

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

January 20, 2011

**SEA OTTER RECOVERY PROJECT  
COASTAL CONTAMINANTS AND ANTHROPOGENIC STRESSORS STUDY**

Project No. 08-079-01

Project Manager: Trish Chapman

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to augment the Conservancy's December 3, 2009, authorization by \$164,000 to the Regents of the University of California, Santa Cruz Campus, for study of coastal contaminants and anthropogenic stressors on southern sea otters, in Monterey County.

**LOCATION:** Southern Monterey Bay and near shore waters off the Big Sur coast, Monterey County, California (Exhibit 1: Project Location Map).

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Coastal and Marine Resources

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [December 3, 2009 Staff Recommendation](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31220, *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby amends its December 3, 2009 authorization to authorize the disbursement of up to an additional one hundred sixty four thousand dollars (\$164,000) to the Regents of the University of California, Santa Cruz Campus (UCSC), to continue a study to identify the impacts of coastal contaminants and anthropogenic stressors on southern sea otter recovery, subject to the condition that, prior to the disbursement of these additional funds, UCSC shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a revised work program, including scope of work, budget and schedule.”

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:

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1. The proposed project remains consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
  2. The proposed authorization remains consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Coastal and Marine Resource Protection and with the resolutions, findings and discussion of the accompanying the Conservancy authorization of December 3, 2009, attached as Exhibit 2.”
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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The proposed augmentation would provide funding to complete the third and final year of a study investigating the impact of coastal contaminants and anthropogenic (human-caused) stressors on southern sea otters (also known as California sea otters) and identifying factors preventing population growth. The study is summarized briefly below and discussed in greater detail in Exhibit 2.

Once thought to be extinct, a small group of southern sea otters was re-discovered off the Big Sur coast in 1938. Since then, various protective measures, including the listing of the southern sea otter as threatened on the federal endangered species list, have been implemented, allowing the population to expand to about 2,700 animals. In recent years, however, population growth has stagnated, with no recorded increases since 2004.

The reasons for the stagnation of the southern sea otter population are unknown. To help identify factors that might be contributing to this phenomenon, and utilizing monies from the tax check-off Sea Otter Recovery Program, in September, 2008 the Conservancy approved a grant to UCSC to carry out a study focused on coastal contaminants and anthropogenic stressors that may be inhibiting population growth. The study involves capturing otters, collecting vital biological information, implanting radio tagging devices, and then monitoring otters' movement and behavior through the radio tags. If radio transmitters signal mortality, the body is collected and analyzed to identify factors contributing to the animal's death.

The third and final year of the study will continue the monitoring of otters and will also involve recapture of otters and removal of the radio tags. Researchers will also be compiling and analyzing the data, and developing findings regarding the impacts of coastal contaminants and anthropogenic stressors on southern sea otters.

As a sentinel species in the marine food chain, sea otters reflect the overall health of the environment they inhabit. While the primary focus of the study is the support of a more vigorous sea otter recovery, it is likely that any management strategies developed as the result of this study will improve the overall marine environment of California's central coast.

UCSC operates the Long Marine Lab and will continue to utilize this resource for data analyses and other aspects of the study. The study team consists of experts in ecology, evolutionary biology and marine wildlife and includes researchers from both U.C. Santa Cruz and U.C. Davis, as well as the Department of Fish & Game, the U.S. Geological Survey and the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

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**Site Description:** See Exhibit 2.

**Project History:** See Exhibit 2

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b> (this authorization)	164,000
Coastal Conservancy (December 3, 2009 authorization)	94,250
Coastal Conservancy (Phase I authorization, September 2008)	224,980
<b>Subtotal Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$483,230</b>
<b>Others Funders</b> (Phase I and II)	
U.S. Geological Survey	\$280,000
Department of Fish and Game	150,000
Monterey Bay Aquarium	320,000
U.C. Davis	35,000
National Science Foundation	50,000
<b>Subtotal Other Funders</b>	<b>\$835,000</b>
<b>Total Project Costs</b>	<b>\$1,318,230</b>

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for this project is the fiscal year 2010-2011 appropriation from the California Sea Otter Fund. Established in 2006, the California Sea Otter Fund is an income tax check-off program allowing taxpayers to dedicate funds to facilitate sea otter recovery. The funds may be used for research and programs related to improving the near-shore ocean ecosystem, including, but not limited to program activities to reduce sea otter mortality. Funds may also be used to address pathogens that may be harming sea otters, as well as water treatment technologies. (Revenue & Tax Code Section 18752(c)). This project is consistent with the requirements of the California Sea Otter Fund in that it will focus on the impact of contaminants and other anthropogenic stressors on southern sea otters in order to identify management strategies to counter such impacts.

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

The proposed project remains consistent with the Conservancy's Enabling Legislation as described in the December 3, 2009 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

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

The proposed project remains consistent with the Conservancy's Strategic Plan goals and objectives as described in the December 3, 2009 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

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

The proposed project remains consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines as described in the December 3, 2009 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

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

The proposed project remains consistent with the local watershed management plan and State Water Quality Control Plan as described in the December 3, 2009 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project remains categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations § 15306, which exempts basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious major disturbance to an environmental resource as part of a study leading to an action which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted or funded. This project will not result in a major disturbance to sea otters as evidenced by the review process outlined below.

Although the southern sea otter is a federally listed threatened species, the relevant regulatory agencies have determined that this research study will not result in a serious major disturbance to the animal; and thus the exception to CEQA Category 6 exemptions such as 14 Cal Code Regs. § 15306, does not apply in this case. The wildlife agencies have approved all necessary permits for the project to proceed. Specifically, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has issued a "Recovery Permit" for this study, which allows the capturing, handling, instrumentation, bio-sampling and observation of wild sea otters. The USFWS considers the permit issuance to qualify for a categorical exclusion under the National Environmental Protection Act, per Department of Interior Guidelines. See 43 C.F.R. § 46.210(e).

Upon approval, staff will file a notice of exemption.