

Tips for Equitable Workforce Development in Environmental Conservation Projects

This handout was prepared by Coastal Conservancy staff to advance practices that can lead to more equitable workforce development in environmental conservation. Workforce development typically refers to training programs that help existing and/or potential workers acquire skills needed for an organization or business to remain competitive in its field of work. Workforce development can include utilizing existing job skills programs or developing new programs, such as apprenticeships, depending on an entity's individual specialty and needs. This handout outlines workforce development practices that will help organizations advance equity goals and benefit local and systematically excluded communities. While workforce development activities are not always a requirement of a grant with the Coastal Conservancy, providing pathways for workers from local communities to become expertly trained in ecological restoration work and paid a living wage will ensure the state's money is well spent and our projects are successful and have the highest local benefits. Several of the workforce development ideas listed below could be included in your Coastal Conservancy grant's project budget.

Why does workforce development matter?

The threats of climate change to California's coastal environments and communities require swift action. The environmental restoration community is growing to meet that demand. The jobs needed to work in these sensitive habitats require unique skills, training, and equipment. Projects funded and/or carried out by the Coastal Conservancy to restore and build a resilient and accessible California coast are no different. For example, many construction trades are needed to build trails, plant vegetation, contour land, build oyster reefs, dredge sediment, and maintain bridges and structures in coastal areas, etc. We have an opportunity to provide reliable pathways for local and systematically excluded communities to access skills and economic opportunities with high-quality environmental construction jobs (i.e. decent wages and benefits, and technical training and job advancement opportunities).

How can your organization make a difference? You can:

- Invest in young adults and use the California and local Conservation Corps
- Utilize curriculum from the Ecological Workforce Initiative to train new hires and/or work with the Ecological Workforce Initiative to find new hires
- Require your contractors to pay workers prevailing wage or a living wage
- Develop apprenticeship programs and hire apprentices on construction and restoration projects
- Consider developing a Project Labor Agreement/Community Benefits Agreement for large public works projects
- Use targeted contracting preferences to increase equity and diversity
- Hire employees locally when possible and check if the city or county you're working in requires it via a Local Hire Ordinance
- Partner with internship programs at Nonprofit Organizations, Tribal Governments, Public Agencies, Community Groups, Community Colleges, or Private Companies

1. Invest in young adults and use the California and Local Conservation Corps

The California Conservation Corps and local Conservation Corps provide job skills training and educational opportunities for young adults ages 18-26 while preserving and protecting the environment. The Conservation Corps help youth gain a high school diploma, gain job skills, pursue college, and embark on careers. Many Corps members come from systematically excluded communities, did not complete high school, or are English language learners. The goal is for Conservation Corps members to subsequently obtain permanent and well-paid positions in the environmental field. At times, there are state funding preferences for utilizing the Conservation Corps. Several Conservation Corps have worked on many Conservancy projects typically helping grantees with on-the-ground activities such as invasives species removal, re-vegetation, brush clearing, trash and recycling pick-up, trail and fence building, oyster reef fabrication, etc. To hire Conservation Corps, navigate to “hire a crew” on the following websites:

<https://ccc.ca.gov/> - California Conservation Corps

<https://mylocalcorps.org/> - California Association of Local Conservation Corps

2. Utilize curriculum from the Ecological Workforce Initiative to train new hires and/or work with the Ecological Workforce Initiative to find new hires

The Ecological Workforce Initiative is developing a training program to meet the workforce needs of the growing Ecological Restoration Industry by training workers for living-wage careers with the ecological skills needed to work in areas that have stringent permit requirements due to endangered species and sensitive habitats. This program is piloting environmental training certification programs with the North Bay Conservation Corps and other local partners and developing diverse public-private partnerships to increase high-quality ecological labor that results in multiple benefits to communities.

