Staff Recommendation
June 16, 2026

Item 6c

Action Item:
Consideration and Approval to Disburse Funds for a Pilot Statewide Plastics Monitoring Program

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Recommended Action: Authorization to disburse up to $2,500,000 to develop and implement a pilot statewide plastics monitoring program to advance understanding of the extent of plastic pollution across the state.

Location: Statewide

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives: Goal 3: Safeguard Coastal and Marine Biodiversity; Objective 3.4: Protect and improve coastal and marine water quality; Target 3.4.5: Advance coordinated state investments to effectively reduce plastic and microplastic pollution consistent with the existing Statewide Microplastics Strategy and California Ocean Litter Strategy, including projects to monitor and prevent pollution, through the California Plastic Pollution Mitigation Fund established under SB 54 (Allen, 2022).

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:

Plastic pollution can disproportionately impact communities already burdened by environmental and social inequities due to greater exposure from nearby pollution sources. California Native American tribes have extensive experience managing and monitoring lands and waters, including microplastics monitoring, and their inclusion through tribal government-led programs is critical to supporting stewardship of ancestral lands, waters, and cultural resources impacted by plastics. Direct engagement with tribal governments through government-to-government consultation will help ensure monitoring reflects tribal and local priorities, incorporates diverse knowledge systems, and supports a more inclusive and effective statewide approach. Consultation for both the pilot and future statewide plastics monitoring programs will begin in June 2026.

Exhibits:

Exhibit A: Statewide Plastics Monitoring Strategy and Planning Framework

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 2024, which included a $27 million Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) appropriation to OPC for ocean protection and resilience to climate change; and
3. The proposed 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 develop and implement a pilot statewide plastics monitoring program to advance understanding of the extent of plastic pollution across the state. External grantee(s) will be identified in coordination with the State Water Resources Control Board.

This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, 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 recommend the OPC approve the disbursement of up to $2,500,000 to support the development and implementation of a pilot plastics monitoring program, focused on microplastics. OPC has established a strong foundation for addressing plastic pollution through statewide strategies and investments in research and standardized monitoring. This project advances that work by implementing a pilot microplastics monitoring program, guided by the Statewide Plastics Monitoring Strategy and Planning Framework (Plastics Monitoring Strategy;

Exhibit A), to generate consistent, actionable data on microplastic contamination in California's aquatic environments. The project intends to leverage the Stream Pollution Trends Monitoring Program (SPoT), within the State Water Resource Control Board's (SWRCB) Surface Water Ambient Monitoring Program (SWAMP), to integrate microplastics sampling into an existing statewide monitoring framework that samples along a gradient of land uses, including urban, agricultural, and undeveloped watersheds.

Informed by an ongoing technical advisory committee of agency staff and scientific experts, government-to-government consultation with California Native American tribes, and engagement with the public through the Water Quality Monitoring Council, the pilot is intended to fill critical geographic and environmental media gaps in statewide microplastics data by establishing baseline concentrations and characterizing microplastics, as well as evaluating their relationship to watershed land use. Filling these gaps will help to provide actionable information to support management and policy decisions and help evaluate existing and emerging efforts to reduce plastic pollution by establishing a consistent reference point for comparison over time. Ultimately, findings will generate lessons learned that directly inform refinement and expansion of monitoring design, develop foundational state tools and protocols, and guide development of a scalable comprehensive statewide plastics monitoring program.

Background:

OPC has a long-standing leadership role and commitment to protecting ocean health through addressing ocean litter and plastic pollution. This includes the adoption of a Council resolution entitled "Reducing and Preventing Ocean Debris" in 2007, subsequent publication of an Implementation Strategy, and an updated California Ocean Litter Prevention Strategy: Addressing Marine Debris from Source to Sea (California Ocean Litter Strategy) in 2018. In 2022, the Council approved the advance research priorities of the Statewide Microplastics Strategy required to be developed by OPC in collaboration with specified state agencies by Public Resources Code section 35635 (added by Senate Bill No. 1263, Reg. Session 2017-2018).

Advancing this work, in 2023, the Council approved disbursement of funds to support microplastics sample collection method evaluation and standardization, as well as the development of a plastics monitoring plan. The Statewide Plastics Monitoring Strategy and Planning Framework (Exhibit A) describes opportunities to leverage these standardized methods, where appropriate, and provides contextual information and guidance for implementing a statewide plastics monitoring program.

The Plastics Monitoring Strategy recommends that statewide monitoring generate consistent, actionable data on plastic contamination in aquatic environments for water quality managers, partner agencies, California Native American tribes, the scientific community, non-governmental

organizations, community-based organizations, and the public. The Strategy recommends gathering plastics monitoring data to establish baseline conditions and track temporal trends in plastic contamination across state waters; evaluate impacts on human health, ecosystem health, and water quality; inform management actions to reduce those impacts; and track the State's progress in mitigating plastic pollution. These data will support identification of dominant plastic sources and pathways, help prioritize the most effective management and mitigation actions, indicate where contamination levels may pose risks warranting regulatory response, and evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions.

