

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
March 14, 2019

OCEAN CONNECTORS: PARADISE CREEK HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECT

Project No. 18-047-01
Project Manager: Rodrigo Garcia

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$30,000 to The Ocean Foundation for the installation of native plants, and to perform litter and invasive plant removal around Paradise Creek in National City, San Diego County, to restore wetland habitat function, improve water quality, and increase ecosystem health and resilience.

LOCATION: Paradise Creek in National City

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Maps](#)

Exhibit 3: [Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

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

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed thirty thousand dollars (\$30,000) to The Ocean Foundation (“the grantee”) to conduct the Paradise Creek Habitat Restoration Project which will restore approximately one acre of wetland, river, and upland transition habitat adjacent to Paradise Creek in National City.”

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
 2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the project.
 3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding and Proposition 1 as the source of that funding.
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4. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements with the landowner sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Coastal Resource Enhancement Projects.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
 3. The Ocean Foundation is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy disburse up to \$30,000 to The Ocean Foundation to implement their Ocean Connectors Paradise Creek Habitat Restoration Project (the project), which will restore wetland, river and upland transition habitat while also providing an educational program that significantly benefits the health and quality of one of San Diego’s most polluted waterways, the Sweetwater River watershed. This project will engage third-grade students in the restoration of an acre of wetland, stream corridor, and upland transition habitats around Paradise Creek, which is directly behind the student’s school in National City, Kimball Elementary. The project will address some of the most pressing environmental challenges facing residents in San Diego County today, including pollution, habitat loss, invasive species, and sea level rise; in addition the project will inspire students by teaching school children how to address these challenges and build resilience in our coastal communities.

The project will allow third grade students from Kimball Elementary to explore the wetland in their own “backyard”. The students will participate in 10 restoration events during the 2019-20 school year; each session is led by restoration experts. Primary methods to restore wetland habitat function and ecosystem health include installing 300 native plant seedlings, native seed dispersal, litter abatement, and invasive plant removal; Ocean Connectors will consult with local habitat experts from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Paradise Creek Educational Park, Inc. to select appropriate plant species and to determine the best placement of plants in and around the wetland and upland zones. Invasive plants will be removed in the target area and surrounding zones to minimize spreading and re-infestation of invasive plants. Seed dispersal will be used to spread native plants and increase native plant pollination along the edges of the habitat.

The project will also include community-based education and outreach programs by developing educational resources and posting them to Ocean Connector’s website. Ocean Connectors will also provide presentations about the history of the site and review restoration goals and environmental issues as part of their classroom activities. Participants of the proposed project

will learn that migratory birds depend on coastal habitats along the Pacific Flyway for rest, food, and shelter during their long migrations along the west coast of North America. This project supports the federal species recovery plans for the Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*), American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*), and Ridgway's Rail (*Rallus obsoletus*), by protecting and improving essential habitats and removing litter and pollutants from local waterways. Lessons describe the interconnectedness of ecosystems and coastal habitats, and the importance of conserving these habitats to support biodiversity and ecosystem health. At the end of this project, students will build a sense of accomplishment and empowerment as they witness the improvements unfolding before their eyes each day on their way to and from school.

Site Description: Paradise Creek is a small urban creek located outside the coastal zone within National City in San Diego County, in the Sweetwater River watershed, which drains into San Diego Bay (see Exhibit 2). The site of the proposed project is a one-acre park within National City that is about a mile away from San Diego Bay and is heavily impacted by litter, invasive plant growth, urban development, and inadequate public access and awareness (see Exhibit 3). The site contains ecologically-sensitive habitats with vulnerabilities to sea level rise, urban runoff, and invasive species, and requires targeted restoration efforts to create suitable habitat space for native species and safe community access, such as bird watching, walking and interpretation. Paradise Creek is also located on the Pacific Flyway migratory corridor, a key topic covered in the Ocean Connectors classroom curriculum.

The broader goals for this site are to help mitigate pollution impacts, build ecosystem resilience, and re-create high-quality coastal sage scrub, wetland, and stream corridor habitat that will sustain endangered and migratory waterfowl species.

