

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
May 27, 2021

**TOPANGA LAGOON RESTORATION PLANNING**

Project No. 19-001-02  
Project Manager: Kara Kemmler

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$700,000 to the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains to augment a previously authorized Conservancy grant of \$460,000 for planning for the Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project at Topanga State Park and Topanga Beach in Los Angeles County.

**LOCATION:** Topanga State Park and Topanga Beach, Topanga, unincorporated Los Angeles County

---

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)  
Exhibit 2: [March 14, 2019 Staff Recommendation](#)  
Exhibit 3: [Project Area](#)
- 

**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed seven hundred thousand dollars (\$700,000) to the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains (“the grantee”) to augment the Conservancy grant of \$460,000, authorized on March 14, 2019, for planning for the Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project at Topanga State Park and Beach in Los Angeles County.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding coastal resource enhancement.

2. The proposed project, as augmented, is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

---

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize disbursement of an additional \$700,000 to the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains (RCDSMM) for planning for the Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project, including preparing technical studies, performing monitoring, conducting technical advisory and community engagement processes, and developing three conceptual alternatives to restore ecological function, increase resiliency to sea level rise and climate change, and enhance the visitor experience. This would augment the Conservancy's previous grant of \$460,000, which the Conservancy authorized on March 14, 2019 (See Exhibit 2).

The Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project is a multi-benefit project with habitat restoration, resource protection, public access and recreation, and climate resilience goals. The project area includes the lower park area which encompasses the lagoon, lower creek and adjacent riparian woodland, floodplain and filled areas, Topanga Ranch Motel and the visitor services area; the Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) bridge; and the beach (See Exhibit 3).

Both wetlands and native fish populations are quickly disappearing in Southern California. Topanga Watershed is 18 square miles, the third largest watershed draining into Santa Monica Bay. The watershed provides habitat for the federally listed endangered southern steelhead trout and tidewater goby. Steelhead in the Santa Monica Bay are on the brink of extinction and Topanga Creek is currently the only stream with a reproducing population. However, the current conditions in Topanga Lagoon are not optimal to support growth and rearing opportunities for steelhead and the existing narrow channel opening under the bridge over PCH intensifies high flows and limits the opportunities for steelhead to enter the creek or for smolts to emigrate. The PCH bridge has been identified as a priority for replacement to enhance fish passage. The new bridge span will be longer which will allow the lagoon footprint to be enlarged to restore ecological function and increase resiliency to sea level rise impacts. The lagoon is a small remnant of its historical footprint (approximately 30 acres) and is restricted by fill placed to develop the area including the building of PCH. The restoration project will expand the current 0.59 acre wetland into 10-12 acres and provide improved habitat and fish passage opportunities for tidewater gobies and southern steelhead trout.

The project area sits at the bottom of the watershed surrounded by natural resources. Documented Native American village remains lie buried beneath the site. Additionally, there are existing visitor serving structures that are under consideration for relocation and/or redesign for future use, including possible renovation of the historic Topanga Ranch Motel for lower-cost overnight accommodations. The cultural and natural resources coupled with the

visitor services and proximity to the beach provide a valuable opportunity to enhance the public access, recreation and interpretive landscape.

The project also addresses the relocation of existing structures located south of the PCH bridge on either side of the lagoon, including the public restrooms and lifeguard station on the beach and the helipad just above the beach. The restrooms and lifeguard station are currently threatened by sea level rise and coastal erosion. The helipad is located on fill that hems the lagoon in on the western flank. Emergency access is challenging along this stretch of coast. The relocation of these structures and redesign of the PCH bridge will provide opportunities to improve resiliency and enhance access and public safety during emergencies.

This project is the first phase of planning. Following on this effort will be the second planning phase which will include further development of alternatives and the environmental review. The scope of work occurring in phase one will provide the information that is critical to move the project into phase two. To date, a substantial amount of work has been completed under the existing grant, including various technical studies and modeling, several meetings to gather input from the landowners, technical advisory group and community, and initial design development. As the project progressed additional data needs were identified, including technical studies such as traffic and visual impacts analyses, conceptual design development for an alternative bridge alignment, additional surveys and monitoring, and a more robust community engagement process. These additional studies and engagement are the focus of the current augmentation for the completion of phase one planning.

There have been two technical advisory committee meetings to date. The technical advisory committee includes public agencies, nonprofit organizations, wetland experts, scientists and academics. In addition, two public stakeholder meetings have occurred to date. The meetings were well-attended, however, the project partners noticed an underrepresentation of folks from outside the local area. The project includes a state park and public beach and as such it is important that it be accessible and welcoming to all visitors, therefore, input from a diverse public is essential. The project partners made the decision to build on the existing outreach effort with a focused effort to engage communities of color in the larger Los Angeles landscape, specifically in areas that suffer from lack of open space.

