COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 18, 2026

STATE SCIENCE INFORMATION NEEDS PROGRAM:
WILDFIRE IMPACTS ON COASTAL ECOSYSTEMS

Project No. 26-009-01

Project Manager: Lilly Allen

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to $1,000,000 to California State University's Council on Ocean Affairs, Science and Technology (COAST) to undertake the State Science Information Needs Program: Wildfire Impacts on Coastal Ecosystems, consisting of granting funds to California State University faculty, research scientists, and/or students to conduct a total of two to four research projects that will provide data on the impacts of wildfire on coastal ecosystems that is needed to advance coastal habitat restoration and wildfire resilience work across California.

LOCATION: Statewide

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: 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 one million dollars ($1,000,000) to California State University's Council on Ocean Affairs, Science and Technology ("the grantee") to undertake the State Science Information Needs Program: Wildfire Impacts on Coastal Ecosystems, consisting of granting funds to California State University faculty, research scientists, and/or students to conduct a total of two to four research projects that will provide data on the impacts of wildfire on coastal ecosystems that is needed to advance coastal habitat restoration and wildfire resilience work across California ("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. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding and Proposition 4 as the source of that funding.

Prior to disbursing Conservancy funds for a research project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer: the research topic, scope of work, schedule, budget, and plan for documenting and disseminating the results of the research

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 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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to $1,000,000 to California State University's (CSU) Council on Ocean Affairs, Science and Technology (COAST) to undertake the State Science Information Needs Program: Wildfire Impacts on Coastal Ecosystems, consisting of granting funds to CSU faculty, research scientists, and/or students to conduct a total of two to four research projects that will provide data on the impacts of wildfire on coastal ecosystems that is needed to advance coastal habitat restoration and wildfire resilience work across California (Exhibit 1).

COAST serves as a CSU systemwide consortium for ocean and coastal research, education, and workforce development across all 23 CSU campuses. COAST provides funding to CSU faculty, research scientists, and students to conduct basic, applied, and solution-oriented research within coastal ecosystems including nearshore habitats, estuaries, wetlands, and offshore habitats.

COAST's State Science Information Needs Program (SSINP) is a funding program in which COAST works closely with state agencies to identify and address California's highest-priority ocean and coastal information needs. State agencies participating in a SSINP grant round set research priorities outlined in the request for proposals, help select research projects for funding, and provide technical support for ensuring research will meet the state's needs. Projects funded under this program generate policy-relevant data that is essential for guidance for coastal resource management, development of sustainable policy, and climate resilience planning.

The recommended authorization will support one SSINP grant round focused on the impacts of wildfire on coastal ecosystems. California's escalating wildfire frequency and intensity pose serious but understudied risks to downstream coastal ecosystems. Post-fire runoff and debris flows can alter riverine hydrology, overwhelm fish-passable culverts, and deliver sediment,

nutrients, and contaminants that threaten water quality and degrade coastal rocky intertidal zones, beaches, and estuaries. These disturbances threaten habitat quality, water resources, and the natural resilience of coastal landscapes, yet critical data that could affect how wildfire resilience projects are carried out and how restoration should be designed remain sparse. This research will inform policy by providing an evidence-based foundation to define problems, evaluate potential solutions, and assess effectiveness, moving decision-making beyond assumptions.

COAST will partner with the Conservancy to develop a competitive research solicitation focused on these priorities. As part of this process, COAST will convene staff from the Conservancy and other key natural resource management agencies, along with Tribal Nation representatives and community organizations, to identify research objectives that align with their priority science needs.

This iterative approach will help ensure that key topics—such as post-fire debris-flow impacts on coastal riverine systems, evaluation of fish-passable culverts and infrastructure under altered flow regimes, post-fire water quality and toxin inputs, debris-flow burial effects on intertidal and estuarine habitats, and wildfire resilience measures (e.g., vegetation management)—are clearly defined and actionable.

Once the solicitation is finalized, COAST will release it systemwide to researchers across all 23 CSU campuses and promote it through their website, email list, campus contacts and social media. COAST will manage the full proposal process, including applicant support, scientific peer and stakeholder review, and selection of projects that best meet the Conservancy and other stakeholders' objectives and climate bond criteria.

Following award decisions, COAST will oversee grant agreements, manage invoices, track research progress, and facilitate ongoing communication between funded investigators and stakeholders. This includes organizing semi-annual meetings and hosting briefings to share results with the Conservancy and other partners through the grant period. Reports describing the results of each research project will be provided to COAST at the completion of the project, who will then share them with relevant stakeholders to support state and local agencies in habitat restoration, riverine infrastructure planning, and climate adaptation. This grant program will generate the science-based data needed to guide wildfire resilience work and coastal habitat restoration.

Site Description: COAST leverages the geographic breadth of the CSU—spanning California's coast from Humboldt to San Diego—to connect researchers and students with the diverse marine and coastal environments that define the state. These sites include nearshore habitats, estuaries, wetlands, and offshore ecosystems that are directly affected by climate change, sea-level rise, and other human impacts.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: COAST serves as the systemwide consortium for ocean and coastal research, education, and workforce development across all 23 CSU campuses. COAST has extensive experience administering competitive grant programs across the CSU. Each year, COAST distributes hundreds of awards collectively totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars to CSU faculty, research scientists, and students for research and engagement in ocean and

coastal science. COAST manages the SSINP, which funds large, multi-year projects of $200,000–$500,000 that directly address California's highest-priority ocean and coastal information needs. COAST routinely develops solicitations, coordinates rigorous peer and stakeholder review, executes and administers grant agreements, and ensures timely reporting and fiscal accountability. This proven administrative infrastructure and long-standing partnerships with state agencies position COAST to successfully manage Conservancy funds and deliver high-quality, policy-relevant research outcomes.