Grantee Qualifications: Ocean Connectors has been in existence since 2005, and has been a sponsored project of Washington D.C.-based The Ocean Foundation since 2009. Ocean Connectors has successfully managed three grants from the Conservancy over the last seven years. On October 5th, 2016 the Industrial Environmental Association (IEA) recognized Ocean Connectors for giving back to the San Diego community and contributing to the quality of life in Southern California by awarding them the Excellence in Community Leadership and Outreach award. In 2018 Ocean Connectors was selected by the Port of San Diego to receive the Michelle White Environmental Award for the Community category for providing innovative, hands-on environmental curriculum through field trips, in-class lectures, and land and water-based tours within the San Diego Bay watershed.

Project History: Ocean Connectors has successfully conducted youth-led habitat restoration programs around Otay River for seven years in partnership with the Fish and Wildlife Service. Ocean Connectors intends to expand this restoration effort to Paradise Creek in National City. Through various funding sources including one grant from the Conservancy in connection with the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project in 2017, Ocean Connectors has conducted six restoration events at Paradise Creek. With the Conservancy's grant, Ocean Connectors was able to install 500 native plant seedlings, apply 32 cubic feet of mulch, and remove litter and invasive plants. The proposed project will expand Ocean Connector's habitat restoration efforts to another section of Paradise Creek as shown in Exhibit 2.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$30,000
The San Diego Foundation	\$5,000
San Diego Gas and Electric	\$5,000
The Volgenau Foundation	\$5,000
<u>Wells Fargo</u>	<u>\$5,000</u>
Project Total	\$50,000

The expected source of funding for this authorization is from the 2017/18 FY appropriation to the Conservancy from the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 (“Proposition 1”, Division 26.7 of the Water Code Sections 79700 et seq.). Funds appropriated to the Conservancy derive from Chapter 6 of Proposition 1 and may be used “for multi-benefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects for the watershed of the state.” (Section 79731). Section 79732(a) identifies the specific purposes of Chapter 6, of which the following pertain to this project: Protect and restore aquatic, wetland, and migratory bird ecosystems, including fish and wildlife corridors (subsection (a)(4)); protect and restore coastal watersheds, including, but not limited to, bays, marine estuaries, and nearshore ecosystems (subsection (a)(10)); reduce pollution or contamination of rivers, lakes, streams, or coastal waters, prevent, and protect or restore natural system functions that contribute to water supply, water quality, or flood management (subsection (a)(11)); assist in the recovery of endangered, threatened, or migratory species by improving watershed health, and instream flows (subsection (a)(12)). Because one of the purposes of this project is to provide environmental education to elementary school children, it is not feasible to utilize the California Conservation Corps to achieve the project purposes. (See Section 79734).

As required by Proposition 1, the proposed project provides multiple benefits and will help achieve the above-referenced Chapter 6 purposes. The project will help improve water quality, habitat connectivity, and flood reduction through the creek restoration, and increase the area’s resilience to the potential impacts of climate change. The project will also benefit from community-based outreach and educational resources prepared by Ocean Connectors, which will not be funded using bond funds.

The proposed project was selected through the tenth-round competitive grant process under the Conservancy’s *Proposition 1 Grant Program Guidelines* adopted in June 2015 (see § 79706(a)). The proposed project meets each of the evaluation criteria in the Proposition 1 Guidelines as described in further detail in this “Project Financing” section, the “Project Summary” section, and in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” section of this report. Twenty thousand dollars in cost share funds for this project proposal come from The San Diego Foundation, San Diego Gas and Electric, The Volgenau Foundation, and Wells Fargo, as displayed in the table above.

The remaining cost share funds are not displayed in the table, as they are contributed by the prospective grantee partner (National School District), via in-kind contributions. National School District will be contributing approximately \$5,000 of in-kind services.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation (commencing at § 31251 of the Public Resources Code), to enhance coastal resources. The proposed project is consistent with Section 31251 which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of natural or human-induced events, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. The proposed project will enhance Paradise Creek, which has been heavily degraded by surrounding development.

