

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 25, 2015

**REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA  
WETLANDS RECOVERY PROJECT**

Project No. 97-001-02

Project Manager: Megan Cooper

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to the Aquatic Science Center for technical assistance needed to update the 2001 *Regional Strategy* for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project, affecting the counties of San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura, and Santa Barbara.

**LOCATION:** Coastal wetlands and watersheds from Point Conception in Santa Barbara County south to the international border with Mexico (Exhibit 1).

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Location – WRP Region and Current Projects](#)

Exhibit 2: [Staff recommendation for a grant to SCCWRP to complete work on the \*Regional Strategy\*](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31111, and 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to the Aquatic Science Center (ASC) for technical assistance needed to update the 2001 *Regional Strategy* for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project. Prior to the disbursement of funds, ASC shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, including budget and schedule, and any contractors to be employed for these work program tasks.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

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1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the funding of feasibility studies and plans, and with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding resource enhancement.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.”
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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$300,000 to the Aquatic Science Center (ASC) for technical assistance needed to update the 2001 *Regional Strategy* for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP) (project). Staff anticipates entering into an Interagency Agreement with ASC, a public agency. The *Regional Strategy* serves as a decision-making guidance for management of coastal wetlands and requires updating to reflect current conditions.

A portion of the grant funds is anticipated to be from a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant awarded to the Conservancy specifically for this WRP project and another portion of the EPA grant will fund staff time and the WRP’s Science Advisory Panel’s work on this project.

The WRP is a group of 18 federal and state agencies, local governments and non-profits with a cooperative mission to protect, restore, and enhance Southern California’s coastal wetland resources. The WRP has been highly successful in acquiring property for potential wetland restoration, implementing restoration and enhancement projects, and developing guidance for monitoring and assessment.

There is a critical need to update the 2001 WRP *Regional Strategy* in order to provide a science-based strategy to guide coastal wetlands restoration and protection in Southern California. Since the 2001 *Regional Strategy* was written, over a decade of information has become available on wetland extent and condition, historical ecology and predicted climate change impacts. The updated *Regional Strategy* will be based on this new information and will provide useful tools to help local partners make decisions about wetlands restoration and management, and will help the WRP member agencies make decisions about project prioritization.

The WRP member agencies repeatedly express the need to develop quantitative habitat objectives to support a proactive process of identifying targeted resource areas and supporting development of projects in those areas. In order to proactively identify projects, the WRP needs quantifiable regional habitat goals that provide an understanding of where the critical resources have been lost, how they are functioning today, and how they are going to be impacted in the future. And to support the development of projects that will help achieve the WRP’s goals, local land managers need project-scale decision making tools that incorporate data from an updated *Regional Strategy* into project design and management recommendations.

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An update of the WRP's *Regional Strategy* will include regional habitat goals for coastal wetlands and guidance for selection, design and prioritization of site-specific restoration projects. These approaches for restoration and project prioritization will provide clear guidance on appropriate restoration and management techniques and success measures. Additionally, development of the *Regional Strategy* update will use a multi-agency collaborative process, to help establish goals that are consistent and compatible across relevant agencies.

The WRP's Science Advisory Panel (SAP) consists of regional experts in tidal wetlands, stream and other non-tidal wetlands, historical ecology, climate change, regional planning and monitoring/assessment. The SAP will provide guidance on key issues and decisions in updating the *Regional Strategy*. However, the SAP needs additional technical support, beyond the capacity of Conservancy staff, to conduct the analyses and create the technical products that will form the basis of the updated *Regional Strategy*.

ASC will provide this technical support to the SAP as follows. ASC's first task will be to describe the current regional physical conditions and processes that sustain different types of coastal wetlands using a conceptual model of formative physical processes for each of the selected archetype systems. This understanding of current conditions will form the basis for the potential restoration areas and an understanding of the abilities of different wetlands to support resilient ecological functions in the future.

ASC's second task will be to analyze regional changes in ecological function that have occurred since the 1800's. This task will involve developing a typology of historical ecological functions and then mapping the selected functions onto the past and present landscape. An understanding of the changes in the landscape of ecological functions will guide the restoration targets for the updated *Regional Strategy*.

The third task will involve compilation of the historical data and contemporary information into written documents, matrices, maps and other visualization tools. The data compilations will form the basis of the quantitative regional habitat goals for the *Regional Strategy* update developed by the SAP.

The fourth task will be an integration and synthesis task to assist the SAP in the development of the regional habitat goals for selected systems. To facilitate this integration, the proposed work by ASC will be done in conjunction with work being completed by the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP). SCCWRP is being funded by the Conservancy and a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – Landscape Conservation Cooperative to develop sea level rise adaptation strategies for Southern California wetlands (see Exhibit 2). SCCWRP and ASC will work in close partnership to integrate the analyses and products from both projects to successfully assist the SAP in developing regional habitat goals.

