

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 2, 2021

SEA OTTER RECOVERY GRANTS 2022

Project No. 08-079-11
Project Manager: Hilary Hill

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$52,000 to Sea Otter Savvy to implement a project to aid in recovery of the southern sea otter, consisting of conducting an educational outreach and community engagement program on responsible viewing of wild sea otters to reduce sea otter disturbance in Santa Cruz, Monterey, and San Luis Obispo counties.

LOCATION: Santa Cruz, Moss Landing, Monterey, Morro Bay, and Avila Beach

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Sea Otter Savvy Photos and Materials](#)
- Exhibit 3: [California Sea Otter Fund — Summary of Projects](#)
- Exhibit 4: [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 fifty-two thousand dollars (\$52,000) to Sea Otter Savvy (“the grantee”) to conduct an educational outreach and community engagement program on responsible viewing of wild sea otters to reduce sea otter disturbance in Santa Cruz, Monterey, and San Luis Obispo counties.

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 funding.

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 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Integrated Coastal and Marine Resource Protection.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. Sea Otter Savvy is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy disburse \$52,000 to Sea Otter Savvy to implement its educational outreach and community engagement program on responsible viewing of wild sea otters to reduce sea otter disturbance in Santa Cruz, Monterey, and San Luis Obispo counties. Outreach will target the wildlife-viewing public (such as kayakers, stand-up paddlers, wildlife photographers) with activities such as in-person events, pop-up stations at disturbance hot-spots, online media, printed materials, school programs, and its business certification program. The purpose of this project is to aid in the recovery of the southern sea otter.

The southern sea otter is an ecologically important species that has been listed on the Endangered Species List as a threatened species since 1977, after being hunted to near extinction for its fur. Historically estimated at 16,000-20,000 animals with a range along the entire California coast and south into Baja California, the southern sea otter population has been slow to recover. Today the population numbers around 2,960 animals inhabiting a range from San Mateo County south to Santa Barbara County, a fraction of their historic range. In addition to its small population size and limited range, the sea otter population in California is threatened by oil spills, infectious disease, human-caused pollutants and disturbance, and shark bites.

To address concerns regarding the slow recovery of the southern sea otter, in 2006 the California legislature passed AB 2485 to establish the California Sea Otter Fund. Taxpayers can voluntarily contribute to this fund, of which the Conservancy receives approximately half the proceeds to support projects that will assist in the recovery of sea otters and the remaining 50% is directed to the Department of Fish and Wildlife for sea otter-related purposes. Since 2008, the Conservancy has provided over \$1.5 million of sea otter tax check-off funds for projects to aid in the recovery of southern sea otters. Projects funded to date include critical research for sea otter recovery, education, and reduction of environmental stressors impacting sea otters (Exhibit 3). The proposed project recommended for funding this year builds on the sea otter recovery work from previous years.

In July 2021, the Conservancy solicited project proposals for recovery of the southern sea otter. The Conservancy received two proposals, and staff recommends funding the following project:

Sea Otter Savvy Educational Outreach and Community Engagement Program.

With the proposed project, Sea Otter Savvy will implement its “Sea Otter Savvy” educational outreach and community engagement program that promotes responsible viewing of wild sea otters to reduce disturbance and harassment. Sea otters are widely beloved by the public, and this charismatic species draws kayakers, photographers, stand-up paddlers, wildlife tour operators, scuba divers, and other marine recreationists to view them. Often however, people viewing sea otters approach too closely and human disturbance to sea otters has become a persistent and widespread issue.

Sea otters have high metabolisms to keep them warm, which requires them to eat nearly 25% of their body weight in food each day and spend most of their day foraging or resting to conserve their critical energy reserves. Frequent and repeated human disturbance of sea otters throughout the day threatens this balance. Research conducted by Sea Otter Savvy’s citizen science team revealed that female otters are 30% more likely to be active when marine crafts are nearby. Female sea otters are especially vulnerable to disturbance during their reproductive stage, and in extreme cases the additional stress caused by human disturbance may lead to pup abandonment or death. As sea otters become acclimated to regular proximity of humans, they can also lose their natural fearfulness, leading to unwanted, aggressive interactions—which in some cases has necessitated permanent removal of a wild sea otter from the wild. The number of marine recreationists using coastal waters of the Central Coast continues to rise, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when restrictions on indoor activities has resulted in a record number of visitors and revenues for kayak rental businesses.

