

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

January 29, 2004

**BALLONA WETLANDS  
ENHANCEMENT PLANNING**

File No. 04-088

Project Manager: Mary Small

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project for scientific review of the project alternatives, data collection, and monitoring program associated with the restoration of the Ballona Wetlands.

**LOCATION:** The Ballona Wetlands are located west of Lincoln Boulevard and south of the Marina del Rey along the Ballona Creek Channel in Los Angeles County. A portion of the project is in the City of Los Angeles and a portion is in unincorporated Los Angeles County (Exhibits 1 & 2).

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Coastal Resource Enhancement

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Ballona Creek Watershed Map

Exhibit 2: Project Site Map

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

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

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project for scientific review of restoration alternatives, data collection, and monitoring program associated with planning the restoration and enhancement of the Ballona Wetlands, subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of any funds for any work, the Conservancy’s Executive Officer shall approve the work plan, budget and any contractors to be hired for that work.”

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 authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270, regarding the Conservancy's mandate to protect and enhance coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001."

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The Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP) will convene and retain scientists to participate on a Science Advisory Committee for the Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project. The Science Advisory Committee will provide scientific review of the project alternatives, data collection and monitoring programs for the restoration of the former Ballona Wetlands. In December, the Conservancy authorized up to \$750,000 for data collection and the development of restoration alternatives. This authorization would compliment that effort by funding a Scientific Advisory Committee to review the scientific issues associated with planning and monitoring the project.

SCCWRP will work in close coordination with the Conservancy and the two agencies that own the project site, the Department of Fish and Game and the State Lands Commission. The Science Advisory Committee will be made up of approximately a dozen scientists representing a range of expertise in wetlands restoration and estuarine ecology. The Science Advisory Committee will meet at major project milestones to analyze science being employed in the planning process, assess whether appropriate factors are being considered in the planning effort, and provide overall technical guidance. The Science Advisory Committee will help ensure that the Ballona Restoration project learns from the efforts of wetland restoration efforts nationally and is employing a scientifically rigorous planning process.

SCCWRP, a joint powers agency formed among southern California water dischargers and regulators, is an appropriate partner for leading the Science Advisory Committee 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."

For the past four years, SCCWRP has managed the Science Advisory Panel (SAP) of the Southern California Wetland Recovery Project. The purpose of the Science Advisory Panel is to provide scientific oversight to support implementation and evaluation of the Wetland Recovery Project's Regional Strategy. During the past few years, the SAP has focused on creating a regional monitoring program and developing assessment tools that could be used in implementing that program. To avoid duplicating existing efforts, the Ballona Science Advisory Committee would be created as a subcommittee of the Wetland Recovery Project's Science Advisory Panel.

The Conservancy, DFG, and SLC have initiated a public planning process for the Ballona Wetlands that engages trustee agencies, local government, nongovernmental organizations, and the public. There is a long history of conflict over this site and many stakeholders are interested in the planning process. The Conservancy has committed to staffing the public planning process. Developing alternatives for enhancement of the site will involve a number of technical issues, including, but not limited to, hydrology, ecology, cultural resources, and public access. Given the

past controversy and intense public interest in this restoration, scientific oversight of the development of the restoration plan and monitoring program is critical to the project's ultimate success.

**Site Description:**

The Ballona Creek watershed is the largest watershed draining into Santa Monica Bay. The watershed includes approximately 130 square miles and includes much of the City of Los Angeles as well as the cities of West Hollywood, Beverly Hills and Culver City (Exhibit 1). Approximately 80% of the watershed is urbanized and it is home to more than 1.5 million people. The project area receives surface runoff from adjacent urban areas through numerous storm drains. The site itself drains into the Ballona Creek channel. Flow patterns are constrained by existing roadways and limited drainage outlets into Ballona Creek.

The project area includes 607-acres owned by the State of California (Exhibit 2). The Department of Fish and Game owns 540 acres, and that land was purchased with funds provided from the Conservancy to the Wildlife Conservation Board. The State Lands Commission owns 67-acres, including a newly created freshwater marsh and adjacent land. All of the project area is part of a much larger historic wetland complex that once occupied more than 2,000-acres.

The project area has been substantially altered during the last century, significantly reducing the quantity and quality of the wetlands. Major human activities that have affected the ecological function of this site include past oil field development, channelization of Ballona Creek, and the construction of the Marina del Rey lagoon, which involved deposition of dredge material onto project area. In addition, several major roadways cross the site and it is surrounded by residential and commercial development.

More than 98% of the coastal wetlands in the Southern California bight have been destroyed or degraded. The enhancement of the Ballona Wetlands is one of the largest and best remaining opportunities to restore coastal wetlands in southern California. Despite the degradation of site resources resulting from prior development, significant wetland habitat remains within the Ballona Wetlands. Plant species within the project site include wetland indicators such as pickleweed, marsh heather, saltgrass, arrowgrass and glasswort, and a variety of upland and exotic species including brome, iceplant, oxalis, and ryegrass. Bird surveys indicate that the site is used seasonally by a variety of migratory shorebirds, as well as by typical shoreline residents (gulls, terns, and ducks) and typical upland birds including small raptors.

