



Staff Recommendation

March 23, 2026

Item 7

Action Item:

Consideration and Approval of Disbursement of Funds to Advance Adaptive Management of the Marine Protected Area Network

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Recommended Action: Authorization to disburse up to \$2,500,000 to advance management of California’s Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network through the following projects:

7.1 Up to \$2,300,000 to the Regents of the University of California San Diego (UCSD)/California Sea Grant (CASG) to administer a Request for Proposals (RFP) for social science and other priority monitoring needs of the MPA Network

7.2 Up to \$200,000 to the University of California Santa Barbara to expand SeaSketch California’s platform for visualizing long-term MPA monitoring data

Location: Statewide

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives: Goal 2: Maximize Community Benefits and Stewardship; Objective 2.2: Expand Engagement with underserved communities; Goal 3: Safeguard Coastal and Marine Biodiversity; Objective 3.2: Strengthen the performance and durability of California’s Marine Protected Area Network.

Exhibit:

Exhibit A: [Recommendations for Social Science Research and Monitoring of the California Marine Protected Area Network](#)

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits: Healthy marine ecosystems translate directly to economic, cultural, and health benefits for coastal communities. Many of California’s MPAs are located within or near communities burdened by environmental and social injustice. By directly engaging underserved communities in coast and ocean stewardship and ensuring equity concerns, these projects will address the following priorities in OPC’s Equity Plan: Goal 1 (Establish

and implement more equitable and sustainable community engagement and funding); Goal 3 (Lead equitable ocean and coastal policymaking in California); and Goal 4 (Intentional investments in research and monitoring that value and integrate broader knowledge sources).

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 the Budget Act of 2025 which included a \$2.5 million General Fund appropriation for MPA monitoring;
3. The proposed projects are consistent with the adopted State Water Resources Control Board’s Water Quality Control Policy on the Use of Coastal and Estuarine Waters for Power Plant Cooling; and
4. The proposed projects are not ‘legal projects’ that trigger the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Public Resources Code section, 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 \$2,500,000 to advance adaptive management of California’s Marine Protected Area Network (MPA) through the following projects:

- Up to \$2,300,000 to the Regents of the University of California San Diego (UCSD)/California Sea Grant (CASG) administer a Request For Proposals (RFP) for social science and other monitoring needs of the MPA Network
- Up to \$200,000 to the University of California Santa Barbara to expand SeaSketch California’s platform for visualizing long-term MPA monitoring data

This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, the grantees 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 approves the disbursement of \$2,500,000 to fund two projects for the purpose of advancing the recommendations of the MPA Decadal Management Review (DMR) and supporting adaptive management of the MPA Network: up to \$2,300,000 to the Regents of the University of California San Diego (UCSD)/California Sea Grant (CASG) to advance social science monitoring, and other monitoring as needed, of the MPA Network; and up to \$200,000 for the University of California Santa Barbara to expand SeaSketch California’s public platform for visualizing long-term MPA monitoring data.

Completed in 2023, the first-ever [Decadal Management Review](#) of the MPA Network [included 28 priority recommendations](#) to advance adaptive management of the Network. The funds to California Sea Grant will help advance DMR recommendation #12 (Invest in improving understanding of the human dimensions of MPAs and develop a human dimensions working group and research agenda) by supporting an RFP process for collecting initial baseline assessments of social science (or “the human dimensions”) of the Network, and other priority monitoring as needed. The focal areas of these assessments will be based on the recently released [recommendations of the MPA Social Science Working Group](#) (Exhibit A) convened by Ocean Science Trust.

The second investment to University of California Santa Barbara will build from an existing [OPC-funded project](#) that developed [SeaSketch California](#) platform to visualize the 2023 MPA petitions submitted by the public to the California Fish and Game Commission. This project will add the MPA Network’s long-term ecological monitoring data to the SeaSketch platform. When completed, it will be the first-ever public tool specifically dedicated to California’s MPA Network to explore and interact with the robust datasets collected across the Network’s five habitats. The combined investment between these two projects will improve understanding of the basic social dimensions of the MPA Network and provide the public with a tool to explore the breadth and scope of the Network’s long-term ecological monitoring data.

