

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 23, 2021

NORTH COAST SANTA CRUZ ACCESS FACILITIES AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

Project No. 21-051-01
Project Manager: Hilary Hill

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to the County of Santa Cruz to develop a facilities and management plan for public access and natural resource protection for the north coast region of Santa Cruz County.

LOCATION: North Coast, Santa Cruz County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

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

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the County of Santa Cruz (“the grantee”) to develop a facilities and management plan for public access and natural resource protection for the north coast region of Santa Cruz 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. To the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy’s ‘Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development’.

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 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding System of Public Accessway.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize disbursement of \$100,000 to the County of Santa Cruz to develop a facilities and management plan for public access and natural resource protection for the north coast region of Santa Cruz County (“Santa Cruz North Coast”), from the northern Santa Cruz city limits to the San Mateo County line. Santa Cruz County Parks (County Parks) will lead a planning effort bringing together approximately 20 agencies and organizations to create a comprehensive and long-term facilities and management plan that identifies the collective infrastructure priorities and multi-beneficial actions to enhance visitor experience, manage visitor impacts, and preserve natural resources on the Santa Cruz North Coast.

With its spectacular beauty, recreational opportunities, and proximity to population centers of Santa Cruz, Silicon Valley, and the Bay Area, the Santa Cruz North Coast has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of people visiting its coastline. The Santa Cruz North Coast has limited visitor amenities, infrastructure, and law enforcement, and high visitation levels have increasingly overwhelmed the area and threatened natural resources, public safety, and visitor experience. Lack of restrooms results in trail-side defecation/urination and beach access routes are frequently strewn with toilet paper. Limited trash receptacles regularly overflow and litter is common, which feeds an excess population of ravens, crows, and ground squirrels that in turn prey on threatened and endangered species. Beach access paths are generally steep and rocky, posing risk of injury, and unsafe routes sometimes result in emergency response calls. Conditions on Highway 1 become highly congested on weekends, leading to serious accidents and hazardous conditions for bicyclists as there is limited formal parking and turn-offs from the highway. The visitor experience is compromised by these conditions, particularly for those anticipating a family-friendly environment. Recent events including the Covid-19 pandemic (during which there was an increase in visitation) and the CZU Lightning Complex Fire has put additional strain on the area and its resources.

Numerous public and non-profit agencies own and manage property on the North Coast (see Site Description section below) and this patchwork of ownership calls for a coordinated and collaborative approach to this issue. The proposed project fills this urgent need by bringing together relevant organizations, stakeholders, and staff of several state and federal agencies to work together under the title “North Coast Multi-Agency Coordinating Committee”, including: California State Parks, Caltrans, Coastal Commission, Coastal Conservancy, California Highway

Patrol, County Sheriff, Davenport/North Coast Association, Bureau of Land Management, Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, Sempervirens Fund, Trust for Public Land, Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District, Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, CalPoly Swanton Ranch, County Supervisor Ryan Coonerty, Senator John Laird, Assemblymember Mark Stone, and Congresswoman Anna Eshoo.

With the proposed project, these entities will come together to create the North Coast Facilities and Management Plan that identifies priorities for visitor facilities and recreation management. Several individual plans, such as the County's The North Coast Today and Tomorrow Report (1985), North Coast Beaches General Plan (1987), North Coast Beaches Unified Plan (1990), and North Coast Beaches Master Plan (1991), have been approved for public lands within the region, yet over 22,000 acres of land with public access have been added to the area since 2005 and no recent consolidated facilities and management plan has been created.

The North Coast Facilities and Management Plan will identify collective priorities and multi-beneficial actions that will enhance the visitor experience, manage visitor impacts, and protect natural resources on the Santa Cruz North Coast, while leveraging resources and coordinated management. The plan will be developed to meet multiple objectives, including: safety (e.g., pedestrian and traffic improvements), equity, accessibility for those with physical disabilities, recreation (e.g. Coastal Trail and beach access), ecosystem protection and restoration, climate resiliency, and other objectives identified in the process. Public engagement will be conducted as part of the project to elicit feedback on the needs and priorities of the public. The plan will serve as a foundation for subsequent implementation, including future grant applications to fund project-level planning, design, and construction of facilities and other projects identified in the plan. Conservancy funding will support hiring a consultant for facilitation, plan development, and community engagement. Participating agencies are enthusiastic to participate (see Exhibit 3), thus this project is a timely effort to capitalize on this collaboration to enhance the Santa Cruz North Coast's public access and natural resources.

