

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 20, 2007

**BILINGUAL RIP CURRENT AND STEEP BEACH SIGNS**

File No. 07-052-01  
Project Manager: Deborah Hirst

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$21,925 to Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods to produce and distribute for posting 725 ocean safety warning signs and outreach materials in Spanish and English for local, state and federally managed beaches in Sonoma County and Statewide.

**LOCATION:** Coastal Beaches in Sonoma County and Statewide (Exhibit 1)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Access

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map: Sonoma County and Coast of California](#)

Exhibit 2: [Steep Beach Warning Sign in Spanish and English](#)

Exhibit 3: [Rip Current Warning Sign in Spanish and English](#)

Exhibit 4: [California State Parks 2006 Aquatic Safety Report Statistics](#)

Exhibit 5: [Helicopter Rescue at Portuguese Beach](#)

Exhibit 6: [Letters of Support](#)

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31409 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed twenty-one thousand, nine hundred twenty-five dollars (\$21,925) to Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods (Stewards) to produce and distribute for posting 725 ocean safety warning signs and outreach materials in Spanish and English for local, state and federally managed beaches in Sonoma County and Statewide, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of funds, Stewards shall submit for the written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget, names of any contractors it intends to employ for the project and a plan to acknowledge the Conservancy and

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Proposition 40 funding.”

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 authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501 (c)(3) of the IRS code whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

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### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to twenty-one thousand nine hundred twenty-five dollars (\$21,925) to Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods to produce and distribute for posting 725 ocean safety warning signs and outreach materials in Spanish and English for local, state and federally managed beaches in Sonoma County and Statewide.

The proposed project will provide for statewide use of Spanish and English versions of both a Sonoma area designed “steep beach” warning sign, and a “rip current” warning sign developed for a pilot project funded by California Sea Grant Extension (Exhibits 2 and 3). The rip current warning sign alerts the public to the danger of and technique to escape rip currents. Drownings and rescues are frequently reported along the coast and rivers in Sonoma County and across the state (Exhibit 4, California Department of Parks Aquatic Safety Report 2006 Statistics). Locals as well as visitors can be taken off-guard by the steep beaches, rip currents and sleeper waves that characterize the coast, but are belied by tranquil ocean views and seemingly safe public access locations. Ocean drownings are preventable, particularly those where beach users underestimate dangers due to lack of ocean hazard signs or English only signs. Tragically, rescue attempts can also lead to death as was the case recently when an off-duty fireman lost his life while attempting to save a distressed swimmer at Portuguese Beach in Sonoma (Exhibit 5).

The project will fund the construction of 250 rip current signs in English and 175 in Spanish for state beaches and 50 in each language for federally and locally managed beaches. The project will also provide 75 steep beach signs in each language for state beaches and 25 in each language for federal and local beaches. Sonoma Coast State Beach will also receive 100 pads of ¼ page tear-off flyers for distribution by State Parks rangers, docents and lifeguards for this bilingual safety effort at the coast and in the Russian River area. State Parks will provide additional staff support for beach outreach and sign installation at Sonoma Coast State Beach. Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods will work with project partners to distribute the signs to local managing agencies and

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those agencies will post the signs at sites as needed for beaches in all coastal counties of the state.

Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with the mission of promoting education, preservation and restoration of the natural and cultural resources of Russian River area state parks in partnership with the California Department of Parks and Recreation. SCR has partnered with DPR in providing the Willow Creek Docent Program with funding support from the Conservancy.

### **Site Description:**

California's roughly 1,200 miles of coastline offers hundreds of local, state and federally managed coastal beaches. Partnering with local lifeguards and managing agencies, SCR will work with University of California Sea Grant Extension and California Department of Parks and Recreation to distribute and post signs at coastal beaches across the state. Particular attention will be made by the local agencies to sign hazardous areas known to have dangerous rip current and steep beach conditions. Signs will be affixed to existing posts or structures such as lifeguard towers, where possible, and placed along established beach access walkways and entrances from parking lots.

