



CALIFORNIA
**OCEAN
PROTECTION
COUNCIL**

Wade Crowfoot | Secretary for Natural Resources | Council Chair
Yana Garcia | Secretary for Environmental Protection
Malia M. Cohen | State Controller
Ben Allen | State Senator
Dawn Addis | State Assemblymember
Alexis Jackson | Public Member
Megan Rocha | Public Member

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

December 10, 2025 – March 23, 2026

*Providing an update on outcomes
and accomplishments since the
previous OPC Meeting.*

Contents

Federal Actions Impacting California's Coast and Ocean	2
Updates By Strategic Plan Goal	3
Goal 1: Build Resilience to Climate Change	3
Goal 2: Maximize Community Benefits and Stewardship	5
Goal 3: Safeguard Coastal and Marine Biodiversity	6
Goal 4: Enable a Sustainable Blue Economy That Protects Ocean Health	8
Projects Approved by Executive Director's Delegated Authority	9
Legislation	11
Personnel	12

Proposed Federal Actions Impacting California's Coast and Ocean

Offshore Oil Drilling along California's Coast

On January 23, 2026, Governor Newsom, along with the Governors of Oregon and Washington, submitted a [letter](#) to the federal government's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) voicing strong opposition to the Trump Administration's proposal to open the California coast to new offshore oil and gas drilling. OPC Chair and Secretary for Natural Resources Wade Crowfoot also [submitted formal comments](#) on behalf of the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) opposing the offshore drilling proposal, highlighting the threat to California's marine ecosystems, its coastal communities, and economy. [Formal comments](#) were also submitted by California Attorney General Rob Bonta and the [California Fish and Game Commission](#).

On January 26, BOEM [released a call for information and nominations](#) for lease sales in the Central and Southern California Lease Planning Areas. In response, Secretary Crowfoot submitted [another comment letter](#) on February 24 on behalf of CNRA reiterating California's opposition and requesting that all three planning areas along California's coast be removed from BOEM's Outer Continental Shelf Leasing Program, including the Central and Southern California Planning Areas.

On February 26, BOEM [announced its intent to prepare and Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement](#) for potential offshore oil and gas leasing in California, initiating a 30-day public scoping period on proposed oil and gas lease sales in the Northern, Central and Southern California Planning Areas. CNRA will be submitting formal comments by the deadline: March 30 at 8:59pm PST. Any member of the public can submit comments on the [Federal Register](#).

Critical Mineral Exploration

On February 24, BOEM [announced proposed regulation changes](#) to expedite prospecting, leasing and operations for seabed mining for critical hard minerals in federal waters, initiating a 60-day public comment period. Comments can be submitted on the [Federal Register](#) and are due on April 27 at 8:59pm PST. CNRA will submit formal comments. Although California banned seabed mining in state waters in 2022 ([AB 1832](#)), such activities conducted in federal waters could cause harm to coastal and marine resources within state waters.

Hydraulic Fracking from Platform Gilda

On February 24, BOEM deemed complete a [proposed update to DCOR LLC's Development and Production Plan](#) to incorporate well stimulation activities, specifically hydraulic fracking of 16 oil and gas wells drilled from Platform Gilda in Ventura County. This action begins compliance review, including an National Environment Policy Action analysis to evaluate the potential environmental effects of the proposal, and initiated a 60-day public comment period. Comments can be submitted to BOEM at SantaClaraDPPComments@BOEM.gov. CNRA will submit formal comments and the California Coastal Commission will conduct federal consistency review under the

provisions of the Coastal Zone Management Act to determine whether these activities are consistent with California's Coastal Management Program.

