



Informational Item

June 16, 2026

Item 5a

Information Item:
Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary

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Location: Central Coast

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives: Goal 2: Maximize Community Benefits and Stewardship, Objective 2.1: Strengthen Partnerships with California Native American tribes; Goal 3: Safeguard Coastal and Marine Biodiversity, Objective 3.1: Conserve 30% of California’s Coastal Waters by 2030

Exhibits:

Exhibit A: Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary – Year One and Moving Forward

Executive Summary:

The [Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary](#) (CHNMS) was designated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in November 2024. CHNMS is the first new National Marine Sanctuary in California’s coastal waters in over thirty years, and the first in the United States to be nominated by California Native American tribes. CHNMS protects more than 191,000 acres – just under 6% of California’s coastal waters – off the central coast from Cambria to Santa Barbara, in an area that supports high biodiversity and holds tremendous cultural significance to local Chumash tribes.

The Sanctuary’s focus on co-stewardship and its tribally-driven Management Plan make it a flagship example of a Tribal Stewardship Area, defined in OPC’s [Roadmap to Achieving 30x30 in California’s Coastal Waters](#) as an area that is formally and collaboratively managed, stewarded, and cared for with California Native American tribes in ways that achieve significant biodiversity benefits. In 2025, the State recognized CHNMS as a 30x30 Conservation Area.

This information item is intended to summarize progress made in the first year and a half since CHNMS’s designation, with a particular focus on the ways in which CHNMS is delivering significant biodiversity benefits. Major accomplishments highlighted in this information item include:

Building partnerships for collaborative co-stewardship

- Establishment of a CHNMS Sanctuary Advisory Council to provide a public forum for consultation and deliberation on issues affecting the waters within the sanctuary
- Convening of an Intergovernmental Policy Council as a dedicated venue for co-management between federal, state, and federally recognized tribal governments
- Development of close working relationships with key federal and state agencies that hold jurisdiction, authority, or mandates related to the coast and ocean within CHNMS boundaries

Tribally-led research, monitoring, and resource protection

- Development of a comprehensive permitting system to evaluate the biodiversity impacts of various types of proposed activities within Sanctuary waters on a case-by-case basis
- Connection with coastal and marine research and monitoring programs in the central coast to help build a shared understanding of baseline conditions within CHNMS, and new work to develop biocultural indicators for tracking Sanctuary health
- Formation of a dedicated Research Activities Panel (RAP) to help shape the future of research and monitoring within the Sanctuary

Education, outreach, and community engagement

- Hosting of 17 individual outreach events reaching more than 1,600 people, including an inaugural “Get Into Your Sanctuary” event
- New programs to help expand community science within CHNMS and re-engage Chumash communities with traditional practices

These accomplishments are discussed in detail below and in Exhibit A (Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary – Year One and Moving Forward).

Moving forward, OPC will continue meaningful engagement with CHNMS leadership, staff, and partners, especially tribal partners, to ensure the Sanctuary protects the rich natural and cultural heritage within its boundaries and provides benefits for people and nature that are commensurate with the State’s expectations for a 30x30 Conservation Area.

Background

The [Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary](#) (CHNMS) was designated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in November 2024. CHNMS is the first new National Marine Sanctuary in California’s coastal waters in over thirty years, and the first in the United States to be nominated by California Native American tribes. One of the largest sanctuaries in the entire National Marine Sanctuary system, CHNMS protects more than 4,500 square miles or 191,000 acres – just under 6% of California’s coastal waters – off the central coast from Cambria to Santa Barbara, in a critical biogeographic transition zone where temperate waters from the north meet warmer waters from the south. Wind and currents drive significant upwelling in this region, bringing nutrient-rich waters to the surface and supporting a diversity of invertebrates, fishes, seabirds, and marine mammals. A wide variety of ecosystems can be found within the Sanctuary’s boundaries, from sandy beaches and estuaries to kelp forests and deep rocky reefs, as well as important geologic features such as Rodriguez Seamount, Santa Lucia Bank, and Arguello Canyon.

CHNMS is also an area of high biocultural significance, which reflects the deep interconnectedness of people and nature. The coast and ocean in this region have been sacred to local Native American tribes, including Chumash peoples, since time immemorial. For tens of thousands of years, the Chumash tended coastal and marine ecosystems along the central coast with care and reciprocity and built a thriving, vibrant, ocean-going culture. Despite a history of genocide and oppression following multiple waves of colonization in what is now known as California, Chumash tribes have never ceded their inherent rights and obligations to manage coastal and marine resources sustainably and in accordance with traditional lifeways. The designation of CHNMS was a historic example of this tradition of stewardship, coming after decades of local advocacy spearheaded by the Northern Chumash Tribal Council. Now, CHNMS will help protect not only the region’s unparalleled biodiversity, but also ancient submerged village sites and other important cultural resources.

