



Staff Recommendation

March 3, 2025

Item 8

Action Item:

Consideration and Approval of Disbursement of Funds to Advance Management of California's Marine Protected Area Network

Staci Lewis, Ph.D., Marine Protected Areas Network Manager

Recommended Action: Authorization to disburse up to \$4,540,000 to advance management of California's Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network through the following projects:

- 8.1 Up to \$1,660,000 to Marine Applied Research and Exploration Group (MARE) and the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) for continued ecological monitoring of deep rocky reef habitats in the MPA Network in 2025 and 2026.
- 8.2 Up to \$1,380,000 to San Jose State University for continued ecological monitoring in the MPA Network in 2026 via the California Collaborative Fisheries Research Program (CCFRP).
- 8.3 Up to \$750,000 to the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation for continued research on understanding social dimensions of ocean access and MPAs across California's coastal counties.
- 8.4 Up to \$500,000 to Resources Legacy Fund for the expansion of MPA Watch program to better understand human uses in MPAs and factors that affect MPA compliance.
- 8.5 Up to \$250,000 to the MPA Collaborative Network for the engagement and empowerment of underrepresented communities in MPA management.

Location: Statewide

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives:

Goal 2: Advance Equity Across Ocean and Coastal Policies and Actions; Objective 2.1 Enhance Engagement with Tribes; Objective 2.2 Enhance Engagement with Underserved Communities;

Objective 2.3: Improve Coastal Access. Goal 3: Enhance Coastal and Marine Biodiversity; Objective 3.1: Protect and Restore Coastal and Marine Ecosystems

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:

Healthy marine ecosystems translate directly to economic, cultural, and health benefits for coastal communities. Many of California’s MPAs are located within or near communities burdened by environmental and social injustice. By directly engaging underrepresented communities in coast and ocean stewardship and ensuring equity concerns, these projects will address the following priorities in OPC’s 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).

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;
3. The proposed projects are consistent with the adopted State Water Resources Control Board’s Water Quality Control Policy on the Use of Coastal and Estuarine Waters for Power Plant Cooling; and
4. 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 \$4,540,000 to advance management of California’s Marine Protected Area Network (MPA) through the following projects:

- Up to \$1,660,000 to the Marine Applied Research and Exploration Group (MARE) and the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) for continued ecological monitoring of deep rocky reef habitats in the MPA Network in 2025 and 2026.

- Up to \$1,380,000 to the San Jose State University for continued ecological monitoring in the MPA Network in 2026 via the California Collaborative Fisheries Research Program.
- Up to \$750,000 to the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation for continued research on understanding social dimensions of ocean access and MPAs across California’s coastal counties.
- Up to \$500,000 to Resources Legacy Fund for the expansion of MPA Watch program to better understand human uses in MPAs and factors that affect MPA compliance.
- Up to \$250,000 to the MPA Collaborative Network for the engagement and empowerment of underrepresented communities in MPA management policy and processes.

This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, the grantees 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:

Staff recommends that OPC approve the disbursement of \$4,540,000 to advance management of California’s MPA Network. Of this amount, \$1,500,000 was previously approved by the Council for competitively selected projects to monitor deep rocky reef/mid-depth habitats (> 30 meters deep) within the MPA Network for the 2025 and 2026 monitoring seasons; this recommendation seeks approval to disburse these existing funds for the selected projects and to augment this amount by \$160,000 (Item 8.1), for an up to amount of \$1,660,000. OPC staff additionally recommend approval of \$1,380,000 to the California Collaborative Fisheries Research Program (Item 8.2) for continued monitoring of kelp and shallow rock ecosystems (0 – 30 meters deep) and deep rocky reef/mid-depth habitats (> 30 meters deep) within the MPA Network. OPC’s continued investment is vital to support ongoing long-term monitoring of the MPA Network to inform adaptive management and contribute to broader state priorities, such as sustainable fisheries and climate resilience.

