Informational Item
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Item 4

Informational Item: Impact of Federal Administration Activities on California's Coastal and Marine Programs

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Location: Statewide

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives: All

Executive Summary:

Since January 20, 2025, actions by the Trump Administration have significantly reduced the federal workforce, federal funding, and federal science programs, including coastal and ocean research, monitoring, and management programs in California. This informational item provides an overview of these federal actions and the potential impacts on the state's ability to build climate resilience and protect California's marine life, habitats, fisheries, and coastal communities and economies. The full extent of these impacts is uncertain, as many of these changes are in progress and could be influenced by pending litigation and Congressional input.

At the March 3rd Ocean Protection Council meeting, Council Chair Crowfoot requested an update on the impacts of the federal administration activities on California's coastal and marine programs. In consultation with federal and state agency partners, scientists, philanthropy, conservation organizations, and other partners, OPC staff developed the following summary of possible impacts organized into three areas: 1) Reductions to the Federal Workforce; 2) Federal Funding Delays and Proposed Cuts; and 3) Compromised Federal Services and Partnerships. Cumulative impacts across all of these areas could pose safety risks to Californians, negatively impact livelihoods and California's ocean-based economy, and impede the state's ability to monitor and manage natural resources for the benefit of both people and nature.

Overview of Federal Impacts:

Through a series of Executive Orders, Proclamations, Secretarial Actions, and the President's Fiscal Year 2026 budget request (FY2026 budget), the Trump Administration has made and has signaled their intention to make significant changes to federal capacity, resources, and services.

Reductions to the Federal Workforce

Significant shifts in the federal workforce will impact the collective capacity to manage coastal and ocean resources for the benefit of Californians. In February 2025, the Workforce Optimization Initiative (Executive Order 14210) directed federal agencies to reduce their workforce by initiating large-scale reduction in force strategies, including eliminating positions and programs focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion activities, terminating probationary employees, and offering early retirement and buyout initiatives. Initial Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) cuts reduced many agency workforces by ten percent or more.

Following the termination of 800 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) employees, other NOAA employees have been fired, rehired at the behest of a federal court, and then fired again, while others have been offered early retirement or voluntary separation. This makes it exceedingly difficult to calculate exact numbers.

Many leaders at key federal agencies and programs resigned, including across NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, the Office of Coastal Management, National Marine Fisheries Service, and the Integrated Ocean Observing Program, as well as the United States Geological Survey (USGS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This significant loss of institutional knowledge will impede key state-federal partnerships and impact how OPC and its state and external partners manage and monitor California's coast and ocean. Additionally, loss of capacity at federal agencies poses risks to Californians. For example, staffing cuts to the National Weather Service could have safety implications for shipping and other ocean-based industrial activity. Finally, the elimination of probationary employees is a loss of early career professionals who brought new energy and perspectives to the federal workforce and represented the next generation of ocean stewards.

Federal Funding Delays and Proposed Cuts

The President's recently released FY2026 budget request to Congress would drastically accelerate implementation of federal spending reductions, proposing sweeping cuts across science and natural resources management agencies, as well as the reorganization of agencies and shifting of functions to other agencies. The President's proposed FY2026 budget includes elimination of $1.5 billion in funding to NOAA (more than 25% of NOAA's total budget), cuts that would drastically

curtail California's ability to safely and effectively manage its coast and ocean. If Congress approves the proposed FY2026 cuts to NOAA programs, it could eliminate essential funding for:

- **Coastal Zone Management Programs**. California is one of thirty-four states and territories that manages its coastline in partnership with the federal government through the National Coastal Zone Management Program. California's three Coastal Zone Management Programs, administered by the California Coastal Commission, San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, and the State Coastal Conservancy, as well as its three National Estuarine Research Reserves in Elkhorn Slough, San Francisco Bay, and Tijuana River, manage and protect coastal and marine resources and habitat, support public access and recreation, enable sustainable economic growth, protect working waterfronts, and build resilience to environmental threats facing our communities. Cuts to these programs would impact the ability of California and the federal government to effectively manage California's estuaries, coastlines, and marine ecosystems.

