

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

September 17, 2026

YATSPANSINI WAYAKTSPU CONSERVANCY ACQUISITION

Project No. 26-020-01

Project Manager: Rachel Couch

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$5,000,000 to ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit to undertake the yatspansini wayaktspu Conservancy Acquisition, consisting of acquisition of 357 acres of the Alexander Ranch in San Luis Obispo County to protect and restore natural resources and wildlife habitat; preserve open space; enable compatible aquaculture and agriculture uses, including grazing; protect cultural resources; provide compatible Native American tribal access and managed public access, including the potential establishment and management of tribal camping areas and an education center; and potentially create tribal housing for property management.

LOCATION: North of Cayucos, San Luis Obispo County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

Exhibit 4: [State Water Resources Control Board Concurrence Letter](#)

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 million dollars (\$5,000,000) to ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit ("the grantee") to acquire 357 acres of the Alexander Ranch in San Luis Obispo County to protect and restore natural resources and wildlife habitat; preserve open space; enable compatible aquaculture and agriculture uses, including grazing; protect cultural resources; provide compatible Native American tribal access and managed public access, including the potential establishment and management of tribal camping areas and an education center; and potentially create tribal housing for property management, 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 to protect and restore natural resources and wildlife habitat; preserve open space; enable compatible aquaculture and agriculture uses, including grazing; protect cultural resources; provide compatible Native American tribal access and managed public access, including the potential establishment and management of tribal camping areas and an education center; and potentially create tribal housing for property management. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
4. Conservancy 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.
5. The grantee shall provide reports to the Conservancy or contribute to Conservancy reports to the State Water Resources Control Board, at least annually for 10 years, on the observed benefits of conserving the property's coastal watershed land and the status of subsequent restoration activities and associated observed or recorded increases in marine life and enhancement of estuarine and rocky reef habitat.

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 coastal resource enhancement.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
 3. The ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
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STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$5,000,000 to ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit to undertake the yatspansini wayaktspu Conservancy Acquisition, consisting of acquisition of 357 acres of the Alexander Ranch in San Luis Obispo County (the “property”) to protect and restore natural resources and wildlife habitat; preserve open space; enable compatible aquaculture and agriculture uses, including grazing; protect cultural resources; provide compatible Native American tribal access and managed public access, including the potential establishment and management of tribal camping areas and an education center; and potentially create tribal housing for property management (“the project”). In 2023, yak tit^yu tit^yu yak ti^hini Northern Chumash Tribe of San Luis Obispo County and Region (ytt Tribe or Tribe) established the ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit (“ytt Nonprofit”) as the legal entity for the tribe.

ytt Tribal members describe their historic ties to the land as having served, since time immemorial, as stewards in this coastal area, managing land and ocean ecosystems seasonally through cultural fire, sustainable harvesting, and reciprocal care. Colonization and displacement interrupted ytt Tribe’s access to these homelands but did not sever the Tribe’s sense of responsibility to this area. As a landless Tribe, ytt Tribe has long been excluded from meaningful and sustainable access to its homeland, limiting Tribal members’ ability to carry out traditional cultivation, habitat management, and foodways stewardship that protects and regenerates native species of significance.

ytt Tribe’s acquisition of the Alexander Ranch would mark the first major opportunity in generations for the Tribe to restore cultural, ecological, and ancestral ties to their coastal homelands. The Tribe plans to establish the yakspasini wayatspu Conservancy (“The Ocean and the Land Conservancy”). Their vision centers on restoring native habitats, reviving Indigenous stewardship practices, and creating a space for tribal, intertribal, and community access. This includes habitat restoration across the property, revitalization of traditional foodways, and transferring ecological knowledge across generations. Additionally, ytt Tribal members are involved in youth stewardship programs countywide. With acquisition of the property, the Tribe would be able to bring local and underserved youth to the site year-round to directly engage with the environment, land stewardship, and cultural learning.

A key feature of the site is its long-operating aquaculture facility, once used for commercial abalone and now partially leased to the nonprofit Harmony Coast Aquaculture Institute. The Tribe intends to rehabilitate this infrastructure to support species restoration, research, and culturally grounded, climate-smart food systems. ytt Nonprofit envisions a cultivation of red, white and black abalone for restoration, cultural use, and tribal food security as a key part of the aquaculture. In addition, tribally-guided aquaculture will cultivate species like seaweed and shellfish—foods long valued for their nutritional density and medicinal benefits. These food systems and associated food cultivation practices naturally align with Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)-based land and ocean management and are free from the environmental damage often linked to industrial agricultural practices. The facility provides a rare, permitted

seawater intake system making it uniquely valuable for statewide abalone recovery and vulnerable to loss if acquired by a non-conservation-minded buyer.

