

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 22, 2011

HUNTINGTON BEACH WETLANDS EXHIBITS AND ACCESS TRAIL

Project No. 11-040-01
Project Manager: Greg Gauthier

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorize disbursement of up to \$750,000 to the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy to construct interpretive exhibits for the Huntington Beach Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center and to prepare the design and permit applications for an access trail and interpretive elements at the Huntington Beach Wetlands Magnolia Marsh in Orange County.

LOCATION: Huntington Beach Wetlands in Orange County (Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Urban Waterfront Restoration and Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Interpretive Master Plan](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Huntington Beach Wetlands Map](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [Magnolia Marsh Observation Deck and Boat Launch Image](#)
 - Exhibit 5: [Project Letters](#)
-

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31300-31316 and 31400-31409 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed \$750,000 (seven hundred fifty thousand dollars) to the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy to construct interpretive exhibits for the Huntington Beach Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center and to prepare the design and permit applications for an access trail and interpretive elements at the Huntington Beach Wetlands Magnolia Marsh in Orange County, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds, the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the

Conservancy:

- a. A work program, including project schedule and budget, and the names of any contractors to be employed on the project; and
 - b. For construction work, evidence that all permits and approvals necessary to implement the work have been obtained.
2. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining at the project site a sign or signs, the design, placement and duration of which shall be approved by the Executive Officer.
 3. The Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy shall enter into an agreement consistent with Section 31116(c) of the Public Resources Code, to protect the public's interest in the constructed improvements at the project site and to provide for maintenance of the project.
 4. To the extent appropriate, the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy shall ensure that the final design of the access trail and interpretive elements at the Huntington Beach Wetlands Magnolia Marsh are consistent with the Conservancy's 'Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development' and all applicable federal and state statutes, regulations and guidelines for disabled access."

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 Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines last updated by the Conservancy on June 4, 2009.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapters 7 and 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding restoration of urban waterfronts and the establishment of a system of public accessways to and along the California Coast.
3. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.
4. The Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code, whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed project will authorize disbursement of up to \$750,000 (seven hundred fifty thousand dollars) to the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy (HBWC) to construct interpretive exhibits for the Huntington Beach Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center and to prepare the design and permit applications for an access trail and interpretive elements at the Huntington Beach Wetlands Magnolia Marsh in Orange County.

With funding assistance from the Conservancy and the Wildlife Conservation Board, the HBWC in 2007 constructed a 4,400-square-foot facility that features a fully equipped wildlife hospital, administrative offices, and an education and interpretive center with the capacity to

accommodate more than 100 visitors. In 2008 the Acorn Group, under direction of HBWC, prepared an Interpretive Master Plan (Exhibit 2) for the visitor center with displays focused on teaching about caring for wetlands and native wildlife. Since completion of the visitor center master plan, HBWC has worked to refine conceptual design and raise funding for the various exhibit and interpretive elements of the wetlands center. The proposed project will complete final design, construction and installation of the exhibits rendering the space available for educational programs and public meetings.

The second component of the proposed project will prepare design specifications and permit applications for an access trail and interpretive elements around Magnolia Marsh immediately adjacent to the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center. Magnolia Marsh, one of four major areas of wetlands that make up the Huntington Beach Wetlands complex, was reconnected to tidal influence in March 2010. Restoration of Magnolia Marsh is ongoing with an on-site native plant nursery and a volunteer program to install and nurture native plant communities around and throughout the marsh.

A preliminary conceptual design for the access trail was completed in April 2006 as part of the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conceptual Restoration Plan. The trail is planned to run along the perimeter of the Marsh and be constructed of decomposed granite or compacted earth and sections of boardwalk. The walkway will be designed to minimize, to the greatest extent possible, impacts to jurisdictional wetlands and non-wetland resources via placement of the walkway primarily within disturbed coastal dune habitat and other disturbed upland habitat.