- **NOAA Fisheries**. Proposed FY2026 cuts to NOAA Fisheries will have significant impacts on management of California's commercial and recreational fisheries, with consequences for coastal economies, jobs, and livelihoods. NOAA Fisheries data informs California fisheries stock assessments and quota setting, bycatch monitoring and management, endangered species protection, habitat and ecosystem-based management, and real-time fishery management. NOAA Fisheries data is also critical to assessing impacts to California fisheries from offshore wind development and other human activities. Cuts to the California-based NOAA Fisheries offices, specifically the Southwest and Northwest Fisheries Science Center, will impact the availability of climate and habitat modeling that help California agencies assess broader environmental impacts and adapt fisheries management to changing ocean conditions, as well as state management decisions on species like salmon, market squid, nearshore rockfish, and Dungeness crab. In the absences of federally supported fisheries data and analysis via NOAA's Fisheries Service, California fisheries regulations could be compromised, with impacts to both seafood safety and the livelihoods of commercial fishermen in California.

- **National Estuarine Research Reserves and National Marine Sanctuaries**. The NOAA Office for Coastal Management administers three National Estuarine Research Reserves in California, designated to promote resilient estuaries and coastal watersheds where both human and natural communities can thrive. Additionally, California's five National Marine Sanctuaries were established to protect natural, cultural and historic resources, support recreation and local economies (including tourism and fishing), and advance research and monitoring that improves our understanding of ocean health and helps identify strategies

to conserve biodiversity and build resilience in the face of climate change. For decades, California has partnered closely with the federal government for successful management of these conserved areas in a way that promotes tourism and economic growth while protecting communities from coastal hazards. These collaborative activities include extensive research, monitoring, outreach, and enforcement efforts that leverage expertise and resources and align priorities, investments, and messaging to maximize benefits to ecosystems and communities. Cuts to NOAA will impact the ability of California and the federal government to effectively manage these areas for people and nature.

- **National Sea Grant College Program.** NOAA's National Sea Grant College Program plays a critical role in advancing coastal and marine research, supporting sustainable resource management, and fostering community resilience. Cuts to the National Sea Grant College Program would impact California's two Sea Grant Programs: the University of Southern California Sea Grant Program and the California Sea Grant Program. Both programs provide significant value to California and have been vital partners to OPC and the state for decades, helping advance key research and monitoring priorities for fisheries, aquaculture, marine protected areas, coastal resilience, kelp forest recovery, water quality, beach recreation safety, and plastic pollution, among others, as well as supporting key economic drivers such as ports and shipping. These programs also contribute to essential workforce development and training, including the State Sea Grant and Knauss Fellowships, generating a pipeline of skilled professionals for California. Cuts to these programs would eliminate long-standing partnerships that integrate community needs and priorities into decision-making and support workforce development.

- **Integrated Ocean Observing System.** The Integrated Ocean Observing System (IOOS) provides essential information on ocean conditions, coastal hazards, and water quality that is critical for safe navigation, emergency response, public health, protection of coastal infrastructure, and seafood safety. Cuts to IOOS will impede the operations of the Southern California Coastal Ocean Observing System and Central & Northern California Ocean Observing System to provide California with critical information on harmful algal blooms, oil spills, ocean acidification, and coastal flooding, as well as ecosystem monitoring for biodiversity, abundance, and ocean health. Without these core observing systems, California will lose fundamental understanding of coastal and ocean dynamics needed for effective management, forecasting, and resilience.

- **Long-term Monitoring Programs**: NOAA and other federal agencies, including the National Science Foundation (NSF) and Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, have been key federal partners in supporting collaborative long-term monitoring initiatives in California,

such as the Multi-Agency Rocky Intertidal Network (MARINe). MARINe is dedicated to monitoring and preserving rocky intertidal ecosystems along the U.S. West Coast, with particular significance in California, where these ecosystems are vital for biodiversity and coastal resilience. Other programs that could similarly be affected include the California Cooperative Oceanic Fisheries Investigations (CalCOFI) program. As a longstanding collaboration between NOAA, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, and California Department of Fish and Wildlife, CalCOFI's critical data collection and analysis of oceanographic conditions, fish populations, and ecosystem dynamics could be compromised, jeopardizing California's fisheries management and marine conservation efforts. Proposed cuts to NSF pose serious risks to California's two NSF-funded Long-Term Ecological Research sites: California Current Ecosystem and Santa Barbara Coastal Long-Term Ecological Research. Both programs provide valuable data and insights into how offshore ecosystems and giant kelp forests function and respond to environmental variability and human impacts. Proposed budget cuts would disrupt these critically important long-term research and monitoring efforts, with significant impacts to understanding and managing California's coastal and marine environments.

