

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 15, 2024

TOPANGA LAGOON RESTORATION PLANNING

Project No. 19-001-02

Project Manager: Kara Kemmler

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$646,100 to the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains to augment a previously authorized Conservancy grant of \$1,629,550 for planning for the Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project at Topanga State Park and Topanga Beach in Los Angeles County.

LOCATION: Topanga State Park and Topanga Beach, Topanga, unincorporated Los Angeles County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [March 14, 2019 Staff Recommendation](#)

Exhibit 2: [May 27, 2021 Staff Recommendation \(As corrected\)](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

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

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed six hundred forty-six thousand one hundred dollars (\$646,100) to the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains (“the grantee”) to augment a previously authorized Conservancy grant of \$1,629,550 for planning for the Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project (“Project”) at Topanga State Park and Beach in Los Angeles County subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to disbursement of the augmentation funds, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy the following:
 - a. A revised work program, schedule, and budget.
 - b. Names and qualifications of any additional contractors to be retained in carrying out the Project.

2. Evidence that California Department of Parks and Recreation and the County of Los Angeles Department of Beaches and Harbors have entered into an agreement setting forth their mutual goals for the Project and committing to cooperate on the planning process and selection of a preferred alternative for 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 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding coastal resource enhancement.
2. The proposed project, as augmented, is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize disbursement of an additional \$646,100 to the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains (RCDSMM) for planning for the Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project, including preparing technical studies, performing monitoring, conducting technical advisory and community engagement processes, and developing three conceptual alternatives to restore ecological function, increase resiliency to sea level rise and climate change, and enhance the visitor experience. This would augment previously authorized Conservancy funding totaling \$1,629,550, as shown in the Project Financing Section below (See Exhibits 1 and 2).

The Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project (the project) is a multi-benefit project with habitat restoration, resource protection, public access and recreation, and climate resilience goals. The project area is approximately 23 acres and includes the lower Topanga State Park area which encompasses Topanga Lagoon, lower Topanga Creek and adjacent riparian woodland, floodplain and filled areas; Topanga Ranch Motel and the visitor services area; the Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) bridge; and Topanga Beach (See Exhibit 2).

Both wetlands and native fish populations are quickly disappearing in Southern California. Topanga Watershed is 18 square miles, the third largest watershed draining into Santa Monica Bay. The watershed provides habitat for the federally listed endangered southern steelhead trout and tidewater goby. Steelhead in Santa Monica Bay are on the brink of extinction and Topanga Creek is currently the only stream with a reproducing population. However, the current conditions in Topanga Lagoon are not optimal to support growth and rearing opportunities for steelhead and the existing narrow channel opening under the PCH bridge intensifies high flows and limits the opportunities for steelhead to enter the creek or for smolts to emigrate. Caltrans has identified the PCH bridge as a priority for replacement to enhance fish passage. The new bridge span will be longer which will allow the lagoon footprint to be enlarged to restore ecological function and increase resiliency to sea level rise impacts. The lagoon is a small remnant of its historical footprint (approximately 30 acres) and is restricted by

fill placed to develop the area including the building of PCH. The project will be designed to expand the current 0.59 acre wetland into 10-12 acres and provide improved habitat and fish passage opportunities for tidewater gobies and southern steelhead trout.

In addition to the important natural resources of the site, documented remains of a Native American village lie buried beneath the site. Planning for the project will also include consideration of relocating or redesigning existing visitor serving structures, including possible renovation of the historic Topanga Ranch Motel for lower-cost overnight accommodations. The tribal cultural and natural resources coupled with the visitor services and proximity to the beach provide a valuable opportunity to enhance the public access, recreation, and interpretive landscape. Interpretive and/or artistic elements, which will be developed with tribal input, are also part of the project.

The project also addresses the relocation of existing structures located south of the PCH bridge on either side of the lagoon, including the public restrooms and lifeguard station on the beach and the helipad just above the beach. The restrooms and lifeguard station are currently threatened by sea level rise and coastal erosion. The helipad is located on fill that hems the lagoon in on the western side. Emergency access is challenging along this stretch of coast. The relocation of these structures and redesign of the PCH bridge will provide opportunities to improve resiliency and enhance access and public safety during emergencies.