CHNMS was designated with explicit recognition of cultural, spiritual, and traditional significance of the area to Chumash tribes, and a commitment to meaningful collaborative co-stewardship of the Sanctuary by federal, state, and tribal governments. CHNMS’s [Final Management Plan](#) includes an explicit and binding framework for co-stewardship as well as twelve individual Action Plans that cover topics such as indigenous cultural heritage, climate change, water quality, wildlife disturbance, research and monitoring, and resource protection. The Sanctuary’s focus on co-stewardship and its tribally-driven Management Plan make it a flagship example of a Tribal Stewardship Area, defined in OPC’s [Roadmap to Achieving 30x30 in California's Coastal Waters](#) as an area that is formally and collaboratively managed, stewarded, and cared for with California Native American tribes in ways that achieve significant biodiversity benefits. For these reasons, [CHNMS was recognized as a 30x30 Conservation Area by the State in 2025](#), bringing the total area

of California’s coastal waters conserved to 21.9% – well within reach of the state’s goal to conserve 30% of its coastal waters by 2030.

It is important to note that Sanctuary designation *by itself* is not sufficient to meet the State’s strong definition of a 30x30 Conservation Area, as most National Marine Sanctuaries do not provide sufficient protection from extractive activities to result in meaningful biodiversity benefit. In fact, the State does not currently recognize any other Sanctuaries in California’s coastal waters as 30x30 Conservation Areas. However, CHNMS’s management plan does provide a meaningful and durable framework for tribally-led long-term conservation and care of this special place. This is important as emerging research at the global scale on the effectiveness of protected and conserved areas is increasingly focusing not only on the exclusion of activities that may reduce biodiversity, but also on the promotion of activities that support biodiversity, such as stewardship, sustainable cultural and spiritual practices, research and monitoring, and restoration, especially when these activities are led by indigenous peoples. As detailed in the following sections and Exhibit A, many of these types of activities are planned or already underway within CHNMS.

Building Partnerships for Collaborative Co-Stewardship

In the year and a half since Sanctuary designation, federal, state, and tribal leaders have begun working together to operationalize the framework for collaborative co-stewardship described in the CHNMS Management Plan. Most notably, this has included the establishment of both a Sanctuary Advisory Council and an Intergovernmental Policy Council. OPC leadership and staff are members of both of these important bodies.

Sanctuary Advisory Council

The [CHNMS Sanctuary Advisory Council](#) (SAC) is a community-based body that provides a public forum for consultation and deliberation on issues affecting the waters within the sanctuary. SAC members contribute valuable advice and expertise to inform management decisions, and their public meetings provide a community forum for learning and discussion about the Sanctuary. Convened at the end of 2025, the CHNMS SAC is composed of [18 voting members and 15 alternates](#) that represent various sectors including research, conservation, energy and telecommunications, and fishing, as well as tribal, state, and local government. Critically, the CHNMS SAC is unique in that it includes dedicated Indigenous Cultural Knowledge seats, providing tribes with an opportunity to bring Traditional Knowledges and tribal science to bear on issues related to the Sanctuary. Overall, multiple Chumash tribes – the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, the yak tit^ʷu tit^ʷu yak tiłhini Northern Chumash Tribe, the Coastal Band of the Chumash Nation, and the Barbareño Band of Chumash Indians – are represented across the CHNMS SAC, providing both federally recognized and non-federally recognized tribes with a role in decision-

making and honoring the deep history of stewardship shared by all Chumash tribes with a connection to Sanctuary waters. The SAC has held several productive meetings since its establishment, including a recent in-person gathering hosted by the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians.

Intergovernmental Policy Council

The Intergovernmental Policy Council (IPC) is a forum for co-management between federal, state, and federally recognized tribal governments. Modeled after a similar advisory body at the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary in Washington, the IPC will bring together multiple governments to set overarching policy direction for CHNMS, focused on both biodiversity and cultural heritage. The IPC will help strengthen collaboration at the government-to-government level and provide an important venue for knowledge exchange and resource sharing. The IPC is currently in the process of finalizing its charter, which outlines key details such as membership, responsibilities, meetings and operations, and conflict resolution.

Federal and State Agency Partnerships

Beyond the SAC and the IPC, CHNMS leadership and staff have also begun establishing close working relationships with key federal and state agencies that hold jurisdiction, authority, or mandates related to the coast and ocean within CHNMS boundaries, such as the U.S. Coast Guard, NOAA Fisheries, and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. These partnerships will be critical to ensuring the long-term durability of the Sanctuary and providing effective support for tribally-led stewardship.

Tribally-Led Research, Monitoring, and Resource Protection

In the past year and a half, Sanctuary leadership, staff, and partners have launched several key initiatives related to research, monitoring, and resource protection, in alignment with multiple Action Plans in the CHNMS Management Plan and in support of biodiversity conservation. Much of this work is being led by tribes.

Permitting System

A primary responsibility of National Marine Sanctuaries is to protect Sanctuary resources while supporting sustainable ocean use and access. CHNMS regulations, which prohibit harmful activities such as oil and gas development, seafloor disturbance, or discharge that could impair water quality, are intended to provide comprehensive, ecosystem-level protection. To support this objective, CHNMS staff has developed a robust permitting system to evaluate the biodiversity impacts of various types of proposed activities within Sanctuary waters on a case-by-case basis.

Several permits for projects that support biodiversity have already been issued, including permits for white shark research and monitoring as well as red abalone restoration at Refugio State Beach, which was impacted by a large oil spill in 2015.

