

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
November 21, 2024

**SEACLIFF STATE BEACH LIVING SHORELINE PLANNING**

Project No. 24-044-01  
Project Manager: Lexi Caruthers

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Consideration and authorization to disburse up to \$500,000 to California Department of Parks and Recreation to conduct technical studies and community engagement; and prepare designs, environmental review documents, and permit applications to restore approximately 4.5 acres of dune habitat as a nature-based solution to sea level rise at Seacliff State Beach in Santa Cruz County.

**LOCATION:** Seacliff State Beach, Santa Cruz County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [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 five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) to California Department of Parks and Recreation (“the grantee”) to conduct technical studies and community engagement; and prepare designs, environmental review documents, and permit applications to restore approximately 4.5 acres of dune habitat as a nature-based solution to sea level rise at Seacliff State Beach in Santa Cruz County (“the 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 work program, schedule, and budget.
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2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. 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 Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Climate Ready Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

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## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$500,000 grant to California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) to conduct the Seacliff State Beach Living Shoreline Planning Project (“the project”), which will: (1) conduct technical studies and community engagement; and (2) prepare designs, environmental review documents, and permit applications to restore approximately 4.5 acres of dune habitat which will serve as a nature-based solution to sea level rise. The project is a critical response to ongoing threats posed by coastal erosion and sea level rise and will enhance the resiliency of public recreational facilities and natural habitat at Seacliff State Beach.

Seacliff State Beach is a popular coastal destination within the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, attracting both local residents and visitors. However, the area is increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of sea level rise and coastal erosion, which contribute to the loss of dune habitat and the deterioration of public infrastructure, such as restrooms, parking lots, and walkways. Recent severe storms exacerbated these issues, highlighting the urgent need for action. In response, State Parks is undertaking a comprehensive long-term planning initiative to address these challenges. During this planning initiative, the project was identified as priority action that can occur immediately to increase the resiliency of the area, protecting both natural habitat and public infrastructure.

With the project, State Parks will complete planning tasks to develop a living shoreline project at Seacliff State Beach through restoration of 4.5 acres of dune habitat. The project will plan for a resilient dune system that can withstand coastal erosion and storm pressures, support native biodiversity, protect inland recreational infrastructure, and enhance visitor experiences. Lessons learned from a successful pilot project at Rio Del Mar, adjacent to the project site, will be incorporated into the project.

As part of the project, State Parks will conduct technical studies, including a shoreline change analysis on historical and current erosion patterns and storm vulnerability analysis to evaluate the risks posed by severe weather events. Using information from the technical studies, State

Parks will produce plans and designs for dune restoration to function as a living shoreline. State Parks will also conduct the environmental analysis required by the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”), prepare a CEQA document, if needed, and prepare permit applications.

Community engagement for the project will be conducted in coordination with the long-term planning effort at Seacliff State Beach through public meetings, workshops, and surveys. State Parks will engage with the Amah Mutsun Land Trust in planning for the project to address their priorities and concerns regarding tribal resources and access. Santa Cruz County residents have a strong tradition of participating in community plant days and volunteer activities for habitat preservation. While this grant focuses on the planning phase, future phases will allow community members and Tribes to actively contribute to hands-on restoration activities, such as planting native vegetation.

This project addresses the urgent need for proactive coastal adaptation at Seacliff State Beach by advancing planning for a living shoreline. By enhancing the resilience of the dune habitat to serve as a buffer to coastal hazards, the project will protect public infrastructure, improve recreational opportunities, and contribute to broader coastal resilience and ecosystem restoration efforts across the state.

**Site Description:** Seacliff State Beach is located at the northern edge of Monterey Bay in Santa Cruz County, California. The site previously featured a range of amenities, including a beach-level RV campground, day-use parking lots with picnic areas and barbecues, and a historic pier extending to the S.S. Palo Alto, a relic from World War I. The RV campground and parking areas were protected by a timber bulkhead seawall, providing vehicle access along the beach with convenient access points via stairs and ramps. These facilities are backed by a prominent bluff, and an additional day-use parking area is located atop the bluff. On January 5, 2023, most of these facilities were destroyed by a rapid storm formation, known as a bomb cyclone, which generated extreme swells of approximately 35 feet and a nearly 6-foot-high tide. This event severely damaged the park, resulting in loss of campground facilities, the historic pier, over half a mile of seawall, and other infrastructure. In response to this, the Santa Cruz District of State Parks initiated a long-term planning initiative for Seacliff State Beach to address the area’s vulnerability to sea level rise.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** State Park’s administrative staff have a proven track record of managing state grants effectively. The State Parks Santa Cruz District team brings a wealth of experience in planning and executing projects along the Central Coast, making them well-equipped to oversee this proposed planning project. State Park’s natural resources program has resources to design and enforce management and maintenance for the dune habitat. In the future, volunteers will be engaged for regular vegetation restoration and invasive species control, reflecting practices already successful in other coastal State Park units. Additionally, the State Parks Santa Cruz district is developing partnerships with Cabrillo College for a coastal monitoring program involving oceanography students and planning a coastal monitoring station in collaboration with UCSD Scripps Institution of Oceanography. This coastal monitoring station, funded by State Parks, may include a monitoring camera to support data-driven management decisions and long-term project success.

