

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
May 5, 2020

**COMMUNITY ACTION FOR RESILIENT NOVATO BAYLANDS**

Project No. 94-003-04  
Project Manager: Jeff Melby/Moira McEnespy

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,413,200 to MarinLink for the Novato Baylands Stewards to restore or enhance approximately 177 acres of wetlands through engaging local communities in Marin County.

**LOCATION:** Novato Baylands, Marin County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

---

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Project Site Maps](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [Photos](#)
  - Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)
- 

**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one million four hundred thirteen thousand two hundred dollars (\$1,413,200) to MarinLink (“the grantee”) for the Novato Baylands Stewards (a project sponsored by MarinLink) to restore or enhance approximately 177 acres of wetlands through engaging local communities in Marin County.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
  2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
  3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy.
-

4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.
6. The grantee shall comply with all relevant mitigation measures identified in Bel Marin Keys Wetland Restoration Phase 1 Project Addendum to the Supplemental Environmental Impact Report Environmental Impact Statement for the Bel Marin Keys Unit V Expansion of Hamilton Wetland Restoration 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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
  3. MarinLink is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.”
- 

**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to one million four hundred thirteen thousand two hundred dollars (\$1,413,200) to MarinLink (as the fiscal sponsor) for the Novato Baylands Stewards (“NBS”, a project of MarinLink) to restore or enhance approximately 177 acres of wetlands through engaging local communities in Marin County (see Exhibit 1, “Location Map”).

NBS will restore or enhance approximately 60 acres of tidal wetlands, 60 acres of managed wetlands, and 57 acres of seasonal wetlands through volunteer and student activities at the Hamilton Wetlands Restoration Project, including its Bel Marin Keys Unit V expansion area. (see Exhibit 2, “Site Maps”) This will provide opportunities for practical workforce development; cultivate a substantial volunteer cohort; provide educational programming for school, professional, and community groups about wetland ecology; and engage community members in wetland restoration activities (such as monitoring, adaptive management, controlling non-native invasive plants). NBS will engage underserved communities and create a positive and inclusive space.

Wetland restoration is a direct and critical response to the current climate crisis. The number and scale of wetland restoration sites in the San Francisco Bay Area are dramatically increasing, consistent with recommendations in the Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Science Update

2015<sup>1</sup> and in part due to major public investments (such as via the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority). Now, more than ever, the success of wetlands restoration depends upon the active involvement of community members. Engaging community members in wetlands restoration can provide the main opportunity for direct engagement with other members of the public, train future restoration practitioners, and provide people for long term care for these large and valuable resources into the future. Comprised of concerned community members and professionals, the NBS was created for this purpose—to be a sustainable, resourceful community partner dedicated to increasing the capacity for wetland restoration, improvement, and appreciation of baylands along the north San Francisco Bay shoreline.

Specifically, **the project consists of restoring or enhancing approximately 177 acres of wetland habitat at the Hamilton and Bel Marin Keys (BMK) restoration project areas:** 60 acres of tidal wetlands (50 acres at Hamilton and 10 acres along the bayfront of BMK), 60 acres of managed wetlands (north seasonal wetlands at Hamilton), and 57 acres of seasonal wetlands (29 acres at Hamilton, the south seasonal wetlands; and 28 acres at BMK). NBS will conduct this work by leading Conservation Corps members, volunteers, community members, and students (See Exhibit 3, “Photos”). Adjacent upland habitat will also be enhanced (45 acres at Hamilton and 100 acres at BMK). Project activities include the following: monitoring and adaptive management (e.g., testing soil and water salinity levels, adjusting water levels in seasonal ponds, monitoring vegetation, monitoring bird numbers and behaviors), developing planting plans, propagating and planting native plants, controlling non-native invasive plant species, monitoring and managing outplanted areas, and documenting and sharing lessons learned.

NBS anticipates two years of work will result in high-quality habitat characterized by native vegetation, and controlled or eradicated populations of high-threat invasive non-native plant species at Hamilton/BMK; diking of 275 acres of weedy fields at BMK; progress towards desired soil salinities and native vegetation patterns in the Hamilton north seasonal wetlands; bird use dataset and analysis at Hamilton, BMK, and Rush Creek reference sites; 5,000 native propagules planted in areas to control erosion or increase native vegetation (i.e. adaptive management), and 5,000 planted in areas to out-compete non-native invasive species; planting of 28 acres of alkali meadow/seasonal wetlands at BMK with more than 10,000 propagules.