Acquisition of the property will enable the ytt Tribe to undertake integrated restoration efforts across the land including cultural burning, Villa Creek estuary and riparian corridor restoration, native plant cultivation, and sustainable grassland management. These efforts complement ongoing work by State Parks and regional conservation partners and will enhance climate resilience, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration. The Tribe's stewardship will also phase out grazing in sensitive areas, strengthen endangered species habitat, and protect cultural sites. Upcoming cultural resource surveys supported by partner funding will help identify and safeguard additional significant locations.

ytt Tribe also envisions that the site will serve as a hub for tribal workforce development, intergenerational learning, and collaborative research with universities, colleges, conservation organizations, and other Tribal Nations. Through tribally guided aquaculture and food cultivation, the ytt Tribe aims to strengthen access to nutrient-dense, culturally important foods while advancing statewide rewilding and species restoration efforts. By centering Indigenous ecological knowledge and kinship-based governance, the yatspasini wayatspu Conservancy will promote long-term ecological healing, cultural revitalization, and climate-adaptive stewardship across the coastal landscape.

In furtherance of the acquisition purposes, ytt Tribe will maintain, replace, and refurbish two existing residences for use as housing for property managers, and use the existing trailers on the property for agricultural and aquacultural labor housing. Uninhabitable trailers on the property will be removed before escrow closes and will not be replaced. The only other development that will occur are ceremonial structures and camping, only within existing building envelopes.

Site Description: The 357-acre Alexander Ranch is located 4 miles north of present-day Cayucos, which is also the location of ytt Tribe's village tsitxala. This area of the coast is largely undeveloped rural lands used primarily for cattle grazing. Approximately 162 acres of the property are located west of Highway 1, with the remaining 195 acres located east of the highway. The property includes one mile of coastline, approximately 1.5 miles of lower Villa Creek, coastal wetlands, and rangelands, in addition to historic, preserved cultural sites. Villa creek's riparian corridor traverses the site. Special status species found on the property and on immediately adjacent sites include California red-legged frog, Western pond turtle, Blochman's dudleya, Jones' layia, California Seablite, Monarch butterfly, Tricolored blackbird, Globose dune beetle, Tidewater goby, and South Central California Coast Steelhead. Estero Bay State Park is located immediately south of the property with rural ranch lands located to the north and east.

The property also houses a unique aquaculture facility that historically was used primarily to grow abalone. The facility includes an ocean intake pipe and pumphouse, onsite laboratory facilities and multiple cement aquaculture tanks. The property includes infrastructure for managing the cattle grazing operation and two permanent residences and two habitable occupied temporary mobile residences and associated buildings and infrastructure (see Exhibit 1).

Grant Applicant Qualifications: ytt Nonprofit has considerable experience administering multi-year state and private grants in support of conservation and stewardship. Current funding includes grants from the Department of Conservation, the Ocean Protection Council, and the Strategic Growth Council to advance the Tribe's stewardship efforts, including planning for the Alexander Ranch property. In addition, the organization is managing a Coastal Conservancy grant to support cultural burn projects with multiple landowners across San Luis Obispo County. ytt Nonprofit has a proven track record of completing projects on time and within budget, collaborating with both local and state partners, consistently delivering high-quality outcomes for its conservation partners.

ytt Nonprofit has also established partnership with numerous organizations to support their acquisition of the Alexander Ranch property and future management and restoration of these lands. Partner organizations include the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County, Creeklands Conservancy, and California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly).

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 project is a good investment of state resources because it will contribute to meeting the state's biodiversity and equitable outdoor access goals as outlined in the Strategic Land Acquisition section of the Governor's 30x30 Executive Order by permanently protecting 357 acres of coastal lands. This project also aligns with the priorities set forth in Executive Order N-15-1 issued by Governor Newsom in 2019 to address the historic wrongs committed against Native American tribes, and with the State's commitment to truth, healing, and reconciliation with Tribes. State funding for the project will be leveraged by private foundation funding and funds raised from the local community.

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 proposed project is tribally led and will result in ancestral land return to ytt Tribe. In addition, ytt Tribe is working on a abalone rewilding program with four other Californian Native American tribes.