Of the total amount, staff also recommends the disbursement of \$1,500,000 across three additional projects to expand research and monitoring of human uses in MPAs to empower and engage underrepresented communities in MPA management. The first investment (Item 8.3) will support the expansion of an existing [OPC-funded project](#) to understand social dimensions of ocean access and MPAs across California’s coastal counties in five new counties (Del Norte, Humboldt,

Sonoma, Los Angeles, and San Diego) to develop key policy recommendations for MPA managers to increase long-term ocean benefits, enhance ocean access for all, and support community adaptation to environmental change. The second investment (Item 8.4) will scale out a successful survey administered by MPA Watch programs to understand factors influencing MPA compliance and broader human uses in MPAs across five regions, and help tailor management strategies to local needs and improve overall compliance and effectiveness of MPAs. The third investment (Item 8.5) will enable the continuation of the MPA Collaborative Network’s *Building Pathways to Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for California’s Coast and Ocean* program, and support MPA Collaborative Network’s engagement work with tribal communities and with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW)’s Law Enforcement Division (LED) and enforcement partners to increase MPA compliance and enforcement effectiveness.

Project Summary:

Background:

Since 2017, OPC has committed more than \$50 million for MPA management to improve the long-term state of science and understanding of how the MPA Network is performing with respect to the goals of the [Marine Life Protection Act](#).^{1,2,3,4} This funding has been distributed across the four core management pillars of the Network: 1) Outreach and Education; 2) Policy and Permitting; 3) Enforcement and Compliance; and 4) Research and Monitoring. Progress under each of these pillars was reflected in the 2023 [MPA Decadal Management Review \(DMR\)](#), as well as in a series of [technical monitoring reports](#), which demonstrated that MPAs are helping to conserve California’s unique coastal and marine biodiversity.

As part of the DMR process, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and OPC developed a [prioritized list of twenty eight adaptive management recommendations](#) that was informed by public comment and tribal consultation. To support ongoing monitoring and adaptative management of the MPA Network (DMR recommendation 11), OPC, CDFW, and California Sea Grant have worked to identify key monitoring and investments priorities moving forward. Two of those investment priorities (i.e., deep rocky reef monitoring, and CCFRP-led monitoring) are included in this staff recommendation under items 8.1 and 8.2. The other three

1 [OPC 2019 staff recommendation for initial MPA long-term monitoring funding](#).

2 [OPC 2019 staff recommendation for initial monitoring and assessment of estuarine MPAs](#).

3 [OPC 2022 staff recommendation for long-term monitoring of MPA habitats in 2023](#).

4 [OPC 2023 staff recommendation for long-term monitoring of MPA habitats in 2024-2026](#).

investments (8.3, 8.4, and 8.5) address DMR recommendations related to human uses and compliance of MPAs, including DMR recommendation 12 to improve understanding of human uses (“human dimensions”).

Project Summaries:

8.1 and 8.2 Continued ecological monitoring of deep rocky reef habitats in the MPA Network (8.1) and via the California Collaborative Fisheries Research Program (8.2)

California Sea Grant, in consultation with OPC and CDFW, facilitated a technical expert panel (TEP) to develop [key findings and recommendations](#) released in October 2024 for effective monitoring of California’s deep rocky reef habitats (> 30 meters deep), which faces technological, logistical, and economic challenges. Building upon the TEP recommendations, California Sea Grant administered a [competitive solicitation](#), as approved by the Council at the [September 10, 2024 meeting](#), to determine two recommended projects for monitoring deep rocky reefs (> 30 meters depth) habitats in 2025 and 2026.

OPC authorized \$1,750,000 to California Sea Grant to administer this competitive solicitation and oversee the administration of the monitoring projects, pending Council approval of selected projects. Up to \$250,000 of this amount supports California Sea Grant’s administration of this solicitation process and selected two-year projects. The remaining \$1,500,000 is being considered for disbursement to subgrantees at this Council meeting. OPC staff seeks approval to increase the original authorization from \$1,750,000 to \$1,916,000 to fund the two highest scoring projects from this solicitation for a total of up to \$1,660,000. These two groups (MARE and UCSB) will use different tools, specifically Remote Operated Vehicles (ROVs) and Baited Remote Underwater Video (BRUVs), to support ongoing MPA monitoring of the deep rocky reef/mid-depth habitats (> 30 meters deep) in 2025 and 2026. Per the TEP’s recommendations, funding these complementary monitoring tools enables more robust ecosystem-scale data of deep rocky reef/mid-depth habitats (> 30 meters deep) than the data collected by one tool in isolation.

