

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 2, 2004

ELKHORN SLOUGH COASTAL TRAINING PROGRAM

File No. 03-054
Project Manager: Trish Chapman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to accept coastal estuaries training grant funding from NOAA and disburse these funds to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation to develop and manage the coastal training program for the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve.

LOCATION: Elkhorn Slough, Monterey County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31000 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes its Executive Officer to accept coastal estuaries training grant funds from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and to disburse these funds to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation (Foundation) to develop and manage the coastal training program at the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds by the Conservancy, the Foundation shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer a work program, budget, schedule and any contractors or subcontractors to be employed in the program.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. Acceptance of federal grant funds by the Conservancy is consistent with the authority of the Conservancy under Public Resources Code Section 31104, and disbursement of the granted funds for the proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria in Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) regarding the

enhancement of coastal resources, and specifically with the Elkhorn Slough Conservation Plan adopted by the Conservancy on December 1, 1999.

2. The proposed action is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The project site has been identified in the North Monterey County Local Coastal Program as an environmentally sensitive area requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems.
4. The Elkhorn Slough Foundation is a nonprofit organization existing under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization would enable the Conservancy to accept federal grant funds from NOAA and disburse them to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation (Foundation) to manage the Coastal Training Program (CTP) at the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve (ESNERR). Elkhorn Slough is one of the most ecologically important and largest estuarine systems in California, and provides critical habitat for federal- and state-listed endangered and threatened species, as well as many migratory birds. An initial grant in the amount of \$110,000 was accepted and disbursed to the Foundation pursuant to the Conservancy’s authorization of June 4, 2003. The current authorization would permit acceptance and disbursement of \$137,870 to continue the program over the next year and would also provide for its continuation under subsequent NOAA grants.

The federal grant and corresponding Conservancy grant will enable the Foundation to continue implementing the Elkhorn Slough Conservation Plan, approved by the Conservancy on December 1, 1999. The Conservation Plan, the approved coastal resource enhancement plan for the purposes of the Coastal Conservancy, was developed by the Foundation, the Nature Conservancy, and the Coastal Conservancy to: 1) identify critical biological, agricultural, and scenic resources within the Elkhorn Slough watershed; 2) identify threats to those resources; and 3) devise strategies to abate the threats and maintain the long-term ecological viability of the Slough and related upland communities.

To address these problems, the Plan identifies a multi-pronged strategy of protection, restoration, and education. One of the key recommended actions is to educate “landowners, elected officials, decision makers, and citizens regarding conservation and land management techniques and the specific threats to the Elkhorn Slough system.”

The CTP is a national effort led by NOAA to further the preservation and enhancement of coastal estuaries through trainings and technical assistance aimed at local decision-makers. The CTP Strategic Plan for Elkhorn Slough identifies specific priorities for the program tailored to meet the needs at Elkhorn Slough. Over the next year, the CTP will implement the Strategic Plan’s recommended focus on the following issues: invasive species, recreation, habitat conservation and management, and land use planning. The proposed project will include ten workshops that will provide in-depth information to decision makers. Target audiences will

include private landowners, land management agencies, regulatory agencies, local governments, non-governmental conservation organizations, and researchers.

The CTP will be provided by the Foundation at the ESNERR headquarters near Moss Landing, Monterey County. At this site, the Foundation and the ESNERR staff already provide scientific research and management facilities, substantial public recreational access programs, and interpretive facilities used by both organized school groups and the general public.

Site Description:

Elkhorn Slough is a biologically rich wetland system located on the edge of Monterey Bay. It provides habitat for numerous resident and migratory birds and serves as an important fish nursery and source of nutrients for the bay. The natural communities of Elkhorn Slough and its watershed contain a great diversity of rare plants and animals. Its surrounding landscape of working farms and undeveloped ridges and hills covered with rare maritime chaparral and associated coast live oak woodlands are highly scenic and remarkably intact given the proximity to the Monterey and Santa Cruz.

Due to its ecological importance, Elkhorn Slough was designated as a National Estuarine Research Reserve in 1979. The slough ecosystem encompasses an array of wetland types, including salt, brackish, and freshwater marshes, mudflats and subtidal channels. Each of these wetland habitats supports a unique community of vegetation and wildlife. The Elkhorn Slough NERR includes an area of approximately 1,400 acres and is managed by the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG).

