



Year In Review

2023

Photo Credit – Paddle for Peace 2023 Whale Tail Grantee



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Introduction

“The coast is never saved. It’s always being saved.”

~ Peter Douglas, 1942-2012



Jeff Nigro

2023 marked the beginning of the second half-century of coastal protection in California since the passage of Proposition 20 created the Coastal Commission in 1972. With few exceptions, California’s landmark coastal protection law has remained strong through five decades of implementation, interpretation, and legal challenge. Incremental statutory changes have expanded the Commission’s enforcement powers, added consideration of environmental justice, and included sea level rise planning as a statewide requirement, while numerous efforts to weaken the Coastal Act have been rebuffed by the Legislature. It’s now easier to pursue restoration and public access projects, and tougher to develop offshore oil. Together with the Department of Justice, the Commission has successfully defended the Coastal Act from legal challenges, through litigation to protect public access, sensitive habitats, and wetlands, affirming federal consistency authority and furthering coastal rights and racial and gender equity. The issues the Commission is grappling with today—such as climate change, affordable housing and ocean-based renewable energy—will profoundly shape the coast that future generations will know 50 years from now. In 2023, the Coastal Commission continued to uphold the fundamental tenants of coastal protection, while simultaneously

adjusting and re-positioning to address these emerging imperatives. But big challenges call for big solutions, and big solutions frequently lead to even bigger questions. If we have learned anything over the last five decades, it's that the coast is never saved, it's always being saved, as Peter Douglas, the father of the Coastal Act presciently observed many times over his career.

They say records are made to be broken. That certainly holds true for climate change. 2023 was the third consecutive hottest year on record, even as the [Sierra snowpack](#) was at an all-time high. After years of unrelenting drought, the new year began with 23 days of historic rainfall and deadly flooding, the result of a series of atmospheric rivers that hit California like breakers rolling into shore. The Central Coast was particularly hard hit. Governor Newsom declared a state of emergency on January 4, followed hours later by President Biden's major disaster declarations for Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties. As the term "bomb cyclone" entered the climate change lexicon, flooding shut down freeways, BART stations and sports stadiums. Trains stayed put while kayakers plied local streets. Rivers jumped their banks and busted through levees. Storm surge devoured parts of Santa Cruz's iconic West Cliff Drive, and the Monterey Peninsula became an island. By the time the rain moved on, 22 people had died, and the state was reeling from \$30 billion in damages and economic losses.

The year ended with record-setting high-surf events on the Northern and Central coasts. A huge storm 1,000 miles off the coast sent enormous waves rolling into shore just days before New Year's Eve. On December 28, Mavericks Big Wave Invitational competitors rode some of the [biggest waves in the history of the event](#), while the same swells inflicted serious damage to the Pacifica Pier just upcoast. Despite statewide high surf warnings, spectators lined beach and bluff parking lots and ocean-front balconies to bear witness from Point Reyes to Point Mugu. A [viral video](#) from Ventura illustrated how quickly these extreme surf events can turn dangerous. It was a sobering start to the New Year, but it served to underscore the critical importance of California's unique Coastal Management Program.



King Tides Photo

New Commissioners



Mayor Paloma Aguirre

Dr. Justin Cummings

Anne Notthoff

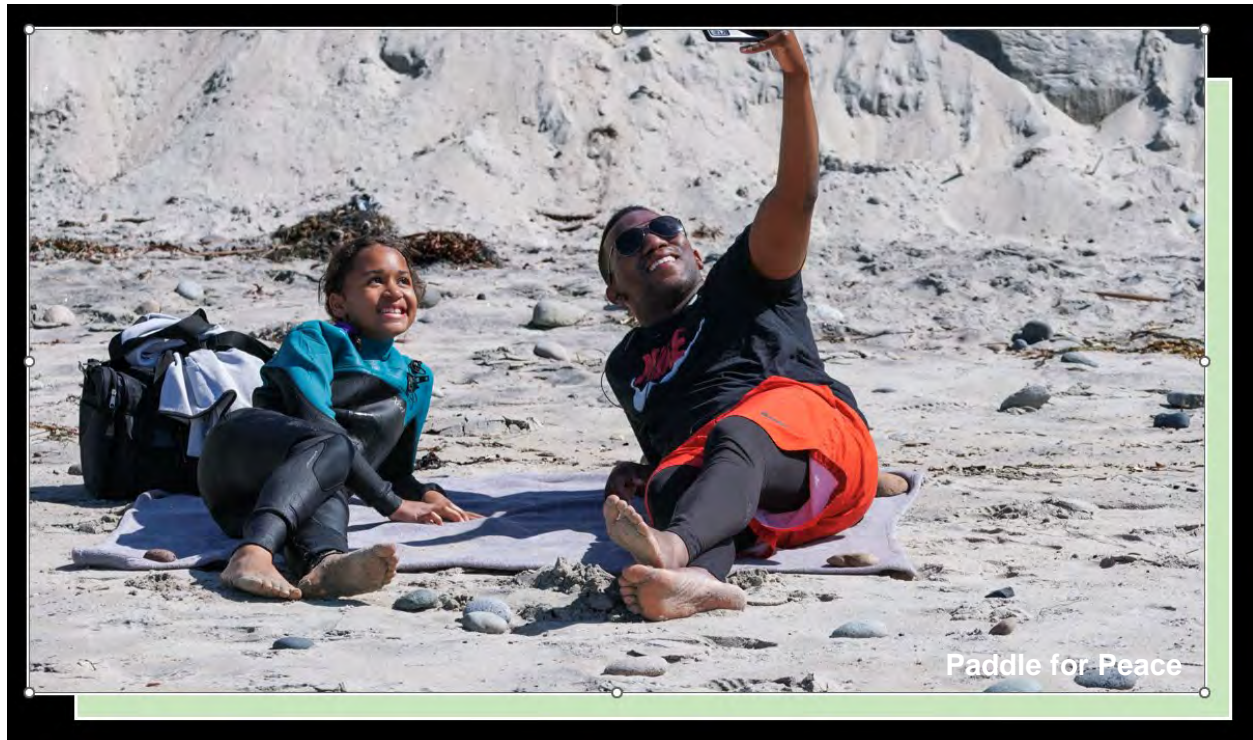
The Commission welcomed three new Commissioners in 2023, beginning with Imperial Beach.