In carrying out the wetland restoration and enhancement, NBS will also:

**Provide opportunities for practical workforce development:** NBS will collaborate with the Conservation Corps North Bay (“CCNB”; approximately 36 work trainees) and apply for a similar collaborative opportunity with the Americorps National Civilian Community Corps (“NCCC”; approximately 12 trainees). Trainees will develop workplace professionalism, personal accountability, knowledge of best horticultural practices, and public speaking skills to improve their employability. Technical skills learned will be relevant to several career

---

<sup>1</sup> Goals Project. 2015. “The Baylands and Climate Change: What We Can Do. Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Science Update 2015” prepared by the San Francisco Bay Area Wetlands Ecosystem Goals Project. California State Coastal Conservancy, Oakland, CA

paths within the profession of ecological restoration, such as horticulturist, wildlife biologist, ornithologist, natural resource manager, park ranger, and more.

**Cultivate a substantial volunteer cohort:** NBS will continue to operate a volunteer program based at the nursery located adjacent to the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Project property to grow the plants needed for the project. Twenty-five weekly volunteers and hundreds of drop-in volunteers will donate over 2,500 volunteer hours annually (5,000 hours are anticipated over the proposed two-year grant period). NBS has run a highly successful volunteer program since 2012, engaging local community groups, adjacent property owners, and concerned citizens. Over 10,000 hours of volunteer time have been logged since 2015.<sup>2</sup>

In order to perform the restoration activities, NBS will educate school, professional, and community groups about wetland ecology through training. NBS will also offer a series of five public tours/events per year that keep the general public informed and in support of the Hamilton Wetlands Restoration Project and ongoing BMK expansion.

Throughout this work, NBS will seek to engage underserved communities and provide a positive and inclusive space. Ninety-nine percent of CCNB's incoming corps-members are living at or below the Federal Poverty Level, which is significantly lower than California's Disadvantaged Communities threshold, and the majority are English language learners. Also, student volunteers will include students from Olive Elementary, whose student body contains a significant number of English learners (20%) and socially economically disadvantaged (41%) students. NBS provides culturally sensitive and bilingual outreach to these students, mindful that many students have experienced trauma from their time in unstable home situations or immigration detention centers. The use of terms such as "Community Science" instead of "Citizen Science", for example, promotes an inclusive sense of belonging. NBS proposes to also engage new underserved community members, such as the low-income, age 55+ residents at the nearby "Villas at Hamilton" residence.

**Site Description:** The Hamilton Wetland Restoration Project site consists of three properties located along the western edge of San Pablo Bay in Marin County totaling nearly 2,600 acres: the 644-acre former Hamilton Army Air Field (including the former 18-acre Navy Ball Field), the 319-acre North Antenna Field (owned by the State Lands Commission), and the 1,585-acre Bel Marin Keys (BMK) property. All of these properties are historic wetlands that were part of a larger tidal marsh system that extended from Corte Madera in Marin County to Vallejo in Solano County.

The NBS will use the on-site nursery that lies adjacent to the Hamilton site as a hub for community engagement and restoration activities; restoration activities will also be conducted at the adjacent BMK property. The Hamilton property contains restored baylands and

---

<sup>2</sup> As detailed in outreach reports (e.g., Pavlik and McWhorter 2018) and available from the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, San Francisco office.

perimeter upland levees and is bordered on its western perimeter by 2.7 miles of the San Francisco Bay Trail. The Bel Marin Keys property contains yet-to-be-restored baylands. See the “Project History” section, below, and Exhibits 1 and 2, “Location” and “Site” maps.

**Grantee Qualifications:** MarinLink is a 501(c)(3) organization established in 2003 to serve as an incubator and fiscal sponsor for community-based projects such as the Novato Baylands Stewards. MarinLink has staff dedicated to financial operations, such as payroll and processing reimbursement payments, and also routinely manages state and federal grants, with successful completion of hundreds of grant award processes.

