

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 3, 2022

Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project - Regional Monitoring Program

Project No. 97-001-07
Project Manager: Meghan Martinez

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Consideration and possible authorization to disburse up to \$404,633 to one state agency, two non-profit organizations, and one Joint Powers Authority to develop a regional wetland monitoring program for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project.

LOCATION: Coastal wetlands and watersheds from Point Conception in Santa Barbara County south to the international border with Mexico (Exhibit 1).

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map – Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Region](#)
Exhibit 2: [Project Support Letters](#)
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

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

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed four hundred four thousand, six hundred thirty-three dollars (\$404,633) to one state government agency, two non-profit organizations, and one Joint Powers Authority to collaboratively develop a regional wetland monitoring program for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP). The four grantees are as follows (presented in alphabetical order):

California Coastal Commission: Thirty-six thousand three hundred thirty-seven dollars (\$36,337) to provide regulatory agency insight and guidance in the development of the regional monitoring program.

San Jose State University Research Foundation (fiscal agent of the Central Coast Wetlands Group): Thirty-five thousand one hundred seventy-five dollars (\$35,175) for the Central Coast

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Wetlands Group to coordinate with Statewide monitoring efforts, help refine monitoring indicators, and help with sentinel site selection.

Southern California Coastal Water Research Project: Two hundred eighty-four thousand ninety-nine dollars (\$284,099) to develop all components of the regional monitoring program and coordinate input from the other grantees.

The Bay Foundation: Forty-nine thousand twenty-two dollars (\$49,022) to incorporate previous monitoring indicators developed in Southern California into the regional monitoring program.

Prior to commencement of the project, each 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.

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 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the funding of plan preparation and feasibility studies, and with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding resource enhancement.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The San Jose State University Research Foundation and The Bay Foundation are nonprofit organizations organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy disburse up to a total of \$404,633 to four entities: the California Coastal Commission, a state government agency, the San Jose State University Research Foundation (fiscal sponsor for the Central Coast Wetlands Group) and The Bay Foundation, both of which are non-profit organizations, and the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP), a joint powers authority, to develop a regional wetland monitoring program for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP). The SCCWRP will develop the monitoring program with the input and advice of the Coastal Commission, Central Coast Wetlands Group, and The Bay Foundation. A portion of the grant funds is from a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant that will be awarded to the Conservancy specifically for this project. The EPA funding will not be disbursed prior to receiving the award letter. The Conservancy's contribution is a required match for the EPA grant. The EPA grant will also fund a portion of the Conservancy staff time on the project.

The WRP is a group of 18 federal and state agencies (funding and regulatory), local governments, and non-profits with a cooperative mission to protect, restore, and enhance

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Southern California's coastal wetland resources. The WRP has been highly successful in developing regional guidance for assessment and management strategies through the development of the goals and objectives of the 2018 Regional Strategy. The WRP's work has facilitated the acquisition of property for potential wetland restoration and the implementation of restoration and enhancement projects.

A major challenge in coordinated wetland restoration is that the responsibility for assessing wetlands extent, abundance, and condition and managing data currently resides with many different agencies. Amongst these agencies, there are a number of wetland monitoring sites, approaches, and protocols, for both voluntary restoration and mitigation projects in the southern California region. Furthermore, southern California's coastal wetlands are extremely vulnerable to sea-level rise (SLR). If the WRP member agencies cannot assess how existing and newly restored wetlands are actively adapting to SLR, the agencies responsible for achieving "no net loss" of wetlands will not be effective in doing so.

There have been recent efforts to establish more consistent design and coordination of wetland monitoring projects; however, until these efforts are standardized, data compilation and comparison across projects is typically difficult. While significant progress has been made in developing standardized site-specific monitoring processes within the academic and scientific communities, the greatest need is a multi-agency collaborative process to confirm previous work will fit the needs of regulatory and funding agencies. The agencies must also develop mechanisms for implementing the monitoring program and agree to standardize the monitoring across multiple agencies.

