

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 18, 2026

PACIFIC VALLEY TRAIL FEASIBILITY STUDY AND CONCEPTUAL PLAN

Project No. 26-010-01

Project Manager: Kostoula Vallianos

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to Ventana Wilderness Alliance to undertake the Pacific Valley Trail Feasibility Study and Conceptual Plan, consisting of technical feasibility studies, community and tribal engagement, and a conceptual plan for a 4-to-6-mile segment of the California Coastal Trail and support facilities along the southern coast of Big Sur, Monterey County.

LOCATION: Los Padres National Forest, Monterey County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)

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 three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to the Ventana Wilderness Alliance (the “grantee”) to undertake the Pacific Valley Trail Feasibility Study and Conceptual Plan, consisting of technical feasibility studies, community and tribal engagement, and a conceptual plan for a 4-to-6 mile segment of the California Coastal Trail and support facilities along the southern coast of Big Sur, Monterey 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.

In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy’s ‘Coastal Access Project Standards’.

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 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding a System of Public Accessways.
2. The Ventana Wilderness Alliance is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
3. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$300,000 grant to the Ventana Wilderness Alliance (VWA) to undertake the Pacific Valley Trail Feasibility Study and Conceptual Plan, consisting of technical feasibility studies, community and tribal engagement, and a conceptual plan for a 4-to-6-mile segment of the California Coastal Trail and access amenities along the southern coast of Big Sur, Monterey County (the project).

Every year millions of visitors are drawn to Big Sur's stunning coastline; yet few opportunities exist along these 70 miles of Highway 1 for visitors to get out of their cars and experience its beauty up close. Pacific Valley is located within the Los Padres National Forest in southern Big Sur. In this area, a broad marine terrace extends west from the steep ridges of the Los Padres National Forest to a dramatic coastline of coves, beaches, and rocky outcrops. While public access is well established at Sand Dollar Beach near the U.S. Forest Service's Plaskett Creek Campground, most of Pacific Valley's gentle coastal bluffs are reached via informal highway pullouts leading to unplanned and unmaintained trails. These informal trails cross sensitive areas, including sensitive habitats and erosion-prone bluffs, creating risks to both natural resources and visitor safety. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is interested in formally establishing the California Coastal Trail (CCT) in this area near Highway 1 between mile markers 13-16.

The project will be the foundation for new inclusive public access amenities and resource protection programs in this area. The project is intended to complement the USFS Coastal Zone Visitor Use Management Strategy and reduce roadside dispersed camping that threatens conservation values of the Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness areas. As part of the project, VWA will plan at least one portion of the 4-6-mile segment to be accessible for people with disabilities. The project includes evaluating the feasibility of expanding beach access and adding amenities, such as low cost/no cost camping, a restroom, parking lot, and bluff-top interpretive locations. Based on the feasibility findings, support amenities, such as the restroom, parking, and campground may be designed to be accessible to visitors with various abilities.

The project will begin with comprehensive community and tribal engagement to ensure all stakeholders, including tribal representatives, have meaningful input on the scope and design of the trail's conceptual plan. The project also includes preparing the necessary technical

feasibility studies to assess cultural and biological resources and geologic and other site conditions to identify the most suitable trail alignment options.

Based on the community input and feasibility studies, the project will develop at least two conceptual design alternatives with a focus on constructability and cost efficiency and will solicit additional community and agency feedback. Using this input, the project will refine the alternatives and select a preferred option that supports community goals for safe and resilient beach and bluff access. Design concepts for parking, a restroom, camping, interpretive features, and accessibility will be prioritized to increase Pacific Valley's capacity to sustainably accommodate greater coastal access.

VWA will carry out the project in close consultation with USFS. USFS staff have enthusiastically expressed their interest (Exhibit 3) in the project. USFS staff will participate in the development of the conceptual design for the trail and associated access amenities to ensure that the conceptual plan can be used by the USFS to carry the project forward.

