

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 9, 2006

HUMBOLDT BAY SUBTIDAL HABITAT GOALS PROJECT

File No. 06-088
Project Manager: Moira McEnespy/Sheila Semans

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to The Regents of the University of California for disbursement to the California Sea Grant College Program to determine subtidal habitat goals for Humboldt Bay.

LOCATION: Humboldt Bay, including the Eel River Estuary and state waters, Humboldt County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: Project Location Map
Exhibit 2: Letters of Support
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of up to \$100,000 to The Regents of the University of California for disbursement to the California Sea Grant College Program (“Sea Grant”) to determine subtidal habitat goals for Humboldt Bay, subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of Conservancy funds, Sea Grant shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Coastal Conservancy a final work program, including budget and schedule, and the names of any contractors to be employed.”

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 is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 3122).
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$100,000 to The Regents of the University of California for disbursement to the California Sea Grant College Program (“Sea Grant”) to determine subtidal habitat goals for Humboldt Bay, including the Eel River Delta and the seaward extent of State waters.

The Conservancy and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Coastal Services Center (“CSC”) have recently completed a “Northern California Coastal Conservation Needs Assessment” to determine regional coastal (marine and terrestrial) conservation planning and implementation needs in coastal Mendocino, Humboldt, and Del Norte Counties. Entitled “Linking Land and Sea,” the assessment sought to determine what is needed to plan for and implement coastal conservation within the terrestrial to marine continuum. Some significant themes relevant to the subtidal habitat goals project emerged from this assessment: The need to better connect terrestrial, estuarine and marine conservation activities; and more specifically, the need to obtain marine and estuarine data to characterize these environments, and to increase research and monitoring to better understand the intertwined effects of land uses with estuarine and nearshore water quality and habitat integrity (e.g., effects of sediment runoff).

In addition, the newly-adopted Ocean Protection Council Strategic Plan specifies actions that overlap with and address many of the needs identified in the assessment. Applicable strategic plan objectives are to implement subtidal habitat restoration projects (Objective D1a, which will build from identified subtidal habitat goals), and to initiate another subtidal habitat goals project in a location such as Humboldt Bay (Objective D1f).

Specifically, the subtidal habitat goals project will include the following tasks, which will be completed within two years:

Conduct subtidal and estuarine habitat data assembly and acquisition (conducted using CSC matching funds): Create an inventory of subtidal habitat data for Humboldt Bay by assembling available subtidal habitat data and identifying priority data gaps; fill priority subtidal habitat gaps (e.g., conduct benthic habitat mapping or lidar surveys, map kelp beds from existing California Department of Fish and Game aerial photography).

Create a subtidal goals report: Use assembled and acquired subtidal and estuarine data to determine appropriate subtidal habitat goals, taking into account important habitat, species, human and other needs; integrate with the existing Science and Technical Alliance for North Coast Estuaries (STANCE) efforts to define an estuarine restoration framework and goals for Humboldt Bay.

California Sea Grant, the proposed grantee, brings experience, expertise in local collaboration via involvement in many working groups and task forces, and technical resources via its association with UC Davis. Sea Grant is committed to working with the Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation and Conservation District and other stakeholders.

Site Description: The geographic scope of the project will include Humboldt Bay (63 sq km), the Eel River delta (24 sq km), which is functionally related to the bay, and the nearshore out to at least three miles. Humboldt Bay is one of the largest and most pristine bays on the Pacific coast, and is the largest estuary in California north of San Francisco Bay. In addition to being the

“front yard” of the north coast’s population centers and a desirable destination for US 101 travelers, Humboldt Bay contains a large diversity of habitat for fish and wildlife, and significant state, national and international resources. Plant and animal species found in Humboldt Bay are subject to international treaties (International Bird Migratory Act), and federal and state management and protection (Endangered Species Act, Essential Fish Habitat, and California Coastal Act). Humboldt Bay contains over 30% of the eelgrass habitat found in California, and some of the most important coho populations spawn and rear in its watershed. In addition, Humboldt Bay is a significant avian stopover on the Pacific Flyway, recognized as a site of International Importance for shorebirds by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, and achieves the highest avian species number for any bird count at comparable latitudes.¹