The final products of ASC's work will include several key visualization products, such as maps of historical/contemporary conditions and opportunity areas; and potential templates/archetypes for restoration.

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ASC is a Joint Powers Authority created by the State Water Resources Control Board and the Bay Area Clean Water Agencies to assist with the promotion and delivery of science support functions and information management for governmental and non-governmental organizations. ASC is administered by the San Francisco Estuary Institute (“SFEI”). SFEI has experience and expertise in developing tools for analyzing, tracking, and setting targets for regional ecosystem change and is becoming a national leader in utilization of landscape data to help restore and sustain natural ecosystem benefits. ASC will utilize SFEI’s staff and resources to update the WRP’s *Regional Strategy*.

**Site Description:** The project area includes the WRP region, which consists of the coastal wetlands and watersheds within the counties of San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura, and Santa Barbara. The region spans from Point Conception south to the U.S./Mexico border (see Exhibit 1).

**Project History:** The WRP is a broad-based partnership established in 1997 that is chaired by the California Natural Resources Agency Director and staffed by the Conservancy staff. There are 18 member agencies of the WRP, including thirteen State and five Federal agencies. WRP partners include non-profits, scientists, and local communities. In 2001, the WRP published its *Regional Strategy*, which is the guidance document that explains that WRP’s restoration, conservation and scientific goals. The *Regional Strategy* needs to be updated to reflect new data and information and contemporary approaches to ecological restoration. Incorporating an understanding of how climate change will impact our approach to restoration is a primary impetus for updating the *Regional Strategy*.

The Conservancy has provided financial, technical and in-kind staff support to the WRP since its inception in 1997. The typology of wetland archetypes that will form the basis of this project were developed through a grant from the Conservancy to SFEI in May 2007. The sea level rise model that will form the basis of the sea level rise climate adaptation strategies will be the Coastal Storm Model System (“CoSMoS”) for Southern California, which was funded by the Conservancy in April 2013. The Conservancy received a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Landscape Conservation Cooperative in October 2014 and funded SCCWRP to develop the sea level rise adaptation strategies for the *Regional Strategy* update on January 29, 2015 (see Exhibit 2). In September 2014 the Conservancy was awarded a grant from the U.S. EPA on behalf of the WRP to update a regional restoration strategy for Southern California’s wetlands.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

Coastal Conservancy Funds	\$206,350
<u>U.S. EPA Grant to Conservancy (portion of grant)</u>	<u>\$93,650</u>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$300,000</b>

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84, Public Resources Code sections 75001 *et seq.*). Proposition 84 allows for the utilization of funds for expenditures pursuant to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, as specified in Section 75060(b). Pursuant to Section 75060(b), funds may be allocated for the resource enhancement and protection of coastal and marine water quality and habitats, so long as the project is compliant with Division 21 of the Public Resource Code.

Of the U.S. EPA grant funds derived from its Wetland Program Development Grant to the Conservancy on behalf of the WRP, there is \$93,650 for the proposed authorization as well as \$149,338 for Conservancy staff support and \$81,900 for Science Advisory Panel stipends and other services.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 3 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resource Code, Sections 31111, and Chapter 6 Sections 31251-31270.

Section 31111 permits the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies for the purpose of funding and undertaking plans and feasibility studies. Consistent with this section, the proposed project will develop a plan for guiding the WRP's, and its partners', actions.

Consistent with Section 31251 of the Public Resources Code, the proposed project would grant funds to ASC, a public agency, to undertake a strategic plan necessary for the prioritization for enhancement of the natural resources of Southern California, which have been impacted by indiscriminate dredging and filling, improper location of improvements, human-induced events, and incompatible land uses and have suffered the loss of natural and scenic values. The proposed project is intended to assist the Conservancy in meeting its purposes and objectives under this section by increasing the feasibility, cost-effectiveness, and persistence of wetland restoration and enhancement projects in Southern California's coastal zone and coastal watersheds. ASC's work on this project, in support of the WRP, will help to develop regional habitat goals and strategies that are needed to carry out successful coastal resource enhancement projects. ASC is a joint powers agency as defined in Public Resources Code Section 31010 and Government Code Sections 6500 *et seq.*, and may enter into an agreement with the Conservancy to carry out the recommended authorization.

Consistent with Section 31252, the proposed project will provide strategies for restoring and managing wetlands that are identified within the applicable certified local coastal plans or programs (LCPs) or that would benefit coastal wetlands and watersheds if the restoration strategy will be implemented outside the coastal zone.