Baseline Monitoring and Biocultural Indicators

CHNMS scientists have begun connecting with coastal and marine research and monitoring programs in the central coast region to help build a shared understanding of baseline conditions within CHNMS, with a specific focus on seafloor mapping, physical oceanographic conditions, and biodiversity. For example, researchers at the UCSB Bren School of Environmental Science and Management are [currently compiling several long-term datasets to provide information related to CHNMS’s physical and biological characteristics and human use patterns](#), with results anticipated in summer 2026. Additionally, [members of the Northern Chumash Tribal Council are collaborating with researchers from Stanford University to collect environmental DNA from traditional Chumash tomols](#), which will help identify biodiversity “hotspots” within CHNMS. Finally, CHNMS interns have started mapping blue carbon habitats within CHNMS using remote sensing data.

To support continued monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management of CHNMS, OPC is recommending funding to support the development of biocultural indicators for the Sanctuary (see [Item 5b](#)). This project will bring together CHNMS scientists and multiple Chumash tribes to develop a suite of indicators, rooted in Traditional Knowledges, that will inform Sanctuary monitoring, research, and stewardship activities moving forward.

Research Activities Panel

CHNMS is currently in the process of forming a dedicated Research Activities Panel (RAP) to help shape the future of research and monitoring within the Sanctuary. Unlike other Sanctuaries’ RAPs, this group will aim to weave together Traditional Knowledges and non-indigenous or “western” science, focused on building relationships, establishing collective priorities, and developing guidelines and protocols for conducting research within CHNMS in a manner that meaningfully engages Chumash tribes and respects tribal sovereignty, including data sovereignty. The RAP’s work is intended to serve as a model for how National Marine Sanctuaries can respectfully collaborate with tribes and indigenous peoples; more than half of the RAP is composed of Chumash tribal members.

Education, Outreach, and Community Engagement

The ability of CHNMS to deliver meaningful biodiversity benefits depends heavily on public awareness, understanding, and support for the Sanctuary and its management programs. Since Sanctuary designation, CHNMS staff and partners have made significant strides toward

implementing effective outreach, education, and community engagement programs, with the goal of encouraging appreciation and awareness of CHNMS, promoting access to CHNMS’s coastline and waters, and fostering stewardship.

Outreach Events

In 2025, CHNMS hosted and participated in 17 individual outreach events, reaching more than 1,600 people. This included an inaugural “Get Into Your Sanctuary” event, which is an annual celebration hosted by NOAA to elevate Sanctuaries as destinations for sustainable recreation. The first such event for CHNMS was hosted at Pismo Beach Pier and, in keeping with the Sanctuary’s focus on local stewardship, included a beach cleanup event, where participants gathered more than 20 pounds of trash from Pismo Beach.

Community Science and Cultural Ambassadors

Funding from the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation is supporting expansion of the Long-term Monitoring Program and Experiential Training for Students (LiMPETS) program in CHNMS. LiMPETS is a long-running and iconic community science initiative that enables students and local volunteer groups to monitor the health of coastal ecosystems within California’s National Marine Sanctuaries. The CHNMS LiMPETS program will establish new intertidal and sandy beach monitoring sites, develop curriculum specific to this unique Sanctuary, and engage local students grade six and older through field trips. Additional funding from the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation will support Chumash community members in becoming trained as traditional *tomol* navigators and Cultural Ambassadors, sharing Chumash maritime heritage and promoting ocean stewardship.

Looking Ahead

Establishing a new National Marine Sanctuary takes time, and as the only Sanctuary in California’s coastal waters that is collaboratively co-stewarded by tribes, CHNMS requires particular thoughtfulness, care, and intentionality. For this new and groundbreaking Sanctuary to be successful, all partners involved in its management must take time to develop relationships, build a foundation of mutual respect, and “move at the speed of trust.”

However, even with this need for slow and deliberate movement, CHNMS has made remarkable strides toward many of the goals in its Management Plan in the first year and a half since its designation. CHNMS, Chumash tribes, and state partners have built the architecture for meaningful, collaborative co-stewardship of the Sanctuary. Research, monitoring, and resource protection activities, many of them tribally-led, are laying the groundwork for biodiversity protection within the Sanctuary. Education and outreach activities are engaging local

communities, fostering stewardship, and helping promote access to the coast and ocean within CHNMS.

This work is just getting under way. Moving forward, top priorities for the next three to five years include:

- Accelerating the work of the Research Activities Panel and developing a vision for research and monitoring in CHNMS into the future
- Developing biocultural indicators to help track the health of the Sanctuary and guide adaptive management
- Further exploring non-regulatory management activities that address water quality and wildlife disturbance issues
- Enhancing public visibility and presence
- Developing outreach materials, such as signs and posters, in collaboration with tribes
- Establishing a CHNMS volunteer program

Moving forward, OPC will continue meaningful engagement with CHNMS leadership, staff, and partners, especially tribal partners, to ensure the Sanctuary protects the rich natural and cultural heritage within its boundaries and provides benefits for people and nature that are commensurate with the State's expectations for a 30x30 Conservation Area.