Site Description: The north coast of Santa Cruz County ("Santa Cruz North Coast") consists of a 17-mile long section of coast following the Highway 1 corridor stretching north from the City of Santa Cruz city limits by Wilder Ranch State Park to the San Mateo County line near Año Nuevo State Park. The Santa Cruz North Coast is sparsely populated and dominated by large amounts of protected open space, agricultural fields lining both sides of Highway 1, and small amounts of residential areas, including the unincorporated community of Davenport. The region is characterized by generally flat coastal terraces that allow for intensive commercial agriculture, mostly the production of Brussels sprouts and artichokes.

Highway 1 on the Santa Cruz North Coast offers spectacular views of the Pacific Ocean. Many of the beaches cannot be seen from the highway as they are hidden by the parallel railroad grade and 40-80 foot bluffs, however occasionally Highway 1 dips down to sea level where broad beaches extend to inland wetland areas. Coastal drainages flow from the Santa Cruz Mountains west to the sea, including San Vicente Creek which is the southernmost habitat for the endangered Coho salmon. Wildlife is diverse and abundant on the Santa Cruz North Coast, and depend on the wetlands, bluffs, beaches, and rocky intertidal areas for habitat. Special status species include, but are not limited to, the snowy plover, which is known to nest in and around

Scott Beach; elephant seals and Stellar sea lions, which haul-out at the beaches near Greyhound Rock and Waddell Beach; steelhead and coho salmon, that breed in coastal streams; marbled murrelet, which transit the length of the project area to access inland forest nesting sites; tide water goby, which are found in coastal lagoons; red-legged frogs, which are common throughout the region; and multiple plant species. Three marine conservation areas exist off the Santa Cruz North Coast, including the Año Nuevo State Marine Reserve, Greyhound Rock State Marine Conservation Area, and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

Protected lands on the Santa Cruz North Coast have a patchwork of public and non-profit ownership, and have varying levels of public access development (see also Exhibit 1):

- Federal lands include California Coastal National Monument and Cotoni-Coast Dairies National Monument, which is currently closed to the public, but has plans for access.
- State Parks properties include Wilder Ranch State Park, Coast Dairies State Beaches (Panther/Yellowbank Beach, Laguna Creek Beach), Big Basin Redwoods State Park, and Waddell Creek State Beach.
- Santa Cruz County-owned properties include Scott Creek Coastal Access, Bonny Doon Coastal Access, Davenport Landing County Park, and Greyhound Rock County Park.
- Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission owns the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line which is planned to become part of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail, a multi-use pedestrian and bicycle trail that will connect Davenport with Watsonville.
- California Polytechnic State University – San Luis Obispo owns Swanton Ranch, a university-owned educational working ranch and forest.
- San Vicente Redwoods is owned and managed by Save the Redwoods League, Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, Peninsula Open Space Trust, and Sempervirens Fund and is currently closed to the public but planned for public access.

The North Coast of Santa Cruz is known for its rustic coastal experience, pocket beaches, and surf spots and has become increasingly busy with visitors, especially on weekends. The wind frequently blows during the spring and summer, but the north coast beaches are not as persistently foggy as the beaches farther north along the San Mateo coast.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Santa Cruz County Parks manages over 1,500 acres of parkland, including 38 neighborhood, community, regional, or rural parks; and 27 coastal access points, including Davenport Landing and Greyhound Rock County Parks on the Santa Cruz North Coast. They are well equipped to carry out this grant as their staff includes: experienced planners who oversee public engagement, permitting, design, and construction processes; park operations and maintenance staff who maintain the parks in a safe manner; and financial analysts who administer and track grant funding. County Parks has experience implementing numerous state grants, including the 2012 Proposition 84 Strategic Growth Council Urban Greening Program Phase 1 projects at the Farm County Park and the 2013 Habitat Conservation Fund for Quail Hollow Ranch County Park.

