

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 1, 2023

OCEAN RANCH RESTORATION PROJECT: AUGMENTATION

Project No. 12-025-04
Project Manager: Michael Bowen

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$426,017 to Ducks Unlimited to augment the Conservancy’s grant, previously authorized on March 25, 2021, for construction of the Ocean Ranch Restoration Project for project modifications including installing a new culvert and access road, conducting storm damage repair and increasing project resilience to future storms, installing new fencing and gates to manage public access, and preparing and installing interpretive signage and materials at the Ocean Ranch Unit of the Eel River Wildlife Area near Loleta in Humboldt County.

LOCATION: Loleta, Humboldt County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [March 25, 2021 staff recommendation for the Ocean Ranch Restoration Project](#)

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 four hundred twenty-six thousand seventeen dollars (\$426,017) to augment the Conservancy’s previously authorized grant for construction of the Ocean Ranch Restoration Project for project modifications including installing a new culvert and access road, conducting storm damage repair and increasing project resilience to future storms, installing new fencing and gates to manage public access, and preparing and installing interpretive signage and materials, at the Ocean Ranch Unit of the Eel River Wildlife Area near Loleta in Humboldt County as described in the March 25, 2021 Staff Recommendation (“Project”).

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 revised work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.

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 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the impacts of climate change.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$426,017 to Ducks Unlimited (“grantee”) to augment the Conservancy’s previously authorized grant for construction of the Ocean Ranch Restoration Project for project modifications including installing a new culvert and access road, conducting storm damage repair and increasing project resilience to future storms, installing new fencing and gates to manage public access, and preparing and installing interpretive signage and materials, at the Ocean Ranch Unit of the Eel River Wildlife Area near Loleta in Humboldt County (Exhibit 1). This will augment the \$4,549,520 grant that the Conservancy authorized on March 25, 2021, for construction of the Ocean Ranch Restoration Project.

The Ocean Ranch Restoration Project (project) is an 850-acre tidal marsh and coastal dune restoration project on the northern edge of the mouth of the Eel River. It is described in the attached March 25, 2021 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2). The project’s goal is to restore full tidal exchange to the northern half of the Eel River Delta, thereby restoring a resilient complex of wetlands, wetland-upland transition zone, and dunes at Ocean Ranch. The project also improves public access to the site with an improved parking area, an access road, a new trail network, and a non-motorized boat launch facility. The project was largely completed in January 2023, however, several modifications to the project are needed, some of which have been constructed. These modifications have resulted in project cost increases.

The project modifications include the installation of a large new culvert in and improved road surfacing on an existing berm in order to allow vehicle access for land management needs while also maintaining tidal exchange at the site. The culvert and road improvements were requested by CDFW just prior to project completion. The culvert has also made it necessary to install either warning signs and/or a debris rack safety to prevent a potential safety hazard to kayakers due to the high inflow rate, protect the culvert entrance, and prevent debris from impeding steady flow of tide into and out of the restored project footprint. In addition, newly constructed areas of the project (main access road, Sand Road and the boat launch) were damaged by an

unusual storm characterized by southern winds in the Eel River. Erosion damage to the Sand Road serving California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) land managers and the public requires stabilization and new rock placement, and the new boat launch requires replacement of the initially compacted sand with more stable rock. These improvements have been designed to improve upon the original design and increase the resilience of the access road and boat launch to future storms, which are expected to become more intense due to climate change. Finally, Ducks Unlimited has determined that the project should include interpretive material, such as signs, in conjunction with local partners, including the nearby Wiyot Tribe. The recommended grant augmentation is for all of these project modifications.

Overall, the Ocean Ranch Restoration Project has been a success, and was completed at very near the engineer's estimated cost and at a low cost relative to many similar large scale restoration projects. The ecological success of the project has been demonstrated by post project surveys revealing Coho salmon, longfin smelt, and other species in formerly inaccessible areas of the project footprint.

The proposed augmentation of the grant will enable Ducks Unlimited to further improve and stabilize the project and increase its resilience to storms, while also enhancing visitation with access and interpretive signage.