Project Summary:

Background:

MPA Monitoring: Since 2017, OPC has invested more than \$60 million in MPA management to improve the long-term state of science and understanding of how the MPA Network is performing

with respect to the goals of the [Marine Life Protection Act \(MLPA\)](#).^{1,2,3,4} This funding has been distributed across the four core management pillars of the Network: 1) Outreach and Education; 2) Policy and Permitting; 3) Enforcement and Compliance; and 4) Research and Monitoring. Progress under each of these pillars was reflected in the 2023 [MPA Decadal Management Review \(DMR\)](#), as well as in a series of [technical monitoring reports](#), which demonstrated that MPAs are helping to conserve California’s unique coastal and marine biodiversity.

As part of the DMR process, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and OPC developed a [prioritized list of twenty eight adaptive management recommendations](#) that was informed by public comment and tribal consultation. Major findings of the DMR included the importance of collecting robust social and social-ecological data related to MPA Network performance, and the need to diversify participation in MPA research and monitoring. Integrating social science into the management of the MPA Network helps managers understand how coastal communities use, value, and depend on marine resources, ensuring management reflects real-world social conditions. Integrating social science into MPA monitoring helps managers understand how coastal communities use, value, and depend on marine resources, ensuring management reflects real-world social conditions. This information supports adaptive management by identifying opportunities to improve transparency, compliance, and shared stewardship, which strengthens conservation outcomes. It also enables the MPA Network to balance ecological goals with social and economic well-being over time, advancing the objectives of the Marine Life Protection Act.

To that end, the investment recommended here is informed by an MPA Social Science Working Group (DMR Recommendation #12: Invest in improving understanding of the human dimensions of MPAs and develop a human dimensions working group and research agenda), which was convened from June 2025 to February 2026 and led by the California Ocean Science Trust (OST). This group of 16 social science experts, including social scientists affiliated with California Native American tribes, assessed existing data, identified information needs, and developed [recommendations](#) (Exhibit A) that provide a science-based framework to monitor, study, and evaluate the “human dimensions” of California’s MPA Network.

In tandem with this working group, OPC is currently engaged with agency and external partners to co-develop a Community Science Strategy, consistent with DMR Recommendation #14: Develop a

1 [OPC 2019 staff recommendation for initial MPA long-term monitoring funding](#)

2 [OPC 2019 staff recommendation for initial monitoring and assessment of estuarine MPAs](#)

3 [OPC 2022 staff recommendation for long-term monitoring of MPA habitats in 2023](#)

4 [OPC 2023 staff recommendation for long-term monitoring of MPA habitats in 2024-2026](#)

comprehensive community science strategy for MPAs and better utilize community science to supplement core monitoring programs. This Strategy will create opportunities for coordination, emphasize the specific benefits of community science, and articulates pathways to integrate community science with other forms of MPA monitoring. OPC will seek public comment and invite tribal consultation on social science and monitoring priorities, including on the forthcoming Strategy and recommendations provided in the MPA Social Sciences Working Group report (Exhibit A), this Spring to inform future monitoring of the Network.

Data Visualization: In response to DMR Recommendation #4 (Apply what is learned from the first Decadal Management Review to support proposed changes to the MPA Network and Management Program), the California Fish and Game Commission released a public call for petitions to propose changes to the Network in December 2023. Twenty petitions for proposed changes to the MPA Network were received in December 2023. OPC funded⁵ the SeaSketch Lab at the University of Santa Barbara’s National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis to digitize the MPA petitions, synthesize data regarding habitat size and spacing, and create a report feature of the public platform that is downloadable and outlines habitat information. [SeaSketch California](#) is an updated version of MarineMap, a mapping tool utilized in the original MPA Network design process, and has been used by the public to understand and assess the Network and the proposed changes being considered by the California Fish and Game Commission.