Mayor Paloma Aguirre who was appointed in February to fill the San Diego ‘elected official’ seat vacated by newly elected Senator Steve Padilla. Commissioner Aguirre worked in her community as an environmental & social justice advocate before earning her master’s degree from Scripps Institute of Oceanography with a focus in Marine Biodiversity and Conservation. As Mayor, and as former Coastal and Marine Director of WILDCOAST, she has devoted almost two decades to fighting cross-border pollution from international sewage treatment plants in the Tijuana River Valley. As it turned out, this would become a major focus for the Commission later in the year.

Santa Cruz County Supervisor Dr. Justin Cummings and longtime coastal advocate Anne Notthoff were both appointed the following month. Supervisor Cummings filled the Central Coast ‘elected official’ seat formerly held by recently retired San Mateo County Supervisor Carole Groom. With a Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Commissioner Cummings’ past research has focused on invasive species and the effects of climate change on the Everglades. As a former City Councilmember and current County Supervisor he has been deeply engaged in coastal land use issues, particularly the need for more affordable housing in the city and county of Santa Cruz.

Commissioner Notthoff’s involvement with coastal protection first began with the passage of Proposition 20 in 1972, followed by a long career as an advocate and coastal policy director at NRDC. She was a member of the State Coastal Conservancy prior to her Senate appointment to serve as a ‘public member at large’ on the Commission. Her institutional knowledge of the Coastal Program and the Commission’s unique history have provided valuable insights throughout the year.

Environmental Justice

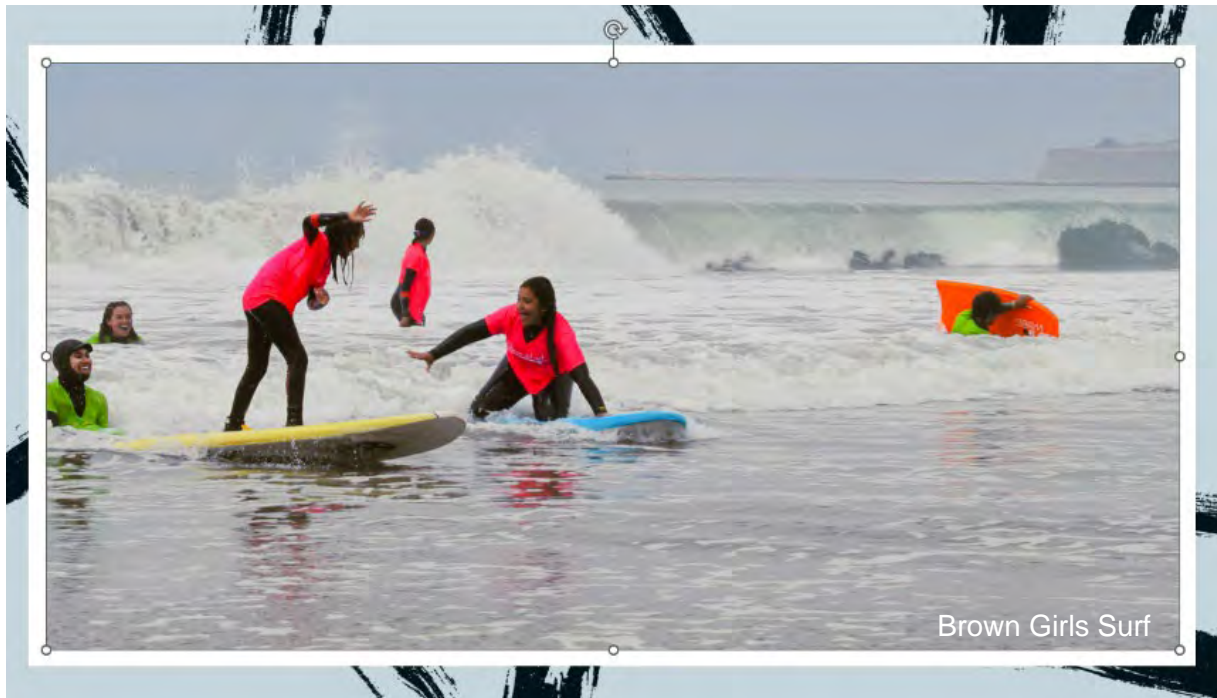


Ever since the Commission gained the authority to consider environmental justice in 2016, it has been addressing EJ in coastal development permits, appeals, and enforcement orders, and re-evaluating the lens by which we consider all programs and activities. The creation of the Environmental Justice Unit has been invaluable in this progress. In 2023, the Commission and the Coastal Act were instrumental in advancing environmental justice on the coast in several important new ways, beginning with a published case targeting harassment and intimidation at an exclusive surf break.



Unpermitted fort at Lunada Bay, Coastal Commission photo.