Site Description: The 850-acre Ocean Ranch Unit is owned and managed by CDFW as part of the Eel River Wildlife Area (ERWA). Just south of Humboldt Bay, the approximately 2,600-acre ERWA contains salt marsh, pasture, wet meadow, brackish marsh, and coastal scrub. It also includes one of the largest riparian forests remaining on California's north coast. The area is regularly used by raptors, tundra swans, waterfowl, and shorebirds. The Ocean Ranch Unit of the ERWA is situated at the mouth of the Eel River, California's third largest river system and one of California's largest coastal estuaries. The project is located within the Eel River floodplain, near Loleta, in Humboldt County. It is immediately across the Eel River channel from the Riverside Ranch restoration site, part of the Salt River Ecosystem Restoration Project. The unit will be managed by CDFW for the foreseeable future. The CDFW Land Program was actively involved in project planning, and they and other branches of CDFW are actively involved in post project monitoring and stewardship of the site.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Having managed the project to this point, Ducks Unlimited is well-qualified to complete the project. Ducks Unlimited may now add Ocean Ranch to a growing list of successful habitat restoration projects completed across the nation. Their work in the San Francisco Bay, particularly in the Napa-Sonoma Marshes, is highly regarded. Ducks Unlimited also served as construction manager at the 444-acre Riverside Ranch in the immediate project vicinity, part of the Salt River Ecosystem Restoration Project in Humboldt County.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project was found consistent with the Conservancy's 2014 Project Selection Criteria as described in the attached staff recommendation. It is also consistent with the more recent Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

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.

By any measurement the project represents a strikingly affordable investment of state resources for habitat restoration and public access enhancement. Concluding at less than \$7.5 million for nearly 1,000 acres of restored habitat and public access, the project is a cost-efficient success. The grant augmentation will result in repairs and improvements that will enhance project function and resilience, with increased benefits for wildlife habitat and public access.

3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.

The project site is located adjacent to the Table Bluff Rancheria, home of the Wiyot Tribe. As such, CDFW and Ducks Unlimited initiated outreach to the Tribe well before project development, and later through AB-52 and CEQA mandated processes. Ducks Unlimited is working with the Wiyot Tribe on the development of outreach and interpretive materials to better depict the historic and contemporary significance of this site which is central to the Wiyot’s ancestral territory and current way of life.

Discussions are underway concerning how to recognize this importance in the context of the Project. Current concepts include an interpretive signage program, incorporating cultural land management practices, and potentially recognizing indigenous peoples through naming site locations on the Preserve. Interpretive signage will be included as part of the project signage that CDFW will develop during construction in the fall and winter of 2023. Cultural land management practices are planned to be incorporated into future fire fuel reduction and natural resource management work.

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

Although the storm damage came as a surprise to both Ducks Unlimited and the contractor, the majority of the project remained intact, and the repairs will ensure that the project features are resilient over the project lifespan consistent with the term of the grant agreement.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project’s multiple benefits were described in the prior staff recommendation. In addition, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has greatly increased the popularity of outdoor recreation and underscored the importance of accessible outdoor space.

The project will benefit the surrounding Severely Disadvantaged Community with increased public access, as well as enhanced fish and wildlife communities for hunting and fishing. CDFW has played a leadership role at this site ensuring that underserved and disadvantaged communities have access to the outdoors.

Ocean Ranch provides a great opportunity to enhance habitat and recreational opportunities within a large area with beach access for the benefit of visitors from within and outside the County.

6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.

CDFW has led an extensive stakeholder process over many years in which numerous agencies, tribal representatives and private citizens have had the opportunity to weigh in on project design. The project is supported by Senator Mike McGuire, Assemblymember Jim Wood, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, Bureau of Land Management, Wiyot Tribe, Humboldt County Resource Conservation District, California Trout, Redwood Region Audubon Society, and others. See Exhibit 2.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy (proposed augmentation)	\$426,017
Prior Funding	
Coastal Conservancy	\$750,000
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant (via Conservancy for Phase I)	\$979,996
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant (via Conservancy for Phase II)	\$841,942
California Department of Fish and Wildlife (via Conservancy)	\$1,975,582
National Marine Fisheries Service	\$1,419,424
Wildlife Conservation Board	\$900,000
Project Total	\$7,292,961