The proposed project will implement the Sea Otter Savvy outreach program to inspire responsible viewing of wild sea otters and modify the expectation of viewing proximity to sea otters to reduce this stressor on sea otters. The program will engage and educate the wildlife-viewing public through a multi-faceted outreach program, targeting heavily-trafficked locations such as Santa Cruz, Moss Landing, Cannery Row in Monterey, Morro Bay, and Avila Beach and working with 30+ commercial operators and local Harbor Districts. This work will include:

- Online media including social media engagement, videos, and website
- Printed materials such as stickers on rental marine crafts that provide clear guidelines for responsible viewing of sea otters, and field guides with tips for safe wildlife viewing
- In-person outreach such as pop-up information stations at disturbance hotspots, school programs, public presentations, and other events such as Sea Otter Awareness Week
- Business certification program “Community Active Wildlife Stewards” to recognize local businesses with responsible wildlife stewardship practices

The Conservancy funded the Sea Otter Savvy program previously from 2016-2019, as the Federal Southern Sea Otter Recovery Plan identifies public outreach and education as a recommended action. Prior to the Sea Otter Savvy program, no long-term, systematic efforts to mitigate the problem of sea otter disturbance and harassment existed. Although law enforcement may investigate the most egregious cases of disturbance, the problem is vast,

diffuse, and ongoing. Without continued intervention, the problem of sea otter disturbance and harassment in densely populated areas is likely to continue to increase.

Site Description: The Sea Otter Savvy program focuses on areas with a high frequency of disturbance reports caused by humans on southern sea otters (as recorded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Wildlife) including Santa Cruz, Moss Landing, the Cannery Row area of Monterey, Morro Bay, and Avila Beach. Sea Otter Savvy will continue to focus outreach efforts in these priority areas. In addition, Sea Otter Savvy will conduct outreach to marine recreation businesses at locations throughout the otters' range and will collaborate with groups working on marine wildlife conservation education.

Southern sea otters' historic range is from Oregon to Baja, but they currently inhabit only from San Mateo County to Santa Barbara County. They are most commonly found in kelp beds in the nearshore environment, generally found in water depths of sixty-five feet or less to forage along the ocean floor. Over the last 20 years have also been found to thrive in salt marshes and eelgrass beds in estuaries.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Sea Otter Savvy has successfully implemented Conservancy grants for Sea Otter Savvy program from 2016-2019 through fiscal sponsorships with Friends of the Sea Otter and Defenders of Wildlife. Sea Otter Savvy recently achieved its own status as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and will be administering this grant themselves for the first time. Sea Otter Savvy has experience fulfilling Conservancy grant requirements and reporting and the Director and Treasurer will work together to manage this grant. Sea Otter Savvy is uniquely positioned to carry out this project as their mission and experienced staff is focused on increasing awareness about sea otter conservation through outreach. The concept for Sea Otter Savvy originated from a collaboratively identified need for a new outreach program, by representatives from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Monterey Bay Aquarium, and Friends of the Sea Otter. Sea Otter Savvy began in 2015 when it received its first grant from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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 September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

- 1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Strategic Plan" section below.
- 2. Project is a good investment of state resources.** As discussed above, the proposed project will implement a recommendation in the Federal Recovery Plan for the California Sea Otter using funds targeted for the recovery of these species. The purpose of the funding source is the primary criteria used to select this project.

The number of volunteer support hours provided by the grantee make the proposed outreach work very cost-effective. In addition, addressing these potential violations of the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act through education is far more cost-effective than a legal enforcement approach.

3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.

