

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

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Date: July 23, 2026

To: Commissioners and Interested Parties

From: Kate Huckelbridge, Executive Director
Sarah Christie, Legislative Director
Annie Kohut Frankel, Public Education Program Manager
Jessica Lie, Grants and Education Programs Analyst

Subject: **Proposed Targeted WHALE TAIL[®] Grants for Fiscal Year 2026/2027 from the Commission's Public Education Program.**
The Executive Director recommends that the Commission approve the following proposed targeted grants for Fiscal Year 2026/2027.

SUMMARY OF STAFF RECOMMENDATION

- A. Approve targeted grants for the following six projects (totaling \$226,560):
 - 1) Kids' Ocean Day School Programs (\$121,560)
 - 2) Heal the Bay Adopt-A-Beach Program (\$30,000)
 - 3) I Love A Clean San Diego Adopt-A-Beach Program (\$30,000)
 - 4) Save Our Shores Adopt-A-Beach Program (\$20,000)
 - 5) California Environmental Educator Certification Program (\$25,000)
- B. Approve a temporary reserve to remain unallocated at this time and awarded later in the fiscal year (\$50,000)
- C. Approve the following actions:
 - 1) Reallocate any unused targeted grant funds to the temporary reserve.
 - 2) Allocate temporary reserve funds to one or more of the above targeted grants if reserve is not otherwise needed and recommended funding levels turn out to be insufficient.

I. MOTION AND RESOLUTION

Motion:

I move that the Commission **approve** the funding allocations set forth in the staff recommendation.

Staff Recommendation of Approval:

Staff recommends a **YES** vote on the foregoing motion. Passage of this motion will result in authorization of the Executive Director or her designee to enter into the appropriate agreements for disbursing the available funds. The motion passes only by affirmative vote of a majority of the Commissioners present.

Resolution of Approval:

The Commission hereby approves and authorizes the Executive Director or her designee to:

- a. enter into the appropriate contracts for five targeted projects
- b. set aside a temporary reserve of \$50,000
- c. reallocate any unused targeted grant funds currently being approved to the temporary reserve
- d. increase targeted grant amounts if necessary, using temporary reserve funds

II. INTRODUCTION

The Commission's WHALE TAIL® Grants support projects that educate and involve the public in the protection of marine and coastal resources. These projects provide important benefits in advancing public understanding and support for the coast and ocean. Targeted grants support high priority, often recurring projects that are linked to existing Commission programs and/or the goals identified in the Commission's Strategic Plan. Funding for the WHALE TAIL® Grants Program comes from sales and renewals of the California WHALE TAIL® License Plate (which are deposited into the California Beach and Coastal Enhancement Account), and voluntary contributions to the Protect Our Coast and Oceans Fund on the State tax form. Targeted grants during this fiscal year will be funded from both of these sources.

Protect Our Coast and Oceans Fund

The Protect Our Coast and Oceans "check box" on the California State tax return form was created in 2013 pursuant to legislation (AB 754) by Assemblymember Al Muratsuchi. AB 754 added Article 5.1 (Sections 18745-18748) to Chapter 3 of the Revenue and Taxation Code as follows:

WHALE TAIL® Grants

All money designated under the Protect Our Coast and Oceans Fund space on a tax return...shall be allocated as follows:

(a) To the Franchise Tax Board and the Controller for reimbursement of all costs incurred by the Franchise Tax Board and the Controller in connection with their duties under this article.

(b) (1) To the California Coastal Commission to support eligible programs awarded grants under the selection criteria established by the California Coastal Commission for the Whale Tail Grants Program, and for direct program-related expenses.

The Protect Our Coast and Oceans Fund was renewed in 2017 by State Senator Josh Newman (SB 503) and renewed again in 2024 by Assemblymember Dawn Addis (AB 2197). The current reauthorization extends through January 1, 2032, provided it continues to meet its annual contribution threshold, which was lowered in 2024 from \$250,000 per year to \$200,000 as part of Budget Trailer Bill AB 178.