Updates By Strategic Plan Goal

Goal 1: Build Resilience to Climate Change

Senate Bill 1 Sea Level Rise Adaptation Grant Program – Sea Level Rise Tribal Cultural Resources Funding Program (Tribal Track)

In July 2025, OPC released the first [Sea Level Rise Tribal Cultural Resources Funding Solicitation](#) under the SB 1 Sea Level Rise Adaptation Planning Grant Program to support California Native American tribes in addressing sea level rise impacts to ancestral lands, cultural sites, and lifeways. OPC received five applications in the first proposal deadline in September 2025, [three of which are being considered for funding at the March 2026 Council meeting](#). Three additional proposals were submitted in the January 2026 application round and are currently under review and undergoing formal tribal consultation. The projects span the breadth of the program's priorities, from pre-planning to planning, and are located across California's coastline. The Council previously approved \$5 million to support this solicitation; if the current set of projects is approved at the March 23 OPC meeting, approximately \$2,920,142 will remain available for future funding rounds.

Senate Bill 1 Sea Level Rise Adaptation Grant Program – Track 2 (Implementation Projects)

In January 2026, OPC released a [solicitation](#) for the first round of SB 1 Track 2: Sea Level Rise (SLR) Implementation Projects, continuing its efforts to advance SLR resilience across California's coastal communities. The solicitation prioritizes key SLR adaptation project outcomes, including strengthening public access to coastal resources, centering nature-based adaptation strategies, providing direct and meaningful benefits to disadvantaged communities, and forming robust partnerships with California tribes throughout the project process. OPC received 31 Letters of Intent (LOIs) in response to the solicitation and anticipates investing nearly \$7 million in California coastal communities through this first round of projects. Selected applications will be invited to submit full proposals by March 20. Recommended projects are expected to be brought to the September 2026 Council meeting for funding approval.

Harmful Algal Bloom Control Workshop

California currently reduces harmful algal bloom (HAB) risks through detection, monitoring, forecasting, and event response. To complement these HAB management strategies, California is interested in exploring the potential use of HAB control strategies that directly kill HAB cells or destroy their toxins, physically remove cells or toxins from aquatic systems, or limit cell growth

and proliferation. On January 12-13, 2026, the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP), on behalf of OPC, hosted a [workshop](#) to assess the state of the science and explore potential options for controlling harmful algal blooms (HABs) in California's coastal waters. OPC will consider funding California-relevant HAB control projects as part of the OAH and HABs solicitation.

Land-Based Nutrients Increase HAB Toxin Risk in Southern California Bight

A new OPC-supported [study](#), led by the University of California Los Angeles and SCCWRP, found that land-based nutrient inputs to the Southern California Bight increases the amount of time ocean conditions may favor toxic *Pseudo-nitzschia* blooms, relative to the natural occurrence of blooms in the region. This modeling study found that, on average, these anthropogenic nutrients increase levels of domoic acid (a neurotoxin produced by *Pseudo-nitzschia*) by 25%.

Ocean Acidification, Hypoxia, and Harmful Algal Bloom Solicitation Now Open

On February 2, 2026, OPC announced the release of a California Climate Investments solicitation: [Monitoring, Research, and Modeling to Support Ocean Acidification, Hypoxia, and Marine Harmful Algal Bloom Management in California](#). The solicitation will support projects that will strengthen California's capacity to track, assess, and address the impacts of ocean acidification and hypoxia (OAH) on marine biota and ecosystems (Track 1); as well as support state management actions to prevent, mitigate, and control the impacts of harmful algal blooms (HABs; Track 2). Funded projects will enhance scientific understanding of OAH and/or marine HABs to advance the State's response related to these two growing threats to California's coastal ecosystems and communities. OPC staff anticipate bringing projects to Council for consideration of approval in September 2026.

Ocean Acidification Research Webinar

OPC and California Sea Grant provided \$2.5 million to fund [three research projects](#) addressing ocean acidification and hypoxia (OAH) in coastal California. These projects were selected through a competitive research call to address OAH research, monitoring, and synthesis priorities. Furthermore, OPC funded the SCCWRP to [expand and integrate biological measurements](#) into ongoing OAH monitoring programs. A public webinar sharing findings from these research projects was held on February 11, 2026. State staff are actively exploring how this work can inform research and management of marine biodiversity and water quality across California state agencies, advance coastal adaptation efforts, and support climate-ready fisheries.

