

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 19, 2026

RANDALL PRESERVE WETLAND RESTORATION FEASIBILITY STUDY

Project No. 25-051-01

Project Manager: Katie Nichols

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$410,000 to the Coastal Corridor Alliance to complete a wetland restoration feasibility study which will include planning tasks and biological analyses to restore and enhance approximately 130 acres of degraded wetland and riparian habitat in the Frank and Joan Randall Preserve, formerly known as Banning Ranch, in the City of Newport Beach in Orange County.

LOCATION: Newport Beach, Orange County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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 ten thousand dollars (\$410,000) to the Coastal Corridor Alliance (the “grantee”) to complete a wetland restoration feasibility study which will include planning tasks and biological analyses to restore and enhance approximately 130 acres of degraded wetland and riparian habitat in the Frank and Joan Randall Preserve, formerly known as Banning Ranch, in the City of Newport Beach in Orange 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.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.

3. 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 corrective measures to enhance coastal resources
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Coastal Corridor Alliance is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to \$410,000 to the Coastal Corridor Alliance (CCA) to complete a wetland restoration feasibility study which will include planning tasks and biological analyses to restore and enhance approximately 130 acres of degraded wetland and riparian habitat in the Frank and Joan Randall Preserve, formerly known as Banning Ranch, in the City of Newport Beach in Orange County (the “project”). See Exhibit 1 for project location.

In December 2022, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) acquired the 387-acre Frank and Joan Randall Preserve (Preserve), formerly known as Banning Ranch, funded in part by the Conservancy. The Preserve is between the cities of Newport Beach and Costa Mesa in Orange County, where the Santa Ana River meets the Pacific Ocean (see Exhibit 2). The Preserve is one of the last remaining large open space areas in Southern California.

Undeveloped ecological and scenic landscapes along the Newport Beach coastline are rare, and this space provides an extremely unique opportunity to enhance coastal resources damaged by decades of oil production and create a new multi-benefit public area. Years of oil production on the property have led to degraded habitats and lack of public access; the oil operations will soon be consolidated to a 14-acre inholding outside the Preserve and remediation work is underway throughout the Preserve.

The Preserve features two distinct elevation zones, transitioning from lowlands (approximately 137 acres) to uplands (approximately 250 acres). This project includes a wetland restoration feasibility study for approximately 130 acres in the lowlands portion of the Preserve including 80 acres of potential salt marsh and 30 acres of potential upland and riparian habitats (see Exhibit 1). These wetlands are mostly cut off from tidal influence but could be reconnected to the tides through the adjacent Santa Ana River marsh, restoring critical estuarine habitat.

The proposed wetland restoration feasibility study will include a jurisdictional delineation of wetlands at the Preserve with focused sensitive species surveys for the Belding’s savannah sparrow and Light-footed Ridgway’s rail. To determine the feasibility of salt marsh restoration

at the site, the opportunities and constraints will be identified for restoration, including associated public access and sea level rise considerations.

The project includes geotechnical and biological analyses, meetings of a technical advisory committee, public engagement and will culminate with formulating and analyzing proposed restoration alternatives, and determining which concept best meets the project's restoration goals. The restoration alternatives will also consider future sea level rise projections and plans for on-site trails and trail connections to the adjacent Talbert Regional Park (South) and the Santa Ana River Trail. The project will also include public engagement before the preferred restoration alternative is selected. Public engagement will prioritize the nearby disadvantaged communities and tribes.

The Conservancy helped support the acquisition of the property and required plans for public access and preparation of a Tribal Access and Engagement Plan as a condition of the acquisition grant, along with cultural resource assessments of the site. The development of the Tribal Access and Engagement Plan and work on a Public Access Plan which will include the types of allowed activities, locations of those activities, and the hours the public can visit the Preserve are underway, and the proposed wetland restoration feasibility study will include coordination with these related efforts.

Site Description: The Frank and Joan Randall Preserve spans approximately 387 acres of undeveloped land along the coast between the urban, densely populated cities of Newport Beach and Costa Mesa in Orange County, where the Santa Ana River meets the Pacific Ocean. The Preserve supports critical biological diversity, and the Coastal Commission designated portions of the property as Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas (ESHA). These areas include approximately 100 acres of coastal wetlands and 200 acres of coastal sage scrub, providing habitat for nearly 20 threatened or endangered plant and wildlife species.