In January 2014, California taxpayers began making voluntary contributions to the Protect Our Coast and Oceans Fund while completing their state tax returns. As of June 30, 2026, over \$4 million has been donated to the Protect our Coast and Oceans Fund.

WHALE TAIL® License Plate

The WHALE TAIL® License Plate was established as a mechanism through which the public can support coastal and marine education programs in California. As of June 30, 2026, 283,808 license plates have been purchased by California motorists. After the DMV deducts administrative fees, funds from WHALE TAIL® Plate sales and renewals are divided equally between the California Beach and Coastal Enhancement Account (CBCEA) and the Environmental License Plate Fund (ELPF). All of the additional fees for personalized plates also go into the ELPF. In total, from FY1997/98 through FY2025/26, WHALE TAIL® License Plate sales and renewal fees (plus miscellaneous other small fees) have contributed \$37.8 million to the CBCEA and \$97 million to the ELPF.

The CBCEA is the primary funding source for the Coastal Commission's Public Education programs. The ELPF funds a variety of environmental programs and related expenditures across several state agencies such as the California Natural Resources Agency, California Conservation Corps, the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, State Coastal Conservancy, California State Parks, and others.

California Vehicle Code Section 5067 dictates how the funds raised by sales of the WHALE TAIL® License Plate and deposited in the CBCEA account are to be used:

"Upon appropriation by the legislature, the money in the account (CBCEA) shall be allocated by the Controller as follows: (A) First to the California Coastal Commission for expenditure for the Adopt-A-Beach program, the Beach Cleanup Day program, coastal public education programs, and grants to local governments and nonprofit

organizations for the costs of operating and maintaining public beaches related to these programs.” (B) Second, from funds remaining after the allocation required under subparagraph (A), to the State Coastal Conservancy for coastal natural resource restoration and enhancement projects and for other projects consistent with the provisions of Division 21 (commencing with Section 31000) of the Public Resources Code (as amended in 2004 in Budget Trailer Bill SB 1107).

For the first two decades, WHALE TAIL® Plate sales were robust. But since 2015, sales have leveled off and declined by an average of approximately 5.5% per year. Possible reasons for this trend include increased competition from other specialty plates in recent years, the length of time the WHALE TAIL® Plate has been on the market, and changes to the DMV’s vehicle registration renewal process. The Coastal Commission staff is working to address this funding reduction through marketing efforts to increase plate sales.

Public Education Grantmaking Budget and Timetable

Staff proposes to spend \$226,560 on targeted grants at this time, with \$201,560 from the Protect Our Coast and Oceans Fund, and \$25,000 from CBCEA. The staff further proposes to allocate \$50,000 to a temporary reserve. A FY2021/2022 General Fund allocation of local assistance funding to the grant program is being reappropriated in the FY2026/2027 budget, extending its available encumbrance for an additional year. Any unspent funds from previously closed General Fund grants that are identified and can be redistributed may be used in place of some of the above funds.

Due to the later than usual calendar of the previous competitive WHALE TAIL® grants cycle, there will be no additional competitive grants issued during FY2026-27.

III. APPROVAL OF TARGETED GRANTS FOR FIVE PROJECTS

The staff recommends five projects for immediate funding. These targeted grants are consistent with the legislative requirements and with the criteria applied to the competitive grants program. The grants will be subject to the same reporting requirements and rules as set forth for the WHALE TAIL® competitive grants.

The projects proposed for grant funding comprise ongoing educational and access efforts and stewardship activities to curb plastic pollution.