A team of experienced local partner organizations (Save The Bay, Point Blue) and highly-qualified contractors have been assembled to carry out project activities. Christina McWhorter will serve as Project Manager and Field Biologist; she has been spearheading restoration activities at the Hamilton site since 2012 and runs a successful community engagement program. Well-respected experts in wetland ecology (Dr. Bruce Pavlik and Dr. Peter Baye) will consult on technical aspects. Finally, workforce development programs have been successful in past years, engaging teams from the AmeriCorps NCCC (4 teams, 48 trainees) and CCNB (3 teams, 22 trainees). Out of hundreds of project sponsors each year, Christina McWhorter has received awards from AmeriCorps NCCC for providing outstanding workforce development opportunities: “Sponsor of the Round” (2016) and “NCCC Pacific Region Sponsor of the Year” (2015).

**Project History:** In 1996, the Conservancy began its role as the non-federal sponsor in developing a wetland restoration plan with the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) for the former Hamilton Airfield and adjacent properties. In September 2000 the Conservancy authorized acquisition of the Bel Marin Keys property, and in August 2003 authorized acceptance of fee title for the Hamilton Airfield. Restoration of the Hamilton site was completed in 2014 and resulted in 648 acres (one square mile) of restored wetland habitat, as well as 2.7 miles of the San Francisco Bay Trail.

In 2015, the Conservancy Board began authorizing funds towards restoration at the Bel Marin Keys site, and in August 2019 authorized construction of the first step: construction of a new bayfront levee, with creation and enhancement of seasonal wetlands on the inland side. Work is anticipated to be complete by the end of 2020, and staff is working with the USACE to determine when and how to implement the remaining tidal wetlands restoration component.

Christina McWhorter has been involved with the Hamilton Wetlands Restoration Project since 2008 and has worked as the Nursery and Site Manager since 2012. Through this work, she has cultivated strong relationships with community members and project stakeholders, and led staff and volunteers in stewardship opportunities. In 2019 she founded NBS based on the conviction that now, more than ever, community partners are needed as on-the-ground, consistent stakeholders in regionally-significant wetlands/baylands projects, providing the main opportunity for direct public engagement, training future restoration practitioners, and caring for these large and valuable resources into the future. She has therefore partnered with

MarinLink as a fiscal sponsor to increase capacity for and focus on this work over the next two years.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$1,413,200</b>
Save The Bay	\$536,000
California Conservation Corps (pending)	\$113,042
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	\$51,107
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$2,113,349</b>

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a fiscal year 2018/2019 appropriation to the Conservancy from the “California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018” (Prop 68, Public Resources Code Division 46, Chapters 1-13, Sections 80000-80173). Chapter 8 of Prop 68 allocates funds to the Conservancy “for the purpose of San Francisco Bay restoration in accordance with the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority Act” (Public Resources Code section 80110(b)(10)). The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority Act authorizes grants for projects that will restore, protect, or enhance tidal wetlands, managed ponds, or natural habitats on the shoreline in the San Francisco Bay area; and such grants can be used for all phases of such projects, including construction, monitoring, operation, and maintenance . (Gov. Code section 66704.5.) The proposed project is consistent with the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority Act (Gov. Code sections 66700 – 66706) because it will restore or enhance tidal, seasonal, and managed wetlands on the shoreline of San Francisco Bay., Accordingly, the proposed project is an appropriate use of Prop 68 funds allocated for restoration of San Francisco Bay consistent with the San Francisco Bay Restoraton Authority Act.

Other funding sources include the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Save The Bay, as indicated above. NBS has also submitted an application (award notification pending) in conjunction with CCNB to the California Conservation Corps.

NBS anticipates bringing \$368,265 in in-kind services: NBS’s volunteer program will provide an estimated 5,000 volunteer hours during the two years of the proposed project (\$149,750 at the 2018 rate of \$29.95 per hour, as set forth by Independent Sector for the Value of Volunteer Time in California); Point Blue Conservation Science’s STRAW program has committed 4,320 volunteer hours (\$129,384, also valued at \$29.95 per hour); a successful AmeriCorps National Community Civilian Corps team application (results pending) will provide personnel hours, gear, and van transportation for their team at no cost to the project (total value of personnel hours is \$89,131).