Development of the monitoring program will involve the four grantees, and the Conservancy, working together to develop the following components of the program: (1) Key programmatic guiding and management questions; (2) sentinel monitoring sites and sentinel site selection criteria; (3) agreed-upon wetland health indicators and associated standard operating procedures; (4) resilience indicators and a conceptual model for evaluating resiliency to sea-level rise; (5) potential mechanisms for implementation, funding, and data management; (6) an outline of strategies in a final programmatic document; (7) a monitoring plan for a minimum of one sentinel site within the WRP region; and (8) outreach products (such as webinars, presentations, and website updates).

The four entities carrying out the proposed project will collaborate with scientists, the WRP's Wetland Managers Group, and the Science Advisory Panel to ensure input and buy-in throughout the program development. Each grantee will participate as follows:

Southern California Coastal Water Research Project: Develop all components of the regional monitoring program and coordinate input from the other grantees.

California Coastal Commission: Provide regulatory agency insight and guidance in the development of the regional monitoring program.

San Jose State University Research Foundation (fiscal agent of the Central Coast Wetlands Group): Coordinate with Statewide monitoring efforts, help refine monitoring indicators, and help with sentinel site selection.

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The Bay Foundation: Incorporate previous monitoring indicators developed in Southern California into the regional monitoring program.

Site Description: The project area includes the WRP region, which consists of the coastal wetlands and watersheds within the counties of San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura, and Santa Barbara. The region spans from Point Conception south to the U.S./Mexico border (see Exhibit 1).

Grant Applicant Qualifications:

The California Coastal Commission (CCC) agency staff have been a part of the WRP for many years and are familiar with how regulatory processes impact wetland restoration monitoring and permitting requirements. CCC staff will provide valuable guidance and direction on the development of the monitoring program.

The San Jose State University Research Foundation (SJSURF) will serve as a fiscal agent for receiving and administering the grant on behalf of the Central Coast Wetlands Group (CCWG). The CCWG has played an instrumental role in developing and validating the California Rapid Assessment Model (CRAM) and furthered novel analysis tools linking landscape scale stressors and CRAM metrics to inform wetland assessment and management.

The Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP) has nearly 30 years of experience in wetland monitoring and assessment and has played a substantive role in the development of major monitoring programs at the state and national level, and in the development of the updated Regional Strategy (2018).

The Bay Foundation (TBF) has over 15 years of regional wetland monitoring experience and implementation of coastal restoration projects across many habitats. The proposed project will in part be building off previous EPA funded work that TBF has developed.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

Selection Criteria

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.

While developing the project proposal, Conservancy staff conducted a survey of five WRP regulatory agencies and one funding agency. The participating agencies identified a need for more standardized monitoring across agency permit requirements and across agencies for both voluntary and mitigation-associated coastal wetland projects and acknowledged that standardized monitoring would help the state assess its large investment in coastal wetland protection, enhancement, and restoration.

