

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 22, 2011

LOS CERRITOS WETLANDS: CONCEPTUAL RESTORATION PLAN

Project No. 98-015-05
Project Manager: Bob Thiel

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$225,000 to the Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority for preparation of a conceptual restoration plan for the Los Cerritos wetlands complex.

LOCATION: The City of Long Beach, Los Angeles County, and the City of Seal Beach, Orange County.

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Integrated Coastal and Marine Resource Protection

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Regional map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Maps of Los Cerritos project area](#)
- Exhibit 3: [LCWA and City parcel boundaries](#)
- Exhibit 4: [Public and private parcel ownership at Los Cerritos](#)
- Exhibit 5: [Photos of the Los Cerritos Wetlands](#)
- Exhibit 6: [Project letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31111 and 31220 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred twenty-five thousand dollars (\$225,000) to the Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority (“LCWA”) to prepare a conceptual restoration plan for the Los Cerritos wetlands complex in Long Beach and Seal Beach, California, subject to the condition that, prior to the disbursement of funds, the LCWA shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work plan (including a schedule and detailed budget) and the names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed to prepare the plan.”

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 Conservancy’s current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Sections 31111 and 31220 (Chapter 5.5 of Division 21) of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resource protection.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

This project would provide funds to enable the Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority (“LCWA”) to complete a comprehensive conceptual plan for restoration of the Los Cerritos Wetlands complex in Long Beach and Seal Beach.

Los Cerritos Wetlands is a 450-acre mosaic of publicly- and privately-owned properties, land uses and resources located along Pacific Coast Highway, the lower reach of the San Gabriel River, and the Los Angeles-Orange county line (Exhibit 2). During the past several decades, various agencies and organizations prepared a number of studies and partial restoration plans for portions of the wetlands, but none offers a comprehensive strategy for restoration of the entire wetland area over time. Because there is now a critical mass of wetland acreage in public ownership, the LCWA would like to begin restoration of those properties in the near future. But it wants to insure that any near-term work would be compatible with the potential restoration of adjacent properties that are now in private ownership but could someday be available for acquisition by the LCWA for conservation and restoration.

Implementing a coordinated restoration vision will require a phased approach driven by funding availability, land acquisition, permitting and the functional sequencing of project elements. That vision must recognize that some parcels may not be available for restoration until perhaps 2030 or later. As a result, restoration design must be flexible enough to allow for phased implementation as parcels come into public ownership. The Conceptual Restoration Plan for Los Cerritos will not only evaluate the engineering, environmental, and economic feasibility of restoration alternatives within the wetlands ecosystem, but will also provide a conceptual restoration and public access framework that could be implemented in coordinated stages over time. Members of the LCWA have had initial discussions with the private landowners regarding the planning effort, and most of the landowners appear willing to have their properties included. Formal agreements for right-of-entry will be entered into prior to LCWA staff and consultants undertaking work on the private parcels.

The plan is sponsored by the LCWA, a joint powers agency among the Coastal Conservancy, the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (“RMC” or “the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy”) and the cities of Long Beach and Seal Beach. The four members organized the LCWA in 2006 to develop a comprehensive program of acquisition, protection, restoration and management at Los Cerritos. The LCWA has since acquired title to more than 170 acres of property in the area, including 66 acres from the Bryant interests and 100 acres from Hellman Properties LLC. The City of Long Beach now owns 33 acres of nearby property known

as Marketplace March that it plans to eventually sell or transfer to the LCWA (see Exhibit 3). Located near the LCWA- and City-owned parcels are another 250 acres owned by private landowners or other public agencies (see Exhibit 4).

Earlier this year, following a competitive procurement process, the LCWA selected a multi-disciplinary team headed by Moffatt & Nichol to prepare the Conceptual Restoration Plan. Because of funding limitations, the focus of the initial planning effort will be limited to the 200 acres owned by the LCWA and the City of Long Beach. But staff from the LCWA's member agencies are negotiating with adjacent landowners for consent to include most (if not all) of the 250 additional acres at Los Cerritos within the geographic scope of the planning effort.