<https://www.ecologicalworkforce.org/>

3. Require your contractors to pay workers prevailing wage or a living wage

3.1 Pay Prevailing Wages

In California, public works projects, which include most publicly-funded construction projects, require that workers be paid the “prevailing wage” subject to a labor compliance program. The State determines

what prevailing wages are based on the type of work and project location and are usually based on rates specified in collective bargaining agreements with unions. The prevailing wage requirement is intended to ensure fair and appropriate wages for workers on government-funded projects. On Conservancy-funded public works projects, prevailing wages are required. Construction projects using public funds are typically considered a public works project unless certain exemptions are met. If the work involves activities that do not cause alteration of the nature or character of the land, is less than \$25,000 or meets other exemptions, it is not a “public work” and is not covered by the prevailing wage laws. Labor compliance programs are entities which are approved by the Director of Industrial Relations to monitor and enforce compliance with state prevailing wage laws on public works projects. As prevailing wage laws interact with many other laws including public works, it is best to consult an attorney to determine if your project requires the payment of prevailing wages or a labor compliance program. (Labor Code 1720)

Organizations can choose to require their contractors to pay prevailing wages on any project, and the Conservancy encourages grantees to do this to ensure workers are paid fair and appropriate wages. Voluntary payment of prevailing wage does not require use of a labor compliance program.

3.2 Pay Living Wage

At a minimum, we recommend grantees pay their workers a living wage, i.e., above minimum wage and including in jurisdictions that do not already have living wage ordinances.

- Living wage calculations for CA counties by MIT: <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/06/locations>
- Existing living wage ordinances by county/city as of 2015: <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/california-city-and-county-living-wage-ordinances/>
- Minimum Wage info: https://www.dir.ca.gov/dlse/faq_minimumwage.htm

[Minimum wage in America: How many people are earning \\$7.25 an hour? \(usafacts.org\)](https://www.usafacts.org/articles/economy/minimum-wage-in-america-how-many-people-are-earning-7-25-an-hour/)

4. Develop apprenticeship programs and hire apprentices on construction and restoration projects

Apprenticeships are also a requirement of public works projects over \$30,000 (one hour of apprentice work for every five hours of journeyman level work). Construction projects using public funds are typically considered a public works project unless certain exemptions are met (see “prevailing wage requirements” above for determining if a project is a public work). Apprenticeships must adhere to the standards administered by the CA Department of Industrial Relations’ Division of Apprenticeship Standards. More information on how to develop an apprenticeship program can be found here: <https://www.dir.ca.gov/DAS/Employers.htm>.

Organizations with apprenticeship opportunities can find eligible candidates by connecting with the California Workforce Development Board – High Road Construction Careers’ pre-apprenticeship programs. The High Road Construction Careers program prioritizes partnerships that link local building and construction trades councils to workforce boards, community colleges, and community-based organizations, creating structured pathways — with a standard core curriculum and critical supportive services — to state-certified pre-apprenticeships in a variety of crafts. For a list of pre-apprenticeship

programs, see <https://apprenticeship.cabuildingtrades.org/pre-apprenticeship/pre-apprenticeship-program-directory/>. For updates or inquiries, email HRCC@CWDB.CA.GOV. While this program is a great workforce development initiative, they have struggled to identify apprenticeships for their trainees to obtain due to the lack of available opportunities. More apprenticeships are needed.

There are also opportunities to increase apprenticeship requirements through project-specific agreements (see Project Labor Agreements below).

5. Consider developing a Project Labor Agreement/Community Benefits Agreement for large public works projects

A Project Labor Agreement (PLA) is an agreement between a project owner and a local building and construction trades council that sets forth the terms and conditions of employment and coordination among trades on a construction project. A PLA provides assurances for workers regarding job conditions and assurances for project owners on timely completion. A PLA is designed for large and complex construction projects to eliminate potential delays resulting from labor strife, ensure a steady supply of skilled labor on the project, and provide a contractually binding means of resolving worker grievances. By definition, a project labor agreement is limited to a single construction project.

For example, the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority has a policy on the use of PLAs for large projects (i.e. project costs more than \$500,000) and has had three projects so far with PLAs (one led by a local agency, one by a non-profit, and one by a private business). San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority PLA Resolution: https://www.sfbayrestore.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/pla_resolution.pdf

PLAs can also be rolled into a broader [Community Benefits Agreement](#) (CBA) as part of a more comprehensive approach to negotiating labor, job training, housing, amenities, and other social/economic benefits to local communities who stand to gain from a public project. A CBA is a legally binding contract between a community and a developer that includes commitments the developer will make to the neighborhood, in exchange for the community's support. In essence, the CBA process is a negotiation between a developer and a community to create a plan to meet the community's needs. In addition to giving local communities a voice for shaping a project in an equitable way, CBAs can potentially be a boon for its project partners by allowing them to [qualify for certain funding](#) that would have been unavailable without the agreement. CBAs can offer all the benefits of a PLA, but because they're intended to address other needs such as housing, they can offer even more mitigation potential against the unintended impacts (i.e., gentrification and displacement) of certain projects.

