Staff Recommendation
June 16, 2026

Item 8

Action Item:
Consideration and Approval of Disbursement of Funds to Support Fisheries Management and Endangered Species Recovery

Katie Cieri, Sustainable Fisheries & Aquaculture Program Manager

Recommended Action: Authorization to disburse up to $3,950,000 to various awardees to support adaptative fisheries management and endangered species recovery.

8.a Up to $2,975,000 to the Resources Legacy Fund (RLF) to administer and support four projects that will support adaptive fisheries management:

8.a.1 Up to $475,000 to convene an expert working group to provide recommendations for innovative fisheries management.

8.a.2 Up to $360,000 to support management strategy evaluation for the Barred Sand Bass fishery.

8.a.3 Up to $1,110,000 to support a stock assessment, fishery management plan, and management strategy evaluation for the White Seabass fishery.

8.a.4 Up to $1,030,000 to support stock assessment, management strategy evaluation, and trawl bycatch evaluation for the California Halibut fishery.

8.b Up to $295,000 to the University of California, Davis (UC Davis) to test gear modifications and evaluate bycatch in the California Halibut fishery.

8.c Up to $680,000 to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) for two projects to support fisheries management and endangered species recovery:

8c.1 Up to $620,000 to support state observers for the California Halibut Trawl Fishery

8.c.2 Up to $60,000 to support the White Abalone Recovery Program

Location: Statewide

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives: Goal 4: Enable a sustainable blue economy that protects ocean health; Objective 4.1: Support thriving fishing communities, climate-resilient fisheries, and sustainable aquaculture.

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits: engage key partners in fisheries management processes, economic benefits to coastal communities

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 OPC's Proposition 68 Grant Guidelines, adopted September 10, 2024; and with Proposition 4, Public Resources Code Section 92020, which provides $135 million to OPC to increase ocean and coastal resilience from the impacts of climate change, including projects that support sustainable fisheries; and
3. The proposed projects 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."

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 $2,975,000 to RLF to administer and support four projects that will support fisheries management; up to $295,000 to UC Davis to test gear modifications and evaluate bycatch in the California Halibut fishery; and up to $680,000 to CDFW for two projects to support fisheries management and endangered species recovery

This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, RLF, UC Davis, and CDFW 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's Marine Life Management Act (MLMA) 2018 Master Plan for Fisheries (2018 Master Plan) provides a scalable, science-based framework for managing state fisheries in response to increasing ecological variability, climate change, and evolving management needs. Using tools such as stock assessments, management strategy evaluations (MSEs), Enhanced Status Reports (ESRs), and Fishery Management Plans (FMPs), and evaluating new, more rapid tools and techniques, CDFW is advancing adaptive and ecosystem-based fisheries management that improves scientific rigor, stakeholder engagement, and decision-making flexibility. These projects collectively support California's Master Plan and advance OPC's Strategic Plan Targets 4.1.1, 4.1.2, and 4.1.3 by supporting immediate adaptive fisheries management needs through the development of innovative tools, modernization of monitoring and reporting systems, reduction of bycatch, and improvement of long-term sustainability for key state-managed fisheries including barred sand bass, white seabass, and California halibut. This package also recommends funding to support the continuation of California's white abalone recovery efforts during a temporary federal funding gap.

Project Summary:

Background:

The MLMA and the 2018 Master Plan direct the management of California's fisheries. CDFW manages dozens of fisheries under the MLMA, including both recreational and commercial fisheries. Under the Master Plan, fisheries may be managed through a continuum of tools ranging from ESRs to more comprehensive FMPs, allowing management resources to be directed where they are most needed. Stock assessments provide critical scientific information on population status, harvest rates, and sustainability, while MSE helps test and compare potential management actions under varying ecological and economic conditions. Together, these tools inform adaptive, science-based fisheries management and support precautionary approaches for more data-limited fisheries.