Los Cerritos is a challenging site for a number of reasons, not merely because of its pattern of landownership. The wetlands historically occupied several thousand acres at the mouth of the San Gabriel River, but a century of dredging, channelization, oil production, and urban development has reduced the wetlands to 200 acres of degraded wetland patches that are largely disconnected from tidal influence and the now-channelized San Gabriel River. The site is bifurcated and constrained by roads and levees, utility infrastructure, cooling channels for adjacent power plants, and oil operations.

The preliminary goals for the Conceptual Restoration Plan are to:

- Restore wetland processes and functions;
- Maximize contiguous wetland areas and minimize the edge between wetlands and sources of disturbance;
- Restore the complex as habitat for resident bird species and migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway;
- Insure the long-term viability and sustainability of the project in the face of such threats as urbanization and climate change;
- Create a public access and interpretive program that will insure a memorable visitor experience; and
- Implement a program that will be practical and economically feasible.

In support of those goals, the project will characterize existing conditions within the study area; identify potential restoration alternatives based on an analysis of opportunities and constraints; evaluate the beneficial and adverse impacts of potential alternatives; and then identify preferred alternatives for further planning. Tasks in the scope of work for the Conceptual Restoration Plan include collecting field data and mapping the site; characterizing biological resources, hydrologic and hydraulic conditions, and upstream activities impacting the wetland; evaluating options for soil remediation, sediment management or disposal; developing concepts for public access and interpretation; refining project objectives, and developing consensus on the alternatives to be chosen.

In analyzing design alternatives, the LCWA's consulting team will develop preliminary designs, hydrodynamic modeling, suggested construction methods, and initial cost estimates for all phases of project implementation and maintenance. A public access plan will describe how the public could experience and learn about the wetlands and how the site could be linked to the San Gabriel River Bike Trail and other regional networks. It will also demonstrate how public access, interpretation and passive recreation could be integrated into each restoration alternative and address the needs of the surrounding urban communities.

The plan will include an explicit analysis of projected sea level rise. The consulting team will incorporate the latest guidance on sea level rise in developing alternatives with a wide mix of habitat and topographic diversity. The plan will also examine the potential for phased implementation of restoration components to accommodate the changes in sea level forecast for a long project life over the next century.

A technical advisory committee of more than 10 resource and other public agencies will help oversee the planning effort. And an extensive public participation component to engage the community in the visioning process will include outreach to community groups, six public workshops, and a project website.

The Rivers and Mountains Conservancy has awarded the LCWA \$450,000 in grant funding for the project, and those monies have allowed the LCWA to initiate the project this summer for the 200-acre initial planning area of publicly-owned property south of Westminster/Second and above Pacific Coast Highway (Exhibit 3). But the LCWA needs additional funds if it is to complete the restoration planning project for the entire 450 acres of the wetlands complex.

The proposed Conservancy authorization would provide funds to the LCWA to fund the balance of the work contemplated for the entire plan, including incorporation of the additional 250 acres now owned by private landowners and other public agencies. The Conservancy grant would provide funding for management of the project on behalf of the LCWA. Because the LCWA has no dedicated staff, personnel from one of the LCWA's members will need to oversee, direct and coordinate the project on behalf of the joint powers agency. With the Conservancy funds, the LCWA would contract for those services with the City of Long Beach, which has offered to dedicate a senior project manager from its Public Works Department to supervise the planning project on a part-time basis.

Site Description:

The Los Cerritos Wetlands Complex adjoins the lower reach of the San Gabriel River where, prior to channelization, the mouth of the river migrated back and forth across the coastal plain. Historically, the complex covered as many as 2,400 acres and stretched two miles inland, ranging from freshwater and brackish wetlands in its inland areas to salt marsh closer to the ocean. Before the river was channelized, the complex included freshwater and brackish wetlands whose size and configuration fluctuated in response to the migration of the river channel across the coastal plain. An aerial photo taken in 1927 depicts more than 1,500 acres of wetlands bordering Alamitos Bay. Today, only about 500 acres of the original site remain undeveloped, and remnants of the historic wetlands occur in about 200 acres of degraded patches (Exhibit 5).

