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Staff Recommendation
March 23, 2026

Item 6

Action Item:
Consideration and Approval of Disbursement of Funds to Advance 30x30 in Coastal Waters

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Staci Lewis, Ph.D., Senior Biodiversity Program Manager (Specialist)

Recommended Action: Authorization to disburse up to $6,048,000 to California Sea Grant for projects selected through a competitive solicitation to advance 30x30 in coastal waters:

Track 1: Action-Oriented Science

- 6.1: Up to $988,000 to The Nature Conservancy for the project "Using ecological genomics to advance eelgrass conservation and restoration in California"
- 6.2: Up to $994,000 to the University of California, Santa Cruz for the project "Identifying multi-species climate refugia along the California coast to support the 30x30 initiative"
- 6.3: Up to $502,000 to the Greater Farallones Association for the project "Shifting shores: Unlocking 30 years of long-term coastal data"
- 6.4: Up to $507,000 to the University of California, Davis for the project "Estuaries at large"

Track 2: Accelerating Environmental Restoration and Stewardship

- 6.5: Up to $707,000 to The Bay Foundation for the project "Predicting restoration success: Model-guided kelp restoration in the Channel Islands"
- 6.6: Up to $548,000 to Friends of the Dunes for the project "Accelerating biodiversity and climate resilience through ecological restoration"
- 6.7: Up to $367,000 to Occidental College for the project "Malibu coastline recovery and restoration project"
- 6.8: Up to $844,000 to the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation for the project "Restoring eelgrass in the Channel Islands: Integrating mooring infrastructure, partnerships, and monitoring techniques for targeted offshore restoration projects"

- 6.9: Up to $591,000 to the University of California, Davis for the project "Reconnecting a keystone species to California's kelp forest ecosystems through increasing white abalone production and outplanting"

Location: Statewide

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives: Goal 3: Safeguard Coastal and Marine Biodiversity; Objective 3.1: Conserve 30% of California's coastal waters by 2030

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits: Mentorship for undergraduate and graduate students; research relationships with minority-serving institutions; meaningful inclusion of local communities in research and restoration efforts; investment in communities impacted by biodiversity loss; supporting improved access to coastal and marine resources and ecosystem services

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;
   The proposed projects are consistent with OPC's Proposition 68 Grant Guidelines, adopted September 10, 2024; and
2. The proposed projects 6.1-6.9 are not 'legal projects' that trigger the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Public Resources Code section, section 15378, since they either involve only: a) data collection, research, experimental management and resource evaluation activities; or b) small scale restoration. Neither will result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource."

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 $6,048,000 to California Sea Grant for projects selected to advance 30x30 in coastal waters:

- 6.1: Up to $988,000 to The Nature Conservancy for the project "Using ecological genomics to advance eelgrass conservation and restoration in California"

- 6.2: Up to $994,000 to the University of California, Santa Cruz for the project "Identifying multi-species climate refugia along the California coast to support the 30x30 initiative"
- 6.3: Up to $502,000 to the Greater Farallones Association for the project "Shifting shores: Unlocking 30 years of long-term coastal data"
- 6.4: Up to $507,000 to the University of California, Davis for the project "Estuaries at large"
- 6.5: Up to $707,000 to The Bay Foundation for the project "Predicting restoration success: Model-guided kelp restoration in the Channel Islands"
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- 6.9: Up to $591,000 to the University of California, Davis for the project "Reconnecting a keystone species to California's kelp forest ecosystems through increasing white abalone production and outplanting"

This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, that all projects receive necessary permits for all project components and that California Sea Grant 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:

California has committed to the goal of conserving 30% of state lands and coastal waters by 2030 (also known as the "30 by 30" or "30x30" initiative). OPC is leading the state's efforts to achieve 30x30 in coastal waters. Currently, 21.9% of coastal waters are conserved. Conserving an additional 275,000 acres of coastal waters by 2030 will require science to identify additional areas to prioritize for conservation, active work to restore and steward ecosystems associated with coastal and marine 30x30 Conservation Areas, and support for tribally-led stewardship. In summer 2025, OPC released a $10 million competitive solicitation for projects to advance these priorities, split into three separate solicitation "tracks": Track 1 (Action-Oriented Science), Track 2 (Accelerating Environmental Restoration and Stewardship), and Track 3 (Revitalizing Tribally-Led Stewardship).

