Staff Recommendation
March 3, 2025

Item 10

Consent Item:
Consideration and Approval of Disbursement of Funds to Augment the Ocean Science Trust Science Advisor Agreement

Michael Esgro, Senior Biodiversity Program Manager & Tribal Liaison

Recommended Action: Authorization to disburse up to $310,000 to the California Ocean Science Trust to administer two scientific working groups: (1) to provide scientific guidance on coastal and marine restoration in a changing climate, and (2) to support the development of a social science research and monitoring plan for California's Marine Protected Area (MPA) network.

Location: Statewide

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives: Goal 3: Enhance Coastal and Marine Biodiversity; Objective 3.1: Protect and Restore Coastal and Marine Ecosystems

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits: Outcomes of both working groups will improve management and stewardship of coastal and marine ecosystems, including those in close proximity to and utilized by members of communities burdened by environmental and social injustice.

Findings and Resolution:

Staff recommends that the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibit(s), OPC hereby finds that:

1. The proposed projects are consistent with the purposes of Division 26.5 of the Public Resources Code, the California Ocean Protection Act;
2. The proposed projects are consistent with the Budget Act of 2024, which included a $2.5 million General Fund appropriation for MPA monitoring; and
3. The proposed projects are not 'legal projects' that trigger the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Public Resources Code section, section 15378."

Staff further recommends that OPC adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 35500 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

"OPC hereby approves the disbursement of up to $310,000 to the California Ocean Science Trust to administer two scientific working groups: (1) to provide scientific guidance on coastal and marine restoration in a changing climate, and (2) to support the development of a social science research and monitoring plan for California's marine protected area network.

This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, the California Ocean Science Trust shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Director of the OPC detailed work plans, schedules, staff requirements, budgets, and the names of any contractors intended to be used to complete the projects, as well as discrete deliverables that can be produced in intervals to ensure the projects are on target for successful completion. All projects will be developed under a shared understanding of process, management, and delivery."

Executive Summary:

OPC staff recommend an augmentation to an existing agreement with the California Ocean Science Trust, in its capacity as Science Advisor to OPC, to support two scientific working groups, in close partnership with OPC and other relevant state agencies:

- **Restoration working group**. As state resource managers increasingly look toward restoration as a vital stewardship tool, critical knowledge gaps around restoration in a changing climate have emerged. In response to high priority science needs identified by OPC and partner agencies, this working group will develop a report containing scientific perspectives on coastal and marine restoration under climate change, addressing topics of key management relevance and providing policy considerations where appropriate. The report is intended to be a scientific resource for state agencies, restoration practitioners, and researchers as they undertake restoration and mitigation projects, identify research priorities, and consider statewide strategies for successful coastal and marine restoration and mitigation in California.

- **MPAs & social science working group**. To date, monitoring and evaluation of California's MPA network has focused more on the network's ecological outcomes than on its "human dimensions" – a term used for how individuals and communities interact with, affect, and are affected by the MPA network. To address this gap and implement relevant recommendations outlined in the 2023 MPA Decadal Management Review, this working group will develop scientific guidance for monitoring socioeconomic outcomes of MPAs, including the development of key research and monitoring priorities, indicators, and

methods. Ultimately, this effort will help California develop an urgently needed framework for better understanding the effects of MPAs on California's coastal communities.

Project Summary:

Restoration Working Group

Restoring coastal and marine ecosystems is essential to ensuring the long-term resilience of California's unique species and habitats as well as the ecosystem services that they provide. Effective restoration can enable vulnerable ecosystems to recover and thrive, even in the face of climate change. However, as state resource managers increasingly look toward restoration as a vital stewardship tool, critical knowledge gaps around restoration in a changing climate have emerged.

From 2021-2023, the California Ocean Science Trust convened a five-member scientific panel of experts to provide technical input on restoration and mitigation policy in California. Through that process, it became evident that a science-based document providing considerations for successful and resilient coastal and marine restoration into the future, which explores the ways that climate change may affect historical approaches to coastal and marine restoration and mitigation, would be a highly useful product for state and local resource managers, especially those involved in managing, funding, or implementing on-the-ground restoration efforts.

In response to high priority science needs identified by OPC and partner agencies (including the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California Coastal Commission, California Coastal Conservancy, State Water Resources Control Board, and California State Lands Commission), this working group will convene in-person and virtually throughout 2025 to develop a report containing scientific perspectives on coastal and marine restoration under climate change, addressing topics of key management relevance including:

- Considerations for setting statewide restoration targets in specific habitats
- Determining when and where restoration is appropriate
- Defining project-specific restoration goals
- Monitoring and evaluating restoration projects
- Restoration for mitigation purposes, including how to approach out-of-kind and off-site mitigation
- Practical guidance for restoration in coastal and marine habitats

This report will provide actionable scientific guidance for California state agencies, restoration practitioners, and scientific researchers engaged in restoration and mitigation efforts, either on a project-by-project basis or at a statewide level. The report is intended to be a scientific resource

for these users as they undertake restoration projects, identify research priorities, and consider statewide strategies for restoration and mitigation.