Within the ESNERR, studies on biology, ecology, geology, hydrology, restoration, and landscape change are underway, under the management of Reserve staff members and through a variety of institutions including the Moss Landing Marine Laboratories, the University of California Santa Cruz, Stanford University, and California State University Monterey Bay. Detailed information regarding the variety of educational, scientific, and public outreach efforts of the ESNERR is provided through the Internet at www.ocrm.nos.noaa.gov/nerr/reserves/nerrelkhorn.html.

Project History: Since 1982 the Elkhorn Slough Foundation has worked with dozens of private and public organizations to protect and enhance the unique coastal resources of the Elkhorn Slough watershed. It has been an essential partner in several Conservancy funded projects in the watershed and owns or manages approximately 1,700 acres of wetlands, uplands, and cropland.

For the past several years, NOAA has provided funding to the Foundation to manage the Coastal Training Program at the Elkhorn Slough NERR. Due to federal regulations, NOAA can not provide the program funds directly to the Foundation. In 2003, the Foundation, NOAA, and DFG requested that the Conservancy accept the funds on behalf of the Foundation. In June 2003, the Conservancy authorized acceptance and disbursement of \$110,000 of NOAA funds for the CTP. Under the proposed authorization, the Conservancy will for the second time accept NOAA grant funds and disburse them to the Foundation. This second grant will provide funding in the amount of \$137,870 to continue the program.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$0
NOAA grant	137,870
Elkhorn Slough Foundation	17,288
California Department of Fish and Game	<u>41,800</u>
Total Project Cost (2004-2005 Grant)	\$196,958

The Conservancy’s grant to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation will be funded entirely with federal grant monies provided by NOAA, under the Coastal Zone Management Act. The grant was given to the Conservancy for the express purpose of carrying out the proposed project. The federal funds would be matched by approximately \$59,088 in materials and in-kind services that would be provided by DFG and the Foundation as part of their existing commitment to the management of the slough. The recommended action would delegate authority to the Executive Officer to accept and disburse NOAA funds for this program under similar circumstances in the future.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Pursuant to Section 31104 of the Public Resources Code, the Conservancy may “. . . apply for and accept federal grants and receive gifts, subventions, rents, royalties and other financial support from public and private sources.”

Pursuant to Section 31251 of the Public Resources Code, the Conservancy may provide grants for “. . . corrective measures that will enhance the natural and scenic character . . .” of coastal resource enhancement areas. The proposed project is consistent with and will help implement the Elkhorn Slough Conservation Plan, a resource enhancement plan adopted by the Conservancy in December 1999 pursuant to Chapter 6 of Division 21. The proposed coastal training program will provide information to a variety of agencies, organizations, and individuals that will contribute to the effort to preserve and enhance the natural resources of the Elkhorn Slough system. It is also expected that the distribution of information regarding the effort at ESNERR will assist and encourage improvements to restoration efforts at other wetland preservation sites.

Consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31252, the proposed project is consistent with the North Monterey County Local Coastal Program, as described in the “Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies” section below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A**, the proposed project will facilitate preservation and enhancement of coastal wetland, dune, and upland habitats within the Elkhorn Slough ecosystem.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve provides interpretive, scientific, and public access services utilized by thousands of visitors annually. The visitor center at the ESNERR serves over 50,000 adults and families annually, in addition to approximately 10,000 school children.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of unincorporated Monterey County.
5. **Need:** The Conservancy will serve as the federal grantee and administer the proposed grant to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation at the request of DFG and the ESNERR. Without the assistance of the Conservancy, the federal grant funds could not be obtained to support the proposed purposes.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Elkhorn Slough is one of the most ecologically important and largest estuarine systems in California as signified by its designation as a National Estuarine Research Reserve.

Additional Criteria

7. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
8. **Readiness:** The Foundation is ready to begin this project immediately.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

Section 2.1 of the North Monterey County Local Coastal Program (LCP) describes Elkhorn Slough as the most significant natural feature in the area, and identifies the need for effective management to protect it and other natural resources in the North County. The project will improve the management of the Slough through trainings and technical assistance provided to landowners and managers, decision makers, and restoration practitioners.

Section 2.3 defines environmentally sensitive habitats as “areas in which plant or animal life or their habitats are rare or especially valuable because of their special nature or role in an ecosystem and which could be easily disturbed or degraded by human activities and developments.” Section 2.3.1 states that environmentally sensitive habitats of North County “shall be protected, maintained, and, where possible, enhanced and restored.” This project will facilitate the preservation and enhancement of the Elkhorn Slough through better management of the slough’s resources.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed authorization to disburse federal grant funds for a resource enhancement training program does not have the potential to result in any physical changes to the environment and therefore is not a “project” subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), as provided in 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15378.