For many years, an infamous local surfer gang in Palos Verdes known as the Lunada Bay Boys had been aggressively [keeping “outsiders” off “their” waves](#). Their tactics included physical and verbal assault, vandalism, throwing rocks and racial slurs at visitors and physically blocking the trail to the beach. An earlier Commission enforcement action had forced the [removal of their beach clubhouse](#), built without permits decades before. Inspired by the Commission’s action, two private attorneys filed a separate Coastal Act suit against the City of Palos Verdes Estates for essentially condoning the continuing harassment and colluding with the Bay Boys to block beach and wave access. Although the trial court rejected the complaint, plaintiffs appealed the ruling, and the Coastal Commission filed an amicus brief in support. In May, a remarkable [appellate court ruling](#) found for the plaintiffs and the Commission, citing the Coastal Act’s definition of “development” to overturn the lower court ruling and uphold the suit against the City. The court concluded that the city was aware of the harassment activities conducted by the Bay Boys, which violated the Coastal Act by allowing an unpermitted “change in the . . . use of water or of access thereto.” In a published opinion, the court found that “Harassment may qualify as development under the Coastal Act.” This case was a victory for public rights and joins the landmark ruling in the [Jonathan Club](#) as an example of how the Coastal Act can be used to address social and racial barriers to coastal access.



Teaching kids to surf is one of the most empowering ways to build a lifelong connection to the ocean. But coastal NGOs have complained for years that it can be difficult and prohibitively expensive to get the necessary local approvals to bring kids to the beach for group surf lessons or camps. One of the most sought-after areas is Linda Mar Beach in Pacifica. With its consistent, gentle break, ample parking, broad sandy beach and public restrooms, it's a natural staging area for groups learning to surf for the first time. After years of brainstorming, problem-solving and coordination with the City of Pacifica, the Commission was able to approve a re-vamped [surf school permitting system](#) providing parity for non-profits who previously had to compete with established, commercial surf schools and camps for a limited number of permits. The new system is both affordable and accessible, and increases coordination between all user groups to ensure all participants as well as the general public can enjoy a safe, welcoming environment.

Expanding on that concept, the Commission was an early and strong supporter of [AB 1150](#), a bill that grew out of conversations between the Commission, State Parks, and the NGO community, about how to reduce financial and administrative barriers for non-profit groups whose mission is to increase access to state parks for underserved populations. The bill was introduced by the Assembly Water Parks and Wildlife Committee and signed by Governor Newsom in October. The Department of Parks and Recreation can now enter into community access agreements with non-profit organizations and Native American tribes providing interpretive and visitor services to underserved populations at state parks. Activities will be free or low-cost for participants.



In an ongoing effort to expand community outreach efforts, the Environmental Justice Unit launched a quarterly environmental justice (EJ) partner call with the Executive Director and other agency staff. The purpose of these calls is to enhance meaningful engagement and create an open line of communication between EJ partners and Commission staff. Over a dozen EJ organizations have participated in each of the calls, where the group engages in substantive discussions of relevant topics, including offshore wind, equitable access to our beaches and housing, and brainstorming ideas for future EJ partner calls.

But the highest-profile EJ issue the Commission tackled in 2023 was the ongoing pollution and beach closures in Southern San Diego County, stemming from inadequate treatment and repeated sewage spills in the Tijuana River Estuary. The South Bay [International Wastewater Treatment Plant](#), located about two miles west of the San Ysidro border crossing, provides basic treatment to approximately 25 million gallons of raw sewage per day from Tijuana, which is then discharged into the Pacific Ocean through the Tijuana River National Estuary Research Reserve near the city of Imperial Beach. Deficiencies in sewage treatment, as well as decades of deferred maintenance and under-investment in the facility have combined with significant increases in transboundary pollution flows from Mexico to contribute to extensive contamination of

coastal and estuarine waters, causing serious health issues for Imperial Beach residents and visitors across southern San Diego County. Nearby public beaches have been closed due to public health risks for the last two years.

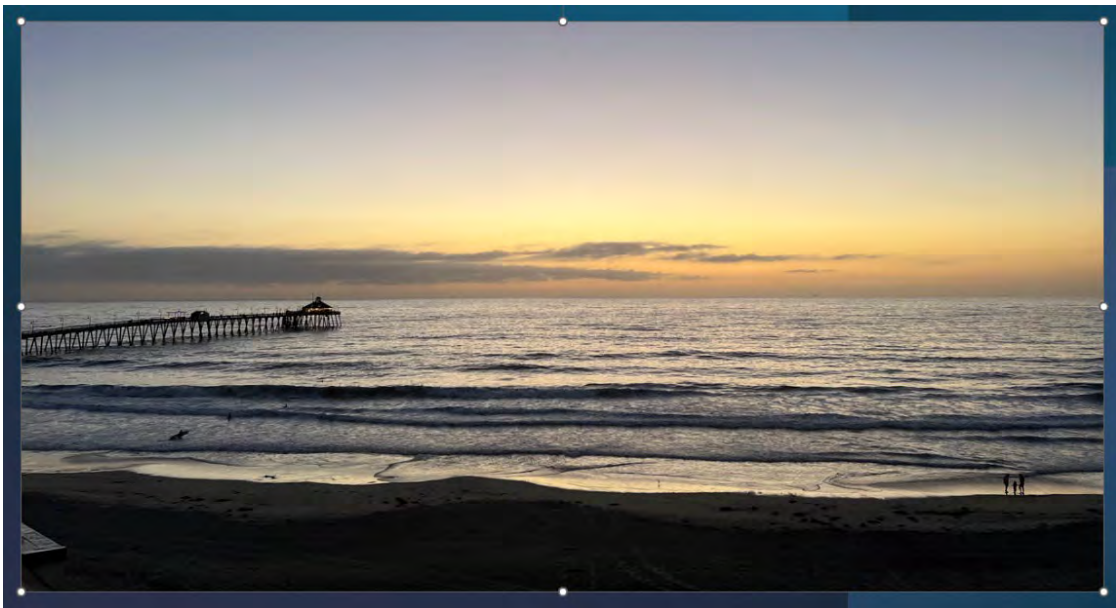
In May, the Commission unanimously concurred with a [federal consistency determination](#) by the US EPA and International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) for a range of projects to more comprehensively address the ongoing crisis. As part of its concurrence, the Commission conveyed its growing frustration with the slow pace of progress to the USEPA and IBWC in addressing the sewage and pollution issues, the worsening effects on public and environmental health, and the need for immediate action, close coordination, and transparency to ensure the proposed projects receive sufficient funding and remain on track. Following the May hearing, the Commission established a standing agenda item to receive regular updates on efforts to resolve the crisis. In August, Tropical Storm Hillary caused additional damage to the plant, resulting in the release of 80 million gallons of sewage daily for several days.



