

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

December 1, 2022

**COMMUNITY AND CLIMATE CONNECTIONS IN THE NOVATO BAYLANDS**

Project No. 94-003-05

Project Manager: Sara Haugen

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$2,150,000 to Point Reyes Bird Observatory, Inc. to steward approximately 177 acres of restored wetlands through engaging the local community to maintain and enhance the wetlands and to implement minor property improvements by repairing and maintaining public access amenities in the Novato Baylands in Marin County.

**LOCATION:** Novato Baylands, Marin County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Project Site Maps](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Photos](#)
- Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)
- Exhibit 5: [Chronology of Past State Coastal Conservancy Actions](#)
- Exhibit 6: [Bel Marin Keys Wetland Restoration Phase 1 Project – Supplemental Environmental Impact Report](#)
- Exhibit 7: [Bel Marin Keys Wetland Restoration Phase 1 Project – Addendum to the Supplemental Environmental Impact Report](#)
- Exhibit 8: [Hamilton Wetland Restoration Plan – Volume II: Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement](#)

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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 (the "Conservancy") hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed two million one hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$2,150,000) to Point Reyes Bird Observatory, Inc. ("Point Blue") to steward approximately 177 acres of restored wetlands through engaging the local community to maintain and enhance the wetlands and to implement minor property improvements by repairing and maintaining public access amenities in the Novato Baylands in Marin County (the "project").

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 the Conservancy.
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.

The grantee shall comply with all relevant mitigation measures identified in Bel Marin Keys Wetland Restoration Phase 1 Project Addendum to the Supplemental Environmental Impact Report Environmental Impact Statement for the Bel Marin Keys Unit V Expansion of Hamilton Wetland Restoration Project and the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Plan – Volume II: Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. Point Blue is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501©(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy (the "Conservancy") authorize disbursement of up to two million one hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$2,150,000) to Point

Reyes Bird Observatory, Inc. (“Point Blue”) to steward approximately 177 acres of restored wetlands through engaging the local community to maintain and enhance the wetlands and to implement minor property improvements by repairing and maintaining public access amenities in the Novato Baylands in Marin County (the “project”) (see Exhibit 1, “Project Location Map”).

The Novato Baylands is the name that the Conservancy gave to the site of the Hamilton Wetlands Restoration Project and Bel Marin Keys Unit V (BMKV) Expansion to improve communication with the public by using a shorter, more recognizable name. The Conservancy owns most of the property and manages the property in partnership with many organizations, agencies, and consultants. These include the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the lead agency for habitat restoration design and construction, and, until earlier this year, Novato Baylands Stewards (NBS), which provided an on-site presence for coordinating community engagement in plant propagation and habitat stewardship. When NBS was no longer able to serve in this role, Point Blue agreed to take over, and the Conservancy transferred its contract with NBS to Point Blue, which also has a long history of engaging the community in stewardship at the site.

At the Novato Baylands, engagement with community members in wetlands restoration has provided an opportunity to train future restoration practitioners and provide avenues for long term care for the restored wetlands. Through this project, the grantee will continue the stewardship work started by NBS with committed volunteers and Point Blue’s climate-smart methods.

Specifically, the project consists of stewarding or enhancing approximately 177 acres of wetland habitat: 60 acres of tidal wetlands, 60 acres of managed wetlands, and 57 acres of seasonal wetlands through volunteer and student activities and workforce development at the Novato Baylands (see Exhibit 2, “Project Site Maps”). Point Blue will conduct this work by leading Conservation Corps members, volunteers, community members, and students (See Exhibit 3, “Photos”). Project activities include the following: monitoring and adaptive management (e.g., adjusting water levels in seasonal ponds, monitoring vegetation, monitoring bird numbers and behaviors), developing planting plans, propagating and planting native plants, controlling non-native invasive plant species, monitoring and managing planted areas, and controlling problematic erosive areas using small-scale nature-based solutions. This will provide opportunities for practical workforce development; cultivate a substantial volunteer cohort; provide educational programming for school, professional, and community groups about wetland ecology; and engage community members in wetland restoration activities. Point Blue will engage underserved communities through partnerships and create a positive and inclusive space.