The state-led stock assessment program at CDFW has only completed one stakeholder-engaged MSE to date and requires additional support to build MSE expertise and workflows. The projects recommended here will address that gap and provide the state with updated stock assessments, robust decision-making support, and inclusive stakeholder processes for three important state-managed fisheries; Barred Sandbass, White Seabass, and California Halibut. The state will also review and update the White Seabass FMP; the second time CDFW has reviewed and updated an FMP since the successful OPC-supported update of the Market Squid FMP. These projects advance Target 4.1.2 of OPC's 2026-2030 Strategic Plan to support adaptive management of priority

climate-vulnerable species through completion of FMPs, improvement of ESRs, and development of innovative scientific tools by 2030, and will serve as a model for future management efforts.

The proposed projects will also improve the climate-readiness of fisheries management in California. California's inherently dynamic ocean and coastal ecosystems are becoming increasingly variable as the effects of anthropogenic climate change progress. Due to increased environmental variability and impacts from rapidly changing oceans, there is a critical need for proactive and data-driven decisions on shorter timelines. Traditional management approaches are essential, but are often costly, highly technical, and time-consuming. To protect California's fisheries in the face of accelerating change, the state needs to build improved flexibility and agility in the quantitative assessment, decision-making, and data collection tools at its disposal, as well as clarity on when and how to deploy such tools. These projects will advance immediate fisheries management needs and incorporate innovative techniques until the development and release of a future Statewide Climate-Ready Fishery Strategy, which will outline the state's approach to future-proofing California's fisheries against increased environmental variability.

Project Descriptions:

8.a.1 Innovative Fisheries Management Working Group (RLF)

Timeline: Fall 2026- Fall 2028

This project will convene an expert working group to provide technical guidance on innovative assessment methods for state-managed fisheries, and inform processes for data acquisition, stakeholder involvement, scientific peer review, reporting, and science-based decision making. Facilitated working group discussions will focus on evaluating state-managed stock and/or population characteristics against available methods, and in developing scalable tools and workflows tailored to diverse management needs across the state. The working group will initially focus its efforts on state-managed finfish but may incorporate state-managed invertebrates pending capacity of the working group. To identify robust and adaptive management strategies suitable for the diverse suite of state-managed marine species, the working group will address topics such as varying data availability, climate vulnerability, fishery size, and existing statutory requirements.

Project outcomes will include a report on the toolbox of quantitative methods and decision-making processes, as well as outreach products for stakeholder audiences. Overall, this project will inform critical management improvements for state fisheries and foster transparency and collaboration in fisheries governance.

8.a.2 Barred Sand Bass Fishery Management (RLF)

Timeline: Fall 2026 - Fall 2027

Barred sand bass is a nearshore species that supports a popular recreational fishery in southern California, where it is highly targeted by shore-based anglers, private vessel owners, and commercial passenger fishing vessels. This proposed project will build from existing OPC-funded work to support the scientific peer-review of a recent barred sand bass stock assessment and develop quantitative tools, testable management procedures, and a sensitivity testing framework that enables use of MSE for barred sand bass decision-making.

This project will advance fisheries management and Target 4.1.2 of OPC's Strategic Plan by supporting the first-ever MSE for barred sand bass. Stakeholders will be engaged through a minimum of four public meetings during the MSE to ensure transparency and incorporate diverse perspectives. The project will also include the administration of a MSE peer review panel. The results of these efforts will provide managers with improved data and practical insights for evaluating management strategies under different scenarios.

8.a.3 White Seabass Fishery Management (RLF)

Timeline: Fall 2026 - Winter 2029

The white seabass fishery is a highly valued commercial and recreational fishery managed under an FMP that emphasizes sustainable harvest, protection of spawning adults and juvenile fish, adaptive management, and stakeholder collaboration to support long-term stock recovery and conservation.

This project will strengthen fisheries management and advance Target 4.1.2 of OPC's 2026-2030 Strategic plan by supporting an update of the white seabass stock assessment that leverages both an external stock assessment expert and formal peer review, a first-ever update of the white seabass FMP, and a first-ever MSE for the species. Importantly, the project will include meaningful stakeholder engagement during the development of the MSE to ensure transparency and collaboration. Finally, the project will convene a White Seabass Working Group to ensure that new analytical approaches and stakeholder input are incorporated into the FMP. This effort will inform future FMP updates for white seabass and other state-managed species. Project outcomes will also directly inform revisions to the existing white seabass Enhanced Status Report to support management of this fishery.

