

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

January 18, 2007

**SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WETLANDS RECOVERY PROJECT
LOCAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

File No. 97-001

Project Manager: Karen Bane

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Approve disbursement of up to \$650,000 to Environment Now to manage the Local Assistance Program of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP).

LOCATION: Coastal wetlands and watersheds from Point Conception in Santa Barbara County south to the international border with Mexico (Exhibit 1A).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: Overview of Local Assistance Program

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

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

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to six hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$650,000) to Environment Now to manage a wetlands restoration local assistance program as a component of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP), subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds, Environment Now shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program and budget, and the names and qualifications of any subcontractors that it intends to employ.”

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 the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 6 of the Public Resources Code (31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the guidelines and criteria set forth in the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted on January 24, 2001.
3. Environment Now is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization will provide a grant to Environment Now (EN) to manage the Local Assistance Program of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP). EN is a key partner in the WRP and has taken a leadership role in efforts to support and expand the WRP. In 1999, the Conservancy approved the original grant to EN to support increasing the participation of local agencies and community-based nonprofits. Since then, EN's role has grown to include management of the Small Grants Program and technical assistance for major wetland acquisition and restoration projects. Collectively, this suite of services is known as the Local Assistance Program.

The WRP began in 1997 as an initiative of state and federal agencies to better coordinate their efforts on wetlands issues in Southern California. Since then, participation in the WRP by local agencies and community based organizations has grown steadily. In the long-term, the WRP can only be successful if local communities recognize the value of their wetland and riparian resources and commit to their preservation and restoration. The participation of local partners is one of the greatest strengths of the WRP, and supporting their efforts must continue to be a priority for the WRP.

The Local Assistance Program has expanded the number and capacity of local organizations and individuals engaged in wetland protection and restoration. Accomplishments since 2004 are summarized in Exhibit 2. The program has three primary foci, including technical assistance, regional coordination, and public outreach.

Technical Assistance

The LAP provides technical assistance with development and implementation of wetland acquisition and restoration projects in Southern California. Each year the Small Grants Program awards funds to approximately 12 groups to build their capacity to conduct wetland restoration in their communities. Since 2001, LAP staff have assisted groups to complete 55 projects and several of these groups have advanced to larger wetland restoration projects. In addition, the WRP maintains a list of priority projects referred to as the Work Plan. Since 1997, more than \$500 million have been dedicated to Work Plan projects – 44 now complete and 74 in progress. The LAP staff began giving technical assistance to Work Plan project partners in 2003. With this proposed authorization, the LAP will expand its technical assistance function by proactively developing projects for important wetland resources that are not being addressed by other partners.

Regional Coordination

The LAP continually improves wetland restoration practice in the region by providing a venue for project proponents to work together and by offering training on technical issues.

- **County Task Forces:** The LAP supports five County Task Forces (CTF) to increase coordination among local agencies and between state and local partners. Each CTF is co-chaired by a county supervisor and a nonprofit leader and are open to anyone interested in coastal wetlands issues. Task Force meetings serve as a resource for restoration information including invasive species, wetlands restoration methodology and practice, salmonid species restoration, and wetland performance monitoring. In addition, the members identify potential projects and resolve issues impeding progress of wetland protection and recovery. Staff facilitates resolution of the issues by conducting research, making recommendations to agency and scientific partners, and sharing successes with other task forces. With the proposed authorization, EN will continue to help the CTFs identify and prioritize projects and resolve new restoration practice issues such as estimating and funding operations and maintenance.
- **Training:** The WRP staff identifies technical issues on which local partners need additional training in order to successfully implement WRP projects. In the past, topics have included permitting, environmental review, invasive species management, restoration design, and monitoring. Every other year, the Local Assistance Program puts on a Wetland Recovery Symposium to provide project partners with access to technical expertise. The Local Assistance Program also organizes technical workshops throughout the year and throughout the region, as topics are identified by the CTF. Efforts are made to offer workshops of regional significance multiple times throughout the region.