Project History: The proposed project builds on a recently-completed “Northern California Coastal Conservation Needs Assessment,” conducted by the Conservancy with CSC funding to determine regional coastal (marine and terrestrial) conservation planning and implementation needs in coastal Mendocino, Humboldt, and Del Norte Counties. Specifically, the proposed project addresses the following needs identified in the assessment: better connection of terrestrial, estuarine and marine conservation activities; marine and estuarine data to characterize these environments; and increased research and monitoring to better understand the intertwined effects of land uses with estuarine and nearshore water quality and habitat integrity. The proposed project will also build on and integrate with the existing Science and Technical Alliance for North Coast Estuaries (STANCE) efforts to define an estuarine restoration framework and goals for Humboldt Bay.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
NOAA Coastal Services Center	
Data assembly and acquisition	<u>150,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$250,000

The proposed source of Conservancy funds for this authorization is an appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 40, “The California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002.” These funds are available for grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for restoration and associated planning, permitting and administrative costs, for the protection and restoration of coastal watershed and streams, and were specifically appropriated for the purposed of funding coastal watershed protection projects under Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code.

The proposed project is consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31220, as discussed in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s enabling legislation” section of this report, below, and with applicable watershed management and water quality control plans, as discussed in the

¹ The “Southern Pacific Coast Regional Shorebird Plan-Humboldt Bay” (including the Eel River mouth) states that this large estuary is recognized as a site of International Importance for shorebirds by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (greater than 100,000 shorebirds/yr or greater than 10% of a flyway population). In addition, the Arcata Christmas Bird Count is among the top 20 Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) in North America, and achieves the highest species number for any count at comparable latitudes. Depending on season, 20,000 to 80,000 shorebirds reside in Humboldt Bay (Colwell 1994). Arcata CBC results over the past 20 years indicate an average of 10,000 and as many as 25,000 individuals of waterfowl winter on north Humboldt Bay.

“Consistency With Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan” section of this report, below. The proposed authorization is thus consistent with Proposition 40.

Matching funds in the amount of \$150,000 will be provided by NOAA CSC for the data assembly and acquisition portions of the project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation (Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Section 31220) regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection in the following respects:

Section 31220(a) provides that the Conservancy may undertake or award grants to conduct marine habitat and living marine resources protection and restoration projects in order to improve and protect coastal and marine water quality and habitats. Consistent with this section, the Conservancy will grant funds to Sea Grant to determine subtidal habitat goals for Humboldt Bay, which will enable better management of and potentially lead to restoration of subtidal habitats in the bay. Also consistent with this section, the grantee will develop the subtidal habitat goals in consultation with, among all other appropriate entities and stakeholders, the State Water Resources Control Board to ensure consistency with Chapter 3 (commencing with Section 30915) of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code.

In the proposed project, the Conservancy will grant funds to Sea Grant to determine subtidal habitat goals for Humboldt Bay, which will address the following elements of Section 31220(b): Protection or restoration of fish and wildlife habitat within coastal and marine waters and coastal watersheds consistent with Section 31220(b)(2), and provision for monitoring and mapping of coastal currents, marine habitats and/or marine wildlife in order to facilitate the protection and enhancement of resources within the coastal zone consistent with Section 31220(b)(5).

Section 31220(c) provides that projects shall include a monitoring and evaluation component and shall be consistent with the Integrated Watershed Management Program established pursuant to Section 30947, local watershed management plans and water quality control plans adopted by the State Water Resources Control Board and regional water quality control boards. The proposed subtidal habitat goals program will include monitoring and evaluation components, and is being developed consistent with all relevant watershed and water quality control plans, as more fully discussed below.

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

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objectives A and B**, the proposed project will develop a plan, specifically a subtidal goals report, to, among other things, inform preservation and restoration of coastal watersheds and improvement of water quality to benefit coastal resources.