Most of the historic wetlands have been filled, lost or degraded, primarily because of oil extraction, channelization of the San Gabriel River, and construction of a cooling channel for nearby power plants. Portions have been used as land fill or burn dump areas, while others have been reduced in size by commercial and residential development. Oil was discovered on the Hellman and Bixby ranches in the early 1900s, and many Los Cerritos properties have been used for oil production since the 1920's. Channelization of the San Gabriel River began in the 1930s and cut off tidal action to much of the wetland area.

The urbanization of Long Beach upstream of Alamitos Bay grew by increments and annexations,

especially during and right after World War II. To drain the area for development, the Los Angeles County Flood Control District constructed a network of small and large flood control channels (including Los Cerritos Channel) across an area totaling 20 square miles. Two huge thermal electric power plants (now operated by AES and the Los Angeles City Department of Water and Power) above the wetlands draw water from Los Cerritos Channel, use it for cooling purposes, and discharge over 22 million gallons per minute back into the San Gabriel River at highly elevated temperatures, overwhelming the natural tidal conditions of the system.

Even though the complex has been dramatically altered and is surrounded by urban development, the Los Cerritos Wetlands provide regionally-significant wildlife habitat. The site is a feeding ground for local and migratory shore birds and a nesting site of special status species such as Belding's savannah sparrow, California least tern, loggerhead shrike, western snowy plover, peregrine falcon, burrowing owl, northern harrier, osprey, and California brown pelican. As many as 120 bird species have been recorded using the area, including 48 different species of water birds. Portions of the wetlands provide important spawning areas and food sources for intertidal and marine aquatic species, including habitat for depleted Southern California commercial fisheries. A variety of rare plant species listed by the California Native Plant Society and numerous salt marsh species inhabit its tidally-influenced drainages and disturbed wetland areas.

Project History:

For nearly thirty years, public agencies and environmental organizations have worked to conserve and restore the Los Cerritos Wetlands.

In 2006, the Conservancy agreed to enter into a Joint Exercise of Powers Agreement (JPA) with the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC) and the Cities of Seal Beach and Long Beach to create the Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority. The purpose of the LCWA is to provide for a comprehensive program of acquisition, protection, conservation, restoration, maintenance, operation and environmental enhancement of the Los Cerritos Wetlands area in a manner consistent with the goals of flood protection, habitat protection, restoration, and improved water supply, water quality, groundwater recharge and water conservation. The LCWA was created in March 2006 pursuant to the state's Joint Exercise of Powers Act (California Government Code §§6500 et seq.)

Since that time, the LCWA has acquired more than 170 acres of wetlands property. The first acquisition, known as the Bryant (or Phase I) property, consists of 66 acres and was financed by a \$7 million Conservancy grant to the Trust for Public Land (approved in April 2006) and \$3 million in additional funding from Signal Hill Petroleum, which acquired the mineral rights. In December 2010, the LCWA acquired the 100-acre Hellman lowlands site (sometimes called the Phase II property), using \$5.1 million in funds from the Wildlife Conservation Board. The City of Long Beach acquired 33 acres of adjacent property, known as the Marketplace Marsh, from LCW Partners in mid-2010 in exchange for a 13.4 acre former public service yard located elsewhere in the City. Both the City and the LCWA hope to eventually sell or transfer the Marketplace Marsh acreage from the City to the LCWA for restoration and management.

[The LCWA has also acquired a 5.11-acre parcel from Southern California Edison under the terms of an offer to dedicate fee title (OTD) to the Coastal Conservancy. But that property,

commonly known as the OTD parcel, was the subject of a separate feasibility study and is not included within the scope of the Conceptual Restoration Plan for Los Cerritos.]

During the past 10 years the Conservancy has worked with other project partners in an effort to acquire the remaining acreage in the Los Cerritos Wetlands complex. The LCWA and its member agencies are continuing this effort, with a focus on the remaining acreage owned by LCW Partners, as well as other adjacent parcels of smaller, privately owned property.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$225,000
Los Angeles & San Gabriel Rivers and Mountains Conservancy	<u>\$450,000</u>
Total Project Costs	\$675,000