In June 2010 Merkel & Associates, Inc. prepared a biological impact report memo for the proposed public walkway at Magnolia Marsh for Moffatt and Nichol, the lead consulting firm on the restoration planning. The purpose of the memo was to address the proposed trail alignment in relation to adjacent habitats in support of permit applications for installation of the public walkway. During the field survey a patch of approximately 100 individuals of coast woolly-heads (*Nemacaulis denudata* var. *denudata*), a California Native Plant Society (CNPS) List 1B.2 species was found located within the dune community along Pacific Coast Highway. List 1B.2 species are rare, threatened, or endangered in California and elsewhere per CNPS. The presence of coast woolly-heads will be taken into account during trail design.

The trail will be designed in compliance with applicable federal and state statutes, regulations and guidelines for disabled access, including the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that was established in 1985, and is uniquely qualified and appropriate for this project. The Conservancy has worked with HBWC since 1987 to acquire and restore the Huntington Beach Wetlands for the purposes of improving coastal habitat and providing educational and recreational opportunities along the coast. Through the years HBWC has taken on increasingly complex projects and demonstrated a leadership role in the restoration, preservation and educational interpretation of the Huntington Beach coastal wetlands complex.

Site Description:

The Huntington Beach Wetlands are part of the coastal wetland system originally formed by the meandering Santa Ana River. This wetland system covered 2,950 acres prior to the introduction of agricultural and urban development into the area. Most of this vast wetland has been destroyed through draining and filling for urban growth. Much of the remaining wetland has been isolated through the construction of the Pacific Coast Highway, channelization of the Santa Ana River, and construction of flood control channels. Today, only a fraction of the Santa Ana River coastal wetland system remains, and much of this is highly degraded due to isolation from tides, neglect, encroachment, unauthorized access and oil exploration.

The Huntington Beach Wetlands is the wetland complex located on the northern side of the Santa Ana River channel. The 191 acres of tidal salt marsh consist of four distinct wetland areas: Talbert Marsh, Brookhurst Marsh, Magnolia Marsh and Newland Marsh (Exhibit 3). All but the 54-acre Newland Marsh have been restored and reconnected to tidal influence. The restored wetlands consist of a mix of pickleweed salt marsh, mudflat, subtidal zones and a small amount of coastal dune habitat. The Huntington Beach Wetlands are part of the Orange Coast River Park, 1000-plus acres of open space wildlife habitat at the mouth of the Santa Ana River.

The wetlands provide habitat for more than 80 species of birds, including several rare or endangered species. These rare and endangered species include Belding's savannah sparrow (state endangered), California brown pelican (state and federal endangered), California least tern (state and federal endangered), and Western snowy plover (federal threatened). The wetlands also are home to the coast woolly-head plant species.

Magnolia Marsh was reconnected to tidal influence in early 2010 and restoration is nearly complete. Interpretive and recreational components that include an observation deck over the marsh and a boat launch to allow small numbers of people to explore the marsh habitat up close were also constructed in 2010 (Exhibit 4). The interpretive trail that will run along the perimeter of the marsh along the Pacific Coast Highway has yet to be constructed.

The area adjacent to Magnolia Marsh is the location of HBWC's native plant nursery that provides plants grown by volunteers for use in the wetlands restoration. The Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center also is located next to Magnolia Marsh. This building is home to a wildlife care hospital that treats and rehabilitates injured marine and coastal species including mammals and seabirds. The Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center of Orange County is part of the statewide collective of trained wildlife care providers, regulatory agencies, academic institutions and wildlife organizations that works to rescue and rehabilitate oiled wildlife in California.

The Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center also houses the HBWC administrative offices, meeting space and an exhibit and interpretive gallery. The exhibits gallery is essentially empty at this time waiting for construction and installation of the exhibits as outlined in the Interpretive Master Plan.