Section 31253 permits the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project, consistent with established project eligibility and priority factors. In determining the amount of Conservancy funding for this project, the factors identified in Section

31253 have been considered and applied, as described in detail below, under the heading “Consistency With Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines”.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2013  
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective A** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will inform the update of the WRP’s *Regional Strategy*. The *Regional Strategy* is the planning document used by the WRP to prioritize and select various restoration, conservation, and preservation efforts throughout southern California’s wetland habitats. The proposed project and the updated *Regional Strategy* will help local project proponents plan more successful projects providing project-scale decision making tools that incorporate regional objectives into project design and management recommendations.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S  
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on October 2, 2014, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy’s statutory programs and purposes:** See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:** The proposed project is consistent with the following state plans and policies:
  - a. The *Regional Strategy* of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP, 2001) is currently utilized in planning and implementing coastal wetland restoration in Southern California and this update will incorporate resilience and future climate conditions into this on-going effort;
  - b. Update of the *Regional Strategy* was identified as a priority in the State’s 2014 Wetland Program Plan, a collaborative plan with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the State Water Resources Control Board, and the Delta Conservancy;
  - c. The update to the *Regional Strategy* will respond to the Governor’s Executive Order S-13-08 instructing all state agencies to plan and consider a range of sea level rise scenarios in order to increase resiliency to sea level rise for all projects in areas of sea-level rise risk. The update to the *Regional Strategy* will include sea level rise adaptation measures for tidal wetlands and will incorporate these measures into site-specific guidance for wetlands restoration; and

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- d. The update to the *Regional Strategy* also aligns with the goals listed in the *CA Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan* (CA Natural Resources Agency, July 2014) in terms of improving management practices for coastal and ocean ecosystems and resources by including climate adaptation strategies.
4. **Support of the public:** The WRP has enjoyed the support of the general public for many years due to efforts in public outreach via its County Task Forces. The County Task Forces provide a county-wide forum for public, private, and non-profit wetlands and watershed stakeholders to help implement feasible projects, mobilize support for funding, channel community concerns to the WRP member agencies, and promote wetlands education and information-gathering. See Exhibit 3 for support letters.
5. **Location:** The update to the *Regional Strategy* addresses the coastal zone throughout the Southern California region and will benefit the coastal resources in Southern California by providing scientifically-sound information that is needed to develop and manage coastal restoration projects regarding future climatic conditions.
6. **Need:** The Conservancy needs technical assistance to complete an update to the *Regional Strategy*. ASC is the agency with the technical expertise to carry out the project's defined tasks. ASC does not have the funding to complete this work absent this proposed authorization.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** By definition, the WRP is a regional partnership of agencies committed to promote and implement coastal restoration in Southern California. By updating the WRP's *Regional Strategy*, projects across the region will be able to coordinate and learn from one another, ultimately facilitating more consistency in the restoration and management practices of Southern California's coastal resources.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** Tidal wetlands in Southern California are highly vulnerable to sea level rise because of their location on the coast and their inability to migrate inland due to existing infrastructure and development constraints. This project is consistent with the Governor's Executive Order S-13-08 as it develops a strategy for incorporating sea level rise scenarios into planning for wetlands restoration projects, in an effort to reduce expected risks and increase resiliency to sea level rise.

**Additional Criteria**

9. **Urgency:** The proposed project is urgent because the portion of the proposed project funds from the EPA expire in September 2017 and the update to the *Regional Strategy* must be complete by that time. The Conservancy needs ASC's technical expertise to complete the update to the *Regional Strategy*.
10. **Leverage:** The Conservancy received a grant for the proposed project from the EPA, covering approximately 1/3 of the proposed project cost. (See the "Project Financing" section above.)
12. **Innovation:** ASC is at the forefront of developing methods that incorporate historical ecology and climate change planning into landscape-level planning.

13. **Readiness:** The project team has already begun to participate in meetings and discussions on the update to the Regional Strategy, and is ready to begin working on specific tasks as soon as the funding is granted.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” section above.
16. **Cooperation:** The WRP is a cooperative effort between 18 state and federal agency partners. In addition, this project is a collaborative effort between scientists, a non-profit organization and the Conservancy.
17. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** Coastal wetlands in the project area will be vulnerable to climate change impacts other than sea level rise. Whereas the update to the *Regional Strategy* will incorporate quantitative analyses of sea level rise, potential climate change impacts other than sea level rise will be assessed qualitatively and a adaptation measures will be incorporated into the regional goals as appropriate.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CALIFORNIA COASTAL ACT POLICIES:**

The California Coastal Act states that each local government lying in whole or in part within the coastal zone shall prepare an LCP for that portion of the coastal zone within its jurisdiction. See Section 30500(a) of the Public Resources Code. LCPs are basic planning and regulatory tools used by local governments to guide development in the coastal zone, in partnership with the Coastal Commission. LCPs specify appropriate location, type, and scale of new or changed uses of land and water.

Consistent with the intent of Section 30500(a), the proposed project will develop a regional strategy with a variety of tools for use by entities in Southern California to apply the best available science in designing more resilient and successful wetland restoration projects that will also be consistent in its recommended strategies with the respective LCP and other coastal plans.

#### **COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15306 Class 6, which consists of “basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.” The proposed project will include data analysis, planning, and stakeholder coordination. These efforts will not have the possibility of a physical environmental effect. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.