The planning effort so far has been focused on technical studies, stakeholder engagement, and conceptual design. To date, a substantial amount of work has been completed under the existing Conservancy grant, including various technical studies and baseline data gathering which includes water quality monitoring, biological resource monitoring, wetland delineation and habitat quality assessment, historical resource assessment, a geo-archeology survey, cultural and archeological resource analyses. RCDSMM has also undertaken a multi-prong stakeholder engagement effort to ensure that input from the landowners, a technical advisory group, and local and visiting communities is incorporated into the design and planning of the project. Three conceptual design alternatives have been developed for the project. Under a separate grant from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, RCDSMM has begun the environmental review (CEQA/NEPA) process, however, they are still gathering data and conducting studies to support the environmental review and feasibility of design alternative features.

Additional analyses needed to support planning for the visitor serving elements are the focus of the current augmentation. This additional work includes assessments that support California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) in analyzing the feasibility of development alternatives such as, an existing conditions, opportunities and constraints analysis, a feasibility study for the Topanga Ranch Motel, facilities management planning, and interpretive planning; a geotechnical report for the lifeguard building; and wastewater management studies, easements, geotechnical surveys and traffic analysis to meet Caltrans requirements. This work will support analysis of various visitor serving features, for example informing feasibility of lower cost overnight accommodations onsite. In addition, RCDSMM is proposing to add additional public meetings to further community engagement. These additional tasks are necessary to inform the environmental review of the project alternatives.

Site Description: Topanga Lagoon is a coastal estuary at the terminus of Topanga Canyon. From its connection to the creek to its outlet at the ocean the lagoon crosses three properties. The project area includes the lower portion of Topanga State Park, which is owned and managed by State Parks, the PCH bridge that spans the lagoon, which is under Caltrans’s jurisdiction, and a portion of Topanga Beach, which lies south of PCH and is owned by the County of Los Angeles Department of Beaches and Harbors (DBH). All of the landowners have been actively engaged in the planning process. Caltrans intends to enter into cooperative agreements with State Parks and DBH (one with each entity). State Parks and DBH intend to enter into a memorandum of understanding that sets forth their mutual goals for the project and their commitment to coordinating on the planning process and selection of a preferred project alternative.

The lower portion of Topanga State Park encompasses the lower creek, lagoon, and adjacent habitat. There are several existing structures within the Park including several visitor serving businesses, the vacant historic Topanga Ranch Motel with approximately 27 structures, parking, picnic tables, and an accessway crossing under PCH to the beach. In addition, there are tribal cultural resources buried beneath the site.

An existing lifeguard headquarters station and public restrooms are located on Topanga Beach to the east of the lagoon. An area on the blufftop above the beach on the west of the lagoon is used as a helipad for emergency events. Topanga Beach is a popular surfing beach and is visited by over 750,000 people annually.

Grantee Qualifications: Over the last two decades, the RCDSMM and State Parks have been engaged in a collaborative effort with multiple agency partners toward the ultimate restoration of Topanga Lagoon. The RCDSMM has managed prior Conservancy grants and led previous planning efforts in partnership with State Parks, and this successful collaboration has continued on this project.

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:

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.

The project is feasible and has the critical support and cooperation of several landowners and agency partners working toward common goals that will benefit all Californians, such as, enhancing visitor services and access at a popular public park and beach, improving climate resiliency, restoring critical wetland habitat, and protecting cultural resources.

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.

There are known cultural resources within the project area and an effort is being made to engage with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated with the project area. Following tribal consultation by State Parks on the project in 2020, State Parks held a field meeting at the site with tribal representatives. Tribes that have engaged with State Parks to date include the Fernandeano Tataviam Band of Mission Indians, Gabrielino Tongva Indians of California Tribal Council, Gabrieleno/Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians and the Nunez family. Representatives from the Gabrielino Tongva Indians of California Tribal Council have provided Native American monitoring for the geoarchaeological study and other geotechnical studies. State Parks has engaged, communicated, and solicited feedback on this project and continues to provide notification of public meetings about the project and opportunities to comment in addition to formal consultation.

