

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

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To: California Coastal Commissioners

From: Susan Hansch, Chief Deputy Director
Rebecca K. Roth, Federal Programs Manager *RR*

Subject: Recommended Approval of an Agreement with the University of Southern Mississippi to Create a Habitat Inventory and Information System to Facilitate Wetland Preservation and Restoration in Central and Northern California

Staff Recommendation

The staff recommends that the Commission authorize the Executive Director to enter into an agreement with the University of Southern Mississippi to support the completion of a project entitled "Creation of a Habitat Inventory and Information System to Facilitate Wetland Preservation and Restoration in Central and Northern California" carried out by a Coastal Management Fellow under the overall sponsorship of the Coastal Services Center (CSC) of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

The total amount of this Agreement is \$15,000, which represents the Commission's portion of the Fellow's stipend over a two-year period. The Coastal Services Center will provide the remaining \$60,000 of the stipend. In addition to personnel expenses, the Commission will provide in-kind contributions to cover everyday expenditures such as supervision and mentoring, travel printing, facilities, etc.

Staff Summary

In 1994, Coastal Services Center was created within NOAA to identify, develop, and facilitate the use of technologies and information that support the sustainable use and management of coastal resources. To that end, CSC established a competitive coastal management fellowship program that provides both professional education and training opportunities for post-graduate students in coastal management and policy. The fellowship provides on-the-job education and training opportunities for post-graduate students in coastal resource management and policy while also contributing specific technical assistance for state coastal resource management programs. The Coastal Commission has hosted two fellows from this program since its inception.

In December 1999, the NOAA Coastal Management Fellowship project committee announced that the Coastal Commission would receive a Fellow for a two-year term starting in August of 2000. In accordance with the Commission's priorities, the project addresses ways to preserve and restore the remaining wetlands in Central and Northern California. The following sections discuss the development of this Fellowship project, its goals, and the scope of work.

The Commission will contribute \$15,000 toward the Fellow's stipend, which does not include the in-kind contributions. This funding will be paid to the University of Southern Mississippi, the sponsoring Sea Grant Institution for this Fellowship. In addition, the Commission has agreed to administer the fellowship

and to provide Internet and computer access, day-to-day supervision, office space, training, and up to \$5,000 travel expenses.

Importance of an Inventory of Wetlands in Central and Northern California

Wetlands are generally acknowledged as one of the most important ecosystems on earth. Yet because of their location in flat, fertile areas, they are also one of the most susceptible to urban development and agricultural conversion. California has lost a vast majority of its wetlands—more than 90%—to development of various types. However, there is still the potential for preservation and substantial restoration in areas of the state.

In Central and Northern California, development has impacted a smaller proportion of wetlands than in Southern California. Moreover, degraded wetlands in Northern and Central California are typically more restorable than those in the southern part of the state. This circumstance presents an opportunity to conserve significant wetland areas and to substantially restore the functioning of degraded wetlands at a reasonable cost. The challenge is that, to date, the basic information required for conservation and restoration planning has been gathered in a piecemeal fashion.

The Coastal Commission has identified as a high priority the goal of improving the agency's program with regard to the protection and preservation of wetlands. Specifically, the *1997 Updated Assessment and Enhancement Strategy of the California Coastal Management Program* described the priority need to better address the individual and cumulative impact of threats to wetlands for purposes of protection and preservation of existing levels of wetlands. An inventory of wetlands will help further this goal.

Project Description

The two-year CSC Fellowship will provide the Coastal Commission, its staff, and local coastal governments with information on wetland habitats in several counties in California. This fellowship project will help create a wetland inventory and GIS mapping layers of wetland areas using existing CCC data and aerial photographs. The Fellow will develop a wetland information system for four Commission-identified priority counties: San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Humboldt, and Del Norte.

Scope of Work

John Dixon, ecologist and staff to the Commission, will provide day-to-day supervision. The work program incorporates peer review. The major goals and objectives of the project are to:

- Provide planners and decision makers with the tools and information needed to preserve existing coastal wetlands, reclaim feasibly restorable historical wetlands, and maintain the water quality and hydrological functions upon which wetlands depend.
- Develop a wetland information system that best meets the day-to-day needs of the Commission, resource agencies, other management agencies, and local government by engaging these users in the design process.
- Create a wetland inventory and an associated information system that contains historical and current wetland and watershed areas and uses, aerial and ground-level photographs, jurisdictional boundaries, ownership, vegetation type, wildlife use, special status species, soil characteristics, hydrology, sediment transport and water quality. For each wetland, document available data and data gaps.
- Characterize, and where feasible delineate, the transitional and upland areas contiguous to the wetland boundaries to provide a scientific basis for buffer determinations.
- Increase local awareness of wetlands and wetlands issues by involving conservation organizations and technical consultants in basic site characterizations and photo-documentation.

- Dynamically link the information system to related web-based data summaries such as the California Rivers Assessment.
- Develop a protocol for using the new information system to prioritize wetlands for preservation and restoration.
- Develop a framework for a statewide system to implement the Coastal Commission's comprehensive regulatory tracking system.

Benefits from Approving the Agreement with the University of Southern Mississippi

This project requires expertise in estuarine habitats and environments. Commission staff could not undertake this project unless staff biologist resources were diverted from current critical assignments. The cost for the Commission staff to undertake this effort would far exceed the cost of the agreement with the University of Southern Mississippi.

Under the proposed standard agreement, the University of Southern Mississippi will receive \$15,000 to support the remaining stipend of the CSC Fellow for completing the above-mentioned work in accordance with the specifications of the Fellowship project.