This solicitation was highly competitive. 73 proposals were received for Track 1: Action-Oriented Science, 36 for Track 2: Accelerating Environmental Restoration and Stewardship, and 13 for Track 3: Revitalizing Tribally-Led Stewardship. Proposals were reviewed for scientific and technical merit by expert panels convened by California Sea Grant, and by OPC for alignment with 30x30 priorities. The projects recommended for approval here are for Tracks 1 and 2 only. OPCwill conduct tribal consultation on projects selected for Track 3, and staff anticipate bringing those projects to the Council for approval at the June 2026 Council meeting.

The suite of projects recommended for funding will support OPC's efforts to achieve 30x30 in coastal waters in multiple ways. Selected Track 1: Action-Oriented Science projects are largely focused on identifying areas to prioritize for strengthened conservation through the 30x30 initiative. Examples include projects that identify potential climate refugia for ecologically and economically important marine species, prioritize vulnerable estuary ecosystems for strengthened protections, and predict patterns of climate-driven change in sandy beach ecosystems to help guide the conservation of these ecosystems into the future.

Selected Track 2: Accelerating Environmental Restoration and Stewardship projects are targeted restoration efforts that will benefit current and potential coastal and marine 30x30 Conservation Areas. Examples include projects that restore degraded kelp forests and eelgrass beds in National Marine Sanctuaries, develop restoration options for marine protected areas (MPAs) impacted by the 2025 Palisades Fire, and restore native species in dune ecosystems adjacent to a coastal National Wildlife Refuge.

The projects recommended here are directly responsive to key actions identified in the California Natural Resources Agency's *Pathways to 30x30* strategy and priorities in OPC's *Roadmap to Achieving 30x30 in Coastal Waters*. Together, they represent a major step forward not only in guiding the designation of new 30x30 Conservation Areas, but also ensuring the active stewardship and restoration of these areas – and California's unique coastal and marine biodiversity more broadly – for the benefit of both people and nature.

Project Summary:

Background:

In October 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom issued Executive Order N-82-20, advancing environmental conservation as a state priority and elevating the role of nature in fighting climate change. As part of this Executive Order, California committed to the goal of conserving 30% of state lands and coastal waters by 2030 (also known as the "30 by 30" or "30x30" initiative). 30x30 was codified into state law by Senate Bill 337 in 2023.

In April 2022, the California Natural Resources Agency released *Pathways to 30x30: Accelerating Conservation of California's Nature*, which defines 30x30 Conservation Areas, highlights the breadth of conservation that is consistent with this definition, and establishes 10 pathways for achieving 30x30 in California. *Pathways to 30x30* included a dedicated appendix (Appendix E: Science Needs for Advancing 30x30 in Coastal Waters) that highlighted specific knowledge gaps and information needs for coastal waters. Building on *Pathways to 30x30*, in June 2025, OPC released its *Roadmap to Achieving 30x30 in Coastal Waters*, which outlines the specific ways in which California will conserve 30% of coastal waters by 2030. As of the 2025 *Pathways to 30x30 Annual Progress Report*, 21.9% of California's coastal waters are conserved.

Accomplishing the actions in OPC's *Roadmap* and conserving an additional 275,000 acres of coastal waters by 2030 will require science to identify additional areas to prioritize for conservation, active work to restore and steward ecosystems associated with current or potential 30x30 Conservation Areas, and support for tribally-led stewardship. In summer 2025, OPC released a $10 million competitive solicitation for projects to advance these priorities, split into three separate solicitation "tracks":

- Track 1: Action-oriented science
- Track 2: Accelerating environmental restoration and stewardship
- Track 3: Revitalizing tribally-led stewardship

This solicitation was highly competitive. 73 proposals were received for Track 1, 36 for Track 2, and 13 for Track 3. Proposals were reviewed for scientific and technical merit by expert panels convened by California Sea Grant, and by OPC and agency partners for alignment with 30x30 priorities. The projects recommended for approval here are for Tracks 1 and 2 only. OPC is currently conducting tribal consultation on projects selected for Track 3, and staff anticipate bringing those projects to the Council for approval at the June 2026 Council meeting.