Additionally, OPC staff seek authorization and approval of up to \$1,380,000 for the disbursement of funds to San Jose State University to enable the California Cooperative Fisheries Research Program (CCFRP) to continue the collection of critical biological and environmental data across deep and shallow rocky reef habitats during the 2026 field season, as well as continuing community outreach & education with a focus on the recreational fishing communities. CCFRP, based at Moss Landing Marine Laboratories, is a collaborative effort among researchers from six California universities, the captains and crew of 36 commercial passenger fishing vessels, and more than 2,000 volunteer anglers spanning the entire California coast. Past [OPC investments](#) have enabled CCFRP to generate scientifically rigorous data collection and analysis for MPA management, but also meaningful outreach and engagement with fishermen, scientists, resource

managers, and the general public. This investment will fill critical gaps in the MPA monitoring program, resulting in the first time that all MPA monitoring groups are funded as a cohesive long-term monitoring program.

These monitoring projects will achieve the following objective:

- Collect additional biological and environmental data (e.g. fish and invertebrate abundance and size structure, community composition, and biodiversity; habitat type and quality) in Tier I MPAs⁵ and at associated reference sites.

8.3 Benefits and Barriers: Understanding Social Dimensions of Ocean Access and Marine Protected Areas across California’s Coastal Counties

Building from the success of the [OPC-funded Prop 68 project](#) awarded in 2023, *Identifying Pathways to Distributive Equity in MPA Management in a Changing Climate*, this project will support the work of California Marine Sanctuary Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to safeguarding California’s coastal ecosystems and enhancing coastal resilience, to explore the intersection of ocean access, ocean benefits, MPAs, and environmental change for California residents in five new counties: Del Norte, Humboldt, Sonoma, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Originally selected through a competitive process, this project has collected over 2000 surveys in three languages English, Spanish, and Chinese. This project is now poised to expand into five new counties and build community partnerships with tribal members and underrepresented communities.

This project supports four overarching goals: 1) obtain baseline data on activities, values, and cultures associated with different coastal species, locations, and habitats; 2) document patterns of access, activity and benefits; 3) evaluate the capacity of MPAs to support and enhance these uses and values in the face of climate driven change and uncertainty; and 4) co-develop local management strategies. CMSF will build new community partnerships and work with the MPA Collaborative Network to develop outreach and education recommendations from research findings. Additionally, research findings will support the ongoing development of updates to the MPA Monitoring Action Plan by OPC and CDFW, which will include both social and ecological considerations.

⁵ Tier 1: required long-term monitoring sites as described in the [MPA Monitoring Action Plan](#).

8.4 Expansion of the MPA Watch Program to better understand human uses in MPAs and factors that affect MPA compliance

To advance priorities related to access and community engagement, OPC and Resources Legacy Fund, a non-profit organization at the intersection of conservation, climate change, and communities, have [supported MPA Watch](#) to collect community science data on consumptive and non-consumptive uses inside and outside MPAs, and to inform MPA compliance. Operating 11 programs in 13 counties across 176 sites, MPA Watch is a network of programs that engages over 200 volunteers per year across California. With OPC and RLF matching funds in 2023 and 2024, and in consultation with social scientists and the University of California at Davis’s Center for Community and Citizen Science, MPA Watch developed a survey to enhance understanding of human dimensions at MPAs. These “intercept” surveys – in which surveyors query individuals they encounter on MPA Watch transects – were piloted in two MPA Watch programs (WILDCOAST in San Diego County and Orange County Coastkeeper in Orange County). The 2024 pilot effort collected 213 surveys and provided initial information related to MPA compliance and the public’s awareness of MPA regulations.

The MPA Watch program and its partners are ready to enter the next phase of the project, which will expand the intercept survey to three additional MPA Watch programs, and implement the survey year round in San Diego and Orange Counties. Ultimately, this project will enhance the state’s understanding of human uses in and around MPAs, as well as provide approaches to collecting new forms of human dimensions data in MPAs, and inform overall compliance with MPA regulations.

Through matching funds and grant administration, Resources Legacy Fund will support WILDCOAST and other partners to train and deploy MPA Watch volunteers for year-round data collection in San Diego and Orange counties and for summer surveys over two seasons (2025 and 2026) in three additional regions. With a goal of representing at least one program in each of the three MPA bioregions (North, Central, and South), this investment will help state agencies and partners better understand how people’s perceptions, knowledge, and compliance of MPAs may vary across regions and how MPA users may change throughout the year. Along with a final analysis, report, and presentation of key findings, the participating MPA Watch programs aim to create a robust framework for ongoing community engagement and data collection, ultimately contributing to the long-term sustainability and success of MPAs in California and beyond.