The Commission toured the Tijuana River Valley in Oct, to view the impacts of cross border pollution.

In October, the Commission convened a day-long tour of the Tijuana River Valley and held a public informational briefing in Imperial Beach. This briefing brought together state and federal officials, stakeholders, local leaders and members of the public to discuss and share information on the impacts of the crisis and need for immediate resolution. Following the October briefing, letters to [President Biden](#), [Governor Newsom](#) and [US Secretary of State Blinken](#) were prepared and sent on behalf of the Commission, calling for expedited funding to expand and upgrade the sewage and wastewater collection and treatment systems. Additional letters were also sent to the

[U.S. House of Representatives' Appropriations Committee](#) and to the California Association of Counties and League of California Cities. Commission staff worked continuously over much of the year to expand coordination efforts with local, state and federal agencies most involved in the crisis, including the City of Imperial Beach, Regional Water Quality Control Board and IBWC, as well as key environmental justice organizations and NGOs in the area. These coordination efforts as well as the Commission's letters, informational briefing, site visits, and monthly public discussions have helped elevate the issue and contributed to Governor Newsom's call to the President for additional federal assistance. On Oct 25, [President Biden requested \\$310 million](#) in emergency supplemental funding request to repair and expand the plant. Just before Thanksgiving, the Biden Administration announced [\\$2 billion in funding](#) for environmental and climate justice as part of the Inflation Reduction Act. Within this funding, \$100 million is specifically allotted for transborder pollution challenges, and specifically allocated toward disadvantaged communities within 100 km north of the U.S. - Mexico border. Today, the challenges in the Tijuana River Estuary persist, but the resources for resolving them have begun to materialize.



Imperial Beach Pier. Area beaches have been closed for more than 2 years.

Tribal Engagement



New Tribal Consultation Story Map available on the Commission's web page.

California Native American Tribes have lived in, on and with every part of California's landscapes since time immemorial. Despite genocidal atrocities committed by colonizers and perpetuated by government policies, coastal Tribes are still on the landscape and still practicing their cultural traditions. To help raise awareness of the rich history and contributions of California Native American cultures, and foster respectful engagement with Tribes today, the Commission created a deeply informative Tribal Consultation [story map](#) that features the voices of California Tribal leaders in their own words. It provides an overview of the Commission's Tribal Consultation Policy as well as advances in state law and examples of how Tribal consultation leads to better project outcomes.

In January, the Commission approved the 2023 Whale Tail grantees, which included 9 grants serving Native American Tribal communities, the highest number of tribal-related awards to date. Grant awards included funding to support an immersive 3-day coastal camp for Yurok youth in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties where they learned indigenous skills from their elders; a Northern San Diego habitat restoration project centered on the Agua Caliente Tribe of Cupeno Indians' indigenous culture and history; and the creation of a certification course on the skills needed for monitoring the

proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary for adaptive management and mitigation of impacts of new energy sources, centered in traditional ecological knowledge and western scientific research. This increase in tribal participation is a direct result of the increased outreach and technical assistance to Tribal communities by staff to raise awareness of the Commission's grant opportunities.



Tribal Students visit the Mendocino coast, thanks to a Whale Tail grant.

In February, Commission staff leadership joined representatives from the California Natural Resources Agency in Sacramento at the California Tribal Nations Summit. The day-long event brought California tribal leaders and Administration officials together to discuss a range of issues important to Tribes, with an emphasis on ways we can work together to strengthen government-to-government relationships throughout the state. The event was co-hosted by the Governor's Office and the California Tribal Chairpersons Association, and provided a productive venue to foster and build productive working relationships for future engagement.



Unpermitted grading on the Bolsa Chica Mesa. Land will be restored and returned to local Tribes.

In a victory for the “Land Back” movement, just before Thanksgiving, the Tongva and Acjachemen Tribes celebrated the [return of 6.2 acres of coastal ancestral land](#) overlooking the Bolsa Chica wetlands in Orange County. The land had been the site of an ancient village and holds deep cultural significance as well sensitive native habitat. The land owner had allowed [extreme grading](#) and land contouring on the site to create a competitive course for mountain bike competitions, without any permits or Tribal consultations. With a significant enforcement action and administrative penalties looming, the landowners worked with the Coastal Commission and the City of Huntington Beach on a plan to transfer the land to the Acjachemen Tongva Land Conservancy (ATLC) which will restore the land and preserve it for ceremonies and traditional cultural practices.