The staff is requesting approval of grants for the following projects:

- 1) Kids’ Ocean Day School Program and Beach Fieldtrip (\$121,560)
Funds would be awarded to Friends of the Dunes, Marine Science Institute, Malibu Foundation for Environmental Education, Orange County Coastkeeper, I Love A Clean San Diego, and Global Ocean Health.
- 2) Heal the Bay Adopt-A-Beach Program (\$30,000)

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- 3) I Love A Clean San Diego Adopt-A-Beach Program (\$30,000)
- 4) Save Our Shores Adopt-A-Beach Program (\$20,000)
- 5) California Association for Outdoor & Environmental Education for the California Environmental Educator Certification Program (\$25,000)

The staff recommends that the grants listed above be funded from the following sources:

Protect Our Coast & Oceans Fund for a total of \$201,560

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|----------------------------|-----------|
| • Heal the Bay | \$30,000 |
| • I Love A Clean San Diego | \$30,000 |
| • Save Our Shores | \$20,000 |
| • Kids Ocean Day programs | \$121,560 |

California Coastal & Beach Enhancement Account for a total of \$25,000

- California Association for Outdoor & Environmental Education \$25,000

1. \$121,560 FOR KIDS' OCEAN DAY SCHOOL PROGRAM & BEACH FIELD TRIP

This annual program engages thousands of children from low-income schools, currently taking place in five locations coordinated by separate partner grantees: San Diego (I Love a Clean San Diego), Orange County (Orange County Coastkeeper), Los Angeles (Malibu Foundation for Environmental Education), San Francisco Bay Area (Marine Science Institute), and Humboldt Bay (Friends of the Dunes). The program includes an engaging school assembly or classroom presentation and discussion of watersheds and the storm drain system, waste and litter reduction strategies, the dangers of marine debris, and the wonders of ocean wildlife. Teachers are provided with additional related activities to conduct with their classes. At the end of the school year, students enjoy a field trip coinciding with World Ocean Day to play at the beach, participate in a beach cleanup, and create an aerial art display by standing in formation to spell out an ocean conservation message which is photographed from above. Art coordination is funded through a grant to Global Ocean Health.

Program History. The program was started in Los Angeles County in 1993 by the Malibu Foundation for Environmental Education with the support of the Coastal Commission. The Commission took the program statewide in 1998 and has supported it through targeted grants in the years since.

Proposal. The staff proposes a total of \$121,560 to continue programs in Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange County, San Francisco Bay Area, and Humboldt Bay. Assemblies will be held during the winter and spring, and beach field trips and aerial art will take place near the end of the school year. Funds will be allocated to the five participating organizations leading programming in their regions (Malibu Foundation for Environmental Education, I Love a Clean San Diego, Orange County Coastkeeper, Marine Science Institute, and Friends of the Dunes) for staff time,

necessary expenses, and buses, as well as to Global Ocean Health to provide guidance and leadership in the aerial art creation.

2. \$30,000 FOR HEAL THE BAY'S ADOPT-A-BEACH PROGRAM

Heal the Bay serves as the coordinator for both the Adopt-A-Beach Program and Coastal Cleanup Day for Los Angeles County. As the coordinator of the Adopt-A-Beach Program, the organization arranges cleanups and provides supplies for hundreds of groups of volunteers committed to cleaning a beach three times during a year. They organize Adopt-A-Beach field trips and provide bus funding to participating low-income schools. Heal the Bay also hosts monthly zero-waste "Nothin' But Sand" public cleanup events and maintains an interactive database of cleanup data.

Program History. Adopt-A-Beach is a statewide volunteer program managed by the California Coastal Commission. Heal the Bay received three competitive Adopt-A-Beach grants in FY1998/99 through FY2000/01. Since FY2002/03, the Commission has supported Heal the Bay's Adopt-A-Beach Program through targeted grants.

Proposal. Staff proposes providing a \$30,000 grant for Heal the Bay to continue and improve its Adopt-A-Beach Program as described above.

3. \$30,000 FOR I LOVE A CLEAN SAN DIEGO'S ADOPT-A-BEACH PROGRAM

I Love A Clean San Diego (ILACSD) serves as the coordinator for both the Adopt-A-Beach Program and Coastal Cleanup Day for San Diego County. As the Adopt-A-Beach Program coordinator, they offer a number of enhanced features such as: acknowledging adopting volunteers by placing placards with their group names at adopted locations; delivering interpretive presentations to cleanup volunteers; coordinating cleanups at inland canyons with waterways that drain to the coast; conducting outreach to the Spanish-speaking community; and hosting interactive litter-tracking and volunteer databases. They encourage zero-waste cleanups by offering kits with reusable supplies. ILACSD's Adopt-A-Beach Program manages 80 coastal and inland cleanup locations throughout San Diego County.