The area for the wetland restoration feasibility study proposed in this project includes 130 acres in the lowlands portion of the Preserve, comprised of approximately 80 acres of potential salt marsh and 50 acres of potential upland and riparian habitats. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife has cited the importance of the lowland and upland mesa habitat in the Preserve in supporting sensitive plant and animal species. Southern coastal scrub and maritime succulent scrub habitat on the property were ranked as "extremely rare" and at "very high risk of extinction," with severely limited distribution throughout the State. The property's vernal pool complex is one of only two federally recognized complexes left on the Orange County coast and hosts endemic plants and animals, including the federally endangered San Diego fairy shrimp. This site is also sacred, and multiple tribes are culturally affiliated with the land.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: CCA, formerly known as the Banning Ranch Conservancy, worked for many years to advocate for the protection and acquisition of the site, and is working closely with the titleholder of the property. CCA has been a primary fundraiser for the Randall Preserve planning studies and has a Memorandum of Understanding with MRCA to fulfill the requirements of the acquisition grant agreements.

Over the last two years, CCA has managed \$1.9M in grants to develop a Resource Management Plan, Public Access Plan, and a Coastal Resilience Strategy for the site. The wetland feasibility

study proposed in this project fits well into the needs for the Preserve, the existing initiatives, and the skillset of the team at CCA. In addition, CCA has demonstrated the ability to work with regulatory agencies and consultants to gather the permits necessary for future restoration of the area.

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:

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.

This project will provide benefits to Californians by planning for restoration of coastal wetland and riparian habitat, which will improve habitat quality and enhance the resilience of a degraded habitat. The eventual restoration of the area is feasible, the budget is reasonable, and CCA is well qualified to conduct the work. This project builds upon previous investments from the Conservancy to acquire the property and plan for tribal access of the site.

The eighteen federal and state agency partners making up the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP) added the proposed project as a priority to their 2023 Work Plan and it is included as a priority on the WRP's 2025-2026 Work Plan.

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 Frank and Joan Randall Preserve was occupied for thousands of years by California Native Americans and multiple tribes are culturally affiliated with the land including Acjachemen and Gabrieleno/Tongva/Kizh. Tribal participation and engagement during the acquisition led to the Conservancy funding a Tribal Access and Engagement Plan (TAEP) for the Preserve. The TAEP is being developed with tribes and will identify opportunities for tribal co-stewardship of the Preserve for tribal access, cultural preservation, stewardship, and other purposes. As part of the process, input from tribes is also being sought to formally and collectively select a tribal name for the Preserve. The TAEP should be completed in early 2026.

Project partners have also created a Tribal Government Advisory Group for the Preserve as part of the TAEP process, and MRCA anticipates this group will continue in the future. Thus this group will also be asked to provide input on the wetland restoration feasibility study. While the scope for the wetland restoration feasibility study is specific, the project will utilize tribal ecological knowledge in tribally generated restoration concepts and has the benefit of coordinating with the overall Preserve's robust tribal engagement and the TAEP process to coordinate this study with these existing groups. When complete, the TAEP will provide opportunities for collaboration with interested tribes as the Preserve continues to evolve and tell the story of the land.

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

By integrating nature-based and tribal ecological knowledge solutions in planning for the wetlands, the project will be well positioned for future restoration funding by establishing a strong ecological and technical foundation. The project will plan restoration of a coastal salt marsh that is adaptable to climate hazards such as sea level rise and coastal flooding. The project will also plan for improved flood protection for nearby communities, support biological diversity through providing critical habitat for native and migratory species, and enhance water quality through natural filtration.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The long-term management, maintenance, and monitoring plan for the Preserve focuses on preserving and enhancing ecological integrity while supporting tribal co-stewardship and equitable public access.

The wetland restoration of Randall Preserve will be planned to provide multiple benefits including:

- Enhancing resiliency by restoring a coastal salt marsh that is resilient to climate change;
- Improving water quality;
- Providing essential habitat for fish and wildlife;
- Reducing flood risk; and
- Providing for pedestrian access and passive recreation opportunities.