Co-located Monitoring of Harmful Algal Blooms and Ocean Acidification

In September 2023, OPC supported SCCWRP to host a workshop to explore the connections between HABs and OAH and assess how California's existing monitoring frameworks could be adapted to better study and address these water quality challenges. A [workshop report](#) is now available, including recommendations and strategies to leverage existing monitoring efforts for implementing collocated monitoring of HABs and OAH.

Best Practices for Monitoring Biological Effects of Ocean Acidification with environmental DNA (eDNA)

In March 2025 SCCWRP, on behalf of OPC, hosted a workshop to identify best practices for monitoring of the biological effects of OA using eDNA. A [workshop report](#) is now available, including recommended actions that could help lay the foundation for incorporating eDNA into routine monitoring efforts.

Goal 2: Maximize Community Benefits and Stewardship

Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council Meeting

On February 12, the [Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council](#) held its first in-person meeting in Avila Beach. The Advisory Council is a community-based body that provides a public forum for discussion of issues that affect Sanctuary management. The Advisory Council is composed of [18 voting members and 15 alternates](#) that represent Indigenous cultural knowledge, the general public, tourism and recreation, fishing, education, research, ocean energy, and other key sectors; this initial meeting was focused on relationship-building, reviewing progress made in the first year of the Sanctuary's designation, and planning for the year ahead. OPC's Executive Director Jenn Eckerle and Senior Biodiversity Program Manager & Tribal Liaison Mike Esagro participate as the California Natural Resources Agency's primary and alternate members on the Advisory Council, respectively.

In parallel, the Sanctuary has established a separate Intergovernmental Policy Council, which brings together federally recognized tribes (the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians) with state and federal government representatives to advance the Sanctuary's vision for [collaborative co-stewardship](#) with Chumash tribes. OPC's participation in both the Sanctuary Advisory Council and Intergovernmental Policy Council will ensure that the State can uplift and support tribal priorities for Sanctuary management.

Environmental Justice Advisory Board

The Environmental Justice Advisory Board (EJ Advisory Board, or Board) met in a hybrid meeting in Richmond on February 23, 2026, for its first session of the year facilitated by OPC staff and the

Better World Group. The meeting focused on priorities in OPC’s 2026-2030 Strategic Plan and the Board’s 2026 priorities to identify key opportunities for input and collaboration this year. Aligned priorities centered on equitable grantmaking; community and tribally-led science, monitoring, and research; and sea level rise adaptation. The Board received presentations by CNRA Deputy Secretary Noaki Schwartz on the forthcoming CNRA Environmental Justice Policy; Dr. Kristina Hill (UC Berkeley) on an OPC-funded project to identify “Public Health Risks: Sea Level Rise and Contaminated Sites in Environmental Justice Neighborhoods;” and the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission’s Environmental Justice Advisors to identify synergies between the two advisory bodies. The meeting concluded with a site visit near an adjacent contaminated site to discuss ongoing monitoring and both environmental and potential community impacts.

Goal 3: Safeguard Coastal and Marine Biodiversity

International Leadership on 30x30 and Biodiversity

On January 21, the [High Ambition Coalition](#) Subnational Government Task Force on 30x30 held its first meeting of the year. This group, which is co-led by California and Quebec, convenes subnational governments from around the world who have committed to the 30x30 target. It provides a critical venue for knowledge exchange around progress, opportunities, and challenges related to implementation of 30x30 at the subnational government level. This first meeting of 2026 focused on officially welcoming two new Task Force members (Cross River State in Nigeria and the State of Pará in Brazil), looking back on 2025 achievements, and discussing priorities for 2026, including planning for the upcoming United Nations Biodiversity Summit this fall.

OPC is also participating in the development of the first-ever Subnational Government Strategy for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Following on California’s [successful participation in the IUCN World Conservation Congress last fall](#), and [Governor Newsom’s announcement that California would join IUCN as a subnational government member](#), OPC has begun working closely with IUCN leadership as well as other subnational governments – including close partners in Quebec and Catalonia – to begin to outline priorities for the Strategy. OPC will continue to play a leadership role in this effort moving forward.