Project History:

The project site is within a wetland area that had been the subject of controversy for

approximately 20 years. Conservancy involvement began when the City of Huntington Beach sought the Conservancy's assistance in resolving a wetland conservation conflict that had consistently prevented approval of the City's Local Coastal Plan. Although the Talbert Marsh restoration was successfully completed with Conservancy funding in 1989, disputes over broader land use issues on adjacent parcels, including the project site, continued until 1996, when the LCP for the area was finally approved.

Subsequently, the Conservancy has assisted the HBWC in its acquisition of several properties in the former marsh, in the development of the Conceptual Restoration Plan, in the construction of the Wetland and Wildlife Care Center at Magnolia Marsh, and most recently in the acquisition of 16.6 acres at Brookhurst Marsh.

From 2000 to 2005 the Conservancy worked with HBWC to acquire approximately 65 acres of the Huntington Beach wetlands. The area had been one of the few coastal wetlands in Southern California remaining in private ownership and was identified as a high priority for acquisition by the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project.

In 2006, with funding from the Coastal Conservancy, HBWC completed a Conceptual Restoration Plan for the Huntington Beach Wetlands from Beach Boulevard to the Santa Ana River. The Plan evaluated the engineering, ecological and economical feasibility of wetland restoration alternatives within the Huntington Beach Wetlands and developed a framework for a coordinated restoration program. The supporting studies characterized the existing conditions; identified potential restoration alternatives based on the opportunities and constraints; and then identified preferred alternatives for further planning. These alternatives included restoration and public access components. Development of the Plan was overseen by a multi-agency team of federal, state and local partners.

Also in 2006 the Conservancy provided grant funds to HBWC to complete construction of the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center. The 4,200-square-foot building, completed in 2008, contains a fully equipped veterinary hospital and space for educational exhibits, programs and meetings. The Center is located adjacent to Magnolia Marsh.

In the following years, HBWC secured funds to complete the engineering and environmental compliance to prepare for restoration. And in November 2007 the Conservancy authorized funds to acquire the 16.6-acre University of California, Riverside property at Brookhurst Marsh for the purposes of coastal resource enhancement and public access. The acquisition was completed in spring 2008 and provided the final piece needed to begin implementing the restoration of Brookhurst Marsh and Magnolia Marsh and some needed enhancements at Talbert Marsh.

HBWC secured initial funding for the multi-million dollar restoration from the California Energy Commission. Following completion of the Brookhurst Marsh restoration and channel dredging projects in 2009, HBWC turned its attention to the 41-acre long-degraded Magnolia Marsh. They applied for and received a \$3.44 million NOAA federal stimulus grant to fund the Magnolia Marsh restoration in July 2009.

Public access and environmental education about the value of coastal wetlands also were important elements in the Magnolia Marsh project. A raised observation deck was constructed that extends out over a tidal pond, and a boat dock was installed for on-the-water tours of the marsh. Both are a short walk from the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center.

The proposed project would complete final design and permit applications for an interpretive trail system will extend around the perimeter of the marsh. It also would complete final design, construction and installation of interpretive exhibits in the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center. This project builds on the years of work to acquire and restore the Huntington Beach Wetlands and provides the needed public access components to help educate wetland visitors about the value and importance of these coastal habitats and species.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$750,000.00
AERA Energy Corp	\$25,000.00
American Trader Recovery Fund	\$20,000.00
Wells Fargo Foundation	<u>\$5,000.00</u>
Total Project Costs	\$800,000.00

