



Staff Recommendation

December 9, 2025

Item 5

Action Item:

Consideration and Approval of Disbursement of Funds to the California Ocean Science Trust for Science Advisor Activities

Sreeja Gopal, Coastal Habitats Program Manager

Recommended Action: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,062,500 to the California Ocean Science Trust (OST) to support Science Advisory Team (SAT) Secretariat activities including the launch of an updated SAT and to enhance state decision-making and management of ocean and coastal resources for the benefit of all Californians.

Location: Statewide

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives: Goal 1: Safeguard Coastal and Marine Ecosystems and Communities in the Face of Climate Change; Goal 2: Advance Equity Across Ocean and Coastal Policies and Actions, Objective 2.1 (Enhance engagement with Tribes); Goal 3: Enhance Coastal and Marine Biodiversity; Goal 4: Support Ocean Health Through a Sustainable Blue Economy

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits: The updated SAT membership serves to incorporate equity, environmental justice, and tribal perspectives as a key priority. The update to SAT structure and composition spans a range of subject matter disciplines, institutions, tribal expertise, and Traditional Knowledges. The SAT membership includes California Native American tribal representatives who are experts in tribal science/natural resource management and can help translate Traditional Knowledges for a statewide audience.

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 project is consistent with the purposes of Division 26.5 of the Public Resources Code, the California Ocean Protection Act;
2. The proposed project is 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
3. The proposed project is not a ‘legal project’ that triggers 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 \$1,062,500 to OST to support SAT Secretariat activities including the launch of an updated SAT and to enhance state decision-making and management of ocean and coastal resources for the benefit of all Californians.

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

As the Science Advisor and Secretariat of OPC’s SAT, OST will launch an updated SAT that builds new institutional and organizational partnerships with California’s scientific community and California Native American tribes. It will also introduce improved processes for engaging a wide range of perspectives and expertise, including tribal science and Traditional Knowledges. The updated SAT will function as a lean, networked mechanism designed to connect OPC with the expertise of California’s research institutions and organizations, as well as California Native American tribes. Its membership will include institutional representatives, rather than representatives by subject matter, to ensure OPC has direct connections and access to a range of scientific institutions and the broader scientific community. This will include both academic scientists and individuals working in tribal science and natural resource management, who can connect the state with broader tribal monitoring and stewardship efforts and help build connections to Traditional Knowledge holders, when appropriate. In addition, OST will collaborate with the scientific community, tribes, and the public to strengthen the delivery of actionable

science related to priority issues as outlined in the OPC 2026 – 2030 Strategic Plan and emerging topics facing California’s coast and ocean.

Project Summary:

Background:

Since 2007, OST has served as the Science Advisor to OPC, providing practical, actionable scientific guidance to inform policy and management decisions that protect California’s coast and ocean resources. The California Ocean Protection Act (COPA), under Public Resources Code section 35615 (added by Assembly Bill 1056 in 2007), also required OPC to establish a “science advisory team of distinguished scientists” to help fulfill COPA’s purposes. The Act authorized the OPC Science Advisor to co-chair the SAT and lead its formation (see also Public Resources Code section 36990). The SAT was formally established in February 2008 to support COPA’s goals. Since that time, OST has partnered closely with OPC to serve as Secretariat of the SAT, including convening, oversight, and management of the SAT.

The OPC and OST partnership through the SAT has been proven as a model for strengthening the application of cutting-edge science to inform recommendations and solutions in state decision-making. This partnership has worked on products such as a science framework to [guide the nation’s first microplastics strategy](#), updated science to support [sea level rise adaptation](#) and planning, and recommendations to guide investments in [ocean acidification monitoring](#) that build-upon existing monitoring and data collection programs. Additionally, in 2023, OST led a process with the SAT to identify a [comprehensive list](#) of potential indicators to track the status of California’s coast and ocean and inform future monitoring and data collection statewide. OST has also worked to generate roadmaps and recommendations on key issues to advance California’s goal to conserve 30 percent of state coastal waters by 2030 (30x30), social sciences considerations for the monitoring and adaptative management of California’s Marine Protected Areas Network, guide marine restoration and mitigation, and climate resilient fisheries, among other emerging topics.

