

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 6, 2024

LOMA ALTA SLOUGH WETLAND ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

Project No. 17-037-02

Project Manager: Bryce Keyes

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,643,344 to the City of Oceanside to undertake the Loma Alta Slough Wetland Enhancement Project consisting of the enhancement of 5.8 acres of coastal wetlands in the City of Oceanside in San Diego County; and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Loma Alta Slough, City of Oceanside, San Diego County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Letters of Support](#)

Exhibit 4: Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration ([Part 1](#) / [Part 2](#))

Exhibit 5: [Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

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

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy (Conservancy) hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed one million six hundred forty three thousand three hundred forty four dollars (\$1,643,344) to the City of Oceanside (“the grantee”) to undertake the Loma Alta Slough Wetland Enhancement Project consisting of the enhancement of 5.8 acres of coastal wetlands in the City of Oceanside in San Diego 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.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain 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 is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Loma Alta Slough Wetland Enhancement Project Final Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration and the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program, both adopted by the City of Oceanside on October 10, 2022 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibits 4 and 5. The Conservancy finds that the proposed project as designed and mitigated avoids, reduces, or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a less-than-significant level, and that there is no substantial evidence based on the record as a whole that the project will have a significant effect on the environment.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$1,643,344 grant to the City of Oceanside (City) to undertake the Loma Alta Slough Wetland Enhancement Project (project) consisting of the enhancement of 5.8 acres of coastal wetlands in the City of Oceanside in San Diego County (Exhibit 1). The project will implement the Loma Alta Slough Wetlands Enhancement Plan, which was prepared using a Conservancy grant authorized on January 18, 2018.

The proposed project will restore and enhance 5.8 acres of coastal wetlands, transitional zones, and upland coastal sage scrub at the Loma Alta Slough (LAS). This restoration project will offer enhanced habitat for various wildlife species, including those listed as endangered or threatened, such as the tidewater goby, Least Bell's Vireo, Light-footed Ridgway's Rail, Belding's Savannah Sparrow, California Least Tern, and Coastal California Gnatcatcher. Furthermore, the

project will improve water quality and provide flood protection, and make the habitat and surrounding infrastructure more climate resilient.

Project activities involve removing sediment by dredging and removing fill and riprap from developed areas to expand the wetland, grading and building marshland channels to improve hydrology and water quality, and planting native vegetation on the coastal wetland and the transitional riparian and upland coastal sage scrub habitat. These restoration activities will increase water storage, improve water quality, improve habitat quality, and provide suitable habitat for sensitive and endangered coastal wildlife (see Exhibit 2, Figure 3).

The project will also expand coastal access and public recreation by constructing approximately 1,200 ft (0.25 miles) of new trail, a boardwalk, an overlook point, and installing interpretive signage. These improvements will allow the public to better interact with the revitalized ecosystem and more easily access the nearby beach without impacting sensitive habitats. The trail will connect to two nearby city projects on the northern boundary of the site, including a trail adjacent to the La Salina Wastewater Treatment Plant and the Coastal Rail trail, which will ultimately better connect the nearby disadvantaged community (DAC) to the coast. Public features will coincide with the improvements to the adjacent Buccaneer Park that the City is undertaking in a separate effort.

Community engagement was a key activity in the planning stage of the project. The project's design and goals were community-driven, and involved various stakeholders, including residential community members, nearby business owners, environmental non-profits, and government agencies. A Technical Advisory Committee, consisted of staff from regulatory agencies, engineers, and scientists, guided the project's objectives, and community members who frequent the area provided support and approval. The involvement of stakeholders such as Preserve Calavera, Buena Vista Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Urban Corps of San Diego, and others underscore the collaboration that has gone into the planning and design of the project. The City will continue to engage the public and foster a deeper connection between the community and the restored ecosystem by hosting stewardship events during and after construction.

Tribes were contacted at multiple points during the development of the project. The Conservancy sent tribal engagement letters in 2017 and 2023, consultants sent letters on behalf of the City to complete the Cultural Resource Assessment Report in 2020, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sent letters to fulfill Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act in 2023. Multiple tribes have responded with requests to remain informed on the project and to have tribal monitors present during ground disturbance activities.