**Project History:**

There have been more than twenty years of intense conflict about land use at this site. Several development proposals and regulatory approvals have resulted in litigation, some of which continues today. In 2001, the Trust for Public Land entered into a purchase agreement with Playa Capital Company, the former landowner. Through this purchase agreement, the Department of Fish and Game ultimately took title to 540 acres of the property during the past year. The Conservancy provided \$10 million for that acquisition.

The Conservancy has long supported enhancement and public access at the Ballona Wetlands. The first Conservancy project at this site was a 1986 grant to the National Audubon Society for

environmental education facility associated with a proposed site restoration. That project was never implemented due to the ongoing conflicts about development at the site. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Conservancy provided funding for planning and implementation of enhancements to the nearby Ballona Lagoon and holds easements for resource enhancement over much of the land bordering the Lagoon.

More recently, the Conservancy has provided funding to the Friends of Ballona Wetlands for dune restoration and invasive plant removal on the southwestern portion of the project area. Last year, the Conservancy approved two grants for projects in the Ballona Creek Watershed that helped implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan. One of these grants was awarded to the Ballona Wetlands Foundation to develop the Ballona Outdoor Learning and Discovery (BOLD) project. It is a condition of the grant that the BOLD project will developed to be consistent with the larger restoration project.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Proposition 12, Coastal Conservancy	<u>\$200,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b> (Scientific Advisory Committee)	<b>\$200,000</b>

The Conservancy funding would be derived from an appropriation of funds specifically designated for the Ballona Wetlands in the 2000 park bond, Proposition 12. Public Resources Code Section 5096.352(f) provides that \$25 million is available to the Conservancy for this purpose.

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

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270, Coastal Resource Enhancement Projects. The project would enhance the natural and scenic character of resources within the coastal zone. As discussed below, consistent with Section 31252, the project is consistent with the policies and objectives of Division 20 of the Public Resources Code.

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

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project would help the Conservancy to restore and enhance up to 600 acres of coastal wetland and adjacent habitat. When implemented, this project will complete 60% of the total acreage target for Southern California.

**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:** There is broad public support for developing a restoration plan for this site.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Los Angeles County.
5. **Need:** Independent scientific oversight of the restoration plan is essential to the long-term success of this project. Conservancy participation in the development of a restoration plan for this site is needed because the Conservancy has experience developing restoration plans with meaningful public involvement and based on sound science. The Conservancy’s commitment to developing a plan based on the best available science is essential to the success of the project given the long history of conflict over this site and the numerous stakeholders. The Conservancy will staff the public planning process and take the lead in coordinating with the Science Advisory Committee. The land-owning agencies do not have the staff, expertise or resources to manage this planning effort.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project will be the largest coastal wetland restoration project in Los Angeles County. The site provides habitat for threatened and endangered species, including the Belding’s savannah sparrow and the California brown pelican. The site also provides valuable and scenic open space and public access opportunities in the heart of congested Los Angeles County.

**Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** More than 98% of the coastal wetlands in the Southern California bight have been destroyed or degraded. This project offers an opportunity to restore and enhance 600 acres of habitat.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Restoration alternatives will be developed to achieve a number of goals, including: enhancement of wetland and adjacent habitat, creation of compatible public access opportunities, and improvement of coastal water quality, consistent with the goal of habitat improvement.
9. **Innovation and Cooperation:** The Conservancy, DFG, and SLC have agreed to develop restoration alternatives in a public, participatory process that allows stakeholders and interested members of the public to see and comment on interim and final products. The restoration plan will be developed with the best available science. The planning process will respect the authority of all the participating agencies, and will accommodate significant public comment. This transparent approach is critical to restoration planning given the long history of bitter conflict surrounding this site.

10. **Readiness:** The Conservancy has already authorized funding for the development of restoration alternatives; if approved staff would seek to commit funds to technical studies early in 2005.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.
12. **Cooperation:** The Conservancy has hosted a series of community meetings this fall that were attended by more than 65 representatives of local nonprofit organizations, agency staff and members of the public. Comments received at these meeting have been overwhelmingly supportive of the proposed planning process.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

In the late 1980s, the California Coastal Commission certified two separate Land Use Plans that covered this project area. No Local Coastal Program was ever completed for the Ballona wetlands area and the two Land Use Plans are now out of date. However the proposed project is consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act. The project goals are consistent with the Coastal Act goals as stated in Section 30001.5, the project will protect, enhance and restore the natural resources of the site and expand public recreational opportunities consistent with conservation of those resources. Specifically, Section 30231 states that coastal wetlands shall be maintained and restored. The project is consistent with Section 30240(a), in that it will help ensure that environmentally sensitive habitat areas are protected against significant disruption of habitat values. As stated in Section 30251, the project will protect the scenic resources and open space of the project site.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/  
STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:**

A Watershed Management Plan for the Ballona Creek Watershed was completed by an interagency-stakeholder task force this year. The purpose of the plan is to identify opportunities to improve water quality and restore habitat. The restoration of the Ballona Wetlands is specifically identified as a priority activity in the watershed.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

Under 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262, feasibility and planning activities are categorically exempt from California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review. Similarly, 14 CCR Section 15306 exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.