Public Outreach

The WRP Working Agreement identified two primary goals for public outreach: 1) create visibility, interest, and support for wetland conservation efforts in the region; and 2) ensure that community interests and concerns are taken into consideration in the planning, prioritizing, and implementing of WRP projects. The WRP's public involvement program is overseen by the Public Advisory Committee (PAC) and primarily carried out by the five CTFs. Through the Local Assistance Program, EN provides staff support to the PAC and CTFs. Due to the nature of the work it is critical that the staff of the public outreach program is located in Southern California to maximize its extensive contacts in the region.

EN is a private nonprofit environmental organization whose mission is to protect, preserve, and restore the environment. One of its five core goals is to protect and restore coastal habitats. Facilitating the work of the WRP has become an integral part of EN's coastal restoration program. Key contributions of EN to the WRP include managing the public participation program, and developing and managing the Small Grants Program, and building a wetland technical assistance program for local partners. The proposed authorization will combine all of these efforts into one cohesive program to further the goals of the WRP.

Site Description: The project area for the WRP is the coastal wetlands and watersheds from Point Conception in Santa Barbara County to the International Border with Mexico. Southern

California's bays, marshes and estuaries are among the most productive and densely populated habitats on the Pacific coast. Coastal wetlands are nursery areas for both commercial and recreational fisheries, such as halibut. South coast wetlands are also important to migratory birds traveling on the Pacific Flyway.

Prior to the 1800's, southern California contained rivers with wide, unobstructed floodplains that were fed by numerous tributaries and flowed freely to the sea. All of the river systems supported large estuaries at their mouths with a diversity of wetland habitats that transitioned from salt marsh habitat to brackish and freshwater marsh to riparian habitat. Riparian vegetation consisting of cottonwood, alder, willow and freshwater marsh species lined most of the coastal rivers and creeks. In addition, vernal pools were found in scattered locations throughout the region. This mosaic of marsh and riparian habitats existed for thousands of years.

Over the past 150 years, Southern California coastal wetlands and watersheds have been dramatically altered or destroyed by human activities. Most of the riparian areas of the region's coastal rivers and streams have been lost. Rivers and creeks have been rerouted, dammed, channelized, and paved. Wetlands have been filled. Important freshwater and salt water inputs to coastal wetlands have been altered. Few estuaries are open to the necessary tidal influence. The overall general health and integrity of the region's watersheds and wetland habitats has declined

The loss and degradation of the region's wetland ecosystems is reflected in the significant decline in the abundance of several species of fishes, shorebirds, seabirds, kelp habitats, and the supply of food observed since 1950. Southern steelhead trout, for example, have been reduced in the past century from tens of thousands in number to approximately 200 to 300 (Pacific Marine Fisheries Council 2000). It is estimated that 55 percent of the animals and 25 percent of the plants designated as threatened or endangered by the State depend on wetland habitats.

Project History:

The WRP is a partnership of federal, state, and local agencies, business leaders, and environmental organizations working together to implement a regional strategy for wetlands recovery in Southern California. The Coastal Conservancy serves as lead agency and primary fiscal agent for the WRP, providing overall guidance and staff support for the Governing Board, Wetlands Managers Group, and project implementation. Since its inception in 1997, the WRP through its member agencies, local agencies and nonprofit partners, has acquired almost 6,585 acres and restored or enhanced 800 acres of wetlands and associated habitats. More than \$500 million have been dedicated to WRP projects, including \$330 million in state funds, \$30 million in federal funds, and \$147 million in local and private funds. Of that amount, approximately \$122 million of this has been provided by the Coastal Conservancy. There are currently 74 projects on the Work Plan, with an estimated cost of over \$350 million.

The WRP Working Agreement signed by the 17 partner agencies recognized the importance of participation by local agencies and community groups. The WRP has initiated several programs to nurture local participation, including: creating wetlands task forces in each of the five coastal counties to increase coordination among local agencies and between state and local partners; adding task force representatives to the WRP Managers Group to provide local participants with a greater voice in WRP policy-making; initiating the small grants program to build local capacity and community involvement; and creating a wetlands restoration local assistance program to

empower local partners in their efforts to preserve and restore coastal wetlands and watersheds in Southern California.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$650,000
Earth Island Institute	500,000
NOAA’s Community-based Habitat Restoration Partnership Grant (applied)	223,000
USEPA Targeted Watershed (applied)	748,000
Total Project Cost	\$2,121,000

The intended source of Conservancy funds is monies appropriated to the Conservancy from Proposition 40, the “California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002.” Allowable uses under this legislation include acquisition, restoration, and protection of land and water resources in accordance with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation. The proposed project will further the WRP’s efforts to acquire, restore, and enhance coastal wetland and coastal watersheds in Southern California. Therefore, the project is consistent with the purposes of the funding source.

