as emerging priorities by stakeholders in the Aerospace & Defense and Clean Economy sectors.

Sector-Specific Occupational Priorities

Occupation	Primary Sector Supported	Advancement Potential*	Sectoral Employment**
Agricultural Equipment Operators	Working Lands & Water	Moderate	2,377
Aircraft Mechanics and Service Technicians	Aerospace & Defense	*	517
CNC Tool Operators and Programmers	Aerospace & Defense	*	1,439
Carpenters	Clean Economy	High	6,458
Computer User Support Specialists	High-Tech	High	2,591
Dental Laboratory Technicians	Life Sciences	High	191
Electricians	Clean Economy	High	3,529
HVAC Technicians	Clean Economy	High	1,987
Medical and Clinical Laboratory Technicians	Life Sciences	High	805
Phlebotomists	Life Sciences	High	545

Notes:

* BW's Job Advancement Index measures workers' potential to advance to higher-paying job opportunities. Advancement potential is not applicable for occupations that already pay high wages.

** These figures represent employment within the primary sector only, and do not constitute full regional employment across each occupation. Full regional employment spans multiple sectors across the SCC.

Potential Regional Hubs for Priority Occupations

Industrial Machinery

- **College of the Canyons** offers construction technology-focused certificate and associate degree programs; and Antelope Valley College, SJVC, and Ventura offer certificate programs.

Welding

- **College of the Canyons**, **Cuesta College**, **Allan Hancock College**, and **Ventura College** offer certificate and associate degree programs.

Electrical and Electronic Equipment Assembly

- UC Santa Barbara provides the majority of training programs, but **Ventura College** offers certificate and associate degree programs, and **Moorpark College** offers a certificate program.



Cross-Cutting Skills Needs



Data Analysis and Problem-Solving



Troubleshooting and Diagnostics



Hands-On Mechanical Skills



Hands-On Electrical/Electronics
Technical Skills



Safety and Compliance Protocols



Communication Skills



Precision Assembly



AI Literacy and Digital Skills

Continuing Employer Input

- **Establish a unified, streamlined process** to guide employer engagement, with clear metrics and data governance structures.
 - Clarify roles for **dedicated employer engagement leads** and faculty and administrators in building and managing employer relationships.
 - Identify responsibility for data collection (e.g., **institutional research departments** or other staff).
 - Define common **data metrics** to track participation and completions across institutions.
- **Identify potential pilot programs** to explore expanded employer engagement models and scale based on results.
- **Offer a foundational job readiness skills course** as a prerequisite to work-based learning.



Internship/Apprenticeship Program Potential Metrics



- **Enrollments** (total; and by demography)
- **Completions** (total; and by demography)
- **Conversion rates** (to full-time employment)
- **Competency attainment** (where relevant – certificates, etc.)
- **Placement rates** (employment in a relevant field within 6-12 months of program completion)
- **Wage growth and earnings** (comparison of pre- and post-participation earnings)
- **Employer participation and/or retention rates** (number of employers; and retention percentage)
- **Employer and/or student feedback**

Internship/Apprenticeship Program Considerations/Challenges

- **Limited funding** and **limited staff capacity** can serve as a barrier to measurement and data collection.
- **Post-completion placement rates** and **wage growth data** provide useful information but are difficult to track. Privacy laws may limit access to data.
- **Employer and/or student feedback** regarding program satisfaction and barriers to participation is typically collected via surveys, but low response rates may limit usefulness.
 - For employers, feedback can be collected via formal advisory structures.
 - For students, requiring completion of a survey to complete for-credit courses may help boost response rates.
 - Monitoring noncredit experiences (e.g., exposure and awareness series) presents greater difficulty.
- **Regular reporting of program outcomes** may support tracking of growth in new sectors and can provide valuable insights on access within underserved populations.

Strategic Questions to Guide Workforce Planning

- How closely do **employers' growth expectations** align with actual outcomes over time?
- How are **automation and AI** shaping hiring expectations by industry and by occupation, and how are they redefining the skills and abilities sought by employers?
- How are **evolving supply chains** and **trade policies** affecting sector performance and workforce needs?
- How are **rising energy demands** impacting regional infrastructure capacity, and is the SCC prepared for future load and technology shifts?
- How will **immigration and migration patterns and policies** affect workforce supply across the SCC?



Role of Community Colleges

- **Build foundational and transferable skills** that enable continuous learning and adaptability to prepare students and jobseekers for the rapidly evolving world of work.
- **Balance exposure to emerging technologies with core competencies**, ensuring that students and jobseekers build AI literacy skills alongside foundational skills in reading, writing, and numeracy.
- **Provide early insight into shifting employer expectations** and support proactive curriculum alignment through skills intelligence.
- **Expand access to higher-wage pathways** by offering flexible, accessible programs with strong wraparound supports.
- **Coordinate regional employer engagement** to strengthen feedback loops and maintain curriculum relevance.

THANK YOU.

