

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 8, 2005

**BALLONA WETLANDS
ENHANCEMENT PLANNING**

File No. 04-088
Project Manager: Mary Small

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Foundation for planning, data collection, and other activities associated with the restoration of the Ballona Wetlands and to implement the Santa Monica Bay Plan, adopted by the Conservancy on August 2, 2001. The project area is in Los Angeles County.

LOCATION: West of Lincoln Boulevard and south of the Marina del Rey along the Ballona Creek Channel in Los Angeles County. A portion of the project is in the City of Los Angeles and a portion is in unincorporated Los Angeles County (Exhibits 1 & 2).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Coastal Resource Enhancement and Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: Project Area and Watershed Map

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 and 31400 et seq. of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to Santa Monica Bay Restoration Foundation for planning, technical review, data collection and public outreach to support the restoration of the Ballona Wetlands, approved by the Conservancy on December 2, 2004. This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, the Conservancy’s Executive Officer shall approve the work plan, budget and the contractor for this work.”

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. The proposed project authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270, regarding the Conservancy's mandate to protect and enhance coastal resources.
2. The proposed project authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31409, regarding the Conservancy's mandate to assist in the development of a system of public accessways to and along the coast.
3. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
4. The project serves greater than local need.
5. The Santa Monica Bay Restoration Foundation is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code and which purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

This authorization would provide funding to advance the efforts of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Foundation (Foundation) to improve the health of the Santa Monica Bay by helping to restore the former Ballona Wetlands and to implement the Santa Monica Bay Plan. If approved, the Foundation would engage in restoration planning activities, including technical review, collecting data and public outreach. This work would be closely coordinated with and would complement the Conservancy's authorization of December 2, 2004 and other state efforts to restore the 600-acres of the historic Ballona Wetlands owned by the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) and the State Lands Commission (SLC).

The Santa Monica Bay Restoration Foundation is a non-profit organization that was created in 1991 to implement the priorities of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan and to support the work of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission. The Foundation has a number of on-going initiatives including research, public education, and planning. Restoration of the Ballona Wetlands is a priority activity in Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan. For the past several years, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission has been actively involved in developing and implementing a watershed management plan for the Ballona Creek Watershed. One of the top priorities of that plan is the restoration of the Ballona Wetlands.

The Ballona Creek watershed is approximately 130 square miles and is the largest watershed draining to Santa Monica Bay. It includes much of the City of Los Angeles as well as the cities of West Hollywood, Beverly Hills and Culver City. Approximately 80% of the watershed is urbanized and it is home to more than 1.5 million people. The Ballona Wetlands are located at the mouth of that watershed and offer one of the largest opportunities to restore coastal wetlands in southern California. The site provides habitat for threatened and endangered species, including the Belding's savannah sparrow and the California brown pelican.

Site Description:

It is estimated that the historic wetland complex at the mouth of Ballona Creek once occupied 2000-acres. Much of that area has been developed. However the State of California now owns

600-acres of the former wetland complex. The Department of Fish and Game owns 540 acres, and that land was purchased with funds provided from the Conservancy to the Wildlife Conservation Board. The State Lands Commission owns 60-acres, including a newly created freshwater marsh and adjacent vacant land..

The project area has been substantially altered during the last century, significantly reducing the quantity and quality of the wetlands. Major human activities that have affected the ecological function of this site include past oil field development, channelization of Ballona Creek, and the construction of the Marina del Rey lagoon, which involved deposition of dredge material onto project area. In addition, several major roadways cross the site and it is surrounded by residential and commercial development.

Despite the degradation of site resources resulting from prior development, significant wetland habitat remains within the Ballona Wetlands. Plant species within the project site include wetland indicators such as pickleweed, marsh heather, saltgrass, arrowgrass and glasswort, and a variety of upland and exotic species including brome, iceplant, oxalis, and ryegrass. Bird surveys indicate that the site is used seasonally by a variety of migratory shorebirds, as well as by typical shoreline residents (gulls, terns, and ducks) and typical upland birds including small raptors. Bird species of special interest observed in the project area include nesting pairs of Belding's Savannah sparrow and foraging use by California least terns.

Project History:

There have been more than twenty years of intense conflict about land use at this site. Several development proposals and regulatory approvals have resulted in litigation, some of which continues today. In 2001, the Trust for Public Land entered into a purchase agreement with Playa Capital Company, the former landowner. Through this purchase agreement, the Department of Fish and Game ultimately took title to 540 acres of the property during the past year. The Conservancy provided \$10 million for that acquisition.

