

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 11, 2003

SCWRP SCIENCE ADVISORY PROJECT

File No. 00-068
Project Manager: Trish Chapman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 of Coastal Impact Assistance Program (CIAP) funds to the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project to implement the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Science Advisory Project.

LOCATION: Coastal wetlands and watersheds in southern California from Point Conception south to the Mexican border (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Map of WRP Region

Exhibit 2: 2003 Progress Report on SAP Activities

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) of Coastal Impact Assistance Program funds to the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP) to implement the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Science Advisory Project, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds, SCCWRP shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, budget, schedule and any contractors or subcontractors to be employed for these 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:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 6 of the Public Resources Code (31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.

2. The proposed project is consistent with the guidelines and criteria set forth in the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted on January 24, 2001."
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed project would provide a \$200,000 grant to the Southern California Coastal Watershed Research Project (SCCWRP) to implement the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP) Science Advisory Project. This grant would be funded with Coastal Impact Assistance Program (CIAP) funds from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) provided through a grant from the California Resources Agency (see the "Project Financing" section below for more details).

The WRP is a partnership of 17 state and federal agencies working in concert with scientists, local governments, environmental organizations, business leaders, and educators to preserve and restore southern California's coastal wetlands and coastal watersheds. A fundamental tenet of the WRP partnership is that resource decisions should be based on the best-available science. To this end, the WRP Working Agreement recommends assembling a panel of wetland scientists to advise the Governing Board on regional goals, objectives, project criteria, and priorities. The Science Advisory Panel (SAP) was formed in 1998 and has been managed by SCCWRP since 2000 (see Project History section). The SAP provides information and tools to the WRP that is critical for making resource decisions.

Under the proposed project, SCCWRP will continue to manage the SAP and provide technical assistance to the WRP. Specific activities that will be pursued under this grant include:

- **Regional Wetlands Assessment Program.** At the direction of the Governing Board, the SAP has been developing a comprehensive wetland assessment program which includes a regional inventory of wetland and riparian habitat; a regional assessment of wetland condition; and site-specific habitat assessments. Over time, this regional assessment program will help the WRP to: 1) evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts; 2) identify priority areas for preservation and restoration; and 3) identify regional stressors and trends in habitat quality.
- **Decision Support Tools.** The SAP has been working with the Wetlands Managers Group to develop tools that will help resource managers make decisions on how best to allocate limited resources. The SAP has drafted a detailed checklist of ecological criteria for evaluating riparian preservation and restoration projects, and will finalize this within the next year. In addition, the SAP has been working with NOAA Coastal Services Center on a multi-year project to develop a watershed-based GIS tool for assessing opportunities for riparian habitat preservation and restoration (SCREAM – the Southern California Riparian Ecosystem Assessment Model).
- **Habitat Quality and Water Quality.** The WRP partner agencies, including the Coastal Conservancy, have been receiving an increasing number of proposals to restore or create wetlands in order to provide wetland habitat while also treating urban runoff. The SAP has been researching how to design projects to successfully achieve both habitat and water quality goals, as well as to track potentially harmful effects of urban runoff contaminants that may accumulate in the wetlands.

Other priorities may be identified by the Governing Board or Wetlands Managers Group (WMG) over the course of the project and added to the SCCWRP work plan.

SCCWRP, a joint powers agency formed among southern California water dischargers and regulators (including five member agencies of the WRP), is an appropriate partner for undertaking activities in support of the SAP because it is a recognized leader in marine environmental research and maintains a multi-disciplinary scientific and technical staff. SCCWRP's mission is to "contribute to the scientific understanding of linkages among human activities, natural events, and the health of the southern California coastal environment, communicate this understanding to decision makers and other stakeholders, and recommend strategies for protecting the ocean environment for this and future generations." Wetlands are an important component of SCCWRP's watershed program.

Site Description: The project area for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project is the coastal wetlands and watersheds from Point Conception in Santa Barbara County to the International Border with Mexico.

Project History: In April 1998, the WRP Governing Board approved formation of the Science Advisory Panel (SAP). In June 2000, the Governing Board tasked the SAP with four primary roles, committed to funding a half-time staff person to help carry out fulfill these roles, and added the chair of the SAP to the Governing Board as an ex-officio member. The four identified roles for the SAP are:

- Review policy and project documents as requested by the Governors or the WMG;
- Prepare issue papers as directed by the Governors;
- Develop an agenda for a southern California wetlands research program;
- In partnership with the WMG, County Task Forces, and Public Advisory Committee, convene an annual WRP symposium.

At the June 2000 meeting, Steve Weisberg, Executive Director of SCCWRP, was named as Chair of the SAP. In August 2000, the Conservancy approved a \$49,000 grant to SCCWRP to manage the SAP. An additional \$200,000 was approved in January 2002 for management of the SAP and technical research on issues identified by Conservancy staff as obstacles to wetland restoration in southern California.