Project Descriptions:

The suite of projects recommended for funding will support OPC's efforts to achieve 30x30 in coastal waters by 1) supporting identification of areas to prioritize for strengthened conservation through the 30x30 initiative, and 2) implementing targeted restoration efforts that benefit ecosystems associated with current or potential 30x30 Conservation Areas, to help imperiled species recover and enable ecosystems to thrive in the face of a changing coast and ocean.

Track 1: Action Oriented Science

6.1 Using ecological genomics to advance eelgrass conservation and restoration in California (The Nature Conservancy)

This project will support improved conservation of eelgrass, a foundational yet highly vulnerable species in many of California's estuaries, by establishing eelgrass genomic structure across California to support conservation planning and inform climate-resilient restoration. Through genetic analysis and transplanting experiments, this work will identify genetic predictors of thermal tolerance as well as potential climate refugia for eelgrass. Ultimately, these outcomes will inform OPC's prioritization of estuary sites as potential 30x30 Conservation Areas and build knowledge for scaling up eelgrass restoration across the state.

Relevant *Pathways to 30x30* Key Actions: 6.12 (Prioritize coastal habitats and degraded seascapes for restoration through science-based assessments); 6.14 (Restore coastal wetlands, seagrass beds, and kelp forests). Relevant *Pathways to 30x30 Appendix E* information needs: Characteristics of climate refugia for important species and species groups; Locations (current and predicted) of potential climate refugia.

6.2 Identifying Multi-Species Climate Refugia Along the California Coast to Support the 30x30 Initiative (University of California, Santa Cruz)

This project will use cutting-edge modeling techniques – including climate projections and species distribution models – to identify potential climate refugia for 28 ecologically and economically important marine species in California. Researchers will also develop a decision-support tool that integrates refugia maps with human use data, helping to support conservation decisions that minimize potential negative impacts on coastal communities. This work will help OPC strengthen biodiversity protections in existing 30x30 Conservation Areas and identify potential new 30x30 Conservation Areas across multiple coastal and marine ecosystems.

Relevant *Pathways to 30x30* Key Actions: 6.12 (Prioritize coastal habitats and degraded seascapes for restoration through science-based assessments); 10.10 (Further explore the role of California's MPA network in building climate resilience). Relevant *Pathways to 30x30 Appendix E* information needs: Characteristics of climate refugia for important species and species groups; Locations (current and predicted) of potential climate refugia.

6.3 Shifting Shores: Unlocking 30 Years of Long-Term Coastal Data (Greater Farallones Association)

This project will combine multiple datasets and tools – 30 years of photo-based shoreline records, Beach Watch survey data on birds, mammals, and human uses, and a new climate forecasting model – to predict how California's sandy beaches will be impacted by sea level rise and other climate-driven threats. This work will provide OPC with critical information needed to guide the conservation and restoration of California's sandy beaches, 75% of which could be lost by 2100 without direct action.

Relevant *Pathways to 30x30* Key Actions: 6.12 (Prioritize coastal habitats and degraded seascapes for restoration through science-based assessments); 6.17 (Implement restoration that allows for habitats to transgress inland as sea levels rise). Relevant *Pathways to 30x30 Appendix E* information needs: Predictive modeling to understand how habitats and species will shift as a result of climate change; Sea level rise impacts, including coastal erosion and sedimentation.

6.4 Estuaries at Large (University of California, Davis)

This project will explore opportunities to improve the conservation of California's bar-built estuaries, or estuaries that intermittently close at their mouths. These ecosystems are important both ecologically and culturally, but they are currently underrepresented in coastal 30x30 Conservation Areas. This work will use both remote sensing tools and field surveys to identify bar-built estuaries that support high levels of biodiversity, ultimately resulting in a prioritized list of estuary sites to prioritize for conservation.