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

CCA has been working to build relationships and engage the public in the process of protecting and planning for the Preserve for many years. In partnership with MRCA, CCA has engaged a wide range of individuals in planning for the Preserve to date including: tribes, community colleges and universities, environmental/social justice organizations, socially vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, homeowners' associations, Title I schools, local businesses, cities/governments, nonprofits and community-based groups, and other populations or individuals whose voices are less often heard and/or prioritized (e.g., people with disabilities, Latino communities, and LGBTQ+ communities). The existing Randall Preserve Advisory Committee includes representatives from local organizations, decision makers, tribes, environmental groups, and others.

Over the course of planning and advocating for the protection of the Preserve over the past few years, CCA has directly communicated with more than 50,000 residents within half a mile of the property including nearby disadvantaged communities adjacent to the Santa Ana River. To listen to the community, CCA staff hosted focus groups, sidewalk engagements, and training workshops on how to participate in the public planning process for the Preserve. Materials about the Preserve on CCA's website have been translated into Spanish, along with portions of recently developed Preserve planning documents available for public review. CCA will continue to engage these communities and organizations in the development of the Randall Preserve wetland restoration feasibility study.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$410,000
Warne Family Fund	\$30,000
CCA secured Funding	\$9,000
Project Total	\$449,000

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to come from an appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoors Access for All Act of 2018, California Public Resources Code Sections 80000-80173 (Proposition 68). Chapter 9 of Proposition 68 allocates funds to the Conservancy for protection of beaches, bays, wetlands, and coastal watershed resources (Public Resources Code Section 80120(c)). The definition of “protection” means those actions necessary to prevent harm or damage to persons, property, or natural, cultural, and historic resources, actions to improve access to public open-space areas, or actions to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural, cultural, and historic resources, and includes site monitoring, acquisition, development, restoration, preservation, and interpretation (PRC Section 80002(i)). The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will plan for the restoration and enhancement of wetland and coastal watershed resources, which will increase natural defenses against predicted sea level rise and ecological decline by improving the capacity of the habitats to respond to climate change and maintain ecological function.

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 will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resource Code Sections 31251-31253 as follows:

Pursuant to Section 31251, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations to enhance coastal resources which, because of human-induced events or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. Consistent with this section, this planning project will facilitate the enhancement of coastal wetlands and other coastal habitats that have suffered loss of natural and scenic value due to oil development.

Pursuant to Section 31252, projects authorized under Chapter 6 must be identified in a local coastal plan or other local plan which the Coastal Commission determines to be consistent with the policies and objectives of the Coastal Act. The Frank and Joan Randall Preserve is not included in a certified local coastal program. However, the future enhancement of its coastal resources is consistent with the Coastal Act.

Pursuant to Section 30001.5 of the Coastal Act, the goals for the coastal zone are to (a) protect, maintain, and, where feasible, enhance and restore the overall quality of the coastal zone environment and its natural and resources; (b) ensure orderly, balanced utilization and conservation of coastal zone resources taking into account the social and economic needs of the people of the state; and (c) maximize public access to and along the coast and maximize public recreational opportunities in the coastal zone consistent with sound resources conservation principles. Consistent with these sections, this project will plan for wetland restoration in the Preserve while allowing for public access and connections to adjacent trails and open space.

Pursuant to Section 31253, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project, taking into consideration the total cost of the project, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project and other factors as determined by the Conservancy. Consistent with this section, the proposed Conservancy contribution and source of funding is both urgent and appropriately directed.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN:

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project contributes to planning for future coastal wetland restoration in Newport Beach.

Consistent with **Goal 4.1 Sea Level Rise Adaptation Projects**, the proposed project is a planning project that will increase the resiliency of the natural and built environments to the impacts of sea level rise.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to California Code of Regulations Section 15262 ("Feasibility and Planning Studies"), which exempts projects involving only feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions which the agency has not approved, adopted, or funded.

The proposed project is also categorically exempt from review under California Code of Regulations Section 15306 ("Information Collection"), which exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.

Consistent with these sections, the proposed authorization is to fund information collection and planning work necessary to advance the restoration component of the Frank and Joan Randall Preserve.

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