COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 5, 2022

ORMOND BEACH WETLANDS:
INITIAL RESTORATION

Project No. 90-048-08
Project Manager: Christopher Kroll

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to $1,000,294, of which $967,114 was awarded to the Conservancy by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through its National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program, to The Nature Conservancy for the first phase of restoration work at Ormond Beach.

LOCATION: Ormond Beach, City of Oxnard, Ventura County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: Ormond Beach Restoration and Public Access Planning Area

Exhibit 3: May 26, 2016 Staff Recommendation

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 million two hundred ninety four dollars ($1,000,294), of which $967,114 was awarded to the Conservancy by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through its National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant program, to The Nature Conservancy ("the grantee") to implement initial restoration efforts at the Ormond Beach wetlands complex in the City of Oxnard, Ventura 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. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy 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 enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Nature Conservancy is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed one million two hundred ninety three dollars ($1,000,294), of which $967,114 was awarded to the Conservancy by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) through its National Coastal Wetlands Conservation (NCWC) Grant program, to The Nature Conservancy to implement initial restoration efforts at the Ormond Beach wetlands complex in the City of Oxnard, Ventura County. The project will treat 334 acres of coastal wetlands and fence 150 acres of endangered species habitat. The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the City of Oxnard (City) and the Conservancy (collectively, the project partners) have been working for decades to protect the Ormond Beach wetlands complex. The proposed project is an interim step toward restoration of the 650-acre wetlands complex which plans for full restoration and public access.

Ormond Beach is one of the most important wetland restoration opportunities in southern California. Restoration of these wetlands is a high priority of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project. Although large areas of the wetlands have been drained, filled, and degraded over the past century, this is one of the few places in coastal southern California with an intact dune-transition zone–marsh system. Although the ecosystem at Ormond Beach is relatively intact compared to other coastal wetlands in Southern California, there are much-needed improvements and expansion of wetland function and public access. The lack of road and other infrastructure and land currently in agricultural use directly inland provide a unique opportunity to allow for habitat migration inland of the existing habitat areas as sea level rises.

The Ormond Beach Restoration and Public Access Plan will provide a design for the restoration and public access of the entire 650-acre wetland complex at Ormond Beach. However, this plan is currently in the preliminary design phase and will not be completed until additional technical studies, environmental review, and design development are completed.

In the meantime, the project partners have designed the proposed project to implement initial restoration on 334 acres by removing nonnative, invasive plant species, removing trash, and monitoring water quality and pollution sources into Ormond Lagoon. In addition, habitat protection fencing will be installed and 150 acres of nesting habitat for listed bird species will be monitored. Finally, the project includes environmental education trainings related to the wetlands; clean-up events; and public workshops, surveys, focus groups, and field trips related to planning the larger restoration project.

Specifically, this project will eradicate and/or control approximately 16 nonnative invasive plant species across the project area; remove approximately 80,000 tons of trash from the wetlands, waterways, and beaches; and conduct four water quality monitoring events annually during the life of the grant. Approximately 5,000 feet of habitat fencing will be installed to protect the Western snowy plover and California least tern nesting areas. Up to six trainings for volunteers and/or schools, one annual training for law enforcement on nesting habitat protection and management, and approximately 24 community-organized waterway and beach clean-ups will occur. And, finally, at least two public workshops will be held to update the community on the larger restoration and public access plan status.

Nonnative invasive plant distributions across the project site were mapped in 2015. The mapping identified 16 target invasive species with limited distributions and the potential for eradication or control in sensitive habitats. Target species are those that are listed by the California Invasive Plant Council as highly or moderately invasive, California Department of Food and Agriculture "A" rated weeds, or those that pose a particular threat to sensitive habitats. A qualified restoration contractor, with experience working in coastal wetland habitats in proximity to listed species, will be selected to survey and update mapped distributions of target species followed by two-three years of treatment. Treatment methods will include manual, mechanical and/or chemical. Monitoring and protection of coastal, wetland, and riparian dependent bird species and other sensitive species and habitats, and consultation with USFWS would be included in the nonnative plant eradication effort.

The Conservancy previously authorized funding for the preparation of a plan for habitat restoration and public access for the Ormond Beach wetlands complex on May 26, 2016 (Exhibit 3). A draft of the plan, with a preferred alternative and preliminary design of the preferred alternative, has been completed. The Conservancy is working on the restoration planning effort project in partnership with TNC and the City. TNC has secured a grant from the Ocean Protection Council to address some of the data gaps identified in the plan and to complete development of the preferred alternative. In May 2021, the Conservancy authorized funding for preparation of environmental review documents and any related technical studies. The current authorization will allow the Conservancy, TNC, and the City to use the NCWC grant to begin some initial restoration efforts in the project area, ongoing protection of listed bird

species, and increased community outreach and education related to Ormond Beach while the ongoing planning efforts continue.

Site Description: Ormond Beach is located in the City of Oxnard and is made up of several parcels owned and managed by the Conservancy, the City, and TNC (Exhibit 2). The 650-acre wetland complex is shown in Exhibit 2.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: TNC will lead the effort on this project. TNC is a nationwide 501(c)(3) organization that has successfully participated in large restoration projects in California (e.g., Suisun Marsh) and nationwide (e.g., Chesapeake Bay). It has both the resources and expertise to oversee this restoration effort.

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 accomplishes 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 proposed project is a good investment of state resources because it will: 1) protect state and federal endangered and threatened species; 2) leverage a large federal grant; 3) begin initial restoration at Ormond Beach which has been a restoration priority for the Coastal Conservancy for 30 years and is on the Work Plan of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project, a consortium of local, state, and federal agencies focused on restoration of Southern California coastal wetlands and watersheds.

