

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 19, 2026

GREATER BAHIA WETLANDS ACQUISITION

Project No. 25-054-01

Project Manager: Erica Johnson

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$2,000,000 to the Marin Audubon Society to complete the Greater Bahia Wetlands Acquisition, which consists of acquiring the approximately 323-acre Leveroni property located along the Petaluma River in Marin County for protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural resources and wildlife habitat; protection of cultural resources; and potential public access compatible with those purposes.

LOCATION: Leveroni family parcels, Marin County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Parcel Maps](#)

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 two million dollars (\$2,000,000) to Marin Audubon Society (the “grantee”) to complete the Greater Bahia Wetlands Acquisition, which consists of acquiring the approximately 323-acre Leveroni property (described as current Marin County Assessor’s Parcels Nos. 125-190-08 and 125-190-75) located along the Petaluma River in Marin County for protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural resources and wildlife habitat; protection of cultural resources; and potential public access compatible with those purposes, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer):

- a. All relevant acquisition documents for the acquisition including, without limitation, the appraisal, purchase and sale agreement, deed, escrow instructions, environmental or hazardous materials assessment, and title report;
 - b. A baseline conditions report; and
 - c. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
3. The property acquired under this authorization shall be managed and operated for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural resources and wildlife habitat; protection of cultural resources; and potential public access compatible with those purposes. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
4. Conservancy funding, with Proposition 68 as the source of that funding, shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property or in a nearby publicly-viewable area, the design and location of which are to be approved by the Executive Officer.

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 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural habitats.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Marin Audubon Society 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 an amount not to exceed two million dollars (\$2,000,000) to Marin Audubon Society (MAS) to complete the Greater Bahia Wetlands Acquisition, which consists of acquiring approximately 323 acres located along the Petaluma River in Marin County (Exhibit 1) for protection, restoration and enhancement of natural resources and wildlife habitat; protection of cultural resources; and potential public access compatible with those purposes (the project). The two parcels encompassing the 323 acres are referred to as the “Leveroni property.”

The Greater Bahia Wetlands Acquisition and permanent protection of the Leveroni property—two, diked bayland parcels owned by the Leveroni family (Exhibit 2)—is a conservation milestone because the parcels are the last remaining large, privately-owned baylands along the Petaluma River in Marin County. Most of the property lies at or near sea level, and nearly all the property

falls within the flood zone of the Petaluma River and San Pablo Bay, reflecting its low-lying agricultural soils and long-standing use for grazing and hay production.

The first parcel of the Leveroni property, APN 125-190-08, encompasses roughly 153 acres located east of Marin County's airport (Gnoss Field). The second parcel of the Leveroni property, APN 125-190-75, consists of roughly 170.28 acres of diked baylands south of Pinkston Slough, which separates the two parcels. APN 125-190-75 also includes an old hay barn near the western boundary of the parcel that may be torn down, restored and/or maintained, but only as reasonably necessary for the acquisition purposes, including serving as a public visitor center. Together, the Leveroni property totals approximately 323.28 acres of bayland that the project will permanently protect. The project only includes the acquisition of the Leveroni property and does not include the future planning for restoration.

The Greater Bahia Wetlands Acquisition will ensure an uninterrupted corridor between California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) lands immediately north and south, preserving ecological connectivity across these wildlife areas. Particularly, the southern parcel could expand the Bahia Tidal Marsh. The Conservancy supported acquisition of the Bahia Tidal Marsh on January 24, 2002, and MAS completed the restoration in 2010. This connectivity is what gives the project its name, the Greater Bahia Wetlands Acquisition.

Following the acquisition, MAS plans to conduct community engagement and restoration planning for protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural resources and wildlife habitat; protection of cultural resources; and potential public access compatible with those purposes. Future restoration efforts may include a setback levee with an ecotone slope, providing high tide refugia, room for marsh migration, and flood protection for existing infrastructure. These efforts would create critical habitat for endangered species, such as the Ridgway's Rail, Black Rail, and Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse, while also supporting species of concern like the Salt Marsh Yellowthroat and San Pablo Song Sparrow.

The San Pablo Bay Strategy highlights the urgent need for restoration in this area because agriculture is becoming unsustainable on diked baylands. At the Leveroni property, rising sea levels have and will continue to increase overtopping existing agricultural berms during storms and high tides. In addition, a higher groundwater table caused by sea level rise will make pumping water off the Leveroni property more costly and difficult. The Greater Bahia Wetlands Acquisition and potential, subsequent restoration planning is timely because if the project is delayed beyond 2030, restoration of the Leveroni property will become far more dependent on the availability of dredged sediments to raise the elevation of the lands.