The project includes the restoration of approximately 2.6 acres of coastal wetlands by removing fill from developed areas to expand the wetland and reestablish natural tidal processes, allowing for improved flushing and development of multiple habitat types. An additional approximately 1.7 acres of wetlands will be enhanced by removing invasive species and grading sinuous marshland channels to facilitate water movement and result in improved water quality. Native vegetation will be planted to provide habitat and contribute to water quality improvements. Approximately 1.5 acres of riparian and upland coastal sage scrub habitat will

be restored as a buffer zone to help protect the restored wetlands from urban development and provide additional habitat for wildlife. Approximately 1,200 feet, or 0.25 miles, of trail will be constructed to enhance coastal access for the public to open space and facilitate wildlife viewing and outdoor recreational activities. A viewing deck will also be installed to allow for a better view of the LAS without damaging sensitive habitat and a boardwalk will be constructed to cross over sensitive habitat that will connect the new trail to other trail projects (Exhibit 2, Figure 3). Educational signage will also be installed along the trail. The City will continue to engage the community during and after construction by hosting stewardship and cleanup events with non-profits or schools to inspire stewardship and educate the public on nature-based solutions and wetland conservation.

The Conservancy funded the planning stage of the project. The planning phase resulted in a feasibility study, technical reports, conceptual design documents, final environmental documentation, and public input documentation. The design specifically considers sea level rise and lagoon breach dynamics to construct a resilient and adaptable wetland system over the coming years of projected stressors induced by climate change. Furthermore, the design of the channels takes into account the stagnation of the water in summer to improve water quality and vector concerns from mosquito breeding, both of which were concerns expressed in the community engagement workshops during the planning phase of the project.

Site Description:

The City of Oceanside is located in Northern San Diego County and has multiple communities classified as a disadvantaged community (DAC) or a severely disadvantaged community (SDAC). Buccaneer Beach, at the mouth of Loma Alta Slough (LAS), is a popular destination that draws visitors due to its available parking and adjacent park. LAS is a small, intermittently open estuary with a watershed of six square miles (Exhibit 2). LAS was once a 44-acre wetland, but has now dwindled to less than 10 acres. Watershed urbanization, sedimentation, channel engineering, poor water quality, and wetland fill have degraded the health of LAS, leading to its classification as an impaired water body on California's Clean Water Act 303(d) list. To address water quality concerns, La Salina Wastewater Treatment Plant was constructed in 2008. The treatment plant helps improve water quality in the summer, but is not capable of handling wet-weather flows, resulting in polluted water reaching the beach during winter months and posing public health risks. The reduction and constriction of the wetland has also resulted in upstream and wetland flooding impacts and has left the adjacent public park and surrounding residential and commercial communities more susceptible to climate change and sea level rise. Buccaneer Beach is the only beach left in Oceanside that is exposed during high tide other than the beaches near the harbor or pier (2.6 miles and 1.5 miles away from LAS, respectively). The outer coast of southern Oceanside is otherwise armored with riprap. The public can view wildlife at the LAS, but are limited to a footpath on the south side of the slough.

The project area consists of the north and south banks of the LAS and is comprised of five contiguous parcels of undeveloped land owned and managed by the City, undeveloped areas of the City's La Salina Wastewater Treatment Plant, and the recreational path along the southern edge of the Slough (Exhibit 1). The project site is bordered to the west by Pacific Street and to

the east by South Coast Highway. Adjacent land uses also include the Paradise by the Sea RV Park to the south and commercial facilities to the north with outdoor storage. Almost all lands involved in the project site are owned by the City. Small areas of the project site are within railroad right-of-way owned by the North County Transit District and the City expects to have permission to access these areas for the project by the time construction begins. The banks of the LAS currently consists primarily of riprap and scattered vegetation including non-native grasses, ornamental plants, and salt marsh plants.