The anticipated source of funds for this project is the FY 2008/2009 appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 84---the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Pub. Resources Code sections 75001 *et seq.*). These funds may be used by the Conservancy for the protection of coastal watersheds, including projects “to prevent contamination and degradation of coastal waters and watershed, projects to protect and restore the natural habitat values of coastal waters and lands, and projects . . .to promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state” in accordance with the Conservancy’s program authority in Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. (See Public Resources Code §75060.) Preparation of the Conceptual Restoration Plan for the Los Cerritos Wetlands will lead to the long-term, comprehensive protection of a regionally-significant wetlands complex, as well as prevent further degradation of the San Gabriel River watershed, protect and restore the natural habitat values of coastal waters and lands, and promote public access and enjoyment of a significant coastal resource in Southern California. As described below in the section “Consistency with the Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation,” the project is conforms to the authorizations in Sections 31111 and 31220 of Division 21.

In evaluating restoration projects for natural resource protection under Proposition 84, the Conservancy is directed by Section 75071 to give priority to projects that meet one or more of the five criteria specified in Section 75071. Preparation of a conceptual restoration plan for the Los Cerritos Wetlands by the LCWA would meet at least three of those criteria:

1. “Properties that link to, or contribute to linking, existing protected areas with other large blocks of protected habitat. Linkages must serve to connect existing protected areas, facilitate wildlife movement or botanical transfer, and result in sustainable combined acreage.” [Pub. Resources Code § 75071(a)]. Restoration of the Los Cerritos Wetlands will help insure the long-term sustainability of the 450-acre complex and help facilitate wildlife migration to other protected areas along the Pacific Flyway, including the wetlands at Bolsa Chica, Huntington Beach, and the Seal Beach National Wildlife Refuge.

2. “Projects that contribute to long-term protection of and improvement to the water and biological quality of the streams, aquifers, and terrestrial resources of priority watersheds of the

major biological regions of the state. . .” [Pub. Resources Code § 75071(b)]. Restoration of the Los Cerritos Wetlands will help improve the water, biological quality and terrestrial resources of the lower San Gabriel River watershed, one of the priority watersheds in Southern California.

3. “Properties that support relatively large areas of under-protected major habitat types.” [Pub. Resources Code § 75071(b)]. The Los Cerritos Wetlands represent one of the few remaining large wetland complexes in Southern California, a region that has lost more than 90 percent of its coastal wetlands in the past century.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 31220), regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection.

Section 31220(a) of the Public Resources Code authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for restoration of coastal habitats and watersheds if the project meets one or more of the criteria specified in Section 31220(b). Consistent with five of those criteria [§31220(b)(2),(3), (6), (7), and (8)], the conceptual restoration planning project at the Los Cerritos Wetlands will provide a long-term strategy to restore fish and wildlife habitat within a coastal watershed, reduce threats to coastal and marine wildlife, restore coastal wetlands and watershed lands draining sensitive coastal areas, reduce the impacts of population and economic pressures on coastal resources, and provide for public access compatible with resource protection and restoration objectives.

Consistent with §31220(a), staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board in the development of the project to ensure consistency with Chapter 3 of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code; in particular, staff from the Los Angeles RWQCB are participating in the planning effort as part of the technical advisory committee for the project. Consistent with §31220(c), the project conforms to local watershed management plans and the Regional Basin Plan of the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board (see “Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan” below).

The proposed project is also consistent with Section 31111 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, which authorizes the Conservancy, in implementing that legislation, to fund plans and feasibility studies and award grants to public agencies for such plans and studies.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective A** of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop a conceptual plan for the restoration of a major regional coastal wetlands complex, complete a planning phase that will lead to eventual project implementation, and incorporate adaptation strategies to address predicted evolutions in habitat due to climate change.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective E** of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop a conceptual wetland restoration plan whose objectives include improving water quality and reducing the impacts of urban runoff to coastal watersheds.

