



**Staff Recommendation**

September 30, 2025

Item 7

**Action Item:**

**Consideration and Approval of Disbursement of Funds for Tribal and Environmental Justice Small Grants**

Maria Rodriguez, Climate and Environmental Justice Program Manager  
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**Recommended Action:** Authorization to disburse up to \$2,000,000 to the California Coastal Commission to fund tribal and environmental justice small grants through the 2025-26 WHALE TAIL® Competitive Grants Program.

**Location:** Statewide

**Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives:** Objective 2.1: Enhance Engagement with Tribes;  
Objective 2.2: Enhance Engagement with Underserved Communities

**Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:** Supports education, stewardship, cultural engagement, and outdoor experiences that expand access to the coast for California communities. Funding prioritizes communities that have faced barriers to accessing the coast, ocean, and state funding opportunities, including underserved communities and California Native American tribes. Direct benefits include climate change and ocean education, youth and workforce development, community science, coastal habitat restoration, cultural and ancestral practice preservation, and expanded opportunities for recreation and access to California's coast and ocean.

**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 OPC’s General Grant Guidelines, adopted June 2025;
3. The proposed projects consistent with the Budget Act of 2024, which included a \$27 million Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) appropriation to OPC for ocean protection and resilience to climate change; and
4. The proposed projects are not ‘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.”

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 \$2,000,000 to the California Coastal Commission to fund tribal and environmental justice small grants through the 2025-26 WHALE TAIL® Competitive Grants Program.

This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, Coastal Commission 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 authorize the disbursement of up to \$2,000,000 to the California Coastal Commission (CCC) to fund tribal and environmental justice (EJ) small grants through the 2025-26 WHALE TAIL® Competitive Grants Program (program). This action continues and expands OPC’s commitment to equitable grantmaking by increasing opportunities for California communities to access public funding, including dedicated funding for tribal communities alongside funding for EJ small grants.

OPC’s partnership with CCC enables a well-established state program to maximize community benefits through grants that connect Californians to the coast and its watersheds through education, stewardship, cultural engagement, and outdoor experiences. The program prioritizes communities that have historically faced barriers to marine education, coastal access, and opportunities to enjoy and benefit from California’s coast and ocean, as well as barriers to accessing state funding. This investment builds on OPC’s [Equity Plan](#) and [Tribal Engagement Strategy](#) commitments, advances Goal 2 of OPC’s Strategic Plan to “Advance Equity Across Ocean

and Coastal Policies and Actions,” and strengthens California’s ability to protect the health of its coast and ocean through community stewardship and action.

## **Project Summary:**

### **Background:**

In October 2022, OPC adopted its first [Equity Plan](#), which identified small grants as a mechanism to enhance access to funding for EJ communities and California Native American tribes (Equity Plan, Strategy 1.3.7). In 2023, OPC launched its [first EJ Small Grants Program](#), providing \$1 million to support 24 community-led projects statewide that advanced ocean and coastal conservation priorities while strengthening community capacity. This pilot demonstrated the need, value, and impact of smaller-scale, community-based investments delivered through accessible funding opportunities. Launching a dedicated Tribal Small Grants program was also identified as a priority in OPC’s [Tribal Engagement Strategy](#) (2023).

Building on this foundation, OPC identified an opportunity to expand community-focused investments by partnering with the CCC’s WHALE TAIL® Grants Program. This long-standing program has successfully delivered community-based grants statewide and provides the infrastructure to advance OPC’s equity and tribal funding commitments at a broader scale. Through this partnership, OPC is supporting the continuation and expansion of community-led projects that provide direct and meaningful benefits for priority communities and EJ initiatives, while also launching the program’s first dedicated funding for tribal communities.

### **Project Summary:**

The WHALE TAIL® program, supported by OPC’s \$2,000,000 investment, will:

- Administer a statewide competitive small grants program totaling \$2,000,000, with awards of up to \$50,000. At least 25 percent of non-tribal awards will be reserved for micro-grants of \$25,000 or less to increase access for smaller community-based organizations.

- Dedicate approximately \$1,000,000 of the total amount for projects led by, in partnership with, and/or directly serving California Native American tribes and tribal communities.<sup>1</sup>
- Dedicate approximately \$1,000,000 to the general funding pool for eligible applicants such as nonprofit organizations, community-based groups, public schools and districts, government entities, and other qualified organizations. These funds will support projects that advance equitable ocean and coastal education, stewardship, cultural practice, climate resilience, and workforce pathways.
- Prioritize projects that reduce barriers to coastal access and expand opportunities for communities that have historically faced challenges accessing, enjoying, and benefiting from California’s coast and ocean, ensuring that funded efforts reflect community-informed benefits and outcomes.

This investment embeds OPC’s equity and tribal priorities into an existing, long-standing statewide grant program, ensuring that resources support community-led projects that advance ocean and coastal education, stewardship, cultural practice, and resilience. By incorporating dedicated funding for tribal communities, the program also advances OPC’s Tribal Engagement Strategy by strengthening opportunities for tribal leadership and access to California’s coast and ocean.

### **Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:**

The WHALE TAIL® Grants Program directly advances Goal 1 of OPC’s Equity Plan: Equitable Engagement, Outreach, and Funding, specifically Strategy 1.3.7, by providing accessible, community-scale funding opportunities for environmental justice communities and California Native American tribes. The program also aligns with OPC’s Tribal Engagement Strategy by dedicating resources to strengthen tribal stewardship, cultural practices, and access to the coast and ocean. Together, these commitments reflect OPC’s commitment to supporting communities and tribes that have historically faced barriers to accessing and benefiting from California’s coast and ocean.

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<sup>1</sup> Eligible entities include federally recognized tribes; nonprofit organizations or fiscal sponsors applying on behalf of non-federally recognized tribes, inter-tribal consortia, tribal conservation districts, or other organizations; and school districts serving tribal students in partnership with a tribal governments. Applicants must provide proof of partnership or tribal leadership support, which may include a letter of support, council resolution, or other appropriate documentation.

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## About the Grantee:

The CCC has administered the WHALE TAIL® Grants Program since 1998, awarding hundreds of grants across California. Its Public Education Program has a strong track record in equitable coastal education and stewardship, and a robust administrative framework for competitive grantmaking. CCC's expertise and infrastructure make it a capable partner to implement OPC's equity-focused investments broadly ensuring maximizing benefits.

## Project Timeline:

The program cycle will follow CCC's grant process, beginning in Fall 2025 with the release of grant guidelines and a call for applications. OPC staff will inform Council of funded projects in the June 2026 Executive Director's Report. All projects are anticipated to be completed by November 2028.

## Project Financing:

Staff recommends that the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) authorize encumbrance of up to \$2,000,000 to the California Coastal Commission for the 2025-26 WHALE TAIL® Grants Program.

|                          |                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Ocean Protection Council | \$2,000,000        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>             | <b>\$2,000,000</b> |

The anticipated source of funds will be the Budget Act of 2024, Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund appropriation to OPC (Fiscal Year 2024/2025), which authorizes the distribution of funds for competitive or discretionary projects that advance ocean protection and resilience. This program fulfills that purpose by funding tribal and EJ community-led education, stewardship, and restoration projects that strengthen the resilience of marine wildlife, coastal ecosystems, and the communities that depend on them.

## 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.
- Improve coastal water quality.

- 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.
- Protect, conserve, and restore coastal waters and ocean ecosystems.

### **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) may be categorically exempt from review under CEQA pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15306, as they involve education, stewardship, data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.