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

Consistent with Section 31162(b), the proposed project will help restore and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance in the San Francisco baylands. The project will implement activities to achieve these ends, including monitoring and adaptive management, developing planting plans, propagating and planting native plants, controlling non-native invasive plant species, monitoring and managing outplanted areas, and documenting and sharing lessons learned.

Consistent with Section 31162(c), the proposed project is of high priority for funding. It is supported by adopted local and regional plans including the San Francisco Bay Plan; it can be implemented in a timely way, as NBS has already lined up partnerships and programs; it provides benefits that could be lost with time, i.e., there is critical urgency to develop stewardship capacity and increase engagement in and support for wetlands restoration such that functioning habitats are established in time to keep pace with sea-level rise.

Consistent with Section 31162(d), the proposed project will promote, assist, and enhance baylands restoration projects by offering programs that make them more accessible—through better understanding as well as on-site stewardship opportunities—to urban populations for educational purposes.

Consistent with Section 31165, the proposed project will award a grant for activities that facilitate environmental education related to, and are compatible with the restoration and enhancement, regional baylands resources.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will support educational programs and interpretive events that improve public understanding and promote stewardship of coastal resources.

Consistent with **Goal 12, Objective D** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will enhance 177 acres of wetlands habitat.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will provide funding for activities that directly benefit disadvantaged communities.

**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 October 2, 2014, 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. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**
  - “San Francisco Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Report” (San Francisco Bay Area Wetlands Ecosystem Goals Project, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, 1999) and “Science Update 2015” (San Francisco Bay Area Wetlands Ecosystem Goals Project, California State Coastal Conservancy). The report recommends the restoration and enhancement of tidal marsh in San Francisco Bay and provides recommendations to enhance the resiliency of marshes to climate change.
  - “San Francisco Estuary Partnership Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan” (approved by the Governor and U.S. EPA Administrator in 1993, updated in 2016). Restoration of baylands project sites will carry out objectives and actions identified in the CCMP to protect, create, and restore habitat critical for special status wildlife, specifically through enhancement and restoration of marsh and transitional upland habitat.
  - “2014 Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk update to the 2009 California Climate Adaptation Strategy” which seeks to support hazard mitigation by “investing in green infrastructure and other protective structures to address sea-level rise,” and recommends the state “restore and create wetlands.”
  - “California Water Action Plan” (approved by the Governor in 2014), which recommends restoration of coastal wetlands.
  - “California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report.” The proposed project aligns with the strategy area of “Steward and Protect Natural and Working Landscapes,” specifically the goals associated with supporting multi-benefit projects and building resilience into natural systems through natural and green infrastructure solutions.

4. **Support of the public:**

Support described below and indicated in Exhibit 4, “Project Letters.”

Elected officials: Letter of support from Congressman Jared Huffman, U.S. Representative, California’s 2nd Congressional District.

Non-profit and other organizations contributing effort or funding towards the wetland restoration and enhancement work: Save the Bay (see Letter of Support); Point Blue Conservation Science (see Letter of Support); Conservation Corps North Bay (see Letter of Support); AmeriCorps NCCC.

Organizations and schools helping to conduct, or requesting information about, the wetland restoration and enhancement work (some examples): Olive Elementary School (two hands-on trips per year); Marin Montessori (7<sup>th</sup>-, 8<sup>th</sup>-, and 9<sup>th</sup>-graders participate in weekly activities); Dominican University, Environmental Science and Ecology classes (annual hands-

on education activities); Marin Audubon Society (two tours per year); Boy Scout Troop 73 (five Eagle Scout projects have been completed at the project site); Novato Public Library (two presentations previously given, and more scheduled); Rotary Club (presented to the Rotary Club and future volunteer opportunities); Environmental Forum of Marin (annual tour as part of their educational programming); Parents who homeschool children (educational programming provided for several students); Villas at Hamilton (presentations for low-income, age 55+ residents living near the project site); visiting contingencies (for example, agency or government officials from South Korea, Singapore, and the United Kingdom have separately visited to observe state-of-the-art restoration practices implemented at the project site).

Individuals: Several individuals support the project and will contribute effort; individuals from the community that have volunteered steadily/weekly for multiple years.

5. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area region.
6. **Need:** Funding that currently supports some of the proposed project activities will be ceasing this year; furthermore, there is not enough resources to provide support at a level necessary to address the growing need for community engagement and stewardship in regional baylands projects. The proposed project as scoped—to deliver the needed level of engagement and stewardship outcomes—will not occur without Conservancy participation.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project will focus on projects of bay-wide significance from habitat and adaptation perspectives. It also supports the region-wide SFBRA goal of better serving and involving communities in wetlands projects.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** Over many years the project site had deeply subsided, becoming vulnerable to sea-level rise. The Hamilton Wetlands Restoration Project reversed that trend with *de novo* construction of tidal and seasonal wetlands. Ongoing maintenance of levees and berms, monitoring vegetation development, and regulating water-control structures for adjusting soil salinities and duration of inundation will be necessary to maintain the seasonal wetlands in the near term; however, eventual conversion of seasonal to tidal wetlands due to marine transgression is expected after many decades.

#### **Additional Criteria**

9. **Urgency:** The *Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Science Update 2015* recommends accelerating restoration of complete baylands ecosystems by 2030 in order for them to become established in time to keep pace with sea-level rise. Now more than ever, community partners are needed as on-the-ground, consistent stakeholders in regionally-significant wetlands/baylands projects, providing the main opportunity for direct public engagement, training future restoration practitioners, and caring for these large and valuable resources into the future.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will provide practical workforce development; cultivate a substantial volunteer cohort; provide educational programming for school, professional, and community groups about wetland ecology; and engage community members in wetland restoration activities (such as monitoring, adaptive

management, controlling non-native invasive plants). It will also engage underserved communities.

11. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Innovation:** The proposed project exhibits innovation in collaboration sectors (scientific expertise, restoration practice, workforce development, community members, students), technical innovation (in areas of adaptive management, soil and vegetation monitoring, bulk native seed collection and processing, in-ground plant propagation, planting methodologies, erosion control and invasive species management), and educational programming (e.g., horticultural therapy practices that are uniquely tailored to the needs of participants, such as at-risk youth).
13. **Readiness:** NBS has lined up programming and partners that are ready to start this spring season (see Letters of Support).
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The proposed project will implement educational and stewardship activities at the Hamilton Wetlands Restoration Project (see “Project History” section, above).
15. **Cooperation:** See the “Support of the Public” section, above, and Exhibit 4, “Project Letters.”

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH SAN FRANCISCO BAY PLAN:**

The proposed project helps implement the *San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission’s Bay Plan*. Consistent with the following policies pertaining to tidal marshes and tidal flats (amended October 2019), the proposed project includes restoration and stewardship of wetlands habitat: Policy No. 5 discusses managing baylands “to provide important Bay habitat functions such as resting, foraging and breeding habitat for fish, other aquatic organisms, and wildlife” and Policy No. 6 provides that “[a]ny habitat project should include clear and specific long-term and short-term biological and physical goals, success criteria, a monitoring program, and as appropriate, an adaptive management plan.” Consistent with the intent of policy No. 3 pertaining to environmental justice and social equity (adopted October 2019), the proposed project includes education, outreach, and engagement components for all communities (see “Project Description” section, above).

#### **CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project’s wetland restoration and stewardship activities:

- are within the scope of the “Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Report/Statement for the Bel Marin Keys Unit V Expansion of the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Project (HWRP),” certified by the Conservancy on June 16, 2005 (SEIR); and
- are addressed in the “Bel Marin Keys Wetland Restoration Phase 1 Project Addendum to the Supplemental Environmental Impact Report Environmental Impact Statement for

the Bel Marin Keys Unit V Expansion of Hamilton Wetland Restoration Project,” dated August 2017.

At its September 28, 2017 meeting, the Conservancy concluded that the proposed first phase of restoration of the Bel Marin Keys Unit V component of the HWRP was consistent with the restoration of BMKV as described in the Final SEIR/S for the BMKV Expansion of the HWRP, and would not result in new significant environmental effects or a substantial increase in the severity of previously identified significant effects.

These wetland restoration and stewardship activities now proposed for funding require no further analysis or findings under CEQA.