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 grant program is feasible with a reasonable budget given COAST's history of implementing the annual SSINP grant program over the past 7 years. The Conservancy will be directly involved in setting research objectives, selecting projects, providing technical assistance, and sharing research findings broadly to ensure research addresses the state's wildfire resilience needs.

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.**

To further ensure meaningful tribal engagement, COAST will require that at least 10% of each research project budget must be for engagement with one or more California Native American tribes or entities directly representing a systemically excluded community that will benefit from the project. Each research project must include a plan for engaging California Native American tribes—particularly those whose traditional territories, cultural resources, or subsistence and fishing practices may intersect with proposed project sites—throughout all phases of the work. COAST anticipates funding 2-4 research projects with this funding. By integrating tribal perspectives and maintaining engagement across the initiative, COAST strengthens partnerships with California Tribes, promotes environmental stewardship, and ensures that project benefits are equitable, culturally grounded, and broadly shared.

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

The benefits of this grant program will be sustainable and resilient over the life of the project and beyond because, by design, SSINP integrates state agency and stakeholder input from the outset to ensure awards are for research projects that will address stakeholders' highest-priority coastal management needs. Rather than requiring applicants to independently identify

stakeholder information needs, SSINP engages stakeholders at the beginning of the process through structured interviews to define research objectives. The participating state agencies and other stakeholders then select the projects to be funded, ensuring that the resulting science is directly relevant to ongoing management, policy, and planning efforts.

This grant program will fund research aimed at filling critical research gaps in wildfire resilience and habitat restoration in the face of catastrophic wildfires. By answering key questions, the Conservancy and partners will be able to invest and lead wildfire resilience and habitat restoration projects that will face less challenges and failures due to wildfire impacts over time.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The selected research projects in the wildfire SSINP grant round will deliver multiple benefits by generating decision-ready science on wildfire impacts on California's coastal ecosystems, such as research on post-fire debris flows, water quality and toxin inputs, infrastructure vulnerabilities, and ecosystem resilience. Funded projects will produce publicly accessible datasets and synthesis reports, directly supporting state and local agencies in habitat restoration, wildfire resilience, watershed infrastructure planning, and climate adaptation. The selected research projects will also build workforce capacity by training CSU faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students, expanding the next generation of coastal scientists and managers. Tribal and systemically excluded community engagement will be required for each grant awarded, ensuring research outcomes reflect diverse perspectives and support equitable stewardship of California's coastal resources.

In addition to these direct benefits, the selected research project will create broader, long-term positive impacts. By fostering strong partnerships between CSU researchers, state agencies, tribal representatives, and local communities, the grant program will strengthen the statewide coastal science network and promotes collaborative problem-solving. Principal investigators will brief the California Legislature on research findings, helping inform policy decisions and guide natural resource management strategies. Collectively, these efforts will enhance scientific understanding, support equitable decision-making, and improve the resilience of California's coastal ecosystems in the face of increasing wildfire and climate-related risks.

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

To promote inclusion of local communities—particularly those systemically excluded and/or disproportionately affected by wildfire and coastal hazards—COAST will require that at least 10% of each selected research project budget must be for work with California Native American tribes or an entity directly representing the vulnerable population or systemically excluded community that will benefit from the project.

Each selected research project must include a plan for engaging vulnerable populations or systemically excluded community throughout all phases of the research. This may include consultation meetings, collaborative workshops, co-developed research activities, or shared data interpretation sessions to ensure project design, data collection, and outcomes reflect community priorities and knowledge.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	**$1,000,000**
Project Total	**$1,000,000**

Conservancy funds are anticipated to come from the fiscal year 2025/2026 appropriation to the Conservancy from 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 90000-95015. Section 92010 allocates funds to the Conservancy for coastal resilience projects and programs to protect, restore, and increase the resilience of habitats including coastal dunes, wetlands, and riparian areas, and public access facilities. The proposed grant program is consistent with Section 92010 because it will fund the research that is necessary to design projects that will protect, restore and increase resilience of coastal habitats in the face of climate change and wildfire. This research could shed light on how forest thinning treatments should occur with possible insight into water quality and retention impacts.

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 recommended project will be undertaken pursuant to Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which authorizes the Conservancy to address the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction (Section 31113(a)).

Pursuant to Section 31113(c), the Conservancy must prioritize grants for projects that maximize public benefits and have one of several purposes, including preserving and enhancing coastal wetlands and natural lands and conserving biodiversity.

The proposed grant program will generate data and research findings required to 1) protect and restore coastal habitats that are impacted by wildfire and 2) improve wildfire resilience work to help natural lands to be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires which may ultimately reduce greenhouse gas emissions released from increased wildfires due to climate change. The proposed grant program will have multiple public benefits in that it will generate needed date while also building workforce capacity, improving state relationships with tribes, and benefiting disadvantaged communities.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN

The proposed project will assist the Conservancy in meeting a number of its Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives. Relevant Goals and Objectives are listed below.

Consistent with **Goal 1.4, Workforce Development,** the selected projects will build workforce capacity by training CSU graduate and undergraduate students, expanding the next generation of coastal scientists and managers.

Consistent with **Goal 4.2, Wildfire Resilience,** the selected projects will provide data and research findings that will aid resource managers in developing wildfire resilience projects.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed grant program is exempt under 14 CCR Section 15306 (Information Collection) which exempts projects that involve basic data collection and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a major disturbance to an environmental resource. The research projects selected by the grant program will consist of basic data collection and resource evaluation activities that do not result in major disturbance to environmental resources.

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