The anticipated source of funds is the Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2002 (Proposition 40). Proposition 40 funds may be used for the development of land resources in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project serves to assist in the development of land-based public access and, as discussed in the section immediately below, the project is consistent with Division 21. In addition, under Proposition 40, this project is given priority because it includes a commitment for a matching fund contribution. The Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy has secured more than \$7.5 million toward the design and engineering, restoration construction, and operations and maintenance of the Huntington Beach Wetlands.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapters 7 and 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding restoration of urban waterfronts and the establishment of a system of public accessways to and along the California Coast, respectively. Chapter 7 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects and provide grants for urban waterfront restoration activities. Under Section 31316, the Conservancy may “award grants for activities that are compatible with the preservation, restoration, or enhancement of ocean, coastal, or watershed resources, or that facilitate environmental education related to these resources”, including “exhibits . . . emphasizing coastal, watershed, or ocean resource education”. The proposed project will complete final design and construction of exhibits for the Huntington Beach Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center that will educate visitors about coastal resources preservation, restoration and enhancement. Consistent with Section 31305, in selecting this project for funding the Conservancy has taken account the fact that the proposed exhibits emphasize the natural coastal wetlands environment and are within a center that has been carefully integrated into that environment. As required by Section 31308, in determining the amount of the proposed grant, the Conservancy has considered the criteria specified in that section (see “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” section, below).

Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31410) has given the Conservancy the responsibility of implementing a system of public accessways to and along the State's coastline (Section 31400) and to award grants and undertake projects in order to carry out that mandate.

Consistent with Section 31400.1, the proposed project would help the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy develop the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center, a visitor serving facility that meets greater than local needs. The center will serve school children from throughout Orange County and attract visitors from throughout the State.

Consistent with Section 31400.3, the proposed project would help the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy design and complete permit applications for a trail that will provide the public with an enhanced coastal accessway and related functions in order to appreciate the coastal resources of Orange County.

Consistent with Section 31400.2, staff recommends approval of this project after evaluating the amount of funding provided by the Conservancy in light of the total amount of available funds for coastal educational/interpretive centers, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority (see "Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines" section, below).

Finally, as required by Section 31401, as a condition of grant funding, the design of the proposed access trail and interpretive elements at the Huntington Beach Wetlands Magnolia Marsh will take into account and incorporate all relevant and appropriate criteria of the Conservancy's "Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location And Development", including, without limitation: Standard No. 1: locate and design the accessway so as to effectively preserve and protect coastal resources; Standard No. 5: constraints on development of access in environmentally sensitive areas; and Standard No. 13, requiring barrier-free access for persons with disabilities, as feasible.

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

The proposed project is consistent with multiple goals and objectives of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan:

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective C**, the proposed project will design a trail that will open a coastal area currently inaccessible or closed to public use while respecting the need to minimize impacts on sensitive natural resources through the construction of a perimeter trail and boardwalk around Magnolia Marsh.

Consistent with **Goal 3, Objective C**, the proposed project will construct and install interpretive and educational exhibits and displays emphasizing coastal, watershed and ocean-resource education.

Consistent with **Goal 3, Objective D**, the proposed project will increase education of the public about environmental issues affecting the coast by improving the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center through the installation of exhibits ranging in subject matter from wetland habitats and ecology to oil spill response to coastal marine and wetland species.

**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 June 4, 2009, 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 has wide support of the public, area nonprofit organizations and partners, and local elected leaders. Supporters include the many volunteers who donate their time to help the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy. Local and regional nonprofit support includes Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks, and Earth Resource Foundation. The Orange Coast River Park partners also support the project. Elected government leaders supporting the project include Congressman Dana Rohrbacher, State Senator Tom Harman, Assemblyman Jim Silva, Orange County Supervisor John Moorlach and Huntington Beach Mayor Joe Carchio.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the city of Huntington Beach in Orange County near urban centers and can thus provide educational and interpretive services to children who might not otherwise have the opportunity to experience the wetlands and educational exhibits and programs of the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center.
5. **Need:** The Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy completed construction of the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center in 2008 and restoration of the adjacent Magnolia Marsh in 2010. An Interpretive Master Plan for exhibits was developed in 2008 and now that restoration of Magnolia Marsh is nearly complete, the exhibits and access trail plans are ready for final design and construction. Despite substantial fund-raising from other sources, without Conservancy funding this project will not be completed.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The City of Huntington Beach is host to more than 8 million annual visitors. The project area will be accessible to these visitors, residents of Orange County, and the nearly 50 percent of the state's 37.2 million residents who live within the four county region of Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego and Riverside counties.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project is located at an average elevation of 9 feet above sea level. Tidal influence in the Magnolia Marsh is muted due to the restricted opening to the ocean through Huntington State Beach. Under projected sea level rise of 16 inches by 2050 the trail and exhibits constructed under this proposal will not be vulnerable to sea level rise over the course of the Conservancy's grant agreement. Should sea level rise reach 59 inches by 2100, the access improvements will be approximately four feet above sea level. The project site also is protected by Huntington State Beach and the Pacific Coast