The prior grant authorization included reviewing existing data and conducting technical studies to inform the restoration design; developing ecosystem restoration and public access goals and objectives with input from a technical advisory committee and public stakeholders; and developing three conceptual alternatives to restore ecological function, increase resiliency to sea level rise and climate change, and enhance the visitor experience. The project is unchanged but the technical data needs have expanded as has the community engagement effort. The recommended augmentation of the grant amount is needed to include the additional data needs and meaningful community engagement necessary to inform the conceptual design development and prepare for the environmental review that will be part of the next planning phase.

**Site Description:** Topanga Lagoon is a coastal estuary at the terminus of Topanga Canyon. From its connection to the creek to its outlet at the ocean the lagoon crosses three properties. The project area includes the lower portion of Topanga State Park, which is owned and managed by the California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks), the PCH bridge that spans the lagoon, which is under Caltrans’s jurisdiction, and a portion of Topanga Beach, which lies south of PCH, owned by Los Angeles County Beaches and Harbors. All of the landowners have been actively engaged in the planning process.

The lower portion of Topanga State Park encompasses the lower creek, lagoon and adjacent habitat. In addition, there are several existing structures including several visitor serving businesses, the vacant historic Topanga Ranch Motel with approximately 27 structures, parking, picnic tables, and an accessway crossing under PCH to the beach. The remains of a Native American village have been documented in this area as well.

An existing lifeguard headquarters station and public restrooms are located on Topanga Beach to the east of the lagoon. An area on the blufftop above the beach on the west of the lagoon is used as a helipad for emergency events. Topanga Beach is visited by over 750,000 people annually.

**Grantee Qualifications:** Over the last two decades, the RCDSMM and State Parks have been engaged in a collaborative effort with multiple agency partners toward the ultimate restoration of Topanga Lagoon. The RCDSMM has managed prior Conservancy grants and led previous planning efforts in partnership with State Parks, and this successful collaboration has continued on this project.

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

The proposed project remains consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines as detailed in the March 14, 2019 staff recommendation (See Exhibit 2).

**PROJECT FINANCING**

**Previous Funding:**

<b>Coastal Conservancy 2019 Authorization and 15% Augmentation</b>	<b>\$529,000</b>
RCDSMM	\$71,810
State Parks	\$133,000

**Proposed Authorization:**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$700,000</b>
State Parks	\$615,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$2,048,810</b>

There are two anticipated sources of funds for the proposed augmentation. Approximately \$575,000 will come from an appropriation to the Conservancy from the Violation Remediation Account (VRA). Funds in the VRA are available for carrying out provisions of the Coastal Act (Public Resources Code, Section 30823). Funds in the VRA originate from both administrative and judicial actions arising from Coastal Act violations. The VRA funds allocated for this project come from violation penalties specifically related to habitat impacts in the Palisades Highlands/Pacific Palisades area of the City of Los Angeles within and adjacent to Topanga State Park. The project is consistent with the Coastal Act and as the primary goal of the project is habitat restoration in Topanga State Park, it is an appropriate use of those funds.

The second funding source is an appropriation (\$125,000) to the Conservancy from Proposition 12, The Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (Public Resources Code Sections 5096.300, et seq.). These funds are available for Conservancy projects that restore, enhance and develop coastal resources, including waterfronts and public accessways. Consistent with Public Resources Code Section 5096.352(c) the project will conduct the planning necessary to restore Topanga Lagoon and redevelop the public access and recreation corridor and visitor serving area of Lower Topanga State Park and Topanga Beach, including relocating and redesigning existing facilities to restore natural resources and enhance visitor access and experience. It is consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation, as discussed in the "Consistency with Conservancy's enabling legislation" section of the March 14, 2019 staff recommendation (See Exhibit 2). The proposed authorization is thus consistent with Proposition 12.

In addition, the project is supported by a commitment from State Parks of in-lieu fee funds (\$540,000) directed to State Parks from the California Coastal Commission, which will support studies related to visitor services and lower cost accommodations, and Proposition 64 funds (\$75,000) specifically related to illegal cannabis grow sites that have caused environmental degradation in Topanga State Park that will be used for monitoring.

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

The proposed project remains consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Chapter 6 regrading coastal resource enhancement, as detailed in the March 14, 2019 staff recommendation (See Exhibit 2).

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

The proposed project continues to support the Conservancy's Strategic Plan Goals as described in the March 14, 2019 staff recommendation (See Exhibit 2).

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The project, which involves planning and technical studies, is unchanged and remains the same project analyzed under the Conservancy's March 14, 2019 authorization. The proposed authorization does not change the project itself or the purposes for which the funding will be used. Thus, the proposed project remains statutorily exempt under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), as detailed in the March 14, 2019 staff recommendation (See Exhibit 2). The project is also categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to California Code of Regulations Title 14, Section 15306, which exempts basic data collection and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. The technical studies to be conducted for this project will entail basic data collection and resource evaluation, and will not result in disturbance to environmental resources.