8.5 Engagement and empowerment of underrepresented communities in MPA management and processes

Through [previous OPC funding](#), the MPA Collaborative Network has advanced OPC priorities on equity and ocean access. As a women-led 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that facilitates the

efforts of 14 grassroots chapters across California, the MPA Collaborative Network has fostered tribal engagement for inclusion of land acknowledgements on MPA signs, supported MPA enforcement trainings for federal and state agencies (e.g., California State Park and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Office of National Marine Sanctuaries), produced officer reference guides and State Park and National Marine Sanctuaries Interpreter Guides, and worked with district attorney offices to increase awareness and prosecution of MPA violations and to develop of an online violator training module.

With this investment, MPA Collaborative Network will continue its *Building Pathways to Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for California's Coast and Ocean* initiative and three Pathways groups (AAPI, Black, and Latine) that were established in 2023 and 2024 to uplift and empower underrepresented communities to engage in MPA management. Additionally, the MPA Collaborative Network will continue to build tribal engagement and honoraria/reciprocity for participating in collaborative meetings and contributing to collaborative projects and MPA discussions, as well as continue its work with CDFW's Law Enforcement Division (LED) to increase compliance and enforcement effectiveness through coordination and technology with enforcement partners and Deputy District Attorneys and Investigators.

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:

Adaptive management and monitoring of the MPA Network are essential to ensure that the Network functions effectively to protect biodiversity and marine habitats, and thereby improves overall ecosystem health. Healthy marine ecosystems translate directly to economic, cultural, and health benefits for coastal communities. Many of California's MPAs are located within or near communities burdened by environmental and social injustice. Moreover, many of the habitats contained within MPAs provide needed ecological benefits that in turn improve the well-being of nearby human communities. For example, rocky intertidal habitats provide accessible opportunities for the public to observe marine life, protect against shoreline erosion, and harbor harvested species.

Implementing the MPA Decadal Management Review recommendations, including the development of human dimensions-centered research and monitoring and diversifying monitoring through supporting community science, will specifically advance several key objectives of [OPC's Equity Plan](#). By directly engaging underrepresented communities in coast and ocean stewardship and ensuring equity concerns, these projects will address the following priorities: 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).

Project Timeline:

All projects will run for two years, from June 2025 through June 2027. Data analysis, reporting, and dissemination from all research groups, specifically California Sea Grant, MARE, UCSB, CCFRP, CMSF, RLF, and MPA Collaborative Network to state agencies will take place in 2026 and 2027.

Project Financing:

Staff recommends that the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) authorize encumbrance of up to \$4,540,000 to support the following grantees for adaptive management of the MPA Network.

Ocean Protection Council	\$4,540,000
8.1 Marine Applied Research and Exploration and University of California Santa Barbara	\$1,660,000
8.2 San Jose State University	\$1,380,000
8.3 California Marine Sanctuary Foundation	\$750,000
8.4 Resources Legacy Fund	\$500,000
8.5 MPA Collaborative Network	\$250,000
TOTAL	\$4,540,000

The anticipated source of funds for project 8.1 will be from Proposition 68 Chapter 9 Fund, provided by The California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018, Fiscal Year 2020/2021. Chapter 9 funds (Section 80120) may be used to support projects that “conserve, protect and restore marine wildlife and healthy ocean and coastal ecosystems with a focus on the state’s system of marine protected areas and sustainable fisheries.” The proposed project supports the goals of Proposition 68, Chapter 9 to inform adaptive management and monitoring of the MPA Network, allowing the state to conserve marine wildlife and healthy ocean and coastal ecosystems.

The remaining projects will be funded from the Budget Act of 2024, which included a \$2.5 million appropriation for MPA monitoring, and Once-Through Cooling Interim Mitigation Program funds, which directs up to \$5.4 million in mitigation payments annually to support increases in marine life associated with MPAs in the geographic region of coastal power plants uses once-through cooling technology, including advancing the priorities of the MPA management program.

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:

- 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 project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15306 because the project involves only data collection, research and/or resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.