6. Use targeted contracting preferences to increase equity and diversity

The State of California has established several contractor hiring preferences to support targeted communities. While the Conservancy's non-state grantees are not required to use these contracting

preferences, utilizing them will help support more equitable workforce development and therefore we encourage their use.

- a. The Target Area Contract Preference. Contracts for goods or services over \$100,000 employing businesses in distressed areas of the State enjoy contracting preferences. The contract must contain a provision applying work site and hiring preferences, as applicable, to eligible California-based firms. This program encourages and facilitates job maintenance and job development in distressed and declining areas found in California cities and towns. Contact DGS/Dispute Resolution/Preference Program Section for information at (916) 375-4604 or (916) 375-4600.
- b. Contracting with small businesses, including minority and women-owned businesses, and disabled veterans' enterprises can also support systematically excluded communities. Relaxed advertising requirements make contracting with these entities much faster. See <https://www.dgs.ca.gov/PD/Services/Page-Content/Procurement-Division-Services-List-Folder/Certify-or-Re-apply-as-Small-Business-Disabled-Veteran-Business-Enterprise> . 2019 amendments to the Small Business Contracts Act increase the thresholds for small businesses involved in public works if the business has 200 or fewer employees and average annual gross receipts of \$36,000,000 or less over the previous three years. ([Gov. Code § 14837](#))
- c. Sheltered Workshops. This program supports purchasing from community rehabilitation programs serving persons with disabilities. Purchases using these programs are exempt from advertising requirements, conducting a competitive bid, and dollar threshold limits. These transactions are also exempt from the non-competitively bid (NCB) contract requirements. The procurement file must support that the price offered by a community rehabilitation program is fair and reasonable. ([Welfare and Inst. § 19404](#))
- d. Federal grant targeted contracting. Federal grants frequently require the participation of minority and women-owned businesses in grant and contract sub awarding. See, e.g., [40 CFR Part 33 \(EPA award criteria\)](#). These grant criteria provide exceptions to California constitutional prohibitions on the use of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin criteria in contracting or grant-making ([Cal. Const., art. I, § 31\(e\)](#); (Prop 209)).

7. Hire employees locally when possible and check if the city you're working in requires it via a Local Hire Ordinance

Several cities in California have local hire ordinances that require the recruitment of local employees for publicly sponsored projects. For example, in San Francisco, public works or improvement projects with an engineer's estimate of \$600,000 or more and advertised for bid are covered by the Local Hiring Policy for Construction. Grantees should hire locally when possible and make sure to check with their local jurisdiction to see if a local hiring policy will apply to their projects.

8. Partner with an internship program at Nonprofit Organizations, Tribal Governments, Public Agencies, Community Groups, Community Colleges, or Private Companies

Paid internships or fellowships are a way for students or people early in their careers to gain experience and develop professional networks. Some best practices for internship programs include recruitment efforts that ensure a diversity of applicants (e.g. posting to news channels and increasing minimum requirements), meaningful tasks and learning opportunities, and sufficient mentorship and supervision. Consider how your organization or project might involve interns to train and inspire the next generation of workers.

State agencies can use the Environmental Services Intern, the Student Assistant, or the Graduate Student Assistant classifications (temp positions) to provide workers with the experience and training needed to qualify for state professional classifications. Paid temporary Interns working in a state classification can work up to 1500 hours in a 12 consecutive month period. There are other internships or fellowship programs that organizations or agencies can tap into, including CivicSpark (one-year placement; for local government beneficiary), Coro (4-week placements as well as team programs, in LA and SF), and Sea Grant and NOAA Coastal Fellows (one or two-year placements, marine-related).

<https://civicspark.lgc.org/>

<http://www.corofellowship.org/>

<https://caseagrants.ucsd.edu/fellowships/types/state-fellowship>

<https://coast.noaa.gov/fellowship/coastalmanagement.html>

[Graduate Program of Environmental Policy and Management \(ucdavis.edu\)](https://ucdavis.edu/graduate-program-of-environmental-policy-and-management)

[Find Internships | Career Services & Leadership Development \(sfsu.edu\)](https://sfsu.edu/career-services/leadership-development)