Using available standardized monitoring methods, the best available science, and informed by the Plastics Monitoring Strategy and technical advisors, next steps to advance statewide plastics monitoring include the design and implementation of a pilot microplastics monitoring program that leverages existing monitoring efforts, developing appropriate data management infrastructure, and government-to-government tribal consultation to ensure the pilot sampling design and future monitoring efforts reflect tribal priorities.

Project Summary:

The Plastics Monitoring Strategy recommends monitoring sites with a gradient of urban impacts, including background reference sites; prioritizing monitoring water bodies most likely to be worst-case scenario (e.g., impacted by urban runoff and/or includes sensitive habitats); and notes that freshwater and sediment studies are important data gaps. Accordingly, the Strategy suggests the SPoT Monitoring Program, run by SWAMP, as one effective platform to leverage for implementation of these recommendations to fill existing microplastics data gaps.

This project will develop and implement a plastics monitoring pilot study to leverage existing monitoring programs, such as SPoT, to integrate microplastics sampling into an existing statewide monitoring framework that samples along a gradient of land uses, including urban, agricultural, and undeveloped watersheds. Within SWAMP, the SPoT Monitoring Program conducts statewide monitoring to identify long term trends in stream sediment contaminant concentrations and relate these trends to land-use characteristics and management decisions. The SPoT program samples a diversity of locations statewide, with 40% of sites considered urban, 25% agriculturally influenced, and 35% undeveloped. Sampling sites are located at the base of large watersheds, providing an integrated representation of up-watershed processes. Additional locations or priority environmental matrices (e.g., stormwater) may be addressed through special studies or by leveraging other monitoring programs.

Key activities of this pilot monitoring program will include:

- Establishment of a technical advisory committee

- Tribal consultation on tribal priorities, including tribal partnership and priority parameters
- Sample collection and monitoring design
- Data management protocols and infrastructure for environmental matrices included in the pilot
- Field sample collection

Following the Plastics Monitoring Strategy's recommended incremental approach to developing a statewide monitoring program, this pilot monitoring will inform future program expansion guided by lessons-learned, interpretation, and synthesis of results. The Plastic Pollution Mitigation Fund established by the Plastic Pollution Prevention and Packaging Producer Responsibility Act (SB 54, 2022) may also contribute to future statewide monitoring efforts, consistent with California Public Resources Code section 42064, to support the identification of priority locations for investment to mitigate of plastic pollution and track the efficacy of statewide efforts to address and reduce plastic pollution.

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:

California Native American tribes have extensive experience actively managing and monitoring lands and waters, including monitoring microplastics. The inclusion of tribal governments and tribally led monitoring programs is critical to supporting tribal stewardship of ancestral lands, waters, and cultural resources impacted by plastics. Direct engagement with tribal governments, through government-to-government consultation, will help ensure that monitoring efforts reflect tribal priorities and sovereignty, while strengthening the effectiveness and relevance of those efforts. Accordingly, tribal consultation for both the pilot monitoring program and the future statewide plastics monitoring program will begin in summer 2026.

As statewide monitoring evolves, local community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, and impacted communities may also be engaged directly to help ensure that monitoring reflects local needs and priorities. Involving these partners would integrate community-based knowledge and regional expertise, strengthening the effectiveness and relevance of monitoring efforts. Coordinating closely with tribal governments and community-based organizations is important to address disproportionate risks and impacts of plastic pollution, incorporate cultural and local knowledge, and build a monitoring network that is inclusive, responsive, and effective statewide.

About the Grantee:

Upon approval of disbursement of funds, OPC staff will work to identify the appropriate grantee(s) to help design and implement the plastics monitoring pilot in coordination with the State Water Resources Control Board.

Project Timeline:

Pilot study design and planning, as well as tribal consultation, will begin summer 2026, with implementation of the pilot monitoring program beginning in 2027-28. Sampling will occur over one to two years.

Project Financing:

Staff recommend that the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) authorize encumbrance of up to $2,500,000 to grantees, to be identified in coordination with State Water Resources Control Board, to plan and implement a statewide plastics monitoring program.

Ocean Protection Council	$2,500,000
TOTAL	**$2,500,000**

The anticipated source of funds will be from the Budget Act of 2024, Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund appropriation to OPC (Fiscal Year 2024/2025) for ocean protection and resilience to climate change. This project supports the purpose of this appropriation to support resilience projects that conserve, protect, and restore marine wildlife and healthy ocean and coastal ecosystems, and to enhance environmental quality and public health for disadvantaged communities or low-income households or communities

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 coastal water quality.
- 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):

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, 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.