The LAP is implementing a strategy to diversify funding sources and leverage Conservancy funds. Recently, a grant application was submitted to NOAA for the Community-based Habitat Restoration Partnership Grant that would provide funding for WRP projects and technical assistance from the LAP. Also, a grant application was submitted to USEPA’s Targeted Watershed Capacity Building grant program.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed authorization will assist the Conservancy in meeting its purposes and objectives under Section 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code by facilitating the identification, prioritization, planning and implementation of wetland restoration and enhancement opportunities in Southern California’s coastal zone.

Consistent with Section 31254, the proposed authorization will request assistance from local agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other members of the public on the development of priorities for coastal resource enhancement projects in Southern California. Consistent with Section 31255, the Local Partners Program will solicit proposals for resource enhancement projects from local agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other members of the public.

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

The proposed authorization will further efforts to implement the WRP’s Regional Strategy for wetlands restoration. This work will help to further several of the Coastal Conservancy’s Strategic Plan goals, including: Goal 4 – Acquire Significant Coastal Resource Properties; Goal 5, Objective A – Preserve, restore and enhance coastal habitats; Goal 5, Objective B – Implement projects to preserve and restore habitat corridors; Goal 5, Objective C – Implement projects to eradicate non-native invasive species; Goal 6, Objective A – Develop plans and projects that

preserve and restore coastal watersheds and create river parkways; and Goal 6, Objective B – Complete plans or projects to improve water quality.

**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 Wetlands Recovery Project is a partnership 17 state and federal agencies working in concert with local governments, business leaders, and environmental organizations. Its efforts to develop and implement a regional strategy for wetlands recovery in Southern California enjoy broad support from both the public and private sector. Supervisors from each of the five coastal counties participate on the PAC. In addition, over one hundred agencies and organizations participate on the county task forces.
4. **Location:** The WRP region includes the coastal wetlands and watersheds from Point Conception in Santa Barbara County south to the international border with Mexico (Exhibit 1A). Portions of this regional are outside the coastal zone. Some of the key ways that WRP efforts outside of the coastal zone benefit coastal resources include improving coastal water quality, preserving and restoring stream corridors from the coast to inland areas, and providing additional nesting and foraging habitat for coastal-dependent species.
5. **Need:** Environment Now does not have the financial resources to manage this project without Coastal Conservancy funding. The Coastal Conservancy serves as the primary fiscal agent for the WRP and is responsible for funding its ongoing management.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** One of the primary reasons for creating the Wetlands Recovery Project was to coordinate wetland acquisition and restoration projects on a regional basis in order to avoid fragmented and piecemeal efforts. The proposed authorization will further the WRP's efforts to develop and implement a regional wetland strategy. The importance of Southern California wetlands is discussed in the "Site Description" section above.

Additional Criteria

7. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above. In addition, it is expected that by increasing the participation of local partners in wetlands recovery projects in Southern California, Conservancy funding of WRP projects will be leveraged by an increased contribution of local funding and in-kind assistance. In addition, the proposed program will help local partners to identify other likely sources of federal, state, local, and private funds for these projects.

8. **Innovation:** Through its public involvement and local assistance programs, the WRP has developed a unique and highly effective way to integrate federal, state, and local efforts to restore coastal wetlands and watersheds in Southern California. The WRP's structure, with the Public Advisory Committee and County Task Forces, has become a model for other efforts in California, as well as other states.
9. **Readiness:** EN is ready to implement the program immediately.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** "See "Project History" above."
11. **Cooperation:** The Wetlands Recovery Project is a model of cooperation between public and private partners, as well as between federal, state, and local interests. The program has integrated disparate planning and restoration efforts throughout the Southern California into a coordinated, regional effort. It is a model for cooperative regional partnerships throughout the state.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed authorization 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, as provided in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15378.