**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 June 4, 2009, 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:** Acquisition and restoration of the Los Cerritos Wetlands has been a priority of the two cities, community-based organizations, and the public for decades. Letters of support for this project are attached as Exhibit 6.
4. **Location:** The project is located within the coastal zone of the cities of Long Beach and Seal Beach.
5. **Need:** Without the proposed grant from the Conservancy, the LCWA would be unable to complete the full conceptual planning project for the entire Los Cerritos Wetlands complex.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Protection and restoration of the Los Cerritos Wetlands have been a regional priority for decades in Southern California, where over 90 percent of historic tidal marshes have been lost to dredging, filling or development. Los Cerritos provides critical habitat for state- and federally listed threatened and endangered species and, once restored, will provide an important link to other coastal wetlands along the Pacific Flyway.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The topography of the Los Cerritos complex ranges from about -8 to >20 feet above mean sea level, and as a consequence, the site will be vulnerable to projected increases in sea level by 2050 and 2100. One of the principal goals for the conceptual plan is to analyze the potential impacts from sea level rise and to insure the long-term viability and sustainability of the wetlands in the face of sea level rise and other impacts of climate change.

Additional Criteria

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will incorporate a multi-disciplinary approach to restoration planning, as well as a comprehensive analysis and set of recommended actions to address a variety of issues at Los Cerritos. They include restoration of wetland processes and functions; management of potential soil contamination; adaptation measures to promote the long-term sustainability of the site in the face of urbanization and climate change; and creation of a practical and memorable public access and interpretive program.
10. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
12. **Innovation:** The scope of work for the project seeks to apply the most imaginative approaches to wetland restoration, based on the best available science and lessons learned

from other wetland restoration efforts in the region. It will also promote innovative site design to insure that the eventual visitor experience will be memorable, engaging and responsive to the needs of a diverse audience.

- 13. Readiness:** The project was initiated in June 2011 and is projected to be completed by the end of 2012. The consulting team hired by the LCWA, as well as the LCWA's project manager from the City of Long Beach, have established records in completing projects on time and within prescribed budgets.
- 14. Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy has been involved in efforts to acquire and protect the resources of the Los Cerritos Wetlands for more than a decade. Preparation of the plan will provide a useful roadmap to guide future actions by the Conservancy and its partners at Los Cerritos; it would also help realize a long-term regional goal of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project.
- 16. Cooperation:** The project is being led by the LCWA, a joint powers authority among the Coastal Conservancy, Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, and the Cities of Long Beach and Seal Beach. The project will involve consultation with both a public stakeholder group and a technical advisory committee of more than 10 other public agencies.
- 17. Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The plan will assess projected impacts and vulnerabilities of the project from climate change and analyze and recommend potential adaptation strategies and design criteria to address those impacts.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Local Coastal Program of the City of Long Beach (1980), which---as part of its resource management plan for 'waterlands'---has classified the Los Cerritos Wetlands as an environmentally sensitive area and which generally mandates the preservation and restoration of the site (see pages III - R63 through R81). In addition, the City's LCP calls for the preparation of various studies regarding Los Cerritos, including biological field surveys, water quality measurements, analyses of ecological processes, and feasibility studies regarding potential enlargement, reconfiguration and restorations of the wetlands and buffers around them (at page III - R72).

The City of Seal Beach does not have a certified Local Coastal Program. In the Land Use Element of its most recent General Plan (dated December 2003), however, the City of Seal Beach has adopted a series of policies regarding the protection of the Los Cerritos wetlands. They include ones (a) to maintain significant acreage for the restoration or creation of wetlands and retention of viable wetland habitat and biodiversity; (b) to restore the wetlands ecosystem so that it makes a significant contribution to the regional system along the Pacific Flyway; and (c) to preserve and enhance open space and create public access opportunities. The City has submitted this General Plan update to the Coastal Commission for review and approval as the Land Use Plan component of its Local Coastal Program.

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

Restoration of the Los Cerritos Wetlands and development of a trail connection linking the wetlands to bike trails in the surrounding community area are each designated as priority Master Plan projects in the *San Gabriel River Corridor Master Plan* (numbers R7.07 and R7.09 at 3-35 to -37; June 2006). Preparation of the conceptual plan is also consistent with the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board's *Basin Plan for the Coastal Watersheds of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties* (1994), which calls for the protection of existing wetland habitats and associated populations of wetlands fauna and flora. In addition, acquisition and restoration of the Los Cerritos wetlands has been a regional priority of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project since the inception of the Recovery Project's Work Plan.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations, Section 15262, because the project involves only planning studies for possible future action which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted or funded. The project is also categorically exempt from CEQA under Section 15306 of those Regulations, which exempts basic data collection and resource evaluation activities. Following Conservancy approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.