Relevant *Pathways to 30x30* Key Actions: 6.12 (Prioritize coastal habitats and degraded seascapes for restoration through science-based assessments); 6.17 (Implement restoration that allows for habitats to transgress inland as sea levels rise); 10.7 (Parter with local recreation, hunting, and fishing groups to expand environmental monitoring in protected areas). Relevant *Pathways to 30x30 Appendix E* information needs: Improved understanding of land-sea connections; Sea-level rise impacts, including coastal erosion and sedimentation; Assessment of current biodiversity protections, including gap analyses.

Track 2: Accelerating Environmental Restoration and Stewardship

6.5 Predicting Restoration Success: Model-Guided Kelp Restoration in the Channel Islands (The Bay Foundation)

This project will restore degraded kelp forest at two sites up to 0.9 acre each in the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary: San Miguel Island and Santa Cruz Island. These islands have

experienced significant kelp loss in recent years, but they have not previously been targeted for restoration. In collaboration with local commercial fishermen, The Bay Foundation will cull kelp-eating purple sea urchins over approximately one acre of reef at each island, promoting kelp recovery in areas identified as having a high likelihood of restoration success. Key community partners include Commercial Fishermen of Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara City College, and the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians.

Relevant *Pathways to 30x30* Key Actions: 4.5 (Explore possible new measures and initiatives to address threats to biodiversity within National Marine Sanctuaries); 6.14 (Work with state and federal agencies to restore coastal wetlands, seagrass beds, and kelp forests to improve biodiversity, protect blue carbon stores, and build resilience to sea level rise, storm surge, and ocean acidification).

6.6 Accelerating Biodiversity and Climate Resilience through Ecological Restoration (Friends of the Dunes)

This project will restore coastal dunes at the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center, a 130+ acre property immediately adjacent to the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge, in Northern California. By removing non-native invasive plants, Friends of the Dunes will support the recovery of dune ecosystems, which support rich biodiversity including rare and threatened plants and over 40 species of pollinators. The project will include proactive outreach and engagement activities to educate coastal residents and visitors to the Nature Center about the importance of ecological restoration.

Relevant *Pathways to 30x30* Key Actions: 6.14 (Work with state and federal agencies to restore coastal wetlands, seagrass beds, and kelp forests to improve biodiversity, protect blue carbon stores, and build resilience to sea level rise, storm surge, and ocean acidification); 6.17 (Implement restoration that allows for habitats to transgress inland as sea levels rise); 6.18 (Manage invasive marine species in coastal waters).

6.7 Malibu Coastline Recovery and Restoration Project (Occidental College)

This project will support recovery planning for the Malibu coastline, which was devastated by the 2025 Palisades Fire. Following the fire, runoff from burned landscapes introduced nutrients, sediment, toxic metals, and plastics into coastal waters, including two MPAs – the Point Dume State Marine Reserve and Point Dume State Marine Conservation Area. Researchers will assess the extent of fire impacts to coastal and marine habitats inside and outside these MPAs via physical and biological assessments, identify tribal and community restoration priorities, and develop a plan that includes restoration alternatives for kelp, eelgrass, surfgrass, abalone, and other impacted species.

Relevant *Pathways to 30x30* Key Actions: 6.14 (Work with state and federal agencies to restore coastal wetlands, seagrass beds, and kelp forests to improve biodiversity, protect blue carbon stores, and build resilience to sea level rise, storm surge, and ocean acidification)

6.8 Restoring Eelgrass in the Channel Islands: Integrating Mooring Infrastructure, Partnerships, and Monitoring Techniques for Targeted Offshore Restoration Projects (National Marine Sanctuary Foundation)

This project will restore three degraded eelgrass meadows off Santa Cruz Island within the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary. These meadows are co-located with piers and vessel moorings, and over the past decade, have been damaged by vessel anchoring and mooring chains. The National Marine Sanctuary Foundation will work with local partners to replace or retrofit these outdated permanent moorings with new, low-impact designs, and will transplant eelgrass shoots into damaged areas following installation – improving the integrity of these sensitive habitats, enhancing biodiversity, and improving resilience by removing a major stressor.

Relevant *Pathways to 30x30* Key Actions: 4.5 (Explore possible new measures and initiatives to address threats to biodiversity within National Marine Sanctuaries); 6.14 (Work with state and federal agencies to restore coastal wetlands, seagrass beds, and kelp forests to improve biodiversity, protect blue carbon stores, and build resilience to sea level rise, storm surge, and ocean acidification).