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

Initial restoration efforts will remove nonnative invasive plant species that are threatening existing nesting and foraging habitat for western snowy plovers and California least terns. The project area contains federally designated critical habitat for three species: western snowy plover, salt marsh bird's beak and tidewater goby. Eradication of the invasive plant species will allow for expansion of habitat for sensitive species which will be very important especially with the expected impact of sea level rise in the region.

4. **Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

The project will provide significant multiple benefits including habitat benefits through eradication of invasive plant species, trash removal from habitat areas, and protection of nesting habitat for western snowy plovers and California least terns. In addition, the project will include water quality monitoring and significant community outreach through naturalist

trainings, beach clean ups, public workshops, focus groups, and field trips. Existing habitat areas will be protected and restored, and major outreach will be made to local communities.

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

Broad community support already exists for this project and will be supported with a major increase in public outreach through trainings, clean-ups, public workshops, focus groups, and field trips. Outreach materials for the project will be made available in multiple languages, at minimum English and Spanish, which are representative of the languages spoken in the communities adjoining the project area. Outreach to Chumash tribes interested in Ventura County projects was already done. One tribe, the Barbareno/Ventureno Band of Mission Indians indicated an interest in engaging with the project partners on this project.

PROJECT FINANCING

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (via a grant to SCC)	**$967,114**
Coastal Conservancy	**$33,180**
The Nature Conservancy	**$240,501**
Ventura Audubon	**$6,000**
Project Total	**$1,246,795**

In 2021, the Conservancy was awarded a $1 million grant from the USFWS National Coastal Wetlands Conservation grant program for the initial restoration project at Ormond Beach. $967,114 of this amount is recommended for disbursement. The remaining $32,886 will be retained for Conservancy staff costs – grant and project management and related indirect costs.

The expected source for the Conservancy funds for the proposed 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), codified at Public Resources Code ("PRC") section 75001, et seq. Proposition 84 (Public Resources Code Sec. 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 protects and restores the natural habitat value of Ormond Beach by removing nonnative invasive plant species which are threatening sensitive habitat areas, removing trash that accumulates in waterways, wetlands, and dunes, and monitoring water quality. In addition, Public Resources Code Sec. 75071 establishes priorities for restoration projects. The proposed project is a priority for funding under Section 75071 (b) concerning watershed protection because it contributes to long-term protection of and improvement to the water and biological quality of Ormond Beach. Conservancy projects funded utilizing Proposition 84 must be consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation. As discussed below, this project is consistent with Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation.

In-kind contributions to the project in the form of volunteer time and supplies will be provided by the City of Oxnard ($5,643), City of Port Hueneme ($6,030), Ventura Audubon ($28,000), and Surfrider ($97,316), totaling $136,989.

Unless specifically labelled "Required Match" in the table above, the other sources of funding and the in-kind services described above are provided as estimates. The Coastal Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or documentation of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete the project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

As described in the May 26, 2016 staff recommendation (Exhibit 3), the proposed project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code and sections 31252, 31252.2 and 31253. The project remains consistent with these sections of the Conservancy's enabling legislation.

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

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will restore or enhance coastal habitats. Eradication of nonnative, invasive plant species will greatly aid the restoration of coastal habitats at Ormond Beach.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective D** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will implement a project that will enhance a coastal watershed. Removal of invasive nonnative plant species and trash and installing habitat protection fencing will enhance the functioning of existing habitats at Ormond Beach, protect existing salt marsh bird's beak habitat, and support the use of the area by nesting California least terns and Western Snowy plovers, two listed species which currently nest at Ormond Beach.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

On March 24, 2022, staff sought concurrence from the Director of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife that the project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under newly-passed Public Resources Code Section 21080.56. This section exempts from CEQA projects that conserve, restore, protect, or enhance, and assist in the recovery of, California native fish and wildlife and the habitat upon which they depend. Consistent with this exemption the project will enhance the recovery of native fish and wildlife habitat at Ormond Beach. Eradication and control of invasive exotic vegetation will restore habitat for native plants and wildlife at the project site. Removal of trash from waterways and quarterly water quality monitoring in the Ormond Lagoon and Ormond Lagoon Waterway will also aid in the enhancement of native fish and wildlife habitat. In addition, habitat fencing, and monitoring of nesting habitat will assist in the recovery of two shorebird species listed under the Endangered Species Act (California least tern and western snowy plover). Activities undertaken by the project will be done in consultation with the Ventura office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In order to qualify for this exemption, projects must also promote climate resiliency, biodiversity, and sensitive species recovery and include procedures for ongoing management for the protection of the environment. As explained above, the project will promote climate resiliency, biodiversity, and sensitive species recovery through vegetation management, native restoration, and removal of debris. The project will aid in climate resiliency by restoring native wetland habitats that act as a buffer to sea-level rise and at the same time improve biodiversity and sensitive species recovery by addressing threats to habitat from invasive species and disturbance of nesting areas. The project includes public outreach on restoration and public access plan including: a) six trainings annually to volunteer naturalists, and/or schools and, one training annually to local and state law enforcement on nesting habitat protection and management, b) 24 community-organized waterway and beach clean-up events annually, c) two public workshops, surveys, focus groups, and field trips conducted virtually, in multiple languages.

On April 18, 2022, the Director of California Department of Fish and Wildlife concurred with Conservancy staff that project is exempt from further CEQA compliance. Upon approval of the project, staff will file a notice of exemption.