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

The project benefits will be sustainable and resilient by permanently protecting 357 acres of coastal lands through fee acquisition by ytt Nonprofit and through long-term tribal stewardship

of the land. ytt Nonprofit is developing a business plan to ensure adequate funding for the long-term management and stewardship of the property. ytt Tribe’s stewardship commitments and practices always hold the wellbeing and maintenance of future generations as a priority. The Tribe is pursuing opportunities to enhance biodiversity, native species richness and robustness, and associated carbon sink benefits for the next several generations but also will not make future climate adaptations more difficult. ytt Nonprofit is actively engaged in the planning and submission of state grants for appropriate funding to adapt the aquaculture facility to climate change, including relocation of the pumphouse facilities.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

As described above, the proposed project will deliver multiple benefits including returning land to ytt Tribe, permanently protecting natural habitat, open space, and cultural resources. The acquisition will also protect land within a key Central Coast wildlife corridor that connects the Carrizo Plain all the way to the Carmel River in Monterey County. Acquisition of the property also makes possible multiple benefits envisioned by ytt Tribe including restoration of the Villa Creek estuary and riparian corridor, providing access to homelands for ytt tribal members, developing access facilities for larger gatherings involving other tribes and/or community members. The Tribe has been conducting cultural burns with CALFIRE and intends to expand these practices to the Alexander Ranch. In addition, ytt Tribe is in the planning stage for an aquaculture program designed to both sustain stewardship of the property and support restoration of marine ecosystems in partnership with other tribes, universities, nonprofit organizations, and others.

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

ytt Tribal members have been cultivating partnerships and conducting outreach since property negotiations began in 2024. Through a Tribal Nature-Based Solutions planning grant, ytt Nonprofit has formally partnered with The Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County, Harmony Coast Aquaculture Institute, and Creek Lands Conservation. They have also hosted CALFIRE, Cal Poly’s Office of the President, existing partners, Tribal members, and local community participants during multiple site visits.

Planning discussions for future agreements and Memorandums of Understanding are underway and will be finalized once the land is secured. ytt Nonprofit is also developing academic partnerships with Cal Poly’s Construction Management and Ethnic Studies departments, as well as the Center for Coastal Marine Sciences, including opportunities for students to participate in land and ocean stewardship and in rehabilitation of the site’s distinctive concrete aquaculture ponds.

More than 250 private individuals have donated to ytt Nonprofit for acquisition of the property which shows strong community support for this project.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$5,000,000
California Department of Conservation	\$7,000,000

11 th Hour Project	\$800,000
Decolonizing Wealth Project	\$170,000
Private Foundations	\$203,000
Community donors	\$13,055
Yet to be secured	\$4,813,945
Project Total	\$18,000,000

Conservancy funds are anticipated to come from two sources. The first source is an appropriation to the Conservancy for the purpose of coastal resilience 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 Resource Code Sections 90000-95015. These funds are available as described in Section 92010, which describes the purposes of Proposition 4 coastal resilience funds, including grants to protect 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 proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will permanently protect 357 acres of coastal habitat including a portion of the Villa Creek watershed.

The second source of funds is an appropriation to the Conservancy of interim mitigation funds required pursuant to the State Water Resources Control Board's (SWRCB) Once-Through Cooling Policy adopted on May 4, 2010, under Resolution Number 2010-0020. Under the 2026 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the State Water Resources Control Board, Conservancy and California Ocean Protection Council, mitigation funds paid under the Once-Through Cooling Policy may be used by the Conservancy to fund projects that protect, restore or enhance coastal marine or estuarine habitat, protect marine life, or improve, protect, or restore habitat in coastal watersheds where such projects restore or enhance coastal marine or estuarine habitat or otherwise benefit marine species impacted by entrainment and impingement. The proposed acquisition qualifies as an interim mitigation project because it would protect marine life in existing marine habitat; protect coastal watersheds lands to benefit downstream estuarine and marine habitats; enable future restoration of marine habitats; and enable future restoration of lower Villa Creek with benefits to estuarine habitats. Consistent with the MOU, SWRCB staff has concurred that the proposed project is an appropriate use of these funds, on the condition that the grantee shall provide reports to the Conservancy or contribute to Conservancy reports to the SWRCB, at least annually, on the observed benefits of conserving the property's coastal watershed land and the status of subsequent restoration activities and associated observed or recorded increases in marine life and enhancement of estuarine and rocky reef habitat (Exhibit 4).