The Department of Water Resources' online mapping tool has identified the northern bank of LAS west of the railroad as a DAC (gis.water.ca.gov/app/boundaries, accessed April 2024). The project site is located in a DAC and will provide benefits to the DAC that spans north of the project site, including residents of nearby mobile home parks who use Buccaneer Beach Park, and who access the beach via the footpath. State Parks's Outdoor Equity Program Community FactFinder, 2023 Edition identifies the adjacent areas to the LAS as a DAC and SDAC ([parksforcalifornia.org/outdoor equity](https://parksforcalifornia.org/outdoor-equity), accessed April 2024).

Grant Applicant Qualifications:

Over the last 15 years, the City has laid the groundwork for the project by acquiring approximately 3 acres of vacant parcels along the creek edge at the project site with the goal of expanding the existing wetland to restore its historical extent and function. Multiple funding partners, including the Conservancy, Ocean Protection Council, and the National Fish and Wildlife Federation, have helped the City develop the project to a 100 percent construction-ready state. The City's ability to secure necessary funds and successfully manage grants from state and federal agencies for project planning, permitting, and implementation underscores their ability and commitment to execute this important project.

The City acknowledges its responsibility for leading the long-term management of the site, including maintenance and monitoring. The City will be responsible for overseeing the restoration area and trail system's ongoing management and fulfilling monitoring requirements to comply with resource agency permits.

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 proposed project involves the restoration of a critical coastal wetland habitat that has suffered from decades of urbanization and degradation and will have multiple significant

benefits for Californians, including DACs, including improved flood resilience, water quality, habitat for wildlife, public access to the beach, aesthetics, and public recreation opportunities. The budget is reasonable and leverages multiple state and federal funding sources, and volunteer work. The project is ready to be implemented within the year; 100 percent construction design documents were submitted with the City's application and all permits will be in-hand by the time of construction.

The project advances the State's 30x30 Executive Order by restoring and expanding coastal wetlands, contributes to the preservation of critical habitats, and supports biodiversity conservation efforts in the region. The project also advances the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Regional Strategy 2018 (Goal 1) and the California Natural Resources Agency's Priority to Accelerate Nature-Based Climate Solutions and Strengthen Climate Resilience of Natural Systems (Goal C, Action 3) outlined in their 2021 California Climate Adaptation Strategy by restoring coastal wetland habitat using a nature-based approach. The project is consistent with the goals of local plans, including the 2019 San Diego Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, because it will improve water quality and protect and enhance the watershed and natural resources by restoring natural hydrologic functions. The project is located within the Carlsbad Watershed Management Area and is consistent with the 2021 Water Quality Improvement Plan. The project's wetland habitat design will improve the water quality of Loma Alta Creek. The eutrophic conditions of LAS were defined in the plan as the highest priority water quality problem to solve in Loma Alta Creek.

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

The project has been thoughtfully planned and designed by technical experts, residents, and business owners to ensure that benefits are long-lasting, enjoyed by the public, and are resilient to climate change and sea-level rise. For example, natural buffers and transition zones are incorporated into the project design to accommodate for wetland migration over time. The project aims to establish a resilient and self-sustaining habitat that can better withstand the impacts of climate change, including extreme heat, flood, and drought, by planting native vegetation species that are adapted to the local climate and soil conditions.

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

The City provided opportunities for stakeholder engagement at multiple stages of the planning and design process and solicited input on design. The City held three community engagement workshops, including two evening in-person meetings and one virtual meeting, that resulted in multiple adjustments to the project. The City plans to continue to involve the community during the implementation phase by co-hosting stewardship events with community-based non-profit partners, including I Love a Clean San Diego, Buena Vista Audubon Society, Preserve Calavera, and the North County Coastal Group of the Sierra Club. The project is broadly supported; the Mayor of the City of Oceanside, the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board, and Preserve Calavera have submitted letters of support for the project (Exhibit 3).