8.a.4 California Halibut Fishery Management (RLF)

Timeline: Winter 2027 - Spring 2030

The California halibut fishery is a valuable state-managed commercial and recreational fishery that operates primarily in nearshore and coastal waters using trawl, set gill net, hook-and-line, and recreational rod-and-reel gear. Management is informed by a stock structure that distinguishes southern, central, and northern population components, with ongoing stock assessments and management strategy evaluations to support adaptive management, bycatch reduction, and long-term fishery sustainability. This project will support Target 4.1.1, 4.1.2, and 4.1.3 of OPC's 2026-2030 Strategic Plan by enabling a peer-reviewed stock assessment and informing a statewide MSE for California Halibut, as well as supporting the completion of a bycatch evaluation of the California halibut trawl fishery and laying the foundation for data modernization in the trawl fishery.

This project will improve fisheries management by conducting an updated stock assessment for the central and northern stock of California halibut, including formal peer-review, and a statewide MSE in alignment with the 2018 Master Plan. Stakeholders will be engaged during the MSE to incorporate diverse perspectives and promote collaborative decision-making. Project outcomes will also directly inform revision of the existing California halibut Enhanced Status Report to support management of this fishery.

This project will also support peer-review for the ongoing bycatch evaluation of California halibut trawl fishery and scope the development of a new electronic monitoring program for the trawl fishery, resulting in more efficient compliance, robust bycatch assessments, and adaptive management strategies. The monitoring program will be informed by stakeholder workshops and lessons learned from the OPC-funded electronic monitoring/reporting (EM/ER) pilot to ensure that the program improves data accuracy, reduces monitoring costs, and increases transparency in fishery-reported data. This project will include a report with recommendations to modernize data collection by integrating multi-platform observations for electronic monitoring, including sensors, images, and human observers.

8.b California Halibut Trawl Gear Modification Testing and Bycatch Investigations (UC Davis)

Timeline: Fall 2026 - Fall 2028

This project will identify practical strategies to reduce bycatch in the California halibut trawl fishery to improve the sustainability of this important state-managed fishery, address a key data deficiency, and support Target 4.1.1, 4.1.2, and 4.1.3 of OPC's 2026-2030 Strategic Plan. The project will build upon an existing California Sea Grant (CASG)-funded project to test trawl gear

modifications in collaboration with industry members, including alternative mesh designs and modifications to deter marine mammal predation. The CASG-funded project will evaluate the effectiveness of these gear modifications for reducing bycatch and improving the quality of halibut catch.

OPC funding will expand the scope and impact of the CASG-funded project by supporting a mark-recapture study for juvenile halibut, examining the behavior of non-target species, and expanding industry participation. The project will collect essential fishery information by using mark-recapture techniques to evaluate the impact of trawling on post-release mortality of juvenile halibut. The project will also use underwater cameras to examine behavioral characteristics of non-target species that contribute to bycatch, and pilot the use of image analysis for the trawl fishery. Finally, the project will provide stipends to support trawler participation in all research activities and support the development of a Best Practices guide for the fishery. Results of this project will directly support bycatch evaluation of the California halibut trawl fishery and help ensure long-term sustainability of the fishery while meeting MLMA guidelines.

8.c.1 State observers for the California Halibut Trawl Fishery (CDFW)

Timeline: Fall 2026 - Winter 2030

This project will provide funds to CDFW to enhance monitoring and accountability in the California halibut trawl fishery by addressing a critical data need. Until December 2024, the West Coast Groundfish Observer Program (WCGOP), a Federal collaboration between the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission and the National Marine Fisheries Service, provided the state with bycatch and discard data for this fishery. The loss of WCGOP observers has led to a critical data gap for this fishery. This project will fund state fisheries observers to fill that gap by collecting high-quality discard and catch disposition data from the fleet, complementing data that is collected by fishery participants through paper logbooks. Fisheries observers are necessary to sustain monitoring and ensure that bycatch remains at or below acceptable levels, as stipulated in the MLMA, and observer coverage is essential until electronic reporting (ER) and electronic monitoring (EM) can be implemented for the fishery.