The project is intended to result in high-quality habitat characterized by native vegetation and controlled populations of high-threat invasive non-native plant species throughout the designated stewardship areas. Other expected outcomes include progress towards desired soil salinities and native vegetation patterns in the Hamilton north seasonal wetlands; control of problematic erosive areas; and data contributions to monitoring reports based on two more years of bird use data that will be combined with an existing dataset and analyzed as an indicator of habitat value.

In carrying out the wetland stewardship and enhancement, Point Blue will also:

**Engage local youth:** Point Blue will continue programming for local youth through their Students and Teachers Restoring a Wetland (STRAW) program. They will host activities in the classroom and at the restoration site to connect students with the concepts they are learning. Since 1993, almost 50,000 students have participated in over 650 restorations on rural and urban creeks and wetlands through this program (see Exhibit 3, Photos).

**Provide opportunities for workforce development:** Point Blue will collaborate with the Conservation Corps North Bay and has applied for a similar collaborative opportunity with the Americorps National Civilian Community Corps. Trainees will develop workplace professionalism, personal accountability, knowledge of best horticultural practices, and public speaking skills to improve their employability. Technical skills learned will be relevant to several career paths within the profession of ecological restoration, such as horticulturist, wildlife biologist, ornithologist, natural resource manager, park ranger, and more.

**Cultivate a substantial volunteer cohort:** Point Blue will continue to operate a volunteer program based at the nursery located adjacent to the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Project property to grow the plants needed for the project. Twenty-five weekly volunteers and hundreds of drop-in volunteers will donate over 2,500 volunteer hours annually (5,000 hours are anticipated over the proposed two-year grant period). NBS launched their volunteer program in 2012, which has successfully engaged local community groups, adjacent property owners, and concerned citizens. Over 10,000 hours of volunteer time have been logged since 2015, and Point Blue will continue to collaborate with these volunteers.<sup>1</sup>

In order to perform the stewardship activities, Point Blue will educate school, professional, and community groups about wetland ecology through training. Point Blue will also offer a series of public tours and events that keep the general public informed and supportive of the Hamilton Wetlands Restoration Project and ongoing BMKV expansion. Finally, Point Blue will implement minor property improvements by repairing and maintaining public access amenities such as replacing interpretive signs along the trail (with plans to seek input from community and Tribal members).

**Site Description:** The Novato Baylands consists of three properties located along the western edge of San Pablo Bay in Marin County totaling nearly 2,600 acres: the 644-acre Hamilton Wetlands, formerly Hamilton Army Airfield (including the former 18-acre Navy Ball Field); the 319-acre North Antenna Field (owned by the State Lands Commission); and the 1,585-acre Bel Marin Keys (BMK) Unit V property (see Exhibit 2). All these properties are historic wetlands that were part of a larger tidal marsh system that extended from Corte Madera in Marin County to Vallejo in Solano County.

Point Blue will use the nursery that lies adjacent to the Hamilton site on land owned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a hub for community engagement and stewardship activities; and

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<sup>1</sup> As detailed in outreach reports (e.g., Pavlik and McWhorter 2018) and available from the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, San Francisco office.

will conduct stewardship activities at the adjacent BMKV property. The Hamilton property contains restored baylands and perimeter upland levees and is bordered on its western perimeter by 2.7 miles of the San Francisco Bay Trail. The BMKV seasonal wetlands and alkali meadow were recently restored and will require dedicated stewardship for years to come. See Exhibits 1 and 2, for maps, and Exhibit 5 for the project chronology of past Conservancy actions.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** Point Blue is a 501(c)(3) organization established in 1965 as Point Reyes Bird Observatory. Their mission is now focused on nature-based and climate-smart solutions to address environmental challenges. Point Blue has staff dedicated to financial operations, such as payroll and processing reimbursement payments. Point Blue routinely manages state grants, with successful completion of hundreds of grant award processes, including over 10 projects with the Conservancy.