Highway, and it is anticipated that any adaptation measures will be closely tied to necessary plans for regional roadways and infrastructure as a whole.

Additional Criteria

8. **Urgency:** The Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center is constructed and conceptual design for the exhibits is complete. Funding has been secured for some of the larger exhibit elements and final design and construction needs to proceed at this time or some of the existing funding could be in jeopardy.
9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will provide environmental education opportunities regarding coastal resources and species as well as provide the groundwork for opening an inaccessible coastal area to low intensity recreation to allow the interpretive experience to bridge the classroom and the field.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Innovation:** The proposed project will utilize unique and innovative interpretive technology, such as an underwater camera submerged in the wetlands to allow visitors to see real-time activity beneath the water surface.
13. **Readiness:** The project proponent has produced an Interpretive Master Plan and is ready to proceed with final design and construction of the interpretive elements. Preliminary design for the access trail also is complete and ready to proceed with the next phase of final design and permit applications.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
16. **Cooperation:** The Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy developed the plan for the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center in cooperation with the Wildlife Care Center staff. HBWC also works closely with its many volunteers and partner organizations including Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks, Sea and Sage Audubon, and many other area organizations.
18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The exhibit construction will utilize recycled and renewable materials to the extent practicable, thus minimizing potential indirect emissions such as embodied energy in materials used.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The City of Huntington Beach Local Coastal Program (LCP) contains objectives and policies consistent with the Huntington Beach Wetlands Exhibits and Access Trail project. These include: Objective C2.5 “Maintain and enhance, where feasible, existing shoreline and coastal resource access sites.” Objective C2.6 “Promote and provide, where feasible, additional public access, including handicap access, to the shoreline and other coastal resources.” Policy C2.6.6 “Promote public access to coastal wetlands for limited nature study, passive recreation and other

low intensity uses that are compatible with the sensitive nature of these areas.” Policy C3.2.1 “Encourage, where feasible, facilities, programs and services that increase and enhance public recreational opportunities in the Coastal Zone.” Policy C3.2.8 “Promote the implementation of and funding for the proposed Orange Coast River Park concept. The Orange Coast River Park is envisioned as a linkage of public parks (Talbert and Fairview Regional Parks) and private open space lands along and near the mouth of the Santa Ana River, including possible linkages with open space lands located on the inland side of Pacific Coast Highway, between the Santa Ana River and Beach Boulevard in Huntington Beach.” The project area falls within the Orange Coast River Park.

The Huntington Beach Wetlands Exhibits and Access Trail project will enhance access to coastal resources, promote low intensity recreation, enhance recreational opportunities in the coastal zone, and further the concept of the Orange Coast River Park, and is therefore consistent with all these listed objectives and policies.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The exhibits portion of the proposed project involves the construction or placement of minor structures accessory to existing commercial, industrial, or institutional facilities and is therefore categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act, pursuant to Title 14 California Code of Regulations, Section 15311. In addition, the construction and installation of the exhibits in the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center is also categorically exempt pursuant to Title 14, California Code of Regulations, Section 15301, since it consists of the minor interior alteration of an existing public facility, with no expansion of use.

The Magnolia Marsh trail portion of the proposed project involves only planning design, engineering and environmental review for permit applications for the proposed accessway and is therefore statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act, pursuant to Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262.

Upon Conservancy approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.