### **Project History:**

A concerned citizen contacted the State Parks' Sonoma Coast Advisory Committee after the drowning of a Spanish-speaking visitor took place on Sonoma Coast State Beach in 2006. The California State Parks' Aquatic Safety Report provides annual statistics on the high number of rescues occurring at ocean beaches statewide as well as the annual loss of life due to drownings on the coast (Exhibit 4). In 2006, there were 8,606 rip current related rescues made, a large increase over 4,494 rip tide rescues in 2005. Nearly 600 other swimming related rescues took place last year and a total of 21 people drown. Concern for the death of the Spanish-speaking visitor in Sonoma and that other deaths could be prevented led into a nearly year-long review of existing coastal signs and a recommendation for a more graphically universal version in Sonoma County.

The Committee's research on existing signs and potential improvements led to input from a number of partners including a State Parks, Sonoma County Public Health and University of California Sea Grant Extension. UCSGE was in the process of developing plans for a statewide signing project focused specifically on rip currents warnings in English and Spanish. An initial project by UCSGE has successfully begun posting Spanish language rip current warning signs in Baja, southern California and Sonoma County. On finding common goals, the Committee worked with a local designer who developed a more readily understood steep beach sign pro bono, and is working with UCSGE to collaboratively post both rip current and steep beach ocean hazard warning signs.

The proposed project is an effort to complete the production and distribution of the rip current sign and the steep beach sign in Spanish and English to be posted by local

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agencies at ocean beaches throughout the state. The Conservancy has recognized the need for bi-lingual Spanish outreach materials on water safety in the past and provided funding to support the development of the Spanish and English language signs, maps and pamphlets on safe recreation on the Russian River in Sonoma.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$21,925
California Sea Grant Extension	\$15,280
California Parks and Recreation Department	\$10,830
Willow Creek Designs (In-Kind)	\$ 4,200
Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods	<u>\$ 1,025</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$53,260</b>

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to derive from the Conservancy’s FY2003/04 appropriation from Proposition 40 (the “California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks, and Coastal Protection Act of 2002”). Proposition 40 authorizes the use of these funds for the purpose of development of land and water resources in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. As discussed in the section found immediately below, the proposed project, which serves to appropriately develop and improve beach resources so that they are safe for the public, is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21. Proposition 40 also requires the Conservancy to give priority to grant projects with matching funds. The proposed project is supported by a commitment of matching funds and in-kind services from a number of sources.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400 et seq.) of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline.

Section 314000 acknowledges the principal role the Legislature has assigned to the Conservancy in implementing a system of public accessways along the coast of California. To accomplish this objective, Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award a grant to any local public agency or nonprofit organization to develop and manage lands for public access to and along the coast. The proposed project is consistent with this section as the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods is a nonprofit organization working with public agencies to improve the safe management of lands for public access along the coast, in both Sonoma County and statewide.

In addition, pursuant Section 31400.3, the Conservancy is authorized “to provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the

objectives of this division.” Consistent with this section, the proposed project will assist a nonprofit organization, and partner public agencies in developing improved safety for coastal access in the system of accessways at Sonoma Coast State Beach and additional beaches statewide through installation of Spanish and English ocean hazard warning signs and outreach.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:**

Consistent with **Goal 2 - Objective A:** the proposed project will support the improvement of public accessways and coastal parks in coordination with other state and local agencies and a nonprofit partner, Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods, by installing rip current and steep beach warning signs in Spanish and English.

Consistent with **Goal 2 - Objective D:** the proposed project will enhance coastal recreation opportunities by safely directing coastal visitors away from steep beaches and potential rip current locations by installing ocean hazard signs in Spanish and English statewide and enabling docents, lifeguards and State Parks' Rangers to communicate ocean safety information with flyers and person-to-person outreach at Sonoma Coast State Beach.