Along with Point Blue’s staff of restoration specialists, a team of experienced local partner organizations and highly qualified contractors have been assembled to carry out project activities, such as invasive plant control, herbicide application, and monitoring the adaptive management plan. Well-respected experts in wetland ecology will consult on technical and contextual aspects. The workforce development programs, which have successfully engaged teams from the AmeriCorps National Civilian Conservation Corps and Conservation Corps North Bay in past years, will continue as part of this project.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria, 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 2018-2022 Strategic Plan” section below.

**2. Project is a good investment of state resources.**

The proposed project supports stewardship of previous Conservancy-funded restoration work within the Novato Baylands, ensuring that the seasonal wetlands, tidal transition zones, and other habitats created through multimillion-dollar investments over the past two decades continue to function as intended. Point Blue will build upon the existing infrastructure and relationships built in its multi-year partnership as subcontractor for the NBS. This strong network of community volunteers and Point Blue’s STRAW program leverage volunteer work to accomplish stewardship goals, while bolstering community connection to the project. The project also advances several state plans, including the following:

- The State of California’s Pathways to 30x30 plan (April 2022) calls for expansion and acceleration of environmental restoration and stewardship under Pathway 6.

- The San Francisco Estuary Blueprint (September 2022) calls for enhancing tidal marsh ecosystems in Action 10, to increase ecological function and resilience to climate change.
- Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Science Update (2015) recommends directly engaging citizens in the baylands through education, citizen science monitoring, volunteerism, and recreational access.

**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, when starting to plan for the BMKV Phase 1 Project, the Conservancy reached out to a Tribe affiliated to the project area to offer more information or a government-to-government consultation regarding the project. Because BMKV Phase 1 required a Supplemental EIR/EIS, the Conservancy conducted an updated cultural resources analysis. In 2020, the Conservancy reached out to Tribes affiliated to the Project area again when planning to begin construction of BMKV Phase 1 and in 2022 for Phase 2. Conservancy staff has reached out to Marin Tribes regarding the project and potential collaboration in restoration and stewardship activities and have not yet received responses. Point Blue will engage with local Tribes and Tribal Organizations on activities such as restoration workdays and culturally relevant signage on the site.

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

The project involves stewardship and management of restored wetlands, which are known to buffer wave action adding an additional measure of protection to inland communities from sea level rise due to climate change. The project will deliver benefits to the Bay Area region over an extended period, as the various types of restored habitat types (tidal wetland, seasonal wetlands, high transitional marsh) will allow for adaptation to sea level rise. For plantings, Point Blue will choose species that are resilient to climate change, i.e., more drought-resistant and adapted to high heat events. The depth of community engagement in this project will also deliver long-term benefits, as youth and community members volunteering in project activities are more likely to stay connected to and supportive of its continued stewardship after the course of this grant.

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

As explained above, wetland restoration is a critical tool for climate resilience in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition to ensuring continuation of habitat benefits, the project also involves local youth through the STRAW program, local conservation corps, and community volunteers in hands-on planting and wetlands enhancement work. The project adds value to the local economy, as many contractors will need to be hired to carry out this stewardship project. Finally, the planned property improvements, including interpretive signage upgrades, will make the Novato Baylands more informative and enjoyable for trail users and volunteers.

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

Novato residents, the Bel Marin Keys community, and other public members have long been involved at the project site, including through well-established groups such as NBS and North Bay Conservation Corps. Point Blue has already engaged local underserved schools through their STRAW program as subcontractors under NBS's grant, and will continue to engage and inspire local youth. Point Blue will continue to engage local residents, community groups, and partner organizations in the process of restoring this project site to establish a shared vision for the property alongside proven restoration methods. Marin Audubon Society, Marin County Department of Public Works, Save the Bay, and Conservation Corps North Bay support this project (See Exhibit 4, Project Letters).