Together, these efforts further MLPA Goals 2 (Sustain, conserve, and protect marine life populations and help rebuild depleted species) and 3 (Protect marine ecosystems in ways that support public access, learning, and enjoyment), advance DMR Recommendations, and improve adaptive MPA management by providing the data needed to understand social and ecological effects of the Network.

Project Summaries:

7.1 Advancing social science and other priority monitoring needs of the MPA Network through a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP)

Effective management of California’s MPA Network requires consistent, ongoing, and adaptive monitoring of the social and ecological systems to evaluate the status, health, and benefits of the Network. A competitive solicitation, administered by California Sea Grant, will be informed by recommendations from the recent [MPA Social Science Working Group report](#) (Exhibit A), specifically to conduct two-year baseline social science assessments of the MPA Network, and

⁵ [OPC 2024 staff recommendation for funding SeaSketch](#) data visualization.

advance other monitoring priorities as needed. Selected projects are anticipated to advance monitoring objectives within the six cornerstones identified by the Working Group:

1. **MPA Governance** - The norms, institutions, power dynamics, and decision-making processes that shape how diverse actors participate in and are affected by MPA management, influencing adaptive capacity and driving outcomes.
2. **Tribal Stewardship and Guardianship** - Tribal-led training, stewardship, research, and monitoring of MPAs, and the state’s accountability in support of these actions.
3. **Behavior and Usage** - Behavior in, and use of MPAs and connected coastal areas by individuals, social groups, and Tribes; and factors that contribute to or constrain access.
4. **Cognitive and Affective Factors** - Past and present knowledge of attitudes, perceptions, and values towards MPAs, including the educational efforts and social factors that influence them.
5. **Social Outcomes and Tradeoffs** - Social outcomes and influencing factors, and the distribution of costs and benefits among individuals, social groups, and Tribes.
6. **Social-Ecological Linkages** - Relationships among social factors, outcomes, and their influencing factors, and resulting impacts on the ecological dimensions of MPAs, as well as the influence of ecosystem dynamics and changes on human behavior and well-being.

By integrating social science into the MPA Network’s monitoring program, California can more effectively manage the inextricable link between coastal communities and the marine environment. This integration can foster improved compliance, thereby preserving the environment, as well as increase transparency and the promotion of a shared stewardship approach among ocean users. Ultimately, these cornerstones provide a roadmap to ensure the MPA protects both the natural biodiversity and the rich cultural heritage of California’s coast for generations to come.

7.2 Expanding the SeaSketch platform to include MPA long-term ecological data

Public, interactive tools that visualize the MPA Network’s long-term ecological monitoring data will lead to a better understanding of the breadth, scope, and complexity of the data collected across habitats and locations for over a decade. This project would expand work done by the SeaSketch Lab at the University of Santa Barbara’s National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis to include the MPA Network monitoring datasets on the existing [SeaSketch California](#) platform. Ultimately, this work will expand on an existing data visualization tool developed by SeaSketch that is currently limited to analyzing public petitions received by the Fish and Game Commission, and will lead to a public tool (anticipated in December 2026) that allows people to explore the data collected across the MPA Network (e.g., fish, kelp, and birds) through time. Specifically, SeaSketch California will curate spatial data from existing monitoring initiatives hosted on [Data One](#) and other state sites like CDFW’s MPA Management program. In close coordination with OPC

and CDFW, this project will identify suitable monitoring data to standardize and display in an easy-to-understand format on the SeaSketch California platform. New data visualization features will include monitoring sites and multiple data types (i.e. species, habitats) and years. Users will be able to select an attribute (e.g., fish) and year (e.g., 2022) to visualize on the SeaSketch California Map.