Climate Change & Sea Level Rise



California is increasingly experiencing the very real effects of climate change including record heat, record rainfall, wildfires and rising seas. While sea level rise (SLR) has been called a “slow moving emergency”, storm events like those we experienced in 2023 continue to remind us that the effects of climate change are both inevitable and unpredictable. Therefore, preparation is essential. The Commission is at the forefront of helping public agencies in the coastal zone plan for increased resilience and adaptation strategies for the future we know is coming. Throughout the year, in addition to authorizing a significant number of emergency repairs from the January storms, staff worked with local governments and state partners to develop and implement solutions that would be resilient to future conditions. In September, the Commission took a [deep dive](#) into the latest predictions for the winter 2023-24 El Nino event. The Commission’s staff geologist delivered a [public presentation](#) to the Commission explaining the atmospheric forces behind El Nino and La Nina climate conditions, and the art and science of predictions, with an eye toward what communities can do to limit damage through strategic preparation. The Commission’s website has been updated to include an [dedicated page](#) for related information, and staff was subsequently invited to provide a similar briefing to our local government partners at the California State Association of Counties (CSAC).



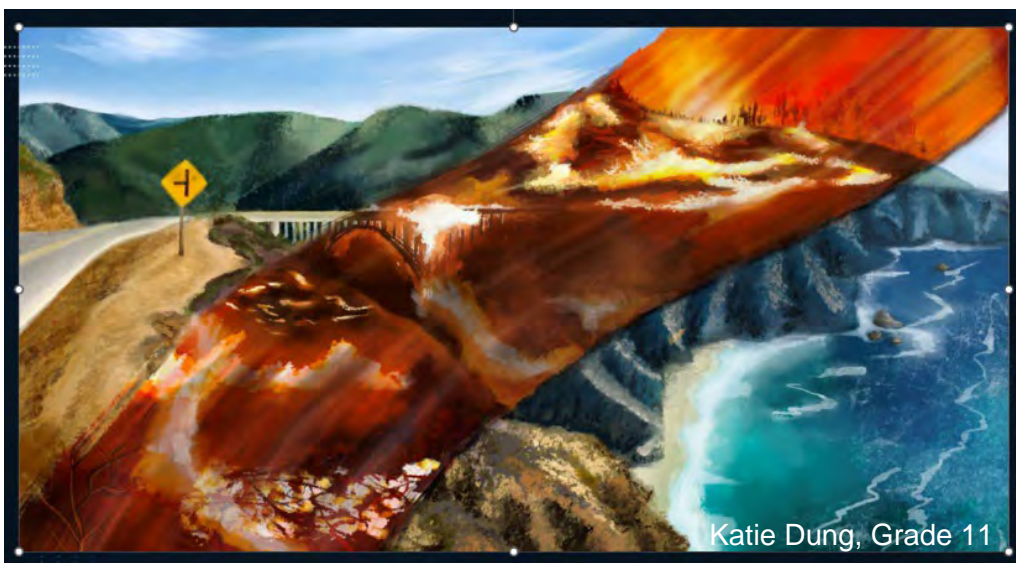
The City of San Diego will conduct a sea level rise vulnerability assessment with a grant from the Commission.

In terms of direct assistance, the Commission continued to promote its Local Assistance Grant Program. Since 2013, the Commission has provided nearly \$21 million in grants to cities and counties to support the inclusion of sea level rise and climate resilience policies in their Local Coastal Programs (LCPs). In 2023, the Commission awarded over \$4.4 million to [14 different jurisdictions](#) to develop a variety of policies, strategies and implementation measures. Also, this year, the Commission replaced its competitive grant cycle with a new process that allows grant applications to be submitted on a rolling basis year-round. Under this new, streamlined process, staff screens proposals for consistency with program priorities and evaluation criteria. Proposals over \$500,000 are reviewed and agendaized for Commission approval at the next available hearing, similar to the process for past competitive grant rounds. Proposals of less than \$500,000 can be approved administratively by the Executive Director.

These updated procedures are more user-friendly and have improved the efficiency and success of the LCP Grant Program for both the Commission and local jurisdictions. By not limiting applications to competitive rounds with specific timelines, local jurisdictions

can apply for grants as needs arise. Decisions are made more quickly, and jurisdictions can initiate work on awarded grants more quickly. In practice, this approach has also led to significantly more coordination between Commission and local staff during the grant proposal development phase resulting in proposals that better meet program requirements and Commission and local goals.

The Commission is also helping public agencies plan for increased wildfire resilience to meet the future we know is coming. In February, the Commission approved a Public Works Plan (PWP) for the Monterey County Resource Conservation District, authorizing a 10-year vegetation treatment program that will enhance ecosystems and improve wildfire resilience in furtherance of the State Board of Forestry's California Vegetation Treatment Program Programmatic (Cal VTP) within the Monterey County coastal zone. The item was approved without modification on the consent agenda. In October, the first project to come forward under the PWP was [84-acres of forest restoration and shaded fuel breaks](#) in the Rancho Rico area of Big Sur.



In December, the Commission approved a [hazardous fuels reduction](#) plan on the Ellwood Mesa Open Space Preserve in the city of Goleta. The city will oversee the removal of dead and dying trees and non-native vegetation across the 78-acre site, as well as reducing fuel ladders to prevent crown fires. The 5-year project will improve forest health while also providing a buffer between the park and neighboring homes, reducing the spread of wildfire in both directions.

Throughout 2023, the Commission continued working with Caltrans to incorporate SLR planning into several critical coastal corridors of the Pacific Coast Highway. This work has typically proceeded on a project-by-project basis through CDP applications, but there is a growing recognition that SLR vulnerability would be more holistically and

proactively addressed through Caltrans' long-range planning efforts and asset management. Several factors greatly expanded the work this year, including extensive coordination between Commission and Caltrans staff on the [2023 update to Caltrans' State Highway System Management Plan](#), which expanded its analysis of SLR vulnerability and allocated \$1.2 billion for SLR adaptation. Commission staff also worked closely with Caltrans to update the [Regional Transportation Plan / Sustainable Communities Strategies Guidelines](#), which will encourage Metropolitan Planning Organizations to proactively analyze SLR vulnerability on a regional scale.

