

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 24, 2022

Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration Project and Tribal and Community Engagement for Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project

Project Nos. 04-088-03 & 21-072-01

Project Manager: Megan Cooper, Emely Lopez, Carol Martinez

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to (1) disburse up to \$500,000 to hire contractors to develop and implement participation from tribal communities, community groups, and residents of the greater Los Angeles region to assist in planning the Ballona Wetlands Restoration project; and (2) disburse up to \$53,000 to the Friends of Ballona Wetlands to restore disturbed riparian habitat at the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve in Los Angeles County.

LOCATION: Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve, a portion of which is in the City of Los Angeles, and a portion is in unincorporated Los Angeles County.

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Site Maps](#)

Exhibit 3: [Riparian Project Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 4: [Staff Recommendation from May 27, 2021, for the Ballona Wetland Restoration Project: Final Design, Permits, & Community Engagement](#)

Exhibit 5: [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 disbursement of: 1) up to five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) to retain contractors to develop and implement participation from tribal communities, community groups, and residents of the greater Los Angeles region to assist in the planning of the Ballona Wetlands Restoration project; and 2) up to fifty-three thousand dollars (\$53,000) to the Friends of Ballona Wetlands (“the grantee”) to restore disturbed riparian habitat as part of the Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration Project at the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve.

Prior to the commencement of the Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration 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 acknowledgment of Conservancy funding and Proposition 84 as the source of that funding.
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.

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 the enhancement of natural resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Friends of Ballona Wetlands is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends Conservancy authorization to (1) disburse up to \$500,000 to hire contractors to develop and implement participation from tribal communities, community groups, and residents of the greater Los Angeles region to assist in planning the Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project (“Wetlands Project” or “the larger project”); and (2) disburse up to \$53,000 to the Friends of Ballona Wetlands (FBW) for the Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration project to restore disturbed riparian habitat at the Ballona Wetlands Ecological

Reserve (BWER) in Los Angeles County. Pursuant to the first authorization, the Conservancy will retain contractors to engage the following groups in the design of the Wetlands Project: tribes, indigenous people, community groups, community-based organizations, and residents from around Los Angeles that reflect the diversity and demographics of the County. The second authorization (the “Riparian Project”) aims to enhance riparian habitat, adjacent dune, and high marsh habitats at the western edge of the BWER to support wildlife, improve biodiversity, and boost environmental educational value.

The Wetlands Project aims to restore wetland ecological functions, maintain existing levels of flood risk management provided by the Ballona Creek channel and levee system, and restore and improve public access for compatible recreational and educational opportunities within the Ballona Reserve. This larger project is crucial because Ballona Reserve is 600 acres, making it one of the largest remaining opportunities for coastal habitat restoration and open space access in Los Angeles County. The project is led by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and supported by the Conservancy. For further information on the restoration components of the Wetlands Project, see Exhibit 4. The proposed Tribal and Community Engagement contracts are intended to inform the Wetlands Project, while the proposed Riparian Project is separate from but adjacent to the Wetlands Project.

Tribal and Community Engagement for the Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project

At the Conservancy's meeting held on May 27, 2021, the Conservancy approved \$1,692,360 for design and permitting of the Wetlands Project and authorized the disbursement of up to \$500,000 to the Prevention Institute to support broad community engagement in planning for that restoration (Exhibit 4). Following the Conservancy's authorization, the Prevention Institute withdrew from the tribal and community engagement grant opportunity. However, as the larger project moves forward, tribal and broad community engagement continues to be necessary to ensure the delivery of an inclusive process for ecological restoration and recreational access.

Staff now seeks Conservancy approval to enter into contracts to assist the project planning with input from tribal representatives or communities and broad community engagement that is representative of the diversity and demographics of the Los Angeles County. Staff seeks approval to hire contractors to lead engagement with local tribal representatives or tribal communities and lead community groups and resident engagement. Staff is recommending two separate contracts for this engagement work, one with tribal communities and one for broader community engagement, because of recommendations from tribal representatives who want their concerns and input separate from the broader public's comments. Input from the tribal and community engagement processes will inform the Wetland Project's engineering, design, and permitting.

Tribal participation is crucial because the land of the Ballona Reserve is the ancestral homeland of the Tongva/ Kizh/ Gabrieleno people. Two archaeological sites with components dating to the Spanish era are in the Ballona Reserve. Because of the historical activity and habitation near the Ballona Reserve, the Native American Heritage Commission considers the site culturally sensitive. Staff recommends that the Conservancy retain a specialized contractor to gather and implement tribal communities' concerns, experience, and priorities in the final design and

permit applications. The contractors will help the Conservancy and CDFW incorporate tribal expertise into the Wetlands Project at the high level of quality that tribes deserve. A portion of the funds will be used to compensate tribal representatives and tribal communities for their expertise and time. Tribal representatives and communities will work with CDFW to ensure that the larger wetlands project respects cultural resources. Tribal representatives and communities will be involved in the creation of interpretive components related to their cultures. This engagement will also help establish ongoing connections between tribal members and the Ballona Reserve.