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 proposed project is supported by agency staff, resource managers and academia, among others. Please see letters of support contained in Exhibit 2.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the County of Humboldt.
5. **Need:** The need to obtain marine and estuarine data to characterize these environments has been documented (see the “Context” section of the “Project Summary,” above). Absent Conservancy funds, the opportunity to leverage available CSC funds to fill this need would be lost.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Humboldt Bay is a resource of regional, State, national and international importance. See the “Site Description” section, above.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The proposed project builds on the momentum of the recently-completed Northern California Coastal Conservation Needs Assessment. Swift action is also necessary to leverage CSC matching funds that will not be available if the project is postponed.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Readiness:** Because the proposed project builds on the momentum of the recently-completed Northern California Coastal Conservation Needs Assessment, and because we now have available matching funds from CSC, the grantee, project partners and relevant stakeholders are anxious to begin work.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” section, above.
15. **Cooperation:** The proposed project will develop subtidal habitat goals collaboratively with a suite of partners, agencies, local entities, land managers, regulators, academia, nonprofits and all relevant stakeholders.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The *Humboldt County General Plan, Volume II, Humboldt Bay Area Plan of the Humboldt County Local Coastal Program (“LCP,” certified October 14, 1982)* is based upon policies contained in the Coastal Act of 1976, including basic goals for the coastal zone which are specified in Section 30001.5 (Public Resources Code, Division 20, California Coastal Act, Chapter 1). Consistent with this section, the proposed project will inform protection, maintenance, and where feasible, enhancement and restoration of the overall quality of the coastal zone environment and its natural and manmade resources; and will implement coordinated planning for mutually beneficial uses in the coastal zone. The proposed project is thus consistent with the basic coastal goals upon which the certified LCP is based.

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

Under Public Resources Code Section 31220(c), projects funded under Chapter 5.5 of Division 21, the Conservancy's enabling legislation, must be consistent with the Integrated Watershed Management Program established pursuant to PRC Section 30947 and local watershed management plans, "if available and relevant to the project." The proposed project is consistent with relevant plans and programs, as described below.

Integrated Watershed Management Program established pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 30947. The *North Coast Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, Phase I (NCIRWMP)*, prepared by *Circuit Rider Productions, July 2005* was developed pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 30947. The NCIRWMP identifies six primary integrated water management objectives for the North Coast region, relevant at both the local and regional scale: (1) Conserve and enhance native salmonid populations by protecting and restoring required habitats, water quality and watershed processes; (2) Protect and enhance drinking water quality to ensure public health; (3) Ensure adequate water supply while minimizing environmental impacts; (4) Support implementation of Total Maximum Daily Loads, the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board's Watershed Management Initiative (WMI) and the Nonpoint Source Program Plan; (5) Address environmental justice issues as they relate to disadvantaged communities, drinking water quality and public health; and (6) Provide an ongoing, inclusive framework for efficient intra-regional cooperation, planning and project implementation. The proposed project consists of determining subtidal habitat goals for Humboldt Bay, which will inform bay management, protection, restoration and use decisions. Development of this project will take into account all relevant existing plans, including the NCIRWMP. The proposed project is thus consistent with NCIRWMP.

Local Watershed Management Plans. The proposed project will determine subtidal habitat goals for Humboldt Bay. Because this effort will integrate with the existing Science and Technical Alliance for North Coast Estuaries (STANCE) effort to define an estuarine restoration framework and goals for Humboldt Bay, a process that itself will integrate recommendations from the *Humboldt Bay Watershed Enhancement Plan (Redwood Community Action Agency, January 2005)*, the *Humboldt Bay Management Plan (Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation and Conservation District, August 2006)* and other existing plans as appropriate, the proposed project is thus consistent with local watershed management plans.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project consists of developing plans and conducting studies, and data collection via aerial imagery or LIDAR bathymetry.

The plans and studies components of the proposed project are statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262 in that they involve only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions which have not yet been approved, adopted or funded.

The data collection component of the proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the CEQA pursuant to 14 CCR Section 15306 in that it consists of basic data collection, research and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious major disturbance to

an environmental resource, and is for information gathering purposes or as part of a study leading to an action which a public agency has not yet approved, adopted or funded.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of this project.