

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
February 2, 2023

**SWEET SPRINGS NATURE PRESERVE RESTORATION**

Project No. 22-078-01  
Project Manager: Timothy Duff

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$50,000 to the Morro Coast Audubon Society to restore coastal dune habitat in its Sweet Springs Nature Preserve property on the south Morro Bay shoreline, San Luis Obispo County

**LOCATION:** South Morro Bay shoreline in the communities of Los Osos and Cuesta-by-the-Sea, unincorporated San Luis Obispo County (Exhibit 1).

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*EXHIBITS*

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Photos of Areas to be Restored](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [Photos of Areas Previously Restored](#)
  - Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)
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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000) to the Morro Coast Audubon Society (“the grantee”) to restore two acres of coastal dune habitat in its Sweet Springs Nature Preserve property on the south Morro Bay shoreline, San Luis Obispo County.

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 retained in carrying out the project.
  3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
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4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.

### Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation 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.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
  3. The Morro Coast Audubon Society is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
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## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends disbursement of up to \$50,000 to the Morro Coast Audubon Society (MCAS) to restore two acres of coastal dune habitat in its Sweet Springs Nature Preserve (the "Preserve") on the south Morro Bay shoreline, San Luis Obispo County (the "project"). Conversion of native coastal dune habitat to non-native veldt grass in the preserve and surrounding shoreline area over the past 30 years has diminished sensitive habitat for birds, insects and the federally-listed Morro shoulderband snail.

With previous funding, including Conservancy funding, MCAS has been working for the past 15 years to remove invasive veldt grass and restore native dune vegetation at the Preserve. This ongoing restoration effort requires a methodical multi-year strategy to successfully restore heavily infested areas to keep the invasives from re-infecting the native plant community. The project is a component of this on-going effort. The project includes removal of veldt grass, native plant propagation, replanting with natives, and supporting those plantings with drip irrigation throughout the establishment period using recycled water obtained from the Los Osos Community Services District's Water Recycling Facility. The project also includes three years of post-planting monitoring. MCAS will submit annual project monitoring reports with photos to document survival data for the replanted plots. As with the restoration efforts completed to date, California Conservation Corps crews will carry out the major weed removal elements of the project.

The local community has been deeply involved in ongoing efforts by MCAS to restore dune habitat at the Preserve. For the past 10-plus years students and teachers from the nearby Los Osos Middle School have successfully propagated native plants at their school and have participated in replanting those natives at the Preserve. The school will continue to provide this critical support for the proposed restoration project. Community residents have also provided hundreds of hours of volunteer time to help restore the Preserve, including installing and managing the drip irrigation system throughout the summer and during extended dry periods during the rainy season. To ensure compliance with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Morro

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shoulderband snail Recovery Plan, MCAS will contract with a local environmental consultant to monitor the project site as required for the duration of the project.

Two local tribes requested formal consultation that resulted in several additional actions to be taken by the grantee in coordination with the tribes. The Northern Chumash Tribal Council will be leading a blessing of the site on or near the first day of restoration activities. The Council will also be suggesting additional native plants to be added to the mix of plants to be planted and will meet with the grantee before the project begins to tour the site and review the planned restoration activities. The Salinan Tribe requested to be notified if any resources are found during ground disturbance activities.

**Site Description:** The 32-acre Sweet Springs Nature Preserve is located along the southern shoreline of the Morro Bay National Estuary in the Baywood-Los Osos community in unincorporated San Luis Obispo County (Exhibit 1). The estuary supports the most significant wetland system on California's central coast south of Monterey, serves as a link for migratory birds, and is home to a diverse collection of wildlife species. The Preserve has been owned and managed by MCAS for the past 35-plus years.

The Preserve contains five acres of wetlands associated with the estuary including salt marsh habitat, freshwater springs, and tidal brackish ponds. There are also five acres of upland dune habitat with remnant patches of coastal scrub. The federally-listed Morro shoulderband snail is known to occur on portions of the dune habitat. An upland area includes a small stand of Monterey cypress and eucalyptus trees that are not native to the Morro Bay region but support a migrating population of Monarch butterflies. Elevations on the site range from zero along the shoreline to approximately 30 to 40 feet along the upland areas. In 2017, MCAS installed a parking space for people with disabilities and a paved ramp that connects to an ADA-compliant trail, boardwalk and viewing deck installed with Conservancy funds. Residential development is located to the north and east of the site with undeveloped land to the south.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** MCAS has done an outstanding job operating and improving the Preserve since it assumed ownership 35 years ago. In 2008, MCAS acquired the East Sweet Springs property with Conservancy funding and successfully raised over \$320,000 in private donations to construct parking and trail improvements, which were completed in 2017. In 2022, MCAS raised another \$300,000 in private funds to acquire additional land to add to the Preserve. With Conservancy and other funding MCAS has successfully restored several acres of upland dune habitat to date. MCAS has funds reserved for the long-term management and maintenance of the project and plans to continue to raise funds through community-based fundraising campaigns for ongoing management of the Preserve.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

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### Selection Criteria

**1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.**

See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Strategic Plan” section below.