Marine Protected Area (MPA) Adaptive Management and Petition Evaluation

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife is finalizing its evaluation recommendations of public petitions, which are proposing changes to the MPA Network, received by the California Fish and Game Commission (FGC) in December 2023. Tribally-led petitions will be discussed at FGC’s Tribal Committee meeting on April 14, with initial discussion on all petitions by the full Commission scheduled for three regional public Commission meetings: April 21 in San Leandro;

2) May 5 – 6 in the Santa Barbara Area; and 3) May 19 in San Clemente. Meeting details can be found on [FGC’s website](#) once available.

Intertidal Biodiversity DNA Barcode Library

Under the leadership of SCCWRP, experts in taxonomy, genetics, and intertidal ecology were convened in-person at SCCWRP’s headquarters in January 2026 to [kick off the sampling campaigns](#) for the Intertidal Biodiversity DNA Barcode Library. Over a two-day period, subject matter experts advised best practices for executing field sampling and genetic sequencing, as well as outreach and community engagement towards the development of the Intertidal Library. Widescale “bio-blitzs” are being planned at key locations across the California coast, while targeted “leveraged sampling” events will fill geographic and taxonomic gaps as the development of the Intertidal Library progresses.

Snapshot Cal Coast 10th Anniversary

On February 2, OPC Senior Biodiversity Program Manager (Supervisor) Mike Esgro and Senior Biodiversity Program Manager (Specialist) Dr. Staci Lewis attended a celebration at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco to mark the tenth anniversary of Snapshot Cal Coast and the City Nature Challenge. At this event, OPC, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and California State Parks received awards in recognition of their roles as key state partners for these programs.

Over the past decade, Snapshot Cal Coast and the City Nature Challenge have empowered tens of thousands of volunteers to build one of the most comprehensive databases of biodiversity in the state – turning everyday Californians into scientists and providing valuable data to resource managers. Learn more about the role that Snapshot Cal Coast is playing in OPC’s work to conserve coastal and marine biodiversity here: [OPC January 2026 Newsletter](#).

Public Comment Period Open for Statewide Plastics Monitoring Strategy and Planning Framework

On behalf of OPC, San Francisco Estuary Institute (SFEI) has developed a draft [Statewide Plastics Monitoring Strategy and Planning Framework](#) to provide a science-based, collaborative roadmap to monitor both macroplastics and microplastics across the state’s freshwater, estuarine, and marine ecosystems. This document will support the development of a comprehensive, long-term monitoring program to understand, track, and guide actions to address plastic pollution in California’s aquatic environments. OPC and SFEI solicited public feedback on the draft and are currently incorporating comments into the final draft. OPC is working closely with partners at the State Water Resources Control Board to consider how the final Monitoring Strategy and Planning Framework will be integrated into a plastics monitoring program for the state; OPC is committed

to holding formal government-to-government consultation to inform implementation of this monitoring program.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) has now been confirmed in elephant seal pups at Ano Nuevo

On February 19–20, 2026, multiple northern elephant seal weanling pups were found dead at Año Nuevo State Park (San Mateo County, CA), with additional live pups exhibiting tremors and seizures; samples collected by UC Santa Cruz and UC Davis researchers confirmed highly pathogenic avian influenza or [HPAI H5N1](#), the first confirmed HPAI H5N1 detections in California marine mammals, following prior detections in local seabirds during the winters of 2025 and 2026. As of March 6, 2026, 12 northern elephant seals and one southern sea otter have tested positive —UC Santa Cruz and UC Davis are conducting ongoing surveys and sampling at Año Nuevo, supported by California's [West Coast Marine Mammal Stranding Network](#) (funded in part by an annual OPC grant to [The Marine Mammal Center](#)). HPAI is can be spread from animals to people; while the risk to the [general public](#) remains low, beachgoers should avoid all contact with sick or dead wildlife and keep pets away from seals and birds.