**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 a valuable investment of state resources as it addresses both immediate and long-term needs at Seacliff State Beach, a popular coastal destination. By enhancing coastal resilience through a nature-based solution, the project will protect valuable public recreational assets while enhancing coastal habitat.

**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 Amah Mutsun Land Trust (AMLT) has expressed strong interest in engaging in the planning process. This engagement will include focus on culturally relevant plant palette considerations, ensuring that the selected species not only support the ecological functions of the dunes but also reflect indigenous cultural values. Ongoing discussions will focus on AMLT's role in shaping the project's design, particularly in areas that reflect the tribe's traditional knowledge and connection to the land.

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

The project is designed to increase the resiliency of public access and coastal habitat at Seacliff State Beach. The design emphasizes the use of nature-based solutions that have already demonstrated their durability, particularly during severe, winter conditions at a nearby pilot project at Rio Del Mar. While no solution is entirely invulnerable, the project will enhance the resiliency of the coastal resources at Seacliff State Beach.

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

The project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impacts by enhancing coastal resilience, supporting biodiversity, and preserving public recreational assets. By planning for the construction of a dune habitat with native vegetation, the project will provide a natural buffer against erosion and improve habitat for wildlife. This approach helps protect the park's facilities from future storm damage, ensuring continued access and enjoyment for visitors. Additionally, the project will support broader conservation goals and serves as a model for similar initiatives, amplifying its positive impact across the region.

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

The project is designed with meaningful community engagement by incorporating extensive public involvement throughout its planning phase. The project will build on established outreach efforts for long-term planning at Seacliff State Beach, including public meetings, surveys, and consultations with local and underserved communities to ensure that diverse perspectives shape the project’s development. Additionally, the expected future phases of the project will utilize community plant days for restoration of native species to encourage local participation and stewardship.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$500,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$500,000</b>

It is anticipated that the Conservancy’s funding will come from a FY23/24 appropriation of General Funds to the Conservancy for “urgent sea-level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based solutions or other strategies.” (Budget Act of 2023, Chapter 12, Statutes of 2023 (SB 101) as amended by Chapter 38, Statutes of 2023 (AB 102)). The proposed project qualifies for use of these funds because it will address sea level rise adaptation needs by planning for a living shoreline, a nature-based solution to sea level rise, at Seacliff State Beach. This project will address erosion and storm vulnerability, ultimately protecting public infrastructure and supporting native biodiversity in the face of climate change.

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 is consistent with Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which establishes the Climate Ready Program and authorizes the Conservancy to address the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within the Conservancy’s jurisdiction.

Pursuant to Section 31113(b)-(c), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to public agencies to undertake projects within the Conservancy’s jurisdiction, “including, but not limited to, those that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, address extreme weather events, sea level rise, storm surge, beach and bluff erosion, salt water intrusion, flooding, and other coastal hazards that threaten coastal communities, infrastructure, and natural resources.”

Pursuant to Section 31113(c)(1)-(2), the Conservancy must, to the extent allowed, prioritize projects that maximize public benefits and accomplish certain purposes, including reducing emissions of greenhouse gases, preserving and enhancing coastal wetlands and natural lands, providing recreational opportunities, reducing flood risk, and/or enhancing fish and wildlife habitat.

Section 31113(d)(1) requires the Conservancy to prioritize projects that use natural infrastructure to help coastal communities adapt to climate change and projects that provide multiple public benefits, including, but not limited to, protection of communities, natural resources, and recreational opportunities.

Consistent with these sections, the proposed project will plan to restore approximately 4.5 acres of dune habitat as a nature-based solution to sea level rise, among other coastal hazards, at Seacliff State Beach in Santa Cruz County, which is located within the coastal zone and therefore within the Conservancy's jurisdiction, to mitigate the impacts of sea level rise while enhancing coastal dune and other habitats.

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

Consistent with **Goal 4.1 Sea Level Rise Adaptation Projects**, the project will conduct planning for a living shoreline at Seacliff State Beach to enhance coastal resiliency to sea level rise.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to Section 15262 of Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations (CCR), which exempts planning and feasibility studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded; and categorically exempt from review under CEQA, pursuant to Section 15306 of Title 14 of the CCR, which exempts basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. The project consists of conducting technical studies and community engagement; and preparing designs, environmental review documents, and permit applications. Thus, the project involves planning and feasibility studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded and basic data collection, research, and/or resource evaluation activities. Consistent with Sections 15262 and 15306, the project will consider environmental factors and not include activities that will result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.

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