MAS intends to retain ownership of the Leveroni property until wetland restoration is complete. Following the acquisition, MAS plans to restore wetland habitat to the maximum extent possible and manage the Leveroni property to benefit wildlife until a potential transfer. Given that CDFW already owns most of the surrounding baylands and seasonal wetlands, it is the logical future steward if MAS transfers ownership of some or all the property rights and if CDFW is able to take on ownership and/or management of the property. Conservancy staff will need to approve any real property transfer.

Site Description: The surrounding landscape encompasses the tidal-influenced area of northeastern Marin County and southern Sonoma County. The area surrounded by three highways - Highway 101 to the west, Highway 37 to the south, and Highway 20 to the north – and the shoreline of San Pablo Bay to the east. The Leveroni property is situated within a large rural area, but with extensive wetlands and tidal habitats. Neighboring lands are largely in public ownership, including the CDFW’s Rush Creek and Bahia Marshes to the south, and the diked seasonal wetlands to the north, which form part of CDFW’s Petaluma Marsh Wildlife Area, Burdell Unit.

The Leveroni property itself consists of two non-contiguous diked bayland parcels along the Petaluma River separated by Pinkston Slough (formerly Black John Slough). Together, the two parcels comprise approximately 323.28 acres historically managed by the Leveroni family, who have grazed cattle on the land for nearly a century. APN 125-190-08 covers approximately 153 acres and is located south of the CDFW seasonal wetland, east of Marin County’s airport (Gnoss Field), and west of a small privately owned bayland parcel with KCBS communication towers. This parcel has levees, culverts, and an off-site pumping station to remove water when flooded. APN 125-190-75 encompasses approximately 170.28 acres south of Pinkston Slough, with its southern boundary defined by Basalt and Rush Creeks, both tributaries of the Petaluma River.

APN 125-190-75 includes an old hay barn near its western boundary and has historically been used for hay production and cattle grazing and some portions of the property have been leased for cattle grazing. Additionally, a small section along Binford Road has been leased to a landscape business, for soil supplement processing, storage, and distribution, including mulching and repurposing soil amendment materials. The cattle grazing and landscaping business lessees will stop operations before the acquisition.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: MAS is a long-standing conservation organization dedicated to protecting and restoring natural ecosystems for the benefit of biodiversity and people. It has over 30 years of experience administering grant funds and 25 years of experience acquiring and managing properties with Conservancy support. One of MAS’s earliest acquisitions was Triangle Marsh in Corte Madera, which MAS purchased, restored to tidal marsh, and continues to own and maintain. Since then, MAS has acquired and still owns approximately 520 acres of land, wetlands, and open water habitats in Marin County. These include the 182-acre Petaluma Marsh expansion project site, 104 acres of diked baylands within Simmon’s Slough, a 5.25-acre parcel of filled baylands adjacent to the Corte Madera Ecological Reserve (half of which has been restored to tidal marsh), and numerous small parcels in the Black Point community of Novato acquired through tax-default sales.

MAS has also worked closely with CDFW on multiple projects - including Bahia Tidal Marsh property, where MAS purchased and restored approximately 335 acres of tidal marsh before transferring the land to CDFW. While MAS has transferred some restored land to CDFW, other projects—such as Triangle Marsh, the Corte Madera Ecological Reserve Expansion, and the Petaluma Marsh Expansion—remain under MAS ownership and management. In these cases, both MAS and CDFW have agreed that continued MAS stewardship best serves the conservation goals of the sites. This collaborative approach reflects MAS’s broader goal of

permanently protecting and restoring native habitats while ensuring long-term stewardship through partnerships with public agencies.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The 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 will secure the permanent protection and restoration of two parcels of diked baylands, ensuring their restoration to tidal wetland habitat that supports endangered and threatened wildlife species. The project advances statewide conservation goals and is consistent with regional and local planning efforts. Specifically, the project aligns with the Landscape Vision outlined in the Petaluma River Baylands Strategy, which designates both parcels as future tidal marsh. The project also supports broader initiatives such as California's 30x30 commitment to protect 30% of lands and coastal waters by 2030, the Baylands Habitat Goals and the San Francisco Bay Joint Venture's target of restoring 100,000 and 125,000 acres of tidal marsh, respectively.

The project also leverages non-state resources to maximize its impact. Further details are provided in the PROJECT FINANCING section below.

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

The project will deliver lasting benefits by permanently protecting two diked bayland parcels and potentially restoring them to tidal wetland habitat. The Leveroni property will be managed by MAS, which plans to restore the property and then potentially transfer the property to another entity, such as to CDFW, ensuring long-term protection and stewardship. Once restored, the parcels create an uninterrupted corridor between existing CDFW lands to the north and south, strengthening ecological connectivity and enhancing the resilience of surrounding wildlife areas.