At the project level, Commission staff continued work with our partners at Caltrans to incorporate SLR planning into critical coastal corridors of the Pacific Coast Highway, including Bolinas Lagoon in Marin County, between Pescadero and Surfers' Beaches in San Mateo County, Scotts Creek beach and lagoon in Santa Cruz County, the area surrounding Big Sycamore Creek in Ventura County, as well as Topanga Creek and Ballona Creeks in Los Angeles County. These projects and planning efforts offer significant potential for addressing climate change vulnerability for critical transportation infrastructure corridors, as well as expanded public access, improved multi-modal transportation options, and habitat protection and restoration.

Future generations will be dealing with the effects of climate change, and hopefully will be finding new ways to manage and minimize the impacts. In July, the Public Education Program announced the results of the Coastal Commission's 2023 Climate Video Challenge. California middle and high school students were encouraged to create videos that answered the following question: "What is your vision for a thriving future?" California's kids rose to the challenge, and their answers were both inspiring and sobering. A panel of judges selected first, second, and third-place winners along with one honorable mention. The winning videos can be viewed [here](#).

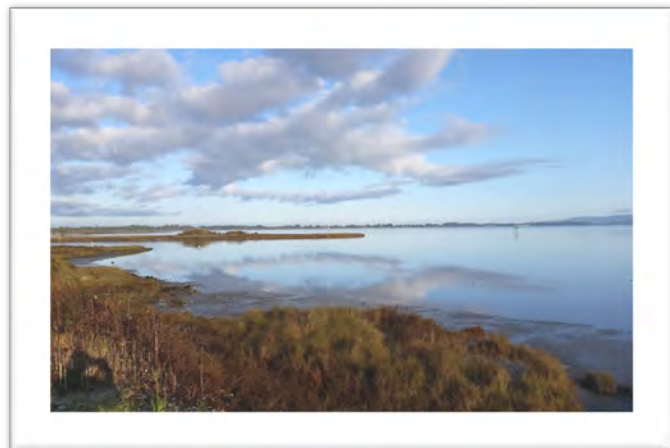
LCP Planning



Sophie Han, Grade 2

Local Coastal Programs (LCPs) are the plans by which coastal cities and counties implement the Coastal Act in ways through policies that are tailored to their jurisdictions. They provide certainty for developers, guideposts for local decision-makers, and help the general public understand the long-range vision for their coastal zone. LCPs are intended to be “living documents” that can be amended as needed to respond to changed circumstances, new information and emerging priorities. All LCP amendments are approved by the Commission, but once certified, local governments are responsible for issuing the permits. The Commission acted on 61 LCP amendments in 2023 to address a variety of issues. Here are some of the highlights:

In February, the Commission certified the City of Eureka’s LCP amendment to [prohibit new digital signs](#) throughout the City’s coastal zone. The Commission’s action followed an earlier action taken a few months earlier to approve updated sign regulations with suggested modifications prohibiting digital signs in most zones.



Scenic Humboldt Bay.

The updated regulations will limit the impacts of night lighting on wildlife, and improve the visual quality of Eureka's commercial corridor and protect the scenic nature of the City's waterfront and other scenic coastal areas.

In March, the Commission approved a comprehensive update of the [Del Norte County Harbor Master Plan](#), which included improvements for public access, visitor-serving amenities and removal of unsightly billboards, as well as increased attention to sea level rise vulnerability. Some of the improvements will include ADA accessible viewing areas, new bus stops, and a policy to include trails and public walkways as an allowable use in all land use designations. Overall, the update will help the Harbor Area reflect the region's current state of transition from resource extraction to a tourism and recreation services-based economy.



In August, the Commission certified the addition of a new Coastal Hazards section to the City of Manhattan Beach's [Land Use Plan](#) (LUP) which had not been updated since 1994. Building off of previous grant funding from the Commission, this update addressed climate change, sea level rise adaptation and resiliency, including a shoreline-wide emphasis on nature-based adaptation measures and minimal coastal armoring. Overall, the new Coastal Hazards section is centered around three primary goals: 1) natural management of coastal hazards; 2) emphasis on protection of public access, recreation, and sensitive coastal resources; and 3) inclusionary decision-making, coordination, and public participation in planning and regulatory processes.