PROJECT FINANCING

| | |
|--|--------------------|
| Coastal Conservancy | \$663,600 |
| U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (via a grant to the Conservancy) | \$979,744 |
| National Fish and Wildlife Foundation | \$500,000 |
| Ocean Protection Council | \$1,011,391 |
| Project Total | \$3,154,735 |

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this authorization is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84, Public Resources Code sections 75001 et seq.). This funding source is available to the Conservancy for projects that are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code and that protect coastal waters and watersheds, protect and restore the natural habitat values of coastal waters and lands, and/or promote access to and enjoyment of coastal resources (Section 75060(b)).

Proposition 84 authorizes funding specifically for projects that protect San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds (Section 75060(f)). The project is an appropriate use of Proposition 84 funds because it will restore coastal wetland habitat that will improve water quality, provide flood protection, support habitat migration with sea level rise, and offer valuable habitat for native species, including threatened and endangered species.

Section 75071 requires the Conservancy to give priority to projects that demonstrate one or more of a list of factors. The project is a priority because it supports the restoration of multiple coastal wetland habitat types that are relatively rare in San Diego County (Section 75071(c)) and there are multiple non-state matching contributions toward the restoration of the habitat (Section 75071(e)).

The Conservancy was awarded \$1,000,000 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) through a National Coastal Wetlands Conservation grant for the restoration of Loma Alta Slough. The Conservancy will grant \$979,740 of the USFWS funds to the City for restoration of LAS and retain the remainder for its costs for administering the grant.

In-kind contribution includes volunteer time for outreach, stewardship, and education from I Love a Clean San Diego, Buena Vista Audubon Society, Preserve Calavera, and the North County Coastal Group of the Sierra Club and is estimated to be worth \$17,685.

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 project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation regarding resource enhancement (Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270).

Consistent with Section 31251, the proposed authorization provides funds to the City of Oceanside to enhance natural resources, specifically wetlands of Southern California, that have suffered the loss of natural and scenic values due to urban development. Consistent with this section, the City is a public agency and therefore qualifies for a grant from the Conservancy under Chapter 6.

Consistent with Section 31252, the proposed project is being undertaken in an area that is identified in the City of Oceanside's Local Coastal Program as requiring public action to resolve existing resource protection problems, as described in the "Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria" section above.

Section 31253 permits the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project, consistent with established project eligibility and priority factors. In determining the amount of Conservancy funding for this proposed project, the factors identified in Section 31253 were considered and applied, as described in detail in the section "Consistency with Conservancy's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan," below.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1, Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will commit \$1,643,344 to restore and enhance a degraded wetland in a systemically excluded community, resulting in enhanced water quality and flood protection.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4, Build Trails**, the proposed project will build approximately 0.25 miles of trail that increases access to a coastal wetland and connects a DAC to the coast.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5, Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project will install bilingual interpretive signage.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2, Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project will restore and enhance 5.8 acres of coastal wetland habitat. Project designs include buffer areas that will allow for the wetland to migrate as sea level rises over time.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

On October 10, 2022, the City of Oceanside adopted the Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Loma Alta Slough Enhancement Project (IS/MND, Exhibit 4) and the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (Exhibit 5), and approved the Loma Alta Slough Enhancement Project. Conservancy staff independently reviewed the IS/MND and concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment.

The IS/MND identified potentially significant environmental effects in the areas of biological resources, cultural resources, geology and soils, and tribal cultural resources. With the project's incorporated mitigation measures, summarized below and available in Exhibit 4, these environmental effects will be less than significant.

Biological Resources:

The project could directly impact nesting birds if construction took place during the general bird breeding season (January 15 and September 15). Special-status bird species have been observed at the project site, but Loma Alta Slough does not have suitable nesting habitat in the project impact area. Implementation of Mitigation Measure (MM) BIO-1 and MM-BIO-2 (Exhibit 4, page 31) requires ground disturbance and vegetation removal be conducted outside of the bird nesting season. If nesting season is not avoidable, surveys will be conducted prior to any construction activity and any nesting sites will be flagged and fenced with an appropriate buffer zone. These measures will minimize impacts on bird species to a less than significant level.