**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:** Regional public agency partners and the Sonoma Coast Advisory Committee of State Parks have provided input for this project. Letters of support for the project are included in Exhibit 6.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located on Sonoma Coast Beach State Park and additional state, local and federally managed beaches along the coast of California.
5. **Need:** The proposed project fills a need identified by the participants of the Sonoma Coast Advisory Committee of State Parks. Absent Conservancy funding, the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods will be unable to proceed with the project.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The project area includes the highly visited resources at the Sonoma Coast Beach State Parks and additional beach access locations throughout the state. The project will benefit local residents as well as visitors from throughout California, nationally and abroad.

**Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** The need to prevent additional deaths by drowning along the coast of California is urgent, particularly for those who might be saved with the addition of Spanish language warnings. The proposed project will provide outreach and ocean hazard warning signs in Spanish and English to alert visitors of steep beaches and the means to escape rip currents up and down the state.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project provides a coordinated approach for improving safe coastal access across local, state and federally managed beaches and addressing concerns for bilingual outreach for the Spanish-speaking population.
9. **Leverage:** The Conservancy's contribution to this project is leveraged by funding from partner organizations and agencies, as discussed in the "Project History" section above.
10. **Readiness:** Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods and its partners have begun to implement initial sign posting efforts in Orange, San Diego and Sonoma Counties and are ready to expand the sign project at Sonoma Coast Beach State Park and other coastal parks statewide.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.
12. **Cooperation:** The project involves the cooperation of a Sonoma County nonprofit organization, California Department of State Parks, and University of California Sea Grant Extension to coordinate outreach and sign posting in Sonoma and statewide.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

Consistent with Section 30210 of the Coastal Act, "maximum access and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people, consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from over use," the proposed project will enhance public safety at coastal access locations by alerting visitors to steep beach and rip current dangers where necessary in all coastal counties. The proposed project will be conducted at beaches in the jurisdictions of corresponding local coastal programs of the cities and counties along the coast. Local coastal programs are prepared and adopted to implement the Coastal Act, including Section 30210. The proposed project is consistent with the local coastal program policies protecting public access and safe use of natural resources.

For example, the project will complete signing at Sonoma Coast State Beach located in

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the coastal zone in Sonoma County and is subject to the jurisdiction of the County of Sonoma's Local Coastal Program (Certified June 1982, Amended December 2001). The proposed project is consistent with the Recreation Section of the Local Coastal Program which refers to maximizing public coastal access and recommending improvements to minimize hazards for public safety at County accessways (Section V, Accessway Criteria).

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project involves the production and distribution of signs. Standing alone, the production and distribution of signs would have no appreciable effect on the environment. The public entities that manage the beaches on which the signs will be placed will select the sign locations. Nonetheless, the placement of the signs is the overall objective of the proposed project and should be considered under CEQA.

The signs will be posted at local, state and federally managed beach accesses and will not be placed in sensitive habitat along the beaches. The twelve inch by eighteen inch signs will be affixed to existing posts or structures such as lifeguard towers, where possible, and otherwise placed along established beach access walkways and entrances from parking lots. That being the case, the proposed project is categorically exempt from CEQA review pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15301, which exempts "minor alteration of existing public . . . facilities, involving negligible or no expansion of use beyond that existing at the time of the lead agency's determination". To illustrate the type of minor alterations covered, Section 15301 provides a non-exclusive list of *types* of exempt projects to which the exemption applies. Included in this list are projects involving the "addition of safety or health protection devices for use . . . in conjunction with existing facilities" (Section 15301(f)). The placement of warning signs on existing public beach facilities is akin to the addition of devices needed to protect public health and safety. Each has as its object the protection of public health and safety and each involves only minor alterations of an existing facility. As placement of the warning signs involves only minor alteration to the existing public beachfronts, that aspect of the proposed project is exempt under Section 15301.

Staff will file a notice of exemption upon Conservancy approval.