Over the past three years, the SAP has taken on an ambitious work plan to assist the WRP. Additional detail about the SAP's activities is provided in the 2003 SAP Annual Progress Report to the Board of Governors attached as Exhibit 2.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy (CIAP grant)	\$200,000
Total Project Cost	\$200,000

Supplemental funding secured by SCCWRP for SAP projects:

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency	\$ 400,000
NOAA Coastal Services Center	
Grant to SCCWRP	105,000
In-kind staff time	450,000
In-kind data acquisition	2,900,000
U.S. Geological Survey Gap Analysis Program	<u>50,000</u>
Subtotal supplemental funding	\$3,905,000

The Conservancy's contribution to the project would be funded with monies provided by the California Resources Agency through a Coastal Impact Assistance Program (CIAP) grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. In 2001, Congress designated \$15.4 million of CIAP funds for the State of California. NOAA administers these funds to the State, and the Resources Agency is responsible for distributing these funds within the State. The Coastal Conservancy was awarded \$900,000 of these funds, of which \$200,000 was targeted to the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Science Advisory Project. The stated objectives for this portion of the CIAP funds is to: 1) address critical issues that could constrain or enhance wetlands restoration efforts; 2) develop a more sophisticated planning context for setting WRP priorities; 3) improve wetland restoration techniques; and 4) Determine the most telling and cost-effective evaluation methods for wetlands projects. The proposed project is consistent with these goals, and thus is consistent with the funding source.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is intended to assist the Conservancy in meeting its purposes and objectives under Sections 31251-31270 (resource enhancement) by increasing the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of wetland restoration and enhancement projects in southern California's coastal zone and coastal watersheds. SCCWRP is a joint powers agency within the meaning of Public Resources Code Section 31010 and Government Code Sections 6500 *et seq.*, which may enter into an agreement with the Conservancy to carry out the recommended authorization.

Section 31251 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to state and local agencies for the enhancement of coastal resources, which, because of indiscriminate dredging or filling, improper location of improvements, natural or human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered a loss of scenic and natural values. SCCWRP's activities in support of the WRP will help to carry out coastal resource enhancement projects identified by the WRP for development and implementation in a cost-effective, scientifically based manner.

Consistent with Section 31251.2(a), the proposed project would address watershed resources that are partly outside the coastal zone in order to enhance the natural and scenic character of coastal resources within the coastal zone.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

The proposed project would facilitate the WRP in its efforts to preserve and restore coastal wetlands and watersheds in southern California. Collectively, WRP efforts will help achieve Goals

4, 5, and 6 of the Conservancy's strategic plan. Consistency of the SAP's contribution with each of these goals is discussed below.

- **Goal 4A and 5A** – The SAP is developing decision support tools to aid the Conservancy in identifying properties with significant ecological value for acquisition.
- **Goal 5B** – The SCREAM model, being developed by NOAA and the SAP, will help identify wildlife corridors for preservation and restoration.
- **Goal 5C** – The Regional Wetland Assessment Program will help identify areas where non-native invasive species are severely affecting habitat quality so that these areas can be prioritized for restoration.
- **Goal 6A** – The SCREAM model is a watershed-based tool that will help prioritize acquisition areas along river parkways and identify additional watersheds where river parkway projects might be appropriate.
- **Goal 6B** – The SAP is developing guidelines for implementing wetland restoration and creation projects that benefit both wildlife habitat and water quality.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, 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. **Support of the public:** The Wetlands Recovery Project is a partnership of 17 state and federal agencies working in concert with local governments, business leaders, and environmental organizations. Its efforts to develop and implement a regional strategy for wetlands recovery in southern California enjoy broad support from both the public and private sectors. Support letters are provided in Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The project area for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project is the coastal wetlands and watersheds from Point Conception in Santa Barbara County to the International Border with Mexico. Portions of the project area are located outside of the coastal zone. WRP efforts benefit coastal resources by providing habitat connections from the coast to inland habitat areas, improving coastal water quality, and improving upstream habitat for anadromous species.
5. **Need:** The Coastal Conservancy serves as staff and project manager for the WRP and is a critical partner for the SAP. Although SCCWRP has been very successful in securing supplementary funding for the SAP, these grants and partnership projects are all dependent on

continuing participation and funding from the Conservancy. Without the Conservancy, the SAP would not continue to exist.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** One of the primary goals of the WRP is to coordinate wetland acquisition and restoration projects on a regional basis in order to avoid fragmented and piecemeal efforts. The proposed authorization will further the WRP's efforts to develop and implement a regional wetland strategy.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above. To date, the Conservancy has provided \$249,000 to SCCWRP for the SAP, and SCCWRP has secured \$3.9 million in additional funds. With the additional \$200,000 recommended in this report, the Conservancy would only be providing approximately 10 percent of the total cost of SAP activities.
11. **Innovation:** The SAP is developing several innovative tools to assist the WRP's efforts. For instance, the SAP is partnering with other efforts around the state to develop a rapid assessment tool for wetlands throughout the state. This will enable the State for the first time to assess the condition of wetlands statewide in a consistent and comparable manner. In addition, the SCREAM model will address the unique conditions in southern California watersheds including extensive urban development and a semi-arid climate.
12. **Readiness:** SCCWRP is ready to continue working on this project immediately.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the "Project History" section above.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE COASTAL ACT:

The technical assistance provided through this authorization will further the efforts of the WRP to develop and implement a regional strategy for wetlands recovery in southern California. Thus, the authorization will further the planning and management policies contained in Section 30231 of the Public Resources Code, which state "the biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries, and lakes appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms and for the protection of human health shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored. . . ."

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed authorization does not have the potential to result in any physical changes to the environment and therefore is not a "project" subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), as provided in 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15378.