Goal 4: Enable a Sustainable Blue Economy That Protects Ocean Health

Marine Aquaculture Action Plan

OPC has convened the Aquaculture Leadership Team to develop a Statewide Marine Aquaculture Action Plan (Plan) to increase coordination among state agencies and improve consistency, transparency, and efficiency in planning, facilitating, permitting, managing, and fostering sustainable marine aquaculture. From October to January, OPC engaged in early consultation with California Native American Tribes and discussions with the [Aquaculture Development Committee](#) (ADC). In January, OPC staff collaborated with California Sea Grant to host workshops with the marine aquaculture and environmental non-governmental communities. These workshops were an opportunity for open discussion and feedback on challenges in marine aquaculture and recommendations for the Plan. In collaboration with the Leadership Team, OPC staff completed a Draft Plan informed by the priorities of tribes, the aquaculture industry, NGOs, and other partners. On March 10, OPC initiated tribal consultation and discussions with the ADC on the Draft Action Plan. The Draft Plan will be released for public comment in early April. On [March 12th](#), OPC staff gave an update to the Marine Resources Committee on the development of the Plan. OPC staff plan to present the final Plan for consideration at the June Council meeting.

Blue Whales Blue Skies Program

In January 2026, Assembly Bill 14 (AB 14), “Coastal resources: Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies Program” was enacted, authorizing statewide expansion of the Blue Whales Blue Skies Program (BWBS) voluntary Vessel Speed Reduction (VSR) program and identifying OPC as an advisor to BWBS. OPC has begun engaging with the BWBS coalition, which includes the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, Benioff Ocean Science Laboratory, and local air quality districts, participating in monthly planning and stakeholder outreach meetings. OPC’s Strategic Plan includes Goal 4: Enable a sustainable blue economy that protects ocean health,” under which OPC supports sustainable economic practices that minimize the impact on marine ecosystems and takes steps to mitigate impacts of industrial uses of the ocean. To achieve this goal, OPC supports the implementation of priority actions to reduce whale vulnerability to ship strikes, including the expansion of the BWBS VSR program, through 2030. More information can be found in [Item 9](#) on the March 23 OPC Meeting agenda.

Projects Approved under Executive Director Delegated Authority

Grantee	Project	Amount	Description
Resources Legacy Fund	Marine Protected Area Compliance Initiative Phase II	\$200,000	Augment an existing project to expand MPA Watch programs by an additional year and include three additional MPA Watch programs to expand the geographic reach of the program.
Southern California Coastal Water Research Project	Assessing Effects of Anthropogenic Nutrient Inputs on Ocean Acidification and Deoxygenation and Biological Indicators	\$67,430	Augment an existing project to convene a workshop related to harmful algal bloom control strategies in California’s coastal environment.

Cher-Ae Heights Indian Community of Trinidad Rancheria	Trinidad Rancheria Marine Stewardship and Management Plan	\$100,000	To support the development of a Stewardship and Management Plan to guide the sustainable stewardship, protection, and management of ancestral marine and coastal resources, consistent with the Yurok-Tolowa Dee-ni' Indigenous Marine Stewardship Area (IMSA) Treaty of Stewardship and Responsibility.
Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation	Developing an IMSA Stewardship and Management Plan for Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation	\$99,707	To support the development of the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation IMSA Stewardship and Management Plan for stewarding and managing ancestral lands and waters.
Point Blue Conservation Science	Sustaining Ocean Acidification Monitoring of Chemistry and Biology in North-Central California	\$199,862	To support sustained measurements of ocean acidification chemistry and biology as part of the Applied California Current Ecosystem Studies (ACCESS) program.
Marine Conservation Institute	Using the MPA Guide to Provide Insight to California's 30x30 Conservation Area Evaluation	\$96,565	To evaluate marine managed areas in state waters for potential inclusion toward California's 30x30 goal.

Legislation

The following is an update on coastal and ocean-related legislative proposals tracked by OPC staff this legislative session.

[AB 946 \(Bryan\)](#): Natural Resources: equitable outdoor access: 30x30 goal: urban nature-based projects. This bill would encourage the Governor's office, state agencies, and the Legislature, when distributing resources, to recognize the coequal goals and benefits of the 30x30 goal and the Outdoor for All Initiative, and to maximize investment in historically underserved urban communities to the extent possible. This is a two-year bill.