As listed above, ytt Nonprofit has secured approximately \$1.1 million in non-state funds for the acquisition. In addition, the California Department of Conservation granted an additional \$23,330 for costs associated with development of the acquisition project.

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 is undertaken pursuant to Section 31251 et seq. of the Public Resources Code (Chapter 6 of Division 21), as described below.

Pursuant to Section 31251, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of natural or human-induced events have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. Grants under this chapter are to be utilized for, among other purposes, the assembly of parcels of land within coastal resource enhancement areas to improve resource management and for relocation of improperly located or designed improvements. Pursuant to Section 31251.2(a), the Conservancy may award grants to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside of the coastal zone in order to enhance the natural or scenic character of coastal resources within the coastal zone. The project site is partially outside the coastal zone, however the acquisition and potential restoration of the site will protect and enhance the natural character of Villa Creek, a watershed resource, by preventing further watershed degradation caused by cattle grazing in the floodplain, which has exacerbated water quality problems in the coastal zone such as erosion, sedimentation and pollution. Acquisition of Alexander Ranch will improve management of coastal resources and will facilitate enhancement of 357 acres of coastal wetlands and other coastal habitat that have suffered loss of natural and scenic value due to decades of cattle grazing, and agricultural production.

The Villa Creek watershed is identified in the County of San Luis Obispo’s certified Local Coastal Program as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems. See “Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies” section, below.

Pursuant to Section 31253, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. Consistent with Section 31253, the following factors were considered in determining the amount of Conservancy funding for this project: the total amount of funding available for coastal resource enhancement projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, the urgency of the project, and the Conservancy’s project selection criteria, as described in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria” section above. The Conservancy’s funds for the property acquisition constitute approximately 28% percent of the total purchase price.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities** and **Goal 1.2 Return Power to Tribes**, the proposed project will return 357 acres of land to the Ytt Tribe.

Consistent with **Goal 3.1 Conserve Land**, the proposed project will protect 357 acres of coastal watershed lands.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2.3 Wildlife Corridor Protection or Enhancement**, the proposed project will protect lands within a wildlife corridor running from the Carrizo Plain to the Carmel River.

Consistent with **Goal 3.3 Working Lands**, the proposed project will protect working ranch lands.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The County of San Luis Obispo's Local Coastal Program (LCP) is a portion of the Land Use Element of the County's General Plan and includes a Coastal Plan Policies document. Chapter 6 of the Coastal Plan Policies document address Environmentally Sensitive Habitat (ESH) and the protection of wetlands and coastal streams, and sensitive terrestrial and marine habitats of the County's coastal zone creeks. ESH Policy 7 states that the "natural ecological functioning and productivity of wetlands and estuaries shall be protected preserved and where feasible, restored." ESH Policy 20 states that "Coastal streams and adjoining riparian vegetation are environmentally sensitive habitat areas and the natural hydrological system and ecological function of coastal streams shall be protected and preserved." ESH LCP policy 9 states that the acquisition or acceptance of offers to dedicate coastal wetlands including Villa Creek Lagoon should be encouraged. ESH Policy 32 also encourages the acquisition or acceptance of offers to dedicate of sensitive terrestrial resource areas. The Agricultural section of the LCP also includes specific policies for rural lands between the communities of Cayucos and Cambria. The LCP details allowable coastal agricultural uses, limits subdivision of rural ranch lands, and enforces protections for the rolling coastal terrace and hillside ranges. Finally, the Visual and Scenic Resources (VSR) Chapter of the LCP highlights the scenic quality of the coastline from San Simeon Creek to Villa Creek which includes the project area. VSR Policy 1 states that "Unique and attractive features of the landscape, including but not limited to unusual landforms, scenic vistas and sensitive habitats are to be preserved protected, and in visually degraded areas restored where feasible. The proposed acquisition will further all of these policies in that the acquisition of the property will protect and restore a coastal watershed and scenic vistas by preventing further development along the creek.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed acquisition is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Title 14, Section 15325 of the California Code of Regulations which exempts transfers in ownership of land to preserve open space or habitat, including the acquisition of land to preserve the existing natural conditions and to allow continued agriculture. Consistent

with this section, the proposed acquisition is a transfer of an interest in land that will preserve open space and existing natural conditions and allow for continued aquaculture and agriculture. Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.