The Conservancy has long supported enhancement and public access at the Ballona Wetlands. The first Conservancy project at this site was a 1986 grant to the National Audubon Society for environmental education facility associated with a proposed site restoration. That project was never implemented due to the ongoing conflicts about development at the site. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Conservancy provided funding for planning and implementation of enhancements to the nearby Ballona Lagoon and holds easements for resource enhancement over much of the land bordering the Lagoon.

More recently, the Conservancy has provided funding to the Friends of Ballona Wetlands for dune restoration and invasive plant removal on the southwestern portion of the project area. Last year, the Conservancy approved two grants for projects in the Ballona Creek Watershed that helped implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan. One of these grants was awarded to the Ballona Wetlands Foundation to develop the Ballona Outdoor Learning and Discovery (BOLD) project. It is a condition of the grant that the BOLD project be developed to be consistent with the larger restoration project.

In December 2004, the Conservancy authorized funds for development of restoration alternatives, feasibility analysis of these alternatives and development of preliminary cost estimates. A consultant team has been hired to develop a conceptual restoration plan. The project is currently collecting data and analyzing existing conditions. Restoration planning for the site will take a minimum of three years. Staff anticipates returning to the Conservancy for authorization to complete this analysis once a preferred alternative has been selected.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Proposition 12, Coastal Conservancy	<u>\$200,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$200,000

The Conservancy funding would be derived from an appropriation of funds specifically designated for the restoration or acquisition of the Ballona Wetlands in the 2000 park bond, Proposition 12. Public Resources Code Section 5096.352(f) provides that \$25 million is available to the Conservancy for this purpose.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270, Coastal Resource Enhancement Projects. The project would enhance the natural and scenic character of resources within the coastal zone. As discussed below, consistent with Section 31252, the project is consistent with the policies and objectives of Division 20 of the Public Resources Code.

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270, Coastal Access. If approved, the planning studies would include analysis of opportunities to enhance the California Coastal Trail and create new public access opportunities at this site.

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

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project would help the Conservancy to restore and enhance up to 600 acres of coastal wetland and adjacent habitat. When implemented, this project will complete 60% of the total acreage target for Southern California.

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective C** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project area could provide a new segment of the Coastal Trail. As discussed above, the project is located at the intersection of the California Coastal Trail and the Ballona Creek Trail, and may offer a significant opportunity for the development of improved connections between these trails.

**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:** There is broad public support for developing a restoration plan for this site. The project is supported by the Department of Fish and Game and the State Lands Commission. Letters of support are attached as Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Los Angeles County.
5. **Need:** Conservancy funds are needed to provide resources for the Foundation to provide planning assistance.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project will help advance the largest coastal wetland restoration project in Los Angeles County. The site provides habitat for threatened and endangered species, including the Belding's savannah sparrow and the California brown pelican. The site also provides valuable and scenic open space and public access opportunities in the heart of congested Los Angeles County.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** More than 98% of the coastal wetlands in the Southern California bight have been destroyed or degraded. This project offers an opportunity to restore and enhance 600 acres of habitat.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Restoration of the Ballona Wetlands will address a number of goals, including: enhancement of wetland and adjacent habitat, creation of compatible public access opportunities, and improvement of coastal water quality.
9. **Readiness:** Restoration planning for the Ballona Wetlands is already underway. If approved, the Foundation will begin work immediately.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** "See "Project History" above.
11. **Cooperation:** This authorization will provide resources to improve coordination with the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission. The Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission includes representatives from local government, state government and many stakeholder organizations.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

In the late 1980s, the California Coastal Commission certified two separate Land Use Plans that covered this project area. No Local Coastal Program was ever completed for the Ballona Wetlands area and the two Land Use Plans are now out of date. However the proposed project is consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act. The project goals are consistent with the Coastal Act goals as stated in Section 30001.5, the project will protect, enhance and restore the natural resources of the site and expand public recreational opportunities consistent with conservation of those resources. Specifically, Section 30231 states that coastal wetlands shall be maintained and restored. The project is consistent with Section 30240(a), in that it will help ensure that environmentally sensitive habitat areas are protected against significant disruption of habitat values. As stated in Section 30251, the project will protect the scenic resources and open space of the project site.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/
STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:**

A Watershed Management Plan for the Ballona Creek Watershed was completed by an interagency/stakeholder task force this year. The purpose of the plan is to identify opportunities to improve water quality and restore habitat. The restoration of the Ballona Wetlands is specifically identified as a priority activity in the watershed.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Under 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262, feasibility and planning activities are categorically exempt from California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review. Similarly, 14 CCR Section 15306 exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.