Program History. In FY2002/03, ILACSD received a competitive grant to enhance its Adopt-A-Beach Program and the Coastal Commission has supported them with targeted grants in the years since.

Proposal. Staff proposes providing a \$30,000 grant for I Love A Clean San Diego to continue and improve its Adopt-A-Beach Program as described above.

4. \$20,000 FOR SAVE OUR SHORES' ADOPT-A-BEACH® PROGRAM

Save Our Shores serves as the coordinator for both the Adopt-A-Beach Program and Coastal Cleanup Day for both Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties. As the coordinator of the Adopt-A-Beach Program, the organization arranges cleanups and provides supplies for dozens of groups of volunteers committed to cleaning a beach three times per year. They also maintain a database of cleanup data.

Program History. The Coastal Commission has previously supported Save Our Shores' beach cleanup programs via competitive WHALE TAIL® grants in FY2006/07, FY2007/08, FY2010/11, and FY2012/13, and via targeted grants in FY2020/21 and FY2025/26.

Proposal. Staff proposes providing a \$20,000 grant to Save Our Shores for expansion of their Adopt-A-Beach Program through enhanced publicity and promotion to increase volunteer recruitment and participation, to enhance volunteer training and recognition, and to increase the use of reusable cleanup supplies to reduce single-use plastic pollution.

5. \$25,000 FOR CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION FOR OUTDOOR & ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATOR CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

The California Association for Outdoor & Environmental Education (AEOE), founded in 1954, is California's statewide association of environmental educators and the California affiliate of the North American Association for Environmental Education. They manage the Environmental Educator Certification Program, an 11-month program in which environmental educators demonstrate their competency through group discussion, individual reflection, submission of assignments, and the completion and presentation of a community action project.

Program History. Coastal Commission funding supported this program with competitive grants in FY2021-22 and FY2023-24.

Proposal. Staff proposes providing a \$25,000 grant to support California's Environmental Educator Certification Program, including incorporation of marine and watershed learning, and scholarships for those facing barriers in the field. AEOE will optimize opportunities for collaboration between program participants to foster deeper connections and relationships within mentor groups, and with key program partners, including the California Coastal Commission, Project WET water education program, and UCANR Climate Stewards. These partnerships will connect environmental educators to resources for educating on critical issues including the California Coastal Act and coastal access, watershed science, and climate change communication.

IV. APPROVAL OF \$50,000 TEMPORARY RESERVE

To keep some funding available for unforeseen needs and other potential targeted grant projects, staff recommends that the Commission set aside a temporary reserve to be allocated at a later date.

Program History. Maintaining a temporary reserve fund is a fiscally prudent efficiency measure for a grant program of this size, as it allows for some flexibility in the face of unforeseen circumstances should one or more grantees go over or under budget. Commissioners have approved setting aside temporary reserves since FY2001/02.

During some years reserve funds have been used for a targeted grant project, during other years they have been divided between funding a targeted grant and adding to the balance of the competitive WHALE TAIL® Grants budget, and during the remaining years the entire balance was added to the amount available for competitive grants later in the fiscal year.

Proposal. Staff recommends maintaining funds in a temporary reserve to keep some grant funding available for potential opportunities and needs that may arise. If not needed this fiscal year, the temporary reserve funds will revert and be available for future grants.

V. APPROVAL OF THE ABILITY TO REALLOCATE UNNEEDED FUNDS

1. In the event that one of the above targeted grantees does not need all the funds currently being allocated, Commissioners direct the staff to reallocate the remaining money to the following competitive grants budget or add it to the \$50,000 reserve described above.
2. In the event that one or more of the above targeted grantees needs more funds than are currently being allocated to successfully complete a project, and not all of the funds in the temporary reserve are needed for another purpose, Commissioners direct the Executive Director to increase the targeted grant awards using funds from the \$50,000 reserve.

The motion can be found on page 2 of this staff report.