The project does not currently have Southern tidewater goby, a federally endangered and California Department of Fish and Wildlife fish species of special concern. However, because habitat for this species may be present in the project area, the fish species may be impacted by construction. Implementation of MM-BIO-3 (Exhibit 4, page 31) requires a focused tidewater goby survey using USFWS-approved methodology prior to construction. If tidewater gobies are detected during the survey, additional measures must be implemented as determined through subsequent consultation with the USFWS and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as part of obtaining the Section 404 permit. These measures will minimize impacts on the fish species to a less than significant level.

Riparian habitats and sensitive natural wetland communities in the project area may be temporarily impacted by accidental disturbance from equipment and regrading. Other permanent impacts to the habitat will be incurred during construction when excavating the tidal channels, grading the riparian berms and marshplain, removing riprap, and constructing a boardwalk. Implementation of MM-BIO-4 through MM-BIO-7 (Exhibit 4, page 32-34) requires: fencing prior to construction activity to limit and define the extent of the project area; mitigation of temporal habitat loss through onsite habitat restoration and creation to improve habitat over existing conditions; and, installation of fencing prior to opening of trails or boardwalk to prevent human incursion into restored, created, and sensitive habitats. Implementation of these mitigation measures will minimize impacts to a less than significant level.

Cultural Impacts

According to the Cultural Resources Assessment, no cultural resources were identified on the project site, but ground disturbing activities may reach undisturbed native soils with archeological deposits and/or human remains. Implementation of MM-CUL-1 through MM-CUL-5 (Exhibit 4, page 36-37) requires a qualified archaeologist to carry out all mitigation related to cultural resources. Prior to the start of ground disturbing activity, the archaeologist will conduct cultural resources sensitivity training for all construction personnel. An

archaeological monitor and Native American monitor will observe all ground disturbing activities. In the event of the unanticipated discovery of archaeological materials, the contractor will immediately cease all work activities in the area (within approximately 100 feet) of the discovery until it can be evaluated by a qualified archaeologist. Construction should not resume until the qualified archaeologist has conferred with the City on the significance of the resource. The qualified archaeologist and City will consult with appropriate Native American representatives in determining treatment for prehistoric or Native American resources to ensure cultural values ascribed to the resource, beyond that which is scientifically important, are considered. If human remains are encountered, the contractor will halt work in the vicinity (within 100 feet) of the discovery and contact the San Diego County Coroner in accordance with PRC Section 5097.98 and Health and Safety Code Section 7050.5. Implementation of these mitigation measures will minimize impacts on cultural resources to a less than significant level.

Geology and Soils

According to the Paleontological Assessment, the sediment has no paleontological potential, but there may be other deposits that can have paleontological potential and be uncovered during the ground disturbing activities. Implementation of MM-PAL-1 through MM-PAL-4 (Exhibit 4, page 43) requires the City to retain a qualified paleontologist to carry out all paleontological mitigation measures including sensitivity training for construction personnel prior to all construction activities, and supervision of a paleontological monitor during all ground disturbing activity reaching a depth of five feet or more. Implementation of the mitigation measures will minimize impacts on paleontological resources to a less than significant level.

Hazards and Hazardous Materials

The project area may have contaminated soil and groundwater as a result of former industrial and commercial uses and there may be an impact if hazardous materials are found. Implementation of MM-HAZ-1 through MM-HAZ-3 (Exhibit 4, page 47-48) requires a soil sampling assessment at identified potentially hazardous sites prior to construction, preparation of a site-specific Health and Safety Plan (HSP) in accordance with OSHA and Cal/OSHA regulations when determined necessary, and where a HSP is necessary preparation and implementation of a Soil and Groundwater Management Plan. These mitigation measures will minimize impacts from hazardous materials to a less than significant level.

With implementation of the project's mitigation measures, environmental effects to biological resources, cultural resources, geology and soils (paleontological resources), and hazards and hazardous materials will be less than significant. Staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the project as mitigated avoids, reduces, or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a level of less-than-significant and that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment. Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Determination.