The proposed project is located outside the coastal zone. Section 31251.2, authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside of the coastal zone, in order to enhance the natural or scenic character of coastal resources within the coastal zone. The project will enhance Paradise Creek, which is a watershed resource that is outside the coastal zone. Paradise Creek flows into Paradise Marsh, which is within the coastal zone. By enhancing Paradise Creek through litter abatement, removal of invasive plants, and the installation of native plant seedlings, the project will protect and restore coastal waters through reduced pollution in Paradise Creek and through restored natural system functions that contribute to water supply, water quality, and flood management. Although the proposed project is outside the coastal zone and therefore not subject to the National City local coastal program (LCP), the LCP has identified Paradise Marsh as appropriate for Conservancy involvement (see Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies section below). The project will enhance Paradise Creek, which directly feeds Paradise Marsh. Further, the proposed grant to the Ocean Connectors meets the LCP goals by achieving sedimentation reduction and improving habitat for anadromous fish, which utilize the Sweetwater River watershed, a coastal draining watershed.

Consistent with Section 31253, the Conservancy has evaluated the amount of funding to be provided by evaluating the total amount of funding available for coastal resource enhancement projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible coastal resource enhancement projects, and the application of other factors prescribed by the conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority in order to more (See Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Guidelines, below).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with Goal 6, Objective 6B of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will restore one acre of coastal habitats.

**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:**

California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report: The project is consistent with the report's overall goal "Steward and protect natural and working landscapes", and the sub-goal #1, "Support landscape-scale approaches to conservation and mitigation that account for multiple benefits". This project contributes to a clean environment, including clean water, open space for recreation, and pollution prevention. Ocean Connectors is also taking steps to increase climate change preparedness, resilience, and adaptation in South San Diego County.

CA Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan: The proposed project is consistent with the broad goal of increasing information sharing and education regarding climate change, specifically sub-goal #2, "Promote public education and outreach on climate change impacts to biodiversity". The educational activities that will be created under this project will educate local residents about reducing emissions, water management, protecting our environment from sea level rise, and preparing for other climate-related risks. This project will also contribute information to help identify climate change impacts, recommendations, and progress that can be applied on a local level.

California Water Action Plan: The restoration of the habitat at Paradise Creek will increase water sustainability and produce outcomes that allow California's water resources to better withstand current and future pressures.

CA Wildlife Action Plan: This project will make a significant contribution to advancing the California Wildlife Action Plan through working to resolve the major stressors affecting South Coast wildlife, including growth and development, water management issues, degradation of aquatic ecosystems, invasive species, and recreational pressures. Ocean Connectors directly addresses these issues with broad community support and targeted habitat restoration efforts around Paradise Creek.

California Aquatic Invasive Species Management Plan: This project will advance this plan through hand removal of aquatic invasive plant species that grow near Paradise Creek, and installation of native plants that will promote wildlife abundance and habitat use. This

project also provides community collaborations and education and outreach programs that are directly aligned with this plan.

State and Federal Species Recovery Plans: This project supports the federal species recovery plans for the Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*), American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*), and Ridgway's Rail (*Rallus obsoletus*), by protecting and improving essential habitats and removing litter and pollutants from local waterways.

4. **Support of the public:** This project is supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Paradise Creek Educational Park Inc., City of National City, National School District and The Ocean Foundation. (See Project Letters, Exhibit 3)
5. **Location:** The proposed project is located partly inside and partly outside the coastal zone of National City in San Diego County.
6. **Need:** The Conservancy is providing a significant contribution to the project and grantee does not have sufficient funding to complete the project without the Conservancy funds.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** San Diego County is a highly developed urban area that is home to a number of federally listed species. Residents in this area face a particular responsibility to protect natural resources because San Diego has one of the highest counts of species that appear on the U.S. endangered species list, making it a high priority for conservation. Threatened and endangered species that have been observed in proximity to the habitat site, or that share habitat connectivity with the site, include the Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*), American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*), Ridgway's Rail (*Rallus obsoletus*), and Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*).

Paradise Creek is identified as high priority habitat due to its location on the Pacific Flyway, which makes it a vital area for numerous species of migratory birds. The Creek is located within the Sweetwater River Watershed. It contains interpretive trails, park space, and an outdoor amphitheater overlooking the creek. The positive impacts of this project will extend beyond the habitat site and target demographic of local students in San Diego County to reach and international audience using "knowledge exchanges" to promote a shared view of coastal stewardship across the U.S.-Mexico border.