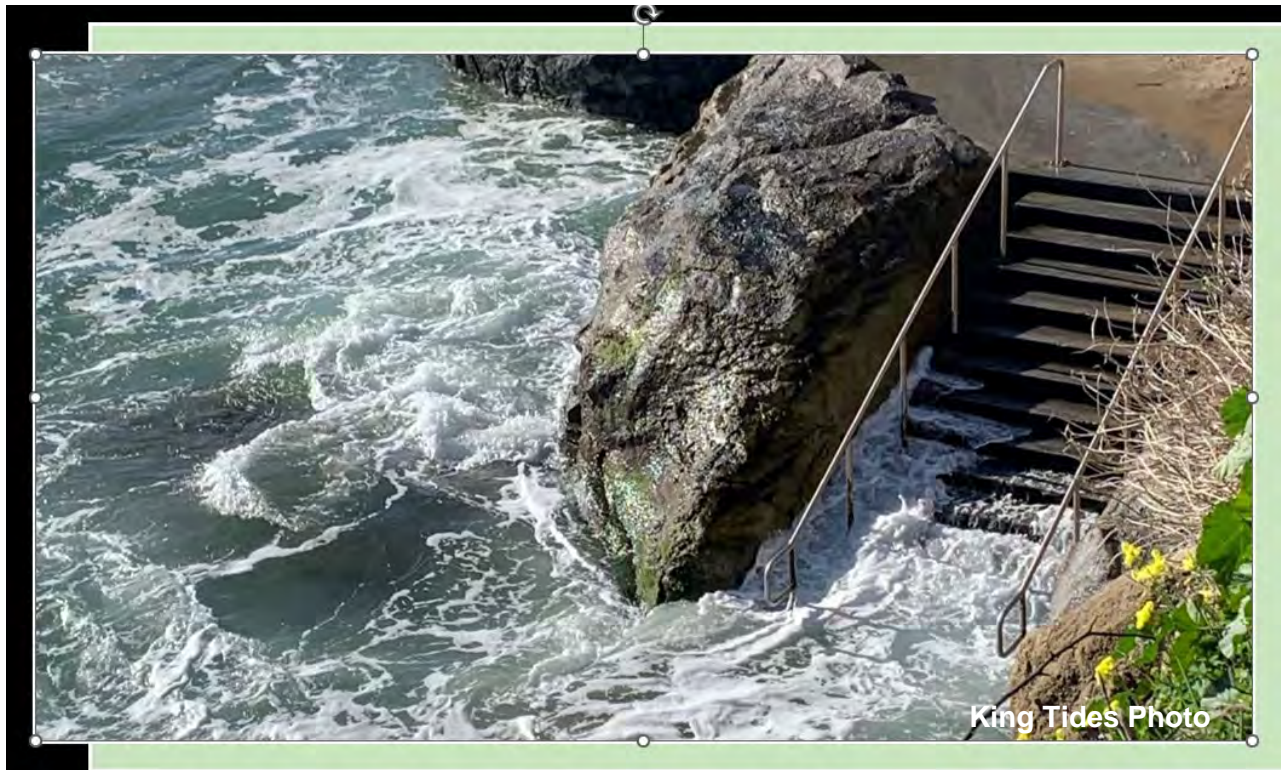
Public Access and Visitor-Serving Opportunities

The Coastal Act calls for maximizing public access to and along the coast, so that the timeless

beauty, tranquility and inspiration is equally available to all the people, regardless of zip code. The Commission accomplishes this visionary mandate by requiring full mitigation for any new development that impacts public access, working with state and local partners to provide new trails, overlooks and stairways, and swiftly correcting Coastal Act violations that block or diminish existing access.

In partnership with the California State Lands Commission, the Commission's Statewide Planning Program recently developed a Story Map called "[Keeping California's Coast Accessible](#)" that describes the impacts of sea level rise on Public Trust resources and uses, outlines a variety of strategies to address those impacts, and provides resources for more information. The Story Map was developed using National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration federal grant funds pursuant to the Commission's five-year 309 Assessment and Strategy under the Coastal Zone Management Act.





In February, the Commission approved a permit for the USS Midway Museum and the San Diego Unified Port District to demolish a vacant building on Navy Pier that was blocking coastal views and construct a [3.6 acre public park](#). The Improvements will include a 32 ft. wide promenade, public restrooms, low-cost snack concession stand, interpretive signs, memorials, and monuments, play structures, bicycle racks and benches. The applicants originally committed to creating this park as mitigation for the visual impacts associated with the berthing the USS Midway once ownership of Navy Pier was transferred to the Port. The transfer occurred in 2003, but the park never materialized. In order to address the visual and public access impacts that occurred from the 20-year delay in bringing this project forward, the applicants agreed to include a 20-year mitigation program that will facilitate access to the Navy Pier Freedom Park and Midway Museum through various programs for disadvantaged communities.



California Coastal Trail improvements in Half Moon Bay.

Just in time for summer, a critical section of the California Coastal Trail was re-opened in Half-Moon Bay, pursuant to a permit issued by the Commission in 2021. The pedestrian bridge and stairs provide for continuous bluff and beach access for thousands of visitors every year had been damaged by erosion and was deemed unsafe. State Parks replaced the bridge with a sturdier design that walkers and bicyclists can safely enjoy once again.

In August, Commission staff joined State Parks in a celebration of the reopening of a public beach stairway at Manresa Uplands State Park in Santa Cruz County. Damaged by storm surge, the stairs were originally made possible by conditions in a 1977 coastal development permit requiring a 28-acre dedication of land as mitigation for a 97-unit condominium complex—an example of how Coastal Act policies can be used to create public benefits as part of private development projects.



Staff from State Parks and the Coastal Commission celebrate the rebuilt stairway at Manresa State Park.

In partnership with the Crystal Cove Conservancy, California State Parks completed the restoration of eight more cottages at Crystal Cove State Park in Orange County just in time for Thanksgiving. The long-awaited opening of the cottages is part of a decades-long project to protect, preserve and restore the 46 historic beachfront cottages and open them for public use. An earlier plan to convert the area into a high-end resort met with intense public opposition in 2001 and was replaced by an ambitious effort to restore the structures for lower-cost visitor use instead. The Coastal Commission has permitted every phase of the project and directed several million dollars in in-lieu fees to the restoration. The Conservancy's programs, supported in part by cottage rental fees, prioritize underserved communities with three-quarters of participants coming from Title 1 schools.



Newly renovated cottage at Crystal Cove State Beach. Crystal Cove Conservancy photo.

Sometimes maximizing public access means removing impediments to what is already there. One recent example involved a private gate and fence blocking a path along Padaro Lane in Carpinteria, which leads to an otherwise inaccessible section of beachfront. Several decades ago, the Commission and the County of Santa Barbara had secured a public access easement allowing pedestrian access from the road to the beach. But nearby property owners installed a locked gate and wooden fence within the easement and the accessway had never been opened. Additional obstructions along the road's shoulder further limited the already-sparse public parking in the area. Following

contact from Commission enforcement staff, the homeowners removed the gate and fence and installed public access signs to highlight the newly opened path. The property owners also removed the parking obstructions which provided additional parking spaces in close proximity to the accessway. See below for additional public access highlights stemming from enforcement actions.