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- The development of a regional wetland monitoring program will respond to the Governor’s Executive Order N-82-20 instructing all state agencies to:
 - “Bring together other governmental partners, California Native American tribes, experts, business and community leaders and other stakeholders from across California to protect and restore the State's biodiversity. State agencies will consult the Collaborative on efforts to expand the communication and use of information, indicators and tools to monitor, track and protect California's biodiversity and natural resources.”
 - “Use existing authorities and resources to identify and implement near- and long-term actions to build climate resilience in our wetlands in ways that serve all communities and in particular low-income, disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.”
- The development of a regional wetland monitoring program aligns with the following Core Elements and actions of the California Wetland Program Plan (2017-2022):
 - Monitoring & Assessment:
 - “Assessments of progress toward WRP’s Regional Strategy restoration objectives” — the proposed project will develop a regional monitoring program necessary for the Southern California Wetland Recovery Project (WRP) to assess its quantitative objectives for coastal wetland restoration under Goal 1 of the WRP Regional Strategy 2018.
 - “Provide technical and policy input and support to adopt and integrate wetland assessment and inventory tools and data into regulatory and grant programs in accordance with the Wetland and Riparian Area Monitoring Plan (WRAMP)” — the proposed project will develop a Level-3 regional monitoring program, in accordance with WRAMP, to assess wetland health and resilience for the regulatory and funding agencies of the WRP.
 - Regulatory Activities:
 - “Improve compliance monitoring” —the proposed project will achieve more standardized monitoring across regulatory agency permit requirements for both voluntary and mitigation-associated coastal wetland projects.
 - Voluntary Restoration and Protection
 - “Support sea level rise vulnerability assessment and adaptive management/restoration planning for coastal wetlands” —the proposed project will achieve agency approval on a set of standardized sea level rise indicators that will be incorporated into monitoring and permitting monitoring programs.
 - “Continue to lead the SCWRP in advancing wetland science, education, and public access as well as restoring, protecting, and enhancing wetlands throughout southern California” —the proposed project will

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support the WRP in understanding the condition and resilience of coastal wetlands throughout southern California and activities needed for successful restoration, protection, and enhancement.

- The proposed project will produce outputs and outcomes needed for the state to successfully restore and protect wetland resources and will further advance the FY 2018-2022 EPA Strategic Plan, Objective 1.2 “Provide for Clean and Safe Water” of Goal 1 “A Cleaner, Healthier Environment”.
- The development of a regional wetland monitoring program also aligns with the goals listed in the California Climate Adaptation Strategy Safeguarding California: 2018 by i) “supporting planning and adaptation to reduce hazards and to increase the resilience of coastal communities, infrastructure, development, and other resources”, and ii) “coordinating across agencies and external partners to ensure efficient problem solving and widely communicating resources for ocean and coastal adaptation strategies”.

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.

A tribal consultation process will be conducted across the WRP Region for the Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties to inform representative native tribes of the project and its long-term goals, and present an opportunity for tribal engagement as participants of the WRP Wetland Managers Group.

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

With regional collaboration occurring amongst key regulatory and funding agencies to develop a site-specific monitoring program, (i) there will be an increased understanding of the needs of each agency; (ii) agency agreement upon wetland health and resilience indicators and protocols will allow for future efforts to develop detailed agency guidelines for sampling and analysis, a data management plan, and finalize a funding strategy; (iii) the implementation strategy will provide agencies with the buy in and support needed to consider changing internal processes that determine wetland monitoring and evaluation within their respective organizations; and (iv) establishing a long-term monitoring program will provide a foundation for future assessment of wetland resilience in subsequent projects or through existing partnerships.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The proposed project is a long-term planning project; however, once the project monitoring program is implemented, it will: (i) provide regulatory and funding agencies with a means to monitor in a more standardized way, reduce duplication of effort, and better leverage efforts across programs to improve regional wetland inventories and baseline condition assessments; (ii) inform state and federal regulatory programs to effectively manage, preserve, and restore highly impacted wetlands in southern California by improving baseline information on wetland condition and performance, which will further State and Federal wetland goals (e.g., “no net loss”); (iii) help agencies assess coastal wetland resilience to address flood effects and climate

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adaptation; and (iv) help assess the quantitative objectives for coastal wetland restoration under Goal 1 of the WRP Regional Strategy 2018.