In 2017 the Conservancy sent letters to tribes within the current range of southern sea otters (San Mateo, Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara counties) informing them about the Sea Otter Recovery grant program and inquiring if any tribes would like to initiate tribal consultation. The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band responded requesting to stay informed regarding the effort. The Conservancy has sent an update on the proposed project to the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band.

4. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.

The direct visitor education, pamphlets, educational stickers, and other outreach materials included in this grant will provide benefits over the course of the project and beyond.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The Sea Otter Savvy outreach program will reduce stress on sea otters and educate the public to view inspire wild sea otters responsibly. This project’s main benefits are the reduced harassment southern sea otters and education of marine recreation businesses and recreationists. Healthy sea otter populations have been shown to benefit a variety of coastal and marine habitats including kelp forests, salt marsh, and sea grass ecosystems. Other wildlife species may also benefit from the education that wildlife viewers will receive through the program.

6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.

The primary purpose of this project is meaningful engagement with people wanting to view southern sea otters. The Sea Otter Savvy program has evolved over time through collaboration with marine recreation businesses and recreationists. Sea Otter Savvy develops outreach materials in multiple languages and media types to reach diverse audiences.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$52,000
Mossy Earth	\$7,500
Project Total	\$59,500

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for the proposed project is an appropriation from the California Sea Otter Fund. Established in 2006, the California Sea Otter Fund is a state income tax check-off program allowing taxpayers to dedicate funds to facilitate sea otter recovery (Revenue and Taxation Code (RTC) Section 18754). The funds may be used for “research, science, protection projects or programs related to the Federal Sea Otter Recovery Plan or improving the nearshore ocean ecosystem, including, but not limited to, program activities to reduce sea otter mortality” (RTC Section 18754.2(a)(3)). The proposed authorization is consistent with the requirements of the California Sea Otter Fund in that funds

will be used to further the objectives of the Final Revised Federal Southern Sea Otter Recovery Plan (2003). Sea Otter Savvy's education and outreach program will directly implement Task 7 of the Federal Sea Otter Recovery Plan to "Develop and implement a public education and outreach program."

RTC Section 18754.2(b) requires the Conservancy to solicit available federal, private, matching, and other dollars to maximize or leverage funds benefitting sea otters. Match funding shown above has been awarded to Sea Otter Savvy by the Mossy Foundation (\$7,500). Additional in-kind contributions will be provided by Sea Otter Savvy volunteers, with an estimated contribution of 50-60 volunteer hours per month to support Sea Otter Savvy as well as in-kind hours contributed by the advisory committee, comprised of US Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Monterey Bay Aquarium, and UC Santa Cruz/US Geological Survey. Match funding listed above are provided as estimates. 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 is consistent with Division 21, Chapter 5.5 (Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation (Public Resources Code § 31220). Under Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code, the Conservancy may undertake living marine resource protection and restoration projects in order to improve and protect coastal and marine water quality and habitats. As keystone predators, sea otters have been shown to benefit a variety of coastal and marine habitats including kelp forests, salt marsh, and sea grass ecosystems.

Section 31220 states that a project must meet any of the objectives specified in subsection (b) of that section. Section 31220(b)(7), the proposed project "[r]educes the impact of population and economic pressures on coastal and marine resources." The proposed project will reduce stress on sea otters (a marine resource) by reducing conflicts between otters and humans.

Section 31220(c) requires projects funded pursuant to the section to include a monitoring and evaluation component. A monitoring and evaluation component would not be relevant to Sea Otter Savvy's education and outreach program because the project will not have a direct physical impact that can be monitored. Funded outside of the proposed project, Sea Otter Savvy's citizen science program monitors and evaluates the effects of marine recreation on sea otter activity and behavior to complement and inform their outreach and education efforts.

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

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective H** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will result in one grant that will support the recovery of the southern sea otter.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The Sea Otter Savvy educational program is categorically exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Title 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) section 15322 (Educational or Training Programs Involving No Physical Changes), which exempts the “adoption, alteration, or termination of educational or training programs which involve no physical alteration in the area affected.” Implementation of the proposed outreach and public education campaign concerning responsible viewing of wild sea otters does not involve the physical alteration of the environment.

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