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

The proposed planning will result in a project that will deliver a multitude of long-term benefits, including restoration of critical wetland habitat that supports the federally endangered steelhead trout, climate resilience, and visitor serving enhancement to provide broader access to the coast. The project will be designed for resilience to expected climate change impacts, such as extreme heat, wildfire, flood, by relocating existing improvements to accommodate sea level rise, restoring habitat to support wildlife species as they adapt to climate change, and enhancing emergency systems to improve community resilience to climate related disasters.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project is a multi-benefit project with habitat restoration, resource protection, public access and recreation, and climate resilience goals.

The planning effort includes meaningful community engagement to explore how visitor serving enhancements can broaden access and expand recreational opportunities for underserved communities who lack opportunities to access open space and the coast.

The project will be designed for resilience to expected climate change impacts, such as extreme heat, wildfire, flood, and drought by relocating existing improvements to accommodate sea level rise, restoring habitat to support wildlife species as they adapt to climate change, and enhancing emergency systems to improve community preparedness for climate related disasters.

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

The grantee has engaged the community on a variety of levels to comprehensively inform the planning and design effort, including public stakeholders, landowners, and a technical advisory committee which includes public agencies, nonprofit organizations, wetland experts, scientists, and academics. The initial public stakeholder meetings were well-attended, however, the project partners noticed an underrepresentation of folks from outside the local area. In order to support the objective that the State Park and public beach are accessible and welcoming to

all visitors, the partners sought to build on the existing outreach effort. The grantee worked with a local community based organization to conduct a focused effort to engage communities of color in the larger Los Angeles landscape, specifically in areas that suffer from lack of open space. The project is broadly supported by the community including elected officials, resource agencies, community based organizations and individuals.

PROJECT FINANCING

Previous Funding

Coastal Conservancy 2019 Authorization	\$717,000
Coastal Conservancy 2021 Authorization	\$700,000
Coastal Conservancy 15% Augmentation	\$212,550

Proposed Authorization **\$646,100**

Others

State Parks	\$133,000
RCDSMM	\$71,810
Wildlife Conservation Board	\$4,496,378
California Department of Fish and Wildlife	\$1,642,602

Project Total (Planning) **\$8,619,440**

The anticipated source of funding for this project is a Fiscal Year 2022/23 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of “urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs” (Budget Act 2022, SB 154 as amended by the Budget Act of 2023, SB 101). The coastal resilience funds are available as described in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the coastal resilience funds. The proposed project is a coastal resilience project that is consistent with this funding source because it will plan for restoration of coastal wetlands and uplands.

State Parks and DBH will provide in-kind project management services and state that the value of these is estimated to be \$250,000 for each agency. Caltrans is providing in-kind project staff services at an estimated value of \$3,000,000.

Unless specifically identified as “Required Match,” the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project remains consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Chapter 6 regarding coastal resource enhancement, as detailed in the March 14, 2019 staff recommendation (See Exhibit 1).

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

Consistent with **Goal 2.5.1, Recreational Facilities and Amenities**, the project goals include enhancement of facilities, such as picnic areas, parking lots, restrooms, and other amenities to enhance coastal recreational opportunities. The feasibility of developing affordable overnight accommodations as part of the project is being assessed as part of the planning effort.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2.1, Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the primary goal of the proposed project is to restore wetland habitat which is critical habitat for sensitive wildlife species. The lagoon restoration will achieve several significant climate benefits, including protecting carbon stores, sequestering carbon, and buffering human and natural communities from the impacts of climate change including sea level rise.

Consistent with **Goal 4.1.1, Sea Level Rise Adaptation Projects**, the proposed project will conduct adaptation planning to protect coastal resources and increase the resiliency of the natural and built environments to the impacts of sea level rise.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project, which involves planning and technical studies, data collection and resource evaluation activities, is unchanged and remains the same project analyzed under the Conservancy's March 14, 2019 and May 27, 2021 authorizations. The proposed authorization does not change the project itself or the purposes for which the funding will be used. Thus, the proposed project remains statutorily exempt under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), as detailed in the March 14, 2019 staff recommendation (See Exhibit 1) and categorically exempt from CEQA, as detailed in the May 27, 2021 staff recommendation (See Exhibit 2).