In addition to the impacts listed above, cuts to NOAA's budget would eliminate infrastructure, operations, and satellites critical to California, as well as key research programs that inform forecasts and monitor the health and safety of seafood, water supplies, and coastal waterways throughout California.

Along with these significant cuts proposed in the President's FY2026 budget, the disbursement of obligated FY2025 funds to programs and partners around the country have been halted by the DOGE policy requiring all federal agencies to submit detailed justification of expenditures exceeding $100,000 for approval. The fate of these unspent federal funds remains unclear, and programs in California that rely on these funds for research, monitoring, and operations have begun contingency planning for reduction in effort and personnel beginning this summer.

The proposed FY2026 cuts and halted disbursement of obligated FY2025 funds will affect California's coastal economies, livelihoods, and infrastructure critical to coastal and ocean monitoring. The loss of federal funds across these, and many more important programs and activities will disrupt California's ability to understand, monitor, and protect coastal and marine environments with significant impacts on California's coastal communities and ecosystems.

Compromised Federal Services and Partnerships

Trump Administration actions are impacting critical programs and have the potential to fundamentally alter federal agencies' roles and responsibilities. Compromised federal services are likely to directly impact programs and partnerships that rely on federal data and agency expertise.

The dismantling of the U.S. Global Change Research Program and the National Climate Assessment will hamper the ability of sectors and businesses to make informed decisions, including OPC's update to the state's sea level rise guidance. Without robust and sustained oceanographic and ecological data that NOAA's Oceanic and Atmospheric Research programs provide, California's ability to predict and respond to marine heat waves, ocean acidification and hypoxia, harmful algal blooms, and other events will be compromised, likely leading to significant impacts to coastal economies and ecosystems. The expansion of offshore drilling and the halting of offshore renewable energy development, while cutting federal staff, budgets, and safety requirements, heightens threats to California's coast.

Scheduled to be released in December 2025, the first-ever California Coast and Ocean Report Card, being developed by OPC and the Ocean Science Trust, is reliant on federal partnerships, datasets, and capacity. Nearly all 17 indicators in the 2025 Report Card rely in part on federal data. Seven indicators would collapse and/or would need to be entirely redefined if federal data were lost: Mammals, Kelp, Ocean Acidification, Hypoxia, Ocean Temperature, Beaches, and Coastal Flooding. Furthermore, the continuity of these datasets remains uncertain, compromising indicators for future Report Cards.

The Report Card also relies on federal science capacity. Federal scientists and NOAA affiliates (contractors) are involved in nearly every single expert group, and 5 out of 17 indicators rely heavily on expertise and time from one or more federal scientists. These five indicators are entirely or substantially led by a federal scientist. Without the guidance of these federal scientists and affiliates, it would take substantially more time and money to complete the work, and the quality of the analysis would be compromised.

California's Ocean Protection Council relies on its deep partnership with many federal agencies, including NOAA and USGS, to advance coordinated research, monitoring, enforcement, and outreach activities along California's coast and ocean. The reduction in federal capacity and the proposed cuts to the federal partners pose unnecessary risks to lives and property and will likely result in millions more dollars being spent both to address preventable coastal hazards, provide essential services, and to prepare for dangerous floods. Furthermore, during this time of profound environmental shifts, federal data and partnerships are paramount to mitigating and adapting California's communities and ecosystems to the impacts of climate change. Without these state-federal partnerships, California's ability to understand, predict, and minimize these impacts will be drastically impeded, exacerbating the effects of climate change on communities and ecosystems. OPC remains committed to working with the federal government to ensure California's coast and ocean are managed and monitored in a way that maximizes benefits to communities and the environment.

Next Steps

In coordination with state agencies, tribes, communities, scientists, and other partners, OPC staff will continue to track changes and impacts to key datasets, research, monitoring, and programs that are essential for the successful protection and sustainable management of California's coast and ocean. This may include the following actions:

- Identify federal funding gaps that jeopardize public health and safety and may merit prioritized state investment;
- Identify key science and data gaps with respect to collection, analysis, and distribution needs in coming years and engage with external and state partners to address urgent gaps; and
- Communicate with federal agency partners to inform them of impacts to date and the risks and harms to Californians associated with additional changes.

Updates on federal impacts to coastal and ocean programs in California will be provided to the Council through the Executive Director report and/or staff presentations at future Council meetings, as needed.