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 below.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section below.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**
 - California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report, which calls for the protection of healthy natural systems, including agricultural lands, forests, and watersheds, which provide recreational and economic benefits.
 - Coastal Act (1976), Public Resource Code Section 30210 on public access and recreation for "maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse.
 - Completing the California Trail (2003), Objective #1, which calls for providing a continuous trail as close to the ocean as possible; Objective #4, which seeks to assure that the location and design of the California Coastal Trail is consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act and Local Coastal Programs; and Objective #5, to design the California Coastal Trail to provide a valuable experience for the user by protecting the natural environment and cultural resources while providing public access to beaches, scenic vistas, wildlife viewing areas and other points of interest.
4. **Support of the public:** This project is supported by State Senator John Laird, State Assemblymember Mark Stone, Congresswoman Anna Eschoo, County Supervisor Ryan Coonerty, Davenport North Coast Association, Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, California State Parks, Bureau of Land Management, Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, California Highway Patrol, Caltrans, California Coastal Commission, County Sheriff, Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, Sempervirens Fund, Trust for Public Land, California Polytechnic State University – San Luis Obispo – Swanton Ranch, and Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District
5. **Location:** See the "Project Summary".
6. **Need:** If Conservancy funding were unavailable, each individual agency would remain responsible for addressing in isolation the current and future influx of visitors and the traffic safety, trash accumulation, illegal behavior, and threats to environmental resources. Management and future access improvements would occur in an uncoordinated and potentially inefficient manner, negatively impacting visitors and residents.

7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The 17 miles of the North Coast of Santa Cruz County attracts visitors from across the County, Silicon Valley, and the larger Bay Area. The area supports recreational opportunities including beach combing, surfing, hiking, wildlife watching, commercial agriculture, residential areas, and harbors multiple special status species within its protected areas.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The North Coast Facilities and Management Plan will include sea level rise considerations in the project planning. The plan will identify areas vulnerable to sea level rise, such as lagoons, coastal access points, and transportation corridors and identify potential projects that address sea level rise/climate resiliency. Addressing sea level rise will be considered for all projects proposed within the facilities management plan.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** Threats facing the North Coast due to the dramatic increases in visitation are urgent and affecting public safety and environmental health. All organizations on the North Coast Multi-Agency Coordinating Committee agree something must be done and are willing to participate in this planning effort; thus, capitalizing on this momentum and agency commitment is crucial.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** This project will address the multitude of issues occurring on the North Coast, including natural resource degradation, traffic, sanitation, public safety/trauma, and beach accessibility.
11. **Readiness:** The project is ready to begin immediately, and the North Coast Multi-Agency Coordinating Committee is eager to begin developing the Plan.
12. **Cooperation:** This project will bring together multiple agencies that provide land stewardship, resource protection, and recreation amenities along the North Coast to cooperate on addressing the public access and natural resource issues the area is facing.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
Project Total	\$100,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funding is an appropriation from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006, Public Resources Code Section 75001 et seq. (Proposition 84). Proposition 84 authorizes the use of these funds for the purpose of protecting and restoring beaches, bays and coastal waters and watersheds and for promoting access to and enjoyment of coastal resources of the state (PRC Section 75060). The project will develop a facilities and management plan that will both protect coastal watersheds and ensure access and enjoyment of the North Coast of Santa Cruz County. As required by projects funded with Proposition 84 funds, this project is consistent with Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation (Division 21 of the Public Resources Code),

as described in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section below. Therefore, it is appropriate to use Proposition 84 funds for the proposed project.

All agencies participating in the North Coast Multi-Agency Coordinating Committee will be providing their staff-time in-kind for the project. The Coastal Conservancy does not typically require matching funds nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete the project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31410), regarding public access to and enjoyment of coastal resources. Public Resources Code, Section 31400 states that it is the Legislature’s intent that the Conservancy play a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. Pursuant to section 31400.1, the Conservancy may award grants to local agencies to develop lands for public access to and along the coast. Consistent with this section, the public access planned under this grant serves state-wide and national interests in this section of the California Coast. Through the proposed project, the Conservancy will assist in improving coastal public access by creating a facilities and management plan for the North Coast of Santa Cruz that identifies visitor-serving facilities needed (such as parking lots, restrooms, trailheads, safe access connections, trash collection, and interpretation/education features) and management actions that will improve accessible, safe, and environmentally-sensitive access to the North Coast of Santa Cruz County.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective C** of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project work will identify priority access facilities needed on the North Coast, such as parking lot, restrooms, trailheads, safe access connections, trash collection, and interpretation/education features that can be further designed and implemented to enhance coastal recreational opportunities and address the impacts which existing recreation demand has its coastal resources.

Consistent with **Goal 15 Objective B** of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will support a new regional collaborative, the North Coast Multi-Agency Coordinating Committee, that furthers Conservancy public access and resources protection goals and objectives and supports the work of partner organizations that manage protected lands on the North Coast of Santa Cruz County.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to the Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, which exempts feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions not yet been approved,

adopted, or funded by the Conservancy. The proposed project will create a regional access plan for the North Coast of Santa Cruz County, which may include possible future actions that are yet to be approved, adopted, or funded by Conservancy. Consistent with Section 15262, the project will consider environmental factors in the plan development.

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