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:

Adaptive management and monitoring of the MPA Network are essential to ensure that the Network functions effectively to protect biodiversity and marine habitats and thereby improves overall ecosystem health. Healthy marine ecosystems translate directly to economic, cultural, and health benefits for coastal communities. Many of California’s MPAs are located within or near communities burdened by environmental and social injustice. Moreover, many of the habitats contained within MPAs provide needed ecological benefits that in turn improve the well-being of nearby human communities. For example, rocky intertidal habitats provide accessible opportunities for the public to observe marine life, protect against shoreline erosion, and harbor harvested species.

Implementing the MPA Decadal Management Review recommendations, including the development of human dimensions-centered research and monitoring and diversifying monitoring through supporting community science, will specifically advance several key objectives of [OPC’s Equity Plan](#). By directly engaging underrepresented communities in coast and ocean stewardship and management of the Network through monitoring and data visualization, these projects will address the following priorities: Goal 1 (Establish and implement more equitable and sustainable community engagement and funding); Goal 3 (Lead equitable ocean and coastal policymaking in California); and Goal 4 (Intentional investments in research and monitoring that value and integrate broader knowledge sources).

About the Grantee:

MPA Monitoring: California Sea Grant has an established, highly respected process for evaluating, prioritizing, and administering research grants related to coastal and ocean resources and has a proven track record of supporting state agencies’ research efforts. California Sea Grant is experienced at managing large contracts and grants, has excellent knowledge of and familiarity with the state’s scientific community, and has successfully managed other solicitation and award efforts on behalf of OPC, including OPC’s previous investments in long-term MPA monitoring.

Data Visualization: Principal Investigators (PIs) at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) have extensive experience with advancing California’s MPA Network and monitoring priorities, familiarity with existing data streams, and rigorous theoretical grounding in quantitative

approaches for MPA evaluation. PIs at UCSB’s National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis are the original developers of the [SeaSketch](#) (originally MarineMap) platform, which has been leveraged throughout the design, implementation, evaluation, and modification of the California MPA Network.

Project Timeline:

MPA Monitoring: Projects will run for two years. Analysis, reporting, and data dissemination to be provided by 2029.

Data Visualization: The project expansion will take place over the next 10 months, with final deliverables in December 2026.

Project Financing:

Staff recommends that the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) authorize encumbrance of up to \$2,500,000 to the Regents of the University of California San Diego (UCSD)/California Sea Grant (CASG) to advance monitoring of the MPA Network. Staff additionally recommend authorization of up to \$200,000 to the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) to expand SeaSketch’s platform to provide a public, interactive tool for visualizing long-term MPA monitoring data.

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| Ocean Protection Council | \$2,500,000 |
| 7.1 Regents of the University of California San Diego / California Sea Grant to advance social science and other priority monitoring needs of the MPA Network through a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) | \$2,300,000 |
| 7.2 University of California Santa Barbara to expand the SeaSketch platform to include MPA long-term ecological monitoring | \$200,000 |
| TOTAL | \$2,500,000 |

The anticipated source of funds for the competitive solicitation to advance monitoring of the MPA Network will be disbursed from the MPA General Fund appropriation (Fiscal Year 2025-26) which included \$2.5 million to support MPA monitoring. The monitoring and analysis projects are

consistent with the goals of the state’s MPA monitoring program by continuing monitoring efforts and subsequent data analyses.

The anticipated source of funds for the data visualization platform will be disbursed from OPC’s Once-Through Cooling Interim Mitigation Program Fund (Fiscal Year 2024/2025) that are deposited into the Ocean Protection Trust Fund. This program directs up to \$6.5 million in mitigation payments annually to support increases in marine life associated with MPAs in the geographic region of coastal power plants using once-through cooling technology, including advancing the priorities of the MPA management program and marine restoration. The proposed project advances management of the Network by improving analysis of foundational monitoring data to understand the status and impacts of the Network, and inform ongoing adaptive management to support the performance of the Network.

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 the management of fisheries and/or foster sustainable fisheries.
- 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.
- 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 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 the project were determined to be a ‘legal project’ under CEQA, it is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15306 because the project involves only data collection, research and resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.