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

Through a multi-year, collaborative planning process between the WRP Wetlands Advisory Group, the WRP Wetland Managers Group, and the WRP Science Advisory Panel, the Regional Strategy (2018) was updated to reflect a shared vision for wetland recovery. Through this process, agencies and scientists identified a critical need to develop a comprehensive, regional wetland monitoring program for coastal wetlands to evaluate whether the goals and objectives of the Regional Strategy are being achieved. This phase of the proposed project will build on this previous work and other monitoring efforts and be structured similarly, with an agency and science stakeholder driven process. In future phases of this project (i.e., with potential subsequent funding from EPA), there may be an opportunity to involve the WRP County Task Forces that are comprised of public, private, and non-profit wetlands and watershed stakeholders that will allow for more targeted community engagement.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$125,000
U.S. EPA <i>via</i> a grant to the Conservancy	\$279,633
Project Total	\$404,633

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for the project is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84, Public Resources Code sections 75001 et seq.). Proposition 84 funds are available for the protection of beaches, bays and coastal waters and watersheds, including projects to protect and restore the natural habitat values of coastal waters and lands, to the extent authorized by the Conservancy's enabling legislation at Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 75060(a) & (b)). The proposed project will help expand, restore, and protect coastal wetlands by establishing a regional wetland monitoring program that will assist WRP member agencies and other stakeholders with selection, permitting and evaluation of wetlands projects.

In addition to the funding listed above, the Conservancy will receive \$85,367 from the U.S. EPA grant for staff support, travel, and conference stipends.

Coastal Quest, a Statewide non-profit organization, will provide \$10,000 of in-kind support to the WRP for the development of a site-specific monitoring plan in Orange County. The source of funds for Coastal Quest is the Warne Family Charitable Foundation.

Unless specifically labelled "Required Match" the other sources of funding listed above are provided as estimates. The Coastal Conservancy does not typically require matching funds, nor

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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 would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 3 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Section 31111, and Chapter 6 Sections 31251-31253.

Section 31111 permits the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the purpose of funding and undertaking plans and feasibility studies. Consistent with this section, the proposed project will develop a plan for guiding wetland regional monitoring for the Southern California WRP.

Consistent with Section 31251 of the Public Resources Code, the proposed project would grant funds to two public agencies (CCC, SCCWRP) and two non-profit organizations (SJSURF, TBF) to undertake a monitoring program necessary for the prioritization for enhancement of the coastal wetlands of Southern California, which have been significantly impacted by indiscriminate dredging and filling, improper location of improvements, human-induced events, and incompatible land uses and have suffered the loss of natural and scenic values. The proposed project is intended to assist the Conservancy in meeting its purposes and objectives under this section by enhancing the capacity for WRP member agencies to assess the effectiveness of their collective actions on the abundance, diversity, condition, and resiliency of wetlands and wetland restoration and enhancement projects in Southern California's coastal zone and coastal watersheds. The work on this project, in support of the WRP, will help to develop a regional wetland monitoring program that is needed to carry out successful coastal resource enhancement projects.

Consistent with Section 31252, the proposed project will provide monitoring strategies for wetlands that are identified within the applicable certified local coastal plans or programs (LCPs) or that would benefit coastal wetlands and watersheds if the monitoring program is implemented outside the coastal zone.

Section 31253 permits the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project, including the state or local share of federally supported projects, that are consistent with established project eligibility and priority factors. In determining the amount of Conservancy funding for this project, the factors identified in Section 31253 have been considered and applied, as described in detail above, under the heading "Consistency With Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria".

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

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective 6A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project outcomes (e.g., effectively assessing whether the objectives of the Regional

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Strategy are being met), will allow for more strategic identification and development of plans for the restoration and enhancement of coastal habitats, including coastal wetlands and intertidal areas, stream corridors, dunes, coastal terraces, coastal sage scrub, forests, and coastal prairie.

Consistent with **Goal 8, Objective 8B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will plan and design a wetland monitoring program that (once implemented) will allow for better identification of adaptation projects that increase resilience to sea level rise and other climate change impacts.

Consistent with **Goal 15, Objective 15B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will lead a regional collaborative that furthers Conservancy program goals and objectives through the WRP and Regional Strategy and supports the work of partner organizations.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15306, which exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. The proposed project will include stakeholder coordination and planning. These efforts will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Additionally, the proposed project is statutorily exempt from CEQA under 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, which exempts feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions. The proposed project consists of planning for coordinated wetland monitoring and will include consideration of environmental factors.

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