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$2,150,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$2,150,000</b>

The Conservancy will be the sole funder for this community stewardship project, aside from in-kind services detailed below. Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2022/23 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of climate resilience. (Budget Act 2022, SB 154) The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it is a coastal resilience project along the coast, including coastal wetlands and watersheds, that build resilience for coastal communities, public access, and critical infrastructure. In addition, Conservancy funding may also come from an appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for local assistance provided for in an amendment to the Budget Act of 2022. (Budget Act 2022, AB 179).

Point Blue anticipates bringing approximately \$368,265 of in-kind services: the community volunteer program will provide an estimated 5,000 volunteer hours during the two years of the proposed project (\$149,750 at the 2022 rate of \$29.95 per hour, as set forth by Independent Sector for the Value of Volunteer Time in California); Point Blue Conservation Science's STRAW program has committed approximately 4,320 volunteer hours (\$129,384, also valued at \$29.95 per hour); and a successful Americorps team application (results pending) will provide personnel hours, gear, and van transportation for their team at no cost to the project (projected total value of personnel hours is \$89,131).

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

This project is being undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (sections 31162-31165). Section 31162 authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area to help achieve regional public access and resource goals.

Consistent with Section 31162(b), the proposed project will help restore and enhance natural habitats by enhancing wetlands along the San Francisco Bay shoreline. The project's activities that will enhance wetlands include monitoring and adaptive management, developing planting

plans, propagating and planting native plants, controlling non-native invasive plant species, and monitoring and managing outplanted areas.

Consistent with Section 31162(c), the proposed project is of high priority for funding. It is supported by adopted local and regional plans including the San Francisco Bay Plan; it can be implemented in a timely way, as Point Blue has already formed partnerships and programs; and it provides benefits that could be lost with time, i.e., there is critical urgency to develop stewardship capacity and increase engagement in and support for wetlands restoration such that functioning habitats are established in time to keep pace with sea-level rise.

Consistent with Section 31162(d), the proposed project will make an open space and natural area, the Novato Baylands, more accessible to urban populations by repairing and maintaining public access amenities such as replacing interpretive signs and by offering programs that enable people to learn about and participate in stewardship of the wetlands at Novato Baylands.

Consistent with Section 31165, the proposed project will facilitate environmental education related to natural resources of the San Francisco Bay shoreline.

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

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective A**, the proposed project will support educational programs and interpretive events that improve public understanding and promote stewardship of coastal resources.

Consistent with **Goal 12, Objective D**, the proposed project will enhance 177 acres of wetlands habitat.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A**, the proposed project will provide funding for activities that directly benefit disadvantaged communities.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

In April 1999, the Conservancy certified the Environmental Impact Report/Statement for the Hamilton Wetlands Restoration project. On June 25, 2001, the Conservancy certified the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Plan Volume II EIR/EIS and approved the Feasibility Report (Exhibit 8). On June 16, 2005, the Conservancy certified the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Report / Environmental Impact Statement for the Bel Marin Keys Unit V Expansion of the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Project (Exhibit 6) and approved modifications to the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Plan to incorporate BMKV. Prior to authorizing funding for construction of BMKV Phase 1, the Conservancy prepared and considered the Bel Marin Keys Wetland Restoration Phase 1 Project Addendum to the Supplemental Environmental Impact Report Environmental Impact Statement for the Bel Marin Keys Unit V Expansion of Hamilton Wetland Restoration Project ("Addendum"). Since preparation of the Addendum (Exhibit 7), there have been no project changes, new information, or changed circumstances that trigger



the need for additional CEQA review of the project pursuant to 14 Cal. Code Regs. Section 15162.

Finally, the minor property improvements to public access amenities, including replacement interpretive signage, are categorically exempt under 14 CCR § 15301, "Existing Facilities" because they involve the operation, maintenance, or repair of existing facilities. Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.