[AB 1740 \(Zbur\)](#): Coastal resources: coastal development permits: urban multimodal communities: bicycle facilities. This bill would allow cities that meet certain criteria to designate themselves as urban multimodal communities, enabling specified transportation projects and bicycle facility installations without a coastal development permit if certain conditions are met.

[AB 1881 \(Ramos\)](#): California Indian Freedom Act of 2026. This bill would prohibit a government agency from burdening a California Indian or California Native American tribe's exercise of religious beliefs or spiritual practices, unless absolutely necessary, would authorize a California Indian or tribe to assert a legal violation of these provisions, and would require government-to-government consultation for government projects that may impact a sacred site or cultural landscape.

[AB 1938 \(Irwin\)](#): Coastal recreation: designated state surfing reserves. This bill would require OPC to establish a process for state surfing reserve designation and include these reserves in the state's 30x30 goal.

[AB 2045 \(Connolly\)](#): Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Act. This bill would remove the January 1, 2027 repeal date, extending the operation of the Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Act indefinitely.

[AB 2051 \(Wicks\)](#): Coastal Resilience Permitting Working Group. This bill would require the Secretary of the Natural Resources Agency, in consultation with the Secretary for Environmental Protection, to form a Coastal Resilience Permitting Working Group, a Coastal Resilience Permitting Roadmap, and a Coastal Resilience Permit Advisory Group.

[AB 2277 \(Schultz\)](#): California State Parks Stewardship Act of 2026. This bill would require the Department of Parks and Recreation to promote park stewardship and management practices that address climate change and would establish the Wildfire Safety and Climate Stewardship fund to support such actions.

[AB 2373 \(Dixon\)](#): The California Coastal Act: local coastal program: sea level rise plan: neighborhood-scale adaptation approach. This bill would authorize local governments within the coastal zone to include a neighborhood-scale adaptation approach in their local coastal program or sea level rise plan.

[SJR 12 \(Laird\)](#): Proposed 2026-2031 National Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program: Opposition. This measure strongly opposes new offshore drilling in federal waters off the Pacific coast and would request the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management hold public hearings in California and prepare a programmatic environmental impact statement on the 2026-2031 proposed oil and gas leasing program.

[SB 1021 \(Choi\)](#): Fishing and Hunting: Youth Program. This bill would require the Fish and Game Commission, in consultation with the Department of Fish and Wildlife, to establish a program to increase opportunities to fish and hunt for youth with life-threatening illnesses and youth who have lost a parent in service to the state or country.

[SB 1180 \(Allen\)](#): Plastic Pollution Prevention and Packaging Producer Responsibility Act: California Plastic Pollution Mitigation Fund. This bill would require fund expenditures to achieve purposes relating to the mitigation of adverse impacts of plastics and the shift away from plastic dependency and updates the fund's grant program implementation process.

[SB 1286 \(Richardson\)](#): State pinniped. This bill would establish the California sea lion as the official state pinniped.

[SB 1393 \(McGuire\)](#): Commercial fishing: steelhead trout: Dungeness crab. This bill would increase the steelhead trout fishing report-restoration card base fee and would extend Dungeness crab fishing provisions including OPC's role in operating the Dungeness crab task force.

[SB 1394 \(Limón\)](#): Environmental protection: lands and coastal waters: conservation goals: reports. This bill would require the Secretary of the Natural Resources Agency's annual 30x30 progress report to include information that represents newly conserved acreage and distinguishes it from acreage previously reported as conserved.

Personnel

Last month, OPC staff members **Ella McDougall** and **Staci Lewis** were both promoted to Senior Environmental Scientist (Specialist) roles. Ella will provide additional leadership for OPC's sea level rise and coastal resilience efforts within our Climate Change Program and Staci will provide similar leadership for OPC's priorities to conserve biodiversity, including MPAs, monitoring, and 30x30 within our Biodiversity Program. We are thrilled to recognize the achievements of both team members to date, and to have this additional layer of organizational structure to strengthen our efficiency and effectiveness; congratulations to Ella and Staci!