The community engagement contract will focus on county-wide public engagement to ensure that restoration and recreational access planning for the Wetlands Project includes inputs from all communities that could benefit from the proposed design. The larger project consists of the restoration of wetlands and native habitats and the expansion of compatible public access. Specifically, CDFW plans to expand recreational opportunities at the Ballona Reserve by building 5.5 miles of new pedestrian trails and a half-mile elevated boardwalk to allow visitors to walk adjacent to the wetlands. The Wetlands Project also plans to realign the existing bike trails and construct a new bike path atop the project's levees around much of the Ballona Reserve's perimeter. It is crucial to have a broad and diverse community engagement process to create a sense of project ownership for Los Angeles residents. The Wetlands Project will create a new regional attraction with recreational access to an estimated 2.8 million Angelenos (Los Angeles residents). According to the LA Times, an estimated 2.8 million Angelenos live within an easy drive from Ballona, more than half from disadvantaged households—including about 106,000 people who live within easy bicycling distance and 9,000 who live within easy walking distance. This is an opportunity to connect Los Angeles residents to the outdoors and provide an opportunity to learn more about the importance of wetlands on the California coast. The contractor will gather and implement input from diverse community groups and stakeholders to refine the designs and consider future management considerations, potential future programming onsite, and regional access issues such as integration into regional bicycle and transit planning.

The contractors will be required to have experience with engaging tribal and local communities in a meaningful way and the ability to build mutual trust and relationships with culturally diverse communities.

Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration Project

The Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration project (“Riparian Project”) is a community-based project that will occur on the margins of the BWER in an area that will not be affected by the larger Wetlands Project. This restoration site is approximately two acres of upland habitat located on the western edge of the BWER adjacent to housing and developed areas. No activities are proposed in the larger project's Environmental Impact Report for the proposed Riparian Project area.

The Riparian Project will restore riparian and adjacent dune and high marsh habitats at the western edge of the BWER to support wildlife, improve biodiversity, and boost environmental educational value. As a result of the restoration, there will be more native habitat for rare

species, increased biodiversity, and sediment and erosion control. Non-native and invasive species, which provide little habitat value, will be removed and replaced with native vegetation. Native vegetation will increase ecological function by providing foraging sources, protective cover, and breeding habitats for various native fauna. Newly established vegetation will increase native biodiversity and provide higher quality habitat for several endangered species of particular concern, such as the California legless lizard, the federally endangered least bell's vireo, the El Segundo blue butterfly, and the wandering skipper butterfly, as well as the monarch butterfly, which winters in the Eucalyptus Grove and forages in and around the restoration area.

The Riparian Project will engage the community in active restoration and stewardship efforts while providing educational and hands-on learning opportunities, especially to inland communities. FBW will guide community volunteers in implementing much of the restoration. FBW will also prioritize engaging the inland community for volunteering opportunities in this smaller project, so Los Angeles residents can be stewards of nature and feel a sense of connection to the BWER. This project will give the public and students a chance to actively restore an ecologically important, degraded system while learning about restoration techniques and native plants and animals alongside the value and functions of healthy wetlands.

The Riparian Project will require hand removal of the existing invasive vegetation and re-planting with local seeds collected from adjacent coastal dune systems and local nurseries. FBW will lead and supervise volunteer groups to ensure proper vegetation removal and replanting methods. FBW will replant the site with appropriate riparian, coastal dune, and saltmarsh plants such as Arroyo willow, mule fat, Fremont cottonwood, seacliff buckwheat, *Encelia*, alkali weed, and saltgrass.

After vegetation removal and replanting, FBW will monitor and maintain the project site by recording conditions data before and after the initial restoration is implemented and tracking ongoing habitat quality improvement as vegetation matures. Removal of non-native species will continue for the project's timeline of five years.