8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The site is close to a shoreline that could be prone to flooding and erosion due to climate change impacts, however these vulnerabilities are being mitigated through the installation of salt-tolerant plants along the shoreline, river, and upland transition sections of Paradise Creek. Even with a sea level rise of 55 inches, the majority of the site would be above tidal influence. Through close examinations of the Sea Level Rise Adaptation Strategy for San Diego Bay, Ocean Connectors will be able to mitigate the potential risks of performing habitat restoration in this environment by restoring transitional habitat thus protecting the long-term investment in restoration of this site.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.

10. **Innovation:** This project uses new and innovative technologies as educational tools throughout the project. Participants receive an introduction to citizen science, and practice using the eBird application developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology to record waterfowl sightings during their habitat restoration field trip. This activity helps build skills that will engage disadvantaged students in college and scientific careers.
11. **Readiness:** The proposed project is ready to implement.
12. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The site is most vulnerable to drought and loss of biodiversity and critical habitat. The current lack of precipitation has led to a severe drought with cascading consequences, including native plant die-off, erosion, and damage to biodiversity. To reduce vulnerability to climate change factors causing unpredictable weather and storm events, participants will install native plants that contribute to the long-term protection of water quality and biological diversity of the watershed and San Diego Bay. Efforts will reduce the presence of greenhouse gases by restoring natural habitats that can sequester carbon, filter pollution, and retain groundwater. The design of the site reduces climate change vulnerabilities through installing drought-tolerant plants in the upland transition area, which will serve multiple purposes for habitat conservation and provide nesting and foraging space for endangered, threatened, and migratory wildlife. In the river corridor and wetland areas, Ocean Connectors will install native plants with a high tolerance for salt, as inundation is projected to increase. Ocean Connectors is dedicated to working closely with their partners to implement adaptive management techniques that ensure the continued success of this restoration process alongside changing climatic conditions and impacts.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** Carbon sequestration will occur through revegetation of native plants, which leads to carbon uptake and decreased erosion and sediment deposition into Paradise Creek, and therefore the Sweetwater River Watershed and San Diego Bay. To minimize greenhouse gas emissions during Ocean Connectors activities, the majority of restoration work will be done by hand, using hand tools rather than machinery.

Kimball Elementary students will walk from their classroom to the site for all restoration events, which further minimizes greenhouse gas emissions related to student involvement in the restoration. All Ocean Connectors employees, volunteers, and parents attending the restoration events will be encouraged to carpool or utilize public transportation to further minimize greenhouse gas emissions associated with this project.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

This proposed project benefits Paradise Marsh, which is consistent with the goals of the Land Use Plan (LUP) of the National City Local Coastal Program, adopted by the City of National City in 1988 and most recently updated and certified by the California Coastal Commission in 1997. The Ocean Connectors project location is not identified in the LUP, but Paradise Creek feeds into Paradise Marsh, which is identified in the LCP. Thus, the project is consistent with the overall vision of the LUP, and specifically supports the sections related to preservation of

Paradise Marsh. The LUP states, “[t]he wetlands of the Paradise Creek Marsh as well as the secondary area of Paradise Marsh, east of I-5, including salt marsh, freshwater marsh, salt-pan, channel, and mudflat habitats are valuable and sensitive biological resources, and shall be preserved” (p. v). The LUP also states, in the Marsh Preservation section, “[t]o enhance the habitat and aesthetic value of Paradise Marsh, the wetlands located west of the railroad, which are not proposed for acquisition, as well as the secondary area of Paradise Marsh, east of I-5, and the Sweetwater River south of 35th Street, feasible restoration activities shall be encouraged” (p. vi). To do this, the LUP states that “[a] feasible restoration program shall be determined with the potential assistance of the Coastal Conservancy, or other appropriate agencies, to finance, plan, and implement such a restoration program” (p. v). The proposed project will help accomplish this stated goal of the LUP through restoration of wetland habitats in Paradise Creek.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed authorization is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations Sections 15322 (educational programs) and 15304 (minor alterations to land). The educational component of the project does not have the potential for resulting in a physical change to the environment. The habitat restoration activities are a minor alteration to land which will result in improvement wildlife resources.

The proposed project is also categorically exempt under Section 15333, small habitat restoration projects, as it is a small-scale habitat restoration project less than five acres in size with no significant adverse impact on endangered, rare or threatened species or their habitat. There are no hazardous materials at or around the project site and the project will not result in impacts that are cumulatively significant.

Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.