Since 2008, the SAT has provided scientific support by drawing on the expertise of its members and requesting input based on their individual subject matter expertise. However, given the wide range of topics addressed by the state and the need to rely on a broader suite of experts, a new structure is needed to meet modern challenges and the emerging, interdisciplinary issues facing California’s coast and ocean. As a result, OPC and OST identified the need to update the SAT in a way that meets the broad needs of the state and aligns with current best practices for engaging the scientific community.

To meet this need, OST collaborated with internal and external partners to develop a vision outlining the updated SAT's role and purpose. Early discussions emphasized the benefits of a smaller group (approximately 10–12 members serving two-year terms) whose primary focus would be institutional-level information sharing and partnership-building. Based on this input, OST has refined the SAT's role, purpose, and membership to strengthen and modernize OPC's partnerships with academic and research institutions, while also ensuring meaningful tribal representation.

Moving forward, communication and engagement will center on direct relationships with research institutions and organizations on discrete topics, with less emphasis on large, full member convenings. The updated SAT will function as a lean, networked mechanism designed to connect OPC with the scientific leadership, capacity, and foresight of California's research institutions and organizations, and California Native American tribes. Its membership will include institutional representatives, rather than representatives by subject matter, to ensure OPC has direct connections and access to a range of scientific institutions and the broader scientific community to inform the broad range of topics facing California's coast and ocean.

Project Summary:

Through this project, OST will launch the updated SAT and support a range of Science Advisor activities, including convening expert panels, scientific working groups, and holding workshops and roundtables on priority topics and emerging issues. The updated SAT will consist of an interdisciplinary group of experts, including scientists and practitioners in leadership roles across California institutions and organizations, to connect OPC with a wide range of scientific institutions. It will also include members working in tribal science and natural resource management who can bring tribal science to bear on important scientific questions, and who can build connections to Traditional Knowledge holders when appropriate. The new SAT will function as a modern, streamlined body designed to strengthen networks and connect OPC with the broader scientific community.

This project will accomplish the following objectives:

1. Launch the updated SAT to strengthen OPC partnerships with research centers, initiatives and institutions, including California Native American tribal governments and institutions, and strengthen the role of the scientific community and tribes in accelerating progress on state policy priorities.
2. Work with the scientific community, California Native American tribes, and the public to continue strengthening the delivery of actionable, pragmatic scientific syntheses and recommendations on priority issues and emerging topics, through the lens and for the benefit of all in California.

3. Convene expert panels, scientific working groups, hold workshops or roundtable discussions, and provide scientific guidance on priority topics and emerging issues facing California’s coast and ocean.
4. Share highlights from SAT engagements on a quarterly basis at Council Meetings.

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:

The updated SAT membership serves to incorporate equity, environmental justice, and tribal perspectives as a key priority. This project will advance the OPC Equity Plan objective 4.3 to “[e]mbed representation, consultation, and engagement of environmental justice communities and California Native American tribes in OPC’s science and research” through actions including but not limited to addition of meaningful tribal representation to the SAT. Tribal representatives on the SAT are envisioned as “boundary spanners” who are working in tribal science and/or western natural resource management, but also are familiar with Traditional Knowledges, can help its translation for policymakers and decision-makers, and can connect OPC with traditional knowledge holders when appropriate. This project will strengthen the SAT by expanding expertise across a range of disciplines, knowledge types, tribal science, and Traditional Knowledges.

About the Awardee:

OST is a nonprofit public-benefit corporation under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code 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 a healthy and productive ocean future for California. As a nonprofit partner to OPC, OST’s strength lies in nimble response to state priorities: leveraging resources and creating partnerships to foster innovative yet pragmatic approaches to difficult problems.

Project Timeline:

March 2026 – March 2029

Project Financing:

Staff recommends that OPC authorize encumbrance of up to \$1,062,500 to OST to support SAT Secretariat activities, including the launch of an updated SAT.

Ocean Protection Council	\$1,062,500
TOTAL	\$1,062,500

The anticipated source of funds will be the Budget Act of 2024, Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund appropriation to OPC (Fiscal Year 2024/2025) for ocean protection and resilience to climate change. The proposed disbursement is an appropriate use of this appropriation because this project will provide information needed to increase the State’s understanding and inform future investment towards effectively and equitably addressing climate impacts on California coast and ocean resources.

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:

- Improve the management of fisheries and/or foster sustainable fisheries.
- 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.
- 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 not considered a ‘legal project’ that triggers 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 it were determined to be a ‘legal project’ under CEQA, the proposed project is 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.