

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 5, 2008

BALLONA WETLANDS EARLY ACTION PLAN

File No. 04-088
Project Manager: Mary Small

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$175,000 to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority to complete final design and permit applications for the implementation access and interpretive improvements identified in the Ballona Wetlands Early Action Plan, Los Angeles County.

LOCATION: Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve, located 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 (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement and Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 2: [Gateway and Trail Improvements South of Ballona Creek](#)

Exhibit 3: [Gateway and Trail Improvements North of Ballona Creek](#)

Exhibit 4: [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 an amount not to exceed one hundred seventy five thousand dollars (\$175,000) to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) to complete final design and permit applications for the implementation access and interpretive improvements identified in the Ballona Wetlands Early Action Plan. Prior to disbursement of any funds, MRCA shall submit to the Conservancy’s Executive Officer for approval a work plan, including budget, and any contractors MRCA proposes to use for the project.”

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 Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding System of Public Accessways.
3. The project serves greater than local need.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed project would provide a grant to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) to complete final design, environmental review and permit applications for projects identified in the Ballona Wetlands Early Action Plan. The projects included in this plan will improve public access and increase interpretive and educational opportunities at the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve (BWER). Currently, the access to the BWER is limited to individuals or groups with permission access letters from the Department of Fish and Game (DFG), the landowner. When implemented, the improvements planned through this project would allow the site to be opened to the general public.

Most of the proposed projects are on the perimeter of the wetlands and improve the interface between the wetlands and adjacent land uses. All of the actions proposed are consistent with all of the alternatives for physical restoration of the site that are currently being evaluated in a restoration feasibility study.

Gateway Entrance and Trail Improvements South of Ballona Creek

The main entrance to BWER is located at a dirt parking lot at the southwestern corner of the site. The lot is behind Gordon’s Market on Culver Boulevard in Playa del Rey. The current parking lot is unimproved and unpaved; it generates dust in the summer and has impassible mud holes during the rainy season (Exhibit 2). Spaces are not delineated and there is no signage indicating that the lot is owned by the DFG. Between the parking lot and the wetlands there is a chain link fence which is in need of replacement.

Groups that access this part of the BWER for educational programs, enter the through a gate at the corner of the lot. This entrance receives some of the heaviest usage of the entire BWER. Approximately 300 - 400 people per week utilize this location for access into the wetlands. Individuals and groups that have formal approval to enter the wetlands, use this access point for educational, scientific and restoration projects.

The Early Action Plan proposes improving the existing parking lot and creating a public staging area. The existing trail, approximately one half mile long, from the Gordon’s parking lot to an overlook platform in the wetlands, would also be improved to meet accessibility standards. This is one of the best sites to view the resources of the BWER. The proposed project will complete final design, environmental evaluation and permit applications for these trail improvements. The trail may need to be re-graded with decomposed granite or improved with a wooden boardwalk to improve access. The specific elements that will be designed and evaluated, are as follows:

- Reconfigure existing parking lot to increase planted areas and improve circulation, including new permeable paving, vegetated swales, and shade planting.

- Design new gateway signage to span vehicular entrance to parking area.
- Create new staging and drop-off area with seating, signage, bicycle racks, trash cans as needed.
- Locate and site portable restrooms.
- Improve existing trail from parking area to the wooden overlook to comply with accessibility standards and prevent impacts to sensitive areas.
- Replace or relocate fencing and gates, add new lockable gate.
- Provide new directional, regulatory, funding, and interpretive signage.

Gateway Entrance and Trail Improvements North of Ballona Creek

The proposed location of a second gateway entrance to the site is at the northwestern most edge of the BWER, along Fiji Way in the County of Los Angeles. This entrance is located directly from the Fisherman's Village in Marina del Rey. This entrance is adjacent to the heavily used Coastal Bike Trail which extends from Will Rogers State Beach to Torrance and the Ballona Creek Bike Path. There is currently no public use of this area of the BWER, though there is a chain-link access gate and dirt area used by Southern California Gas Co. for operations and maintenance of its wells. An Aerial photo of this site and concept plans for its improvement are provided in Exhibit 3.

This site presents a significant opportunity to allow visitors visual access into the wetlands and to create a short trail that links to the Ballona Creek Bike Path. Gateway improvements to be designed and evaluated include:

- New parking area for two ADA-compliant parking spaces, turn-around space for a mid-size van, and permeable surfacing.
- Bicycle parking.
- New perimeter fencing around staging area, installation of a new lockable security gate, and new pedestrian gate.
- Limited plant restoration, and brush clearance around parking area.
- New directional, gateway, regulatory, and interpretive signage.
- New elevated viewing platform.
- Improve existing roads to accommodate pedestrians and including grading, clearing, fencing and edging as needed to create a trail linkage to the Ballona Creek Bike Path.
- New gate and entrance to the site from the Ballona Creek Bike Path.