Site Description: The north end of the proposed trail is expected to begin approximately 60 miles south of Carmel-By-The-Sea near Highway 1's mile marker 16 and run south to end near mile marker 13. Popular attractions, such as Sand Dollar Beach, Plaskett Creek Campground, and Jade Cove, are located within the southern section of the project site. Kirk Creek Campground is located approximately three miles north of the project. The proposed trail is expected to run past the USFS Pacific Valley Fire Station. East of the fire station is the Prewitt Creek Trailhead that leads to Prewitt Ridge Campground and other interior trails of the Los Padres National Forest and Wilderness areas. The project site's coastal bluff habitats include grasslands, wet meadows, and maritime chaparral, interspersed with stands of eucalyptus and riparian vegetation along Prewitt and Plaskett Creeks. These diverse habitats support numerous sensitive species, including steelhead trout (state threatened), Smith's blue butterfly (federally endangered), monarch butterfly (proposed for federal listing), and several rare plants, such as Arroyo manzanita, Adobe sanicle, and Hickman's onion. The site also contains significant archaeological resources, such as coastal middens.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Ventana Wilderness Alliance has extensive experience managing grant-funded projects for wilderness advocacy and policy protection, trail planning and maintenance, and habitat restoration, including largescale cannabis removal and site rehabilitation. For the project, VWA will bring on Matt Freeman Consulting to provide stakeholder engagement and trail planning project management services and lead a team of technical consultants including Zander Westbrook Design and Denise Duffy & Associates. These firms have each delivered numerous successful grant-funded coastal access planning and implementation projects.

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 facilitates the possible future construction of more accessible, safe, and resilient coastal bluff and beach access in Big Sur. The trail alignment will reduce risk of future bluff erosion and prioritize sensitive species and cultural resource protection in areas where current informal uses threaten conservation efforts. Conservancy staff have reviewed the project budget and found that it is reasonable given the project includes robust community and tribal engagement.

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.

Pacific Valley of southern Monterey County are the ancestral lands of the Salinan Tribe. USFS staff regularly meet with the Salinan Tribe to discuss issues across the Monterey District of the Los Padres National Forest. Initial conversations were held in fall 2025 with the Salinan Tribe to specifically discuss the project. The Salinan Tribe’s participation is an integral part of the project and includes meetings dedicated to tribal feedback and stipends to enable tribal representative participation.

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

The project will explore the best coastal adaptation practice to ensure the project provides sustainable public access in the face of sea level rise and coastal erosion. The project will establish the foundation for a resilient design, ensuring the trail segment can adapt to changing coastal conditions. Key design considerations will include appropriate setbacks from bluff edges and cliffs vulnerable to sea-level rise and coastal erosion and strategic placement of bridges and crossings to protect streams and water resources.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will facilitate future, improved public access to the coast, including a portion of the planned trail that will be accessible for people with disabilities, and reduce biological and cultural resource impacts by planning ways to formalize trails.

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

The project includes extensive community engagement, such as several stakeholder meetings, an on-line project survey, multiple tribal engagement meetings, and presentations at the Big Sur Multi-Agency Advisory Council meetings. Input will be solicited throughout the project and will inform the development of design concepts and the selection of the preferred alternative.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$300,000
Project Total	\$300,000

The anticipated source of funding is a fiscal year 2025-26 appropriation to the Conservancy from Chapter 4 of the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (2024 Climate Bond or Proposition 4), codified at Public Resources Code Sections 90000 to 95015. The 2024 Climate Bond funds are available as described in Section 92010(a), which describes the purposes of coastal resilience funds, including grants to protect and increase the resilience of beaches, bays, coastal dunes, wetlands, coastal forests, watersheds, trails, and public access facilities. “Protection” is defined as “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.” (Section 90100(h).) The project is consistent with this funding source because it will plan for resilient public access trails and support facilities along the Big Sur coastline.

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 is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31410), regarding public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. Section 31400 provides that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. Section 31400.3 authorizes the Conservancy to provide such assistance as is required to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of Division 21. Consistent with this section, the project will aid a nonprofit organization in planning for public coastal accessways, which is necessary to meet the objectives of Division 21.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2.3 Expand Accessibility**, the project will plan ways to reduce barriers to coastal access by preparing a conceptual plan for a 4-to-6-mile segment of the California Coastal Trail with a portion accessible for people with disabilities and associated amenities.

Consistent with **Goals 2.4 Build Trails and 2.5 Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the project will facilitate ways to build trails and enhance recreational amenities by preparing a conceptual

plan for a 4-6-mile segment of the CCT and associated amenities, such as parking, a restroom, camping, and interpretive signage.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to Section 21080.57 of the Public Resources Code, which exempts activity and approvals necessary for or incidental to planning and design of nonmotorized recreational trail facilities funded in whole or in part by the 2024 Climate Bond. Consistent with this section, the project will conduct technical feasibility studies and prepare a conceptual plan for nonmotorized recreational trail facilities, and is funded in part by the 2024 Climate Bond.

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