Site Description: The Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve (BWER) is an approximately 600-acre open space surrounded by urban development located partially in the City of Los Angeles and partially within unincorporated Los Angeles County, near the mouth of Ballona Creek. The BWER extends roughly from the Marina Freeway (State Route 90) to the east, the Westchester bluffs to the south, Playa del Rey to the west, and Fiji Way to the north. It is bordered by the communities of Westchester, Marina del Rey, and Playa Vista, and it is approximately five miles north of the LAX Airport and close to Loyola Marymount University (Exhibit 1). CDFW owns most of the reserve and has primary responsibility for managing and maintaining it. The California State Lands Commission owns a small area of BWER. The reserve is bisected by and includes a channelized reach of Ballona Creek. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Works-Flood Control District (LACFCD) owns and operates the Ballona Creek channel and levee system, which are features of the federally authorized Los Angeles County Drainage Area (LACDA) project. The BWER is traversed by major roadways, including Culver, Jefferson, and Lincoln Boulevards. Southern California Gas Company owns mineral rights below the surface

and some surface easements to operate a natural gas storage facility, surface wells, and associated pipelines within the reserve.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Friends of Ballona Wetlands (FBW) is a nonprofit organization existing under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code. FBW has been working since 1979 to protect, restore and provide educational programs about the Ballona Wetlands. FBW conducts monthly volunteer restoration events, hosts tours, and sponsors service groups, classrooms, and others to participate in hands-on restoration projects. In 2017, the Coastal Conservancy funded a FBW project to enhance the BWER by removing exotic non-native plants and re-planting with native dune species. This project will expand on FBW's dune restoration work which has re-established the federally endangered El Segundo Blue Butterfly and restored 8 acres of coastal dune habitat.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

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

Selection Criteria

1. The 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.

The 600-acre BWER is one of the largest open spaces in Los Angeles. The property is considered significant because of its potential for habitat enhancement and the opportunity to create a nature reserve in urban Los Angeles. The proposed larger project, when implemented in the future, will provide additional habitat for native plants, birds, and other wildlife, some of which are imperiled and clinging to existence in the region due to loss of habitat. Additionally, the larger project will also provide recreational and educational opportunities to an estimated 2.8 million Los Angeles residents, who have limited open space access in Los Angeles County.

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.

Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project

During the preparation of the EIR/S both CDFW and the US Army Corps of Engineers sent letters to known tribal representatives. CDFW had extensive engagement with a few representatives who identified as Tongva and who expressed interest in participating in the project planning. In early May 2021, the Conservancy sent a new set of letters to the recognized tribal representatives offering to initiate government to government consultation. Conservancy staff sent tribal consultation interest letters in February 2022 to

local tribes in Los Angeles County. As of February 2022, no response to the letters or consultation requests were received.

Through this proposed approval, the tribal engagement contractor will make a greater effort to engage interested tribal representatives and tribal communities to ensure that the project respects cultural resources. A portion of the funds will be available to compensate tribal representatives or tribal communities for their expertise, time, and contribution to the project.

Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration Project

Conservancy staff sent tribal consultation interest letters in January 2022 to local tribes in Los Angeles County. As of January 2022, no response to the letters or consultation requests were received.

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

The proposed Riparian Restoration project will increase the BWER's resilience to sea-level rise by removing invasive species adjacent to the wetlands and improving habitat function. The tribal and community engagement will contribute stakeholder input to the design of the Wetland Restoration Project, which seeks to restore large contiguous areas with gentle sloping topography to allow for wetland habitat when constructed and wetland migration as sea-level rises.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project

This 600-acre project is a great opportunity to restore habitat for plants and wildlife, improve water quality, sequester carbon, offer flood protection to the neighboring residents, and provide a regional recreational and educational attraction in Los Angeles. The restoration will offer nutrient-rich habitats for fish, birds, and other wildlife. The restored wetlands will also improve water quality and sequester carbon in a highly developed area. Additionally, the larger project plans to create 5.5 miles of new trail for bicyclists, pedestrians, and equestrians to access open space for a regional attraction. Restoring the BWER for wildlife and providing a portion for recreation access will create an educational opportunity for Los Angeles residents to learn more about wetlands and their importance to the region. With these significant improvements to the BWER, it's essential to work with tribal communities and Los Angeles residents to ensure the plans reflect community needs and desires.

Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration Project

The project will engage the community in active restoration and stewardship efforts at the BWER while providing inland communities educational and hands-on learning opportunities. The Los Angeles Conservation Corp (LACC) will be utilized for one week of the project's implementation. In addition, The Bay Foundation created the monitoring protocols FBW will utilize for the project and has performed much of the initial vegetation monitoring of the area. The Bay Foundation performs restoration in other areas at the BWER and partners regularly with FBW to support each other's work.

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

Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project

The intent of this approval is to hire contractors to engage local tribal communities and diverse regional communities with the design, engineering, and permitting of the project to reflect community needs and desires. Furthermore, communities will be engaged in a meaningful way to build mutual trust and relationships.

Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration Project

FBW volunteer programs engage the community in hands-on restoration so Los Angeles residents can be stewards of nature and feel a sense of connection to the BWER. After restoration, the area will provide improved recreational and educational opportunities in a dense urban area.