6.9 Reconnecting a keystone species to California's kelp forest ecosystems through increasing white abalone production and outplanting (University of California, Davis/Bodega Marine Lab)

This project will support the reintroduction of white abalone, an endangered keystone species, to kelp forests off Southern California, including ecosystems within the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary and near MPAs off Catalina Island, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Building on previously successful efforts, researchers at the Bodega Marine Lab, in partnership with The Bay Foundation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Southwest Fisheries Science Center, will culture and outplant white abalone at restoration sites, closely monitor these sites to assess survival rates, and create a "spawning and culturing guide" to help build best practices for future white abalone restoration work. The project will also create internship opportunities for students at Santa Rosa Junior College and members of the Kashia Band of Pomo Indians.

Relevant *Pathways to 30x30* Key Actions: 4.5 (Explore possible new measures and initiatives to address threats to biodiversity within National Marine Sanctuaries); 6.13 (Expand programs that support stewardship and restoration workforce development); 6.14 (Work with state and federal agencies to restore coastal wetlands, seagrass beds, and kelp forests to improve biodiversity,

protect blue carbon stores, and build resilience to sea level rise, storm surge, and ocean acidification).

Contribution to 30x30 Priorities:

The projects recommended here are directly responsive to key actions identified in the California Natural Resources Agency's *Pathways to 30x30* strategy and priorities in OPC's *Roadmap to Achieving 30x30 in Coastal Waters*. Together, they represent a major step forward not only in guiding the designation of new 30x30 Conservation Areas, but also ensuring the active stewardship and restoration of these areas – and California's unique coastal and marine biodiversity more broadly – for the benefit of both people and nature.

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:

The recommended suite of projects will support multiple equity and environmental justice benefits, including: mentorship for undergraduate and graduate students, with the goal of increasing diversity and retention in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields; supporting research relationships with minority-serving institutions; supporting meaningful inclusion of local communities in research and restoration efforts; investment in communities impacted by biodiversity loss; and supporting improved access to coastal and marine resources and ecosystem services.

Project Timeline:

July 2026 - July 2028

Project Financing:

Staff recommends that the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) authorize encumbrance of up to $6,048,000 to California Sea Grant for projects selected through a competitive solicitation to advance 30x30 in coastal waters.

Ocean Protection Council	**$6,048,000**
6.1 The Nature Conservancy	$988,000
6.2 The University of California, Santa Cruz	$994,000
6.3 The Greater Farallones Association	$502,000

6.4 The University of California, Davis	$507,000
6.5 The Bay Foundation	$707,000
6.6 The Friends of the Dunes	$548,000
6.7 Occidental College	$367,000
6.8 The National Marine Sanctuary Foundation	$844,000
6.9 The University of California, Davis	$591,000
TOTAL	**$6,048,000**

The anticipated source of funds 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. 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 projects support the goals of Proposition 68, Chapter 9 to restore and protect marine wildlife and healthy ocean and coastal ecosystems.

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.
- 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.

Compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA):

Track 1: Action-Oriented Science

The proposed projects 6.1 through 6.4 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. If a project were determined to be a 'legal project' under CEQA, the proposed projects are 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.

Track 2: Accelerating Environmental Restoration and Stewardship

Proposed projects 6.5 and 6.9 are categorically exempt from review under CEQA pursuant 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15333 because the projects qualify as small habitat restoration projects not exceeding five acres in size to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife.

Proposed project 6.6 has addressed CEQA by preparing a Negative Declaration. OPC staff will confirm all relevant CEQA documentation is complete and filed with the Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI) State Clearinghouse prior to the project start date.

Proposed project 6.7 is not a 'legal project' that triggers CEQA pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21068 and Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, section 15378. If the project 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 project involves 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. The proposed project is additionally statutorily exempt from review under CEQA pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations section 15262 as a feasibility and planning study.

Proposed project 6.8 is categorically exempt from review under CEQA pursuant 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15304 because the project qualifies as minor alterations to the condition of water within existing officially designated wildlife management areas, which is intended to result in the improvement of habitat for fish and wildlife resources.