**2. Project is a good investment of state resources.**

Providing funds to continue dune habitat restoration at the Preserve is a good investment of state resources because it will restore native habitat to protect wildlife and the federally-listed Morro shoulderband snail as well as enhance habitat for birds that are appreciated by the public. Visitors, including avid bird watchers from throughout the central coast and state, are attracted to the Preserve for its excellent bay and shoreline views, with recently completed parking, restroom and accessible trails attracting more visitors each year. Based on the previous Conservancy grant to MCAS to restore dune habitat at the Preserve, the project is feasible and the budget is reasonable. The project is supported by significant volunteer work and resources and will employ local California Conservation Corps crews. In consultation with relevant federal agencies, MCAS will continue to enhance habitat for the federally-listed Morro shoulderband snail.

**3. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.**

Restoring upland dune habitat will make the Preserve more resilient and adaptable to expected sea level rise by providing restored native habitats for bay and intertidal species migrating upland over time.

**4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

In addition to the restoration of habitat for wildlife, the project will continue to provide public access, as well as community benefits through ongoing volunteer opportunities, including the participation of the local middle school students. MCAS will also employ local California Conservation Corps crews.

**5. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.**

The local community is represented by MCAS’s staff and board because each staff and board member resides in the local community. The project is supported by partnerships with local community-based organizations including the local middle school.

### PROJECT FINANCING

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b><u>\$50,000</u></b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$50,000</b>

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for the project is a fiscal year 2022/2023 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of climate resilience. (Budget Act 2022, SB 154) These funds are available for the purposes set forth in Section 52 of

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SB 155, Chapter 258, Statutes of 2021, which include projects that protect and restore coastal habitat, estuary conditions, and uplands. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will restore two acres of upland dune habitat along the shoreline of the Morro Bay National Estuary. Restoring coastal dunes reduces flooding and erosion from storm surge and sea level rise thereby making the site and surrounding area more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

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

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation (Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270). Pursuant to Section 31251, the Conservancy may award grants to public agencies for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of indiscriminate dredging or filling, improper location of improvements, natural or human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. The project will restore upland coastal dune habitat that has been adversely impacted by the spread of non-native veldt grass. Section 31252 requires that all areas proposed for resource enhancement by a state agency, local public agency, or nonprofit organization pursuant to Chapter 6 shall be identified in a certified local coastal plan or program as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems. The San Luis Obispo Estero District Local Coastal Plan (LCP), Chapter 6, Section VI. Policy B.1, *Protection and Management of Sensitive Habitats*, calls for the county to work closely with public agencies and conservation organizations to protect and manage sensitive resources. The proposed restoration project is consistent with this policy. Pursuant to Section 31253, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. Consistent with Section 31253, the following factors were considered in determining the amount of Conservancy funding for this project: the total amount of funding available for coastal resource enhancement projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, the urgency of the project, and the Conservancy's project selection criteria, as described in the "Consistency With Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines" section above.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 3.2** of the Conservancy's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will restore two acres of dune habitat.

### **CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The project is categorically exempt from review under CEQA pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations Section 15333 (Small Habitat Restoration Projects). The project is limited in size and scope, and will not exceed five acres. Consistent with Section 15333(a), the project will maintain, restore, enhance, and protect habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife, including endangered, rare, or threatened species. There are no known hazardous materials at or around project sites that may be disturbed or removed, as mandated by Section 15333(b). In addition, as required by Section 15333(c), the project will not result in impacts that are significant when viewed in connection with the effects of past projects, the effects of other current projects, and

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the effects of probable future projects because it will continue ongoing restoration activities by removing non-native harmful species and replacing such species with native plants. This project is a prime example of a small restoration project because it is revegetation of disturbed areas with native plants consistent with Section 15333(d)(1) and it will be carried out principally with hand labor consistent with Section 15333(d)(4).

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