This project will support four years of observer coverage by scientific aides stationed in the San Francisco Bay Area and in the region between Santa Barbara and Oxnard, where fishing effort for halibut is concentrated. It will support a short-term, targeted California halibut monitoring onboard monitoring program and will produce an internal report upon the program's completion to document observer work, provide lessons learned, and inform the implementation of a long-term ER/EM solution.

8.7 White abalone recovery program (CDFW)

Timeline: Fall 2026 - Winter 2026

CDFW plays a critical role in supporting the recovery of endangered species, such as white abalone. CDFW is founding member of the White Abalone Recovery Consortium (WARC), a group which includes, in part, government agencies, universities, non-profits, and aquaculture facilities, and conducts critical in-field implementation of recovery actions identified in the federal White Abalone Recovery Plan through the White Abalone Recovery Program. Since 2010, NOAA has provided over $14.5 million to CDFW and other partners for white abalone restoration through Species Recovery Grants to States. This amount does not include additional millions awarded to partners such as UC Davis, Bodega Marine Lab, The Bay Foundation, and the Paua Marine Research Group via other sources of funding. Unfortunately, delays in federal funding have led to a critical funding gap for CDFW's White Abalone Recovery Program this year. Temporary funding is needed to continue this valuable state program.

This project will increase capacity to enable CDFW's White Abalone Recovery Program to continue during a gap in federal funding. This project will enable CDFW vessel and diving support for white abalone outplanting and recruitment surveys, data entry, data analysis, and report preparation. Additionally, ensuring the continuation of CDFW's White Abalone Recovery Program will enable the execution of a Bodega Marine Labs project previously funded by OPC to culture and outplant white abalone and restore rocky reef ecosystems in Southern California.

Equity and Environmental Justice Benefits:

The recommended suite of projects will support equitable participation in state fisheries management by meaningfully engaging key partners, including commercial and recreational fishermen, in fisheries management processes and decision-making. Responsive fisheries management is essential to ensure that California's fisheries continue to provide access, sustainable seafood, and economic benefits to coastal communities. These projects' emphasis on community engagement will also address the following goals of 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).

Project Timeline:

All projects will take place between October 2026 and January 2030, with varying timelines.

Project Financing:

Staff recommends that the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) authorize encumbrance of up to $3,950,000 to various awardees to support adaptative fisheries management and to support endangered species recovery.

8.a.1 Innovative Fisheries Management Working Group (RLF)	$475,000
8.a.2 Barred Sand Bass Fishery Management (RLF)	$360,000
8.a.3 White Seabass Fishery Management (RLF)	$1,110,000
8.a.4 California Halibut Fishery Management (RLF)	$1,030,000
8.b. California Halibut Trawl Gear Modification Testing and Bycatch Investigations (U.C. Davis)	$295,000
8.c.1 State Observers for the California Halibut Trawl Fishery (CDFW)	$620,000
8.c.2 White Abalone Recovery Program (CDFW)	$60,000
TOTAL	**$3,950,000**

The anticipated source of funds will be from the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (Proposition 4), Fiscal Year 2025/2026 and from the Proposition 68 Chapter 9 Fund, provided by the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018, Fiscal Year 2022/2023. Proposition 4, Public Resources Code Section 92020 FY 2025/26 allocates $7.5 million to OPC to increase ocean and coastal resilience from the impacts of climate change, including projects that support sustainable fisheries. Proposition 68 Chapter 9, 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 both proposed funding sources promote the long-term health and

sustainability of marine fisheries and the communities that rely on them, allowing the state to conserve 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.
- 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.
- 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 projects are categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act ("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.

Proposed project 8.c.2 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.