Signage

The final element of the Early Action Plan is design of signs at and around the BWER to increase public understanding and awareness of the wetlands. This project will fund final design of entrance signs at the two gateways described above and interpretive signage at those gateways and along the Ballona Creek Bike Path. If approved, this grant will complement a River Parkway grant to MRCA to design interpretive signs along the Ballona Creek Bike Path upstream of the BWER. In addition, a single, large sign that identifies the BWER will be designed to be visible from the roads traversing the wetlands.

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority) is a local government entity established in 1985 pursuant to the Joint Powers Act. The MRCA is a partnership between the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which is a state agency, and the Conejo Recreation and Park District and the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District, both of which are local park agencies established by the vote of the people in those communities. The MRCA is dedicated to the preservation and management of local open space and parkland, watershed lands, trails, and wildlife habitat. The MRCA manages and provides ranger services for almost 50,000 acres of public lands and parks that it owns and that are owned by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy or other agencies and provides comprehensive education and interpretation programs for the public. Most recently, the MRCA has provided rangers to assist with the management of the BWER. MRCA is also working in partnership with the Baldwin Hills Conservancy to design and build new pocket parks along the Ballona Creek Bike Path, upstream of the BWER.

Site Description:

The historic wetland complex at the mouth of Ballona Creek probably occupied about 2000-acres. Much of that area has been developed. The State of California now owns 600-acres of the former wetland complex. The DFG 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. All of the DFG property and a portion of the SLC property is part of the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve, designated by the Fish and Game Commission.

Despite the degradation of site resources, 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 thirty 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 in 2004. 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. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Conservancy provided funding for planning and implementation of enhancements to the

nearby Ballona Lagoon and transferred to the City of Los Angeles easements for resource enhancement over much of the land bordering the Lagoon.

In 2005, the Conservancy initiated conceptual planning and feasibility analysis of restoration alternatives for the property. This project is being implemented in partnership with the Department of Fish and Game and the State Lands Commission, the two state agency owners of the property. The feasibility analysis is nearly complete and detailed engineering as well as environmental impact analysis will begin this year. Staff is also recommending authorization of funding for additional data collection to support the long-term restoration plan at this meeting.

When the restoration planning began, the Conservancy funded the development of an Interim Site Stewardship Plan to address the pressing concerns related to site management. Many of the projects proposed in the Ballona Early Action Plan were identified in that plan. Throughout the Ballona Creek Watershed, the Conservancy has approved several grants for projects that help implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan, including water quality improvement projects and trail enhancements.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$175,000
MRCA	<u>100,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$275,000

The Conservancy funding would be derived from an appropriation of funds specifically designated for the acquisition, protection and enhancement 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:

The proposed project would be consistent with Division 21, Chapter 9, Sections 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code, which directs the Conservancy to take a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways so that the public can exercise its right to access and enjoy the coastal resources. Consistent with Section 31400.1, the Conservancy may award grants to public agencies to develop accessways that sever greater than local public needs. The proposed project will benefit more than local public access, as described below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective A** of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop plans for improvements to open a currently inaccessible area, including designs for making a trail comply with accessibility standards.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 20, 2007, 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. This project is supported by the Department of Fish and Game and its letter of support is 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 complete this project. Neither MRCA or the Department of Fish and Game, the owner of the site, have resources to complete this planning.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project is adjacent to the both the regional Ballona Creek Bike Path and the Coastal Bike Trail. The nearby Dockweiler State Beach receives approximately three million visitors each year. Currently, visitors to this area can not access the Ballona Wetlands and there is no interpretive signage to inform them about the resources of the area. The proposed project will help open this site for public access and improve a valuable and scenic open space in the heart of congested Los Angeles County. The project complements the restoration of the Ballona Wetlands, currently the largest wetland restoration project being planned in Los Angeles County.

Additional Criteria

7. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will seek to improve public access to a restricted area while protecting the natural resources of the BWER. The project will focus access to already disturbed areas, improve the use of existing staging areas to reduce the overall footprint and will design improvements to protect adjacent resources.
8. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
9. **Readiness:** If approved, the MRCA can begin work immediately.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** "See "Project History" above."
11. **Cooperation:** The Ballona Wetlands Early Action Plan was developed in consultation with numerous nonprofit organizations that are interested in the BWER. It has also been reviewed by DFG, SLC and many other agencies, including the Coastal Commission.

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. This project will collect information needed to apply for a Coastal Development Permit for the implementation of the proposed improvements.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Under 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262, feasibility and planning activities are statutorily exempt from California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Similarly, 14 CCR Section 15306 categorically 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 this project.