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2022/23 appropriation from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) to the Conservancy for the Climate Ready Program for purposes of nature-based projects to address sea level rise (Budget Act of 2022, SB 154, as amended by AB 178, Chapter 45 of the Statutes of 2022). The Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund Investment Plan and Communities Revitalization Act (Health and Safety Code (HSC) Sections 39710 – 39723) requires that GGRF funds be used to (1) facilitate the achievement of reductions of GHG emissions consistent with the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 (HSC Sections 38500 *et seq*), and (2) to the extent feasible, achieve other co-benefits, such as maximizing economic, environmental and public health benefits and directing investment to disadvantaged communities (HSC Section 39712(b)). The Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 sets forth (among other things) certain GGRF funding priorities (HSC Section 38590.1). The California Air Resources Board (“CARB”) has adopted guidelines that establish program goals that agencies must achieve with their GGRF funds.

Consistent with the CARB 2018 Funding Guidelines, the proposed project will help the Conservancy meet its GGRF program goals because the project will:

- Facilitate GHG emission reductions (which includes increases in carbon sequestration) and further the purposes of AB 32 and related statutes by restoring tidal marsh that will sequester carbon;
- Benefit Priority Populations by providing public access to adjacent disadvantaged communities;
- Maximize economic, environmental, and public health co-benefits to the State; and
- Leverage funds to provide multiple benefits and to maximize benefits.

The proposed project will meet these objectives by enhancing tidal flows to restore tidal wetland habitat, which will reduce greenhouse gas emissions because tidal wetland habitat is one of the most carbon dense ecosystems in the world. The project also benefits disadvantaged communities and provides multiple benefits because it will provide public access and recreation opportunities for the public including neighboring disadvantaged communities. The project leverages significant federal funds and other state funds already expended.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The project remains consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation as described in Exhibit 2. Additionally, the project is consistent with Section 31113 of Ch. 3 in that the "...conservancy may undertake projects within its jurisdiction, including, but not limited to, those that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, address extreme weather events, sea level rise, storm surge...and other coastal hazards that threaten coastal communities, infrastructure and natural resources." Pursuant to the Climate Ready Program, the conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations to achieve these goals, while prioritizing multiple benefit projects. The Ocean Ranch Restoration Project, as discussed in Project Financing, above, provides multiple benefits including carbon sequestration in newly reestablished salt marsh, restoration of aquatic estuarine habitat for species impacted by climate change, such as Pacific salmon, and a natural buffer against storm surge and sea level rise. In addition, excavated sediment from newly created tidal sloughs was used on site to establish contoured levees and fill areas that enable migration of salt marsh species as sea levels rise.

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

Consistent with **Section 2.5, Recreation Features and Amenities**, the project improves public access to Ocean Ranch with an improved parking area, an access road, a new trail network, and a non-motorized boat launch facility.

Consistent with **Section 3.2, Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the project restores a resilient 850-acre complex of wetlands, wetland-upland transition zone, and dunes at Ocean Ranch.

Consistent with **Section 4.1, Sea Level Rise Adaptation**, the proposed project supports the implementation of a project to increase the resilience of the natural and built environment to the impacts of sea level rise. The ecosystem and access designs address changing water surface level elevations and increased storm surges to ensure future use and enjoyment of the site.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The Conservancy made CEQA findings regarding the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the project at the March 2021 meeting (see Exhibit 2). Subsequently, CDFW, the lead agency, requested minor modifications to the project, including a new culvert and road surfacing to allow vehicle access along an existing berm, repair work and interpretive signage. The alterations to the project were not substantial and did not warrant a supplemental or subsequent EIR. The project modifications do not result in any new environmental effects, nor do they increase the severity of previously identified environmental effects. The road resurfacing is on an existing berm, the culvert provides the same level of hydraulic exchange as initially planned, and the interpretive signage constitutes a *de minimis* adjustment to the project consonant with the public access features already constructed. Accordingly, the proposed authorization remains consistent with the CEQA findings adopted by the Conservancy in connection with the March 25, 2021 authorization.