For potential future restoration plans, MAS plans to incorporate climate resilience measures that allow the project to adapt to rising sea levels over time. MAS also intends to include a setback levee with an ecotone slope in the potential restoration plans, which creates transitional habitat capable of supporting marsh expansion as tidal waters advance. This approach provides critical high tide refugia for wildlife, enhances the adaptive capacity of the marsh ecosystem, and offers flood protection for inland communities. By combining permanent

protection with forward-looking restoration strategies, the project ensures both ecological sustainability and resilience to climate change.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

Protecting and restoring the diked baylands will create vital habitat for endangered species, such as the Ridgway's Rail, Black Rail, and Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse, while also supporting species of concern like the Salt Marsh Yellowthroat and San Pablo Song Sparrow. Expanding wetland habitat will strengthen wildlife connectivity and resilience in the face of climate change.

MAS intends to incorporate a setback levee with an ecotone slope that provides high-tide refugia in its potential restoration plans, which will support marsh migration as sea levels rise, and protect inland areas from flooding. Potential wetland restoration will also enhance carbon sequestration.

Finally, the project offers opportunities to integrate public access aligned with the acquisition purposes, potentially allowing visitors to enjoy wildlife while safeguarding sensitive habitats.

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

MAS is committed to fostering community involvement throughout the restoration planning process. There are no residential neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the Leveroni parcels - the closest communities lie about a mile south of the site and west across Highway 101. MAS has already initiated outreach to these neighborhoods and met with most adjacent property owners (commercial businesses), with plans for continued engagement when restoration planning advances.

In addition to community outreach, MAS has sought input from local officials and agencies. The County Supervisor representing the district expressed support for the Greater Bahia Wetlands Acquisition, and Marin County Parks staff similarly endorsed the project. This institutional backing underscores the strong local commitment to advancing wetland restoration and conservation.

Finally, MAS and Conservancy staff have also engaged with representatives of the Marin County Airport, Gness Field. Gness Field staff expressed support for the Greater Bahia Wetlands Acquisition and willingness to collaborate with MAS on the restoration planning process. While there are some concerns about potential bird strike hazards, the target bird species for restoration are not likely to be involved in airstrikes due to their flight patterns. Gness Field staff confirmed that the airport itself is not at risk of flooding, as it is protected by its own levee system. There is a runway extension underway on the North side, but Gness Field does not anticipate that interfering with the future restoration of the parcels located on the south side of the airport.

See Exhibit 4 for Project Letters.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy

\$2,000,000

Marin Baylands Advocates	\$883,550
Marin Audubon Society	\$576,450
Project Total	\$3,460,000

The anticipated sources of Conservancy funds for this authorization are fiscal years 2020-2021 (\$1,500,000) and 2023-2024 (\$500,000) appropriations to the Conservancy from the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018 (Proposition 68, Public Resources Code (PRC), Sections 80000-80173). Chapter 9 of Proposition 68 allows funds for “protection of beaches, bays, wetlands, and coastal watershed resources” in accordance with Division 21 of the Public Resource Code (PRC, Section 80120(c)), and the term “protection” includes restoration (PRC, Section 80002(l)). The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 9 because it will acquire baylands habitat for future protection and restoration of wildlife habitat, including wetland habitat. The project is consistent with the funding guidelines for expenditure of Proposition 68 adopted by the Conservancy on December 6, 2018 as described in various sections of the staff recommendation.

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.

All pre-acquisition costs are being funded by Marin Baylands Advocates (MBA), who, together with MAS, will also contribute toward the acquisition costs. MBA is an organization comprised of volunteers who dedicate their efforts to protect Baylands along the shoreline of Marin County. This cost-sharing approach demonstrates strong local investment in the proposed project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The project is being undertaken pursuant to Chapters 4.5 (regarding the San Francisco Bay Conservancy Program) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Chapter 4.5 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area “[t]o protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance.” Public Resource Section 31162(b). Consistent with this section, the project site is in Marin County, one of the nine counties, and it will protect and restore natural habitats, including wetland habitat, while also expanding the connectivity of habitat for endangered and threatened species (see more information in the “Project Summary” section above).

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

Consistent with **Goal 3.1, Conserve Lands**, the project will acquire the approximately 323-acre Leveroni property located along the Petaluma River in Marin County for protection, restoration

and enhancement of natural resources and wildlife habitat; protection of cultural resources; and potential public access compatible with those purposes.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, Section 15325 (Transfers of Ownership of Interest in Land to Preserve Existing Natural Conditions and Historical Resources), which exempts transfers of ownership of interests in land to preserve open space and habitat, including acquisition, sale, or other transfer to allow preservation and restoration of natural conditions. The project is consistent with this Section because the project includes acquisition of baylands at or near sea level to allow preservation and restoration of the wildlife habitat, including wetland habitat.

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