MPAs & Social Science Working Group

To date, monitoring and evaluation of California's MPA network has focused more on the network's ecological outcomes than on its "human dimensions," even though MPAs are a complex social-ecological system. In the context of California MPA management, "human dimensions" describes how individuals and communities interact with, affect, and are affected by California's ocean and coastal ecosystems and MPA network. This includes knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, well-being, and socioeconomic outcomes related to MPAs.

The 2023 MPA Decadal Management Review (DMR) included a recommendation to "invest in improving understanding of the human dimensions of MPAs and develop a human dimensions working group and research agenda." To implement this recommendation, and to support updating the 2018 MPA Monitoring Action Plan with key socioeconomic metrics and monitoring approaches, this working group will meet throughout 2025 to accomplish the following objectives, leveraging key insights obtained from early scoping conversations with social scientists, community partners, and members of OPC's Environmental Justice Advisory Board:

- Establish clear social science research and monitoring priorities, indicators, and methods
- Develop a plan to gather baseline information to support monitoring priorities
- Identify opportunities to strengthen ongoing social science efforts in and around MPAs
- Outline steps to standardize and scale up the collection of human dimensions indicators, with the goal of better integrating ecological and socioeconomic monitoring

The work of this group, to be undertaken in close partnership with OPC and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, will ultimately help California develop an urgently needed framework to inform future MPA monitoring, better understand the effects of MPAs on California's coastal communities, and support adaptive management while enhancing locally-driven stewardship.

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:

Outcomes of both working groups will improve management and stewardship of coastal and marine ecosystems, including those in close proximity to and utilized by members of communities burdened by environmental and social injustice. Protecting and restoring California's coastal and marine ecosystems provides critical ecological benefits that can, in turn, improve the well-being of nearby human communities, including communities entitled to environmental justice.

In particular, the development of a social science research and monitoring plan for MPAs will specifically advance several key objectives of OPC's Equity Plan by improving engagement with underserved communities in coast and ocean stewardship and ensuring equity concerns are better reflected in MPA research and monitoring priorities (Equity Plan Goal 1: Establish and implement more equitable and sustainable community engagement and funding; Goal 3: Lead equitable ocean and coastal policymaking in California; and Goal 4: Intentional investments in research and monitoring that value and integrate broader knowledge sources).

About the Grantee:

The California Ocean Science Trust (OST) is a nonprofit public-benefit corporation and was established pursuant to the California Ocean Resources Stewardship Act of 2000 to encourage coordinated, multi-agency, multi-institution approaches to translating ocean science to management and policy applications. OST bridges the gap between cutting-edge scientific research and sound ocean management, accelerating progress towards and healthy and productive ocean future for California. As a nonprofit partner to OPC, OST's strength lies in nimble response to state priorities; its leadership and staff specialize in leveraging resources and creating partnerships to foster innovative yet pragmatic approaches to difficult problems.

Project Timeline:

March 2025 – December 2025

Project Financing:

Staff recommends that OPC authorize encumbrance of up to $310,000 to OST to administer scientific working groups on restoration and MPA social science to support the health and resilience of California' coastal and marine ecosystems, including improved monitoring of these ecosystems. The anticipated source of funds will be from the Budget Act of 2024, which included a $2.5 million appropriation for MPA monitoring.

Consistency with California Ocean Protection Act:

The proposed project is consistent with the Ocean Protection Act, Division 26.5 of the Public Resources Code, because it is consistent with trust-fund allowable projects, defined in Public Resources Code Section 35650(b)(2) as projects which:

- Eliminate or reduce threats to coastal and ocean ecosystems, habitats, and species.
- Allow for increased public access to, and enjoyment of, ocean and coastal resources, consistent with sustainable, long-term protection and conservation of those resources.

- Improve management, conservation, and protection of coastal waters and ocean ecosystems.
- Provide monitoring and scientific data to improve state efforts to protect and conserve ocean resources.
- Protect, conserve, and restore coastal waters and ocean ecosystems.
- Provide funding for adaptive management, planning coordination, monitoring, research, and other necessary activities to minimize the adverse impacts of climate change on California's ocean ecosystem.

Compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA):

The proposed projects are not considered 'legal projects' that trigger the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21068 and Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, section 15378. If any were determined to be a 'legal project' under CEQA, the proposed project(s) are categorically exempt from review under CEQA pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15306 because the projects involve information collection, consisting of data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.