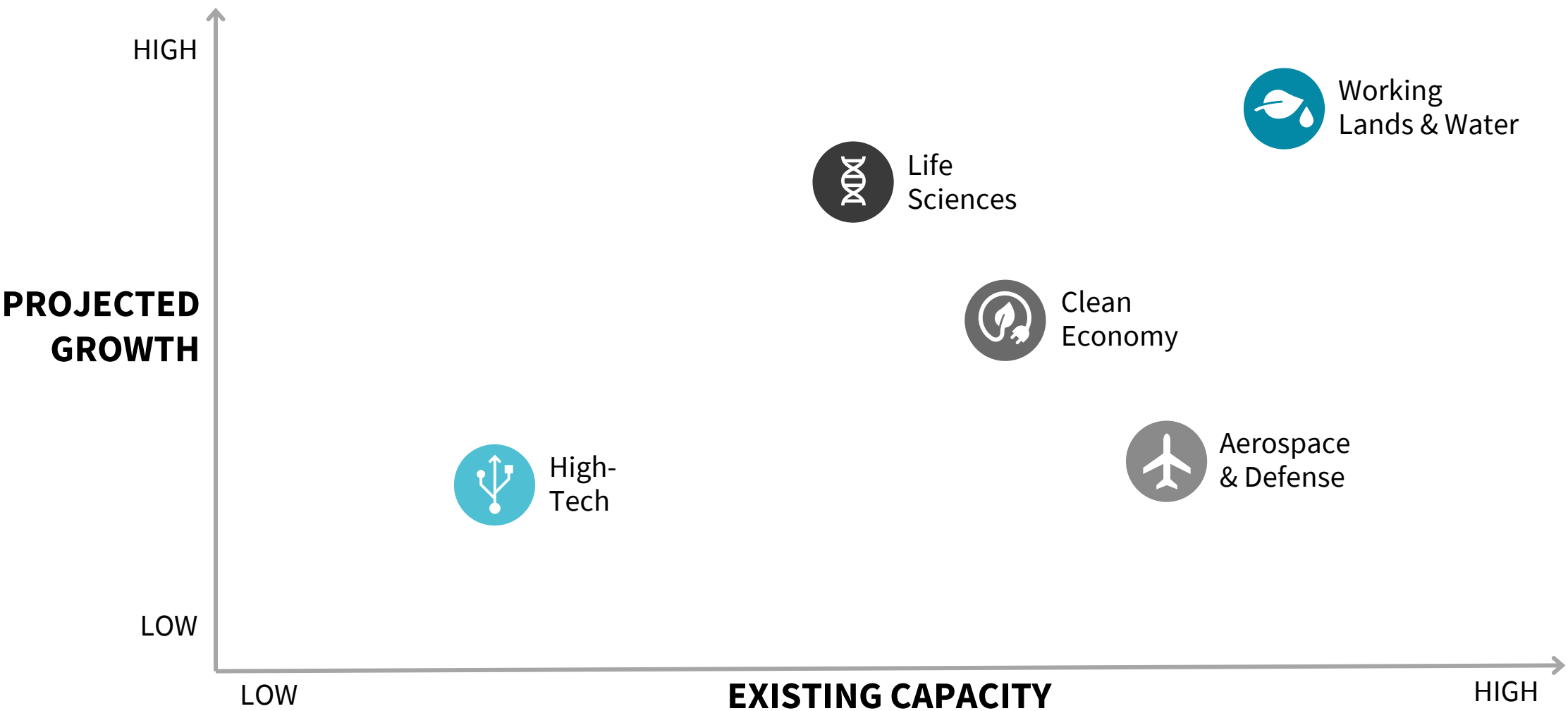


Appendix: Methodology

Sector Snapshots

	 Aerospace & Defense	 Working Lands & Water	 Life Sciences	 High-Tech	 Clean Economy
Employment	23,145	85,441	14,738	18,939	22,485
Average Wage	\$114,997	\$52,624	\$128,196	\$153,581	\$92,324
5-Yr. Job Growth	1%	9%	5%	-9%	0%
Location Quotient	1.11	2.30	1.06	0.82	1.00
Training Programs	204	353	170	189	185
Automation Potential*	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

Sector Capacity Considerations



Occupational Prioritization Criteria

Advancement Potential

- **High** – Occupations **most likely** to provide higher-paying job opportunities
- **Moderate** – Occupations that are **somewhat likely** to provide higher-paying job opportunities
- **Low** – Occupations **least likely** to provide higher-paying job opportunities

BW's Job Advancement Index measures **workers' potential to advance to higher-paying job opportunities** using longitudinal worker advancement data from [the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey \(CPS\) \(2000-2025\)](#).

Advancement potential is not applicable for occupations already paying high wages.

Automation Potential

- **High** – Most automatable occupations with the **highest proportion** of skills and tasks that can be automated
- **Moderate** – Somewhat automatable occupations with **some proportion** of skills and tasks that can be automated
- **Low** – Least automatable occupations with the **lowest proportion** of skills and tasks that can be automated

BW's Job Automation Index measures **the proportion of skills and tasks that can be automated within a particular occupation** using detailed knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) and work activity data from [O*NET OnLine, 30.0 Database \(2025\)](#).

Skills Change

- Skills change levels derived from employer survey responses indicating whether occupations had experienced “considerable,” “some,” or “little to no” skills change over the last 12 months.
- Occupations were grouped into high, medium, and low tertiles based on **relative reported levels of skills change**.

Skills change level is based on the percentage of surveyed employers indicating that an occupation exhibited **“considerable” skills change** over the last 12 months.

However, since survey responses were limited, these findings should be interpreted **directionally** rather than as strict quantitative findings.

Regional Employer Survey

Method	Online Survey (Email and Panel Respondents)
Universe	60,664 establishments in Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Ventura, and Los Angeles Counties
Number of Respondents	274 total completes by firms across priority sectors in Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Ventura, and Los Angeles Counties
Average Length	Online Survey – 17 minutes
Field Dates	April 15, 2026 through May 11, 2026