This grant will give the public and students a chance to actively restore an ecologically important, degraded system while learning about restoration techniques and native plants and animals alongside the value and functions of healthy wetlands. This project will engage approximately 500 community volunteers that will provide at least 750 hours of service each year over three years through the restoration events.

Moreover, the proposed project is supported by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Los Angeles Conservation Corps, and the Bay Foundation (Exhibit 5).

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$553,000
Project(s) Total	\$553,000

Tribal and Community Engagement for Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project

This proposed project will redirect the Proposition 12 funding that was approved at the May 27, 2021 meeting for the Prevention Institute. Those funds have not yet been encumbered. Proposition 12, the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (see Public Resources Code Sections 5096.300- 5096.372) contained an allocation of \$25 million to the Coastal Conservancy “to acquire, protect, and restore wetlands projects that are a minimum of 400 acres in size in any county with a population greater than 5,000,000.” Public Resources Code Section 5096.352(f). The Ballona Reserve was the only wetland project that met that definition. The Conservancy funding will be derived from an appropriation of these funds.

Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration Project

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for this project derives from appropriations to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84, Public Resources Code Sections 75001-75090).

Proposition 84 (Public Resources Code Section 75060) authorizes the Conservancy's use of these funds for the protection and restoration of the natural habitat values of coastal waters and lands. The proposed project restores and enhances the natural habitat value of the BWER by removing exotic plants and installing native species. In addition, Public Resources Code Section 75071 requires the Conservancy to prioritize restoration projects that have certain characteristics. This project is a priority for funding under Section 75071(b) because it contributes to long-term protection of and improvement to the water and biological quality of the BWER.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Both the Wetlands Project and the Riparian Project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270, Coastal Resource Enhancement Projects.

Tribal and Community Engagement for Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project

The proposed project is consistent with Division 21, Chapter 6, Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code, which states that the Conservancy may provide grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the purpose of "enhancement of coastal resources that, because of indiscriminate dredging or filling... have suffered the loss of natural and scenic values." The Ballona Reserve has lost many of its natural values through the deposit of approximately three million cubic yards of dredge material. The proposed project seeks to advance the restoration of ecological function at the Ballona Reserve.

Pursuant to Section 31253, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project and as the project funding is reserved specifically for Ballona Reserve, the proposed project is consistent with this section.

Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration Project

Pursuant to Section 31251, "(t)he conservancy may award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of indiscriminate dredging or filling, improper location of improvements, natural or human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered a loss of natural and scenic values." The site of the Riparian Project area has suffered natural resource degradation due to human activities. As authorized by section 31251, the Riparian Project consists of corrective measures to enhance the natural character of the project site through restoration of riparian, dune, and high marsh habitats.

Pursuant to Section 31253, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project taking into consideration the total cost of the project, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project and other factors as determined by the Conservancy. Consistent with this section, the proposed Conservancy contribution is merited given the Riparian Project's benefits to coastal habitat, the proven track record of the grantee

and the use of community volunteers which provides cost savings and an important public education component.

With respect to Section 31252, the Wetlands Project and Riparian Project are in an area where a Local Coastal Program was never completed. However, both are consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act. Both projects are consistent with the Coastal Act goals as stated in Public Resources Code Section 30001.5, as they will restore natural resources, and the Wetlands Project will expand public recreational opportunities consistent with conservation of the natural resources.

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

Tribal and Community Engagement for Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will design trails that will connect to the coast.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop a restoration plan for a coastal habitat.

Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration Project

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective A**, the proposed project will support events that promote stewardship of coastal resources.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective B**, the proposed project will restore approximately two acres of coastal habitat.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A**, the proposed project will provide educational and hands-on learning opportunities to underserved, inland communities.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project

On May 27, 2021, the Conservancy independently reviewed and considered the Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project Environmental Impact Report (EIR) adopted by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and authorized funding for the project. The Conservancy filed a Notice of Determination with the State Clearinghouse on June 17, 2021.

The project remains substantially unchanged from its description in the EIR, and no new environmental information or change in circumstances require a re-evaluation of the potential environmental effects of the project. (14 Cal Code. Regs. Section 15162). Accordingly, the proposed authorization remains consistent with the CEQA findings adopted by the Conservancy in connection with the May 27, 2021 authorization. See staff recommendation from May 27, 2021 (Exhibit 4).

Ballona Wetlands Dune and Riparian Restoration Project

The proposed project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 Cal. Code Regs. Section 15333, "Small Habitat Restoration Projects." Section 15333 exempts projects that do not exceed five acres in size that assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife. The proposed project qualifies for this exemption because it restores two acres on the western edge of the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve.

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