Padaro Lane Stairs in Carpenteria are open for public use.

Healthy Habitats for Coastal Species



With climate change putting new stressors on sensitive habitats, it's more important than ever to protect and restore coastal ecosystems, from watersheds to micro-habitats. One way to help native wildlife is to remove or modify structures that impact them. A good example was the recent collaboration between the Commission and Caltrans to improve wildlife passage along Highway 101 in Santa Barbara County. Caltrans' [Wildlife Connectivity Assessment](#) analyzes the potential for projects that will benefit central coast wildlife by reducing vehicle collisions as well increasing genetic diversity through by connecting isolated populations. The Commission's early coordination during the planning phase will ensure efficient permitting in the future.

Throughout 2023, Commission worked with San Mateo County to permanently protect 5.4 acres of California red-legged frog habitat near Año Nuevo State Park. The conservation easement area includes a sag pond and surrounding riparian vegetation that supports the endangered frog on an 84-acre parcel. This conservation easement was required through a [coastal development permit](#) for construction of a single family home, approved in 2001.



California red-legged Frog

Commission staff also secured permanent protection of nearly 75 acres in the Pajaro Valley in Santa Cruz County in 2023. The Watsonville Wetlands Watch accepted four agricultural buffer and habitat conservation easements protecting agricultural land and wetlands surrounding the Pajaro Valley High School. The Commission and the City of Watsonville required these conservation easements through coastal development permits for construction of a new high school and lot line adjustments in the early 2000s.



Harkins Slough wetlands adjacent to Pajaro Valley High School.

In June, the California State Lands Commission celebrated the successful removal of the last two oil production piers in California at Haskell's beach in the city of Goleta. [Approved for demolition](#) by the Coastal Commission in 2022, this represents a poignant milestone in California's transition away from fossil fuels, as it marks the end of oil production in the Ellwood Oil Field, 100 years after the first wells were drilled. Nearly 6,000 tons of material were removed, 97% of which was recycled. State Lands produced a [time-lapse video](#) to illustrate the entire removal process.

In September, Executive Direction Huckelbridge issued an Executive Director Cease and Desist Order, following the unpermitted removal of fencing to protect endangered snowy plovers in Newport Beach. The Commission and the City reached an agreement to reinstall the fencing, which was replaced the following month.



Snowy plover chick.

Michelle Velasco

Demonstrating that habitat restoration and public access can be mutually beneficial, the Commission approved another [snowy plover habitat restoration project](#) at Moss Landing in Monterey with a public access component. The 161-acre site is a former salt evaporation pond within Moss Landing Wildlife Area. The managed pond system is protected from the main channel of Elkhorn Slough by an old levee that was not constructed to withstand the impacts of sea level rise and severe weather events caused by climate change. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) will lower and recontour the existing levee, restore the marsh along the bank, and construct a new setback. This nature-based adaptation strategy will slow erosion while still allowing for a fully functional shoreline and marsh ecosystem, as well as expanded eelgrass beds offshore. Erosion management will also result in improved public access with symbolic fencing to prevent foot traffic from impacting vegetation along the bank.

In November the Commission received an update on the implementation of the [National Parks Service's Point Reyes National Seashore Management Plan](#). The Commission's previous concurrence on the plan required additional water quality monitoring measures and an annual update. Pt. Reyes is one of only two National Parks in the country that includes commercial agricultural activities on public lands. Cattle ranching has been a long-standing tradition at Point Reyes. But runoff from the concentrated livestock areas have continued to impair sensitive water bodies, and the fencing restricts the native elk herds. While the update revealed that conditions have improved, the plan has not resulted in full compliance with water quality standards. At the end of the briefing, the Commission asked staff to look more closely at the circumstances, so that the Commission could consider whether a re-opening of the management plan is warranted next year.



Freshwater wetlands at Point Reyes National Seashore.

Keeping oil and other contaminants out of the ocean requires constant vigilance and continuing education. The Commission's [Boating Clean and Green](#) program, in partnership with State Parks, focuses on the latter. In 2023 staff trained a new cohort of 176 Dockwalker volunteers to educate boaters at marinas, launch ramps, and boating events. Dockwalkers and staff also distributed 7,600 California Boater Kits, which provide boaters with the know-how and tools to reduce their environmental impact through clean boating practices. Program staff conducted two oil spill response communication workshops for boating facility managers, and launched new episodes of the [Dockside podcast](#). Topics this year included microplastics, shark research, marine composting toilets, and profiles of trail blazers like Captain Marie Rogers, the first Black woman to hold Commodore ship at a Los Angeles yacht club.

Public Education: Coastal Stewardship Through Learning



The Commission’s Public Education Unit is responsible for implementing the Coastal Act mandate to carry out a public education program for the purpose of promoting and encouraging the conservation and wise use of coastal and ocean resources (PRC 30012(b)). Most of these activities and programs are funded through the sale of [WHALE TAIL® license plates](#) as well as the annual [Protect Our Coast and Ocean Fund](#) (POCO) fund for voluntary tax donations.

While the WHALE TAIL® specialty license plate has consistently been a top seller, revenues over the last several years have been declining due to a variety of reasons, including increased competition from new specialty plates. Whale Tail plate sales and renewals generated \$4.2 million over the last fiscal year. Of this, \$1.1 million was allocated to the Coastal Commission for public education programs and Whale Tail Grants. The remaining \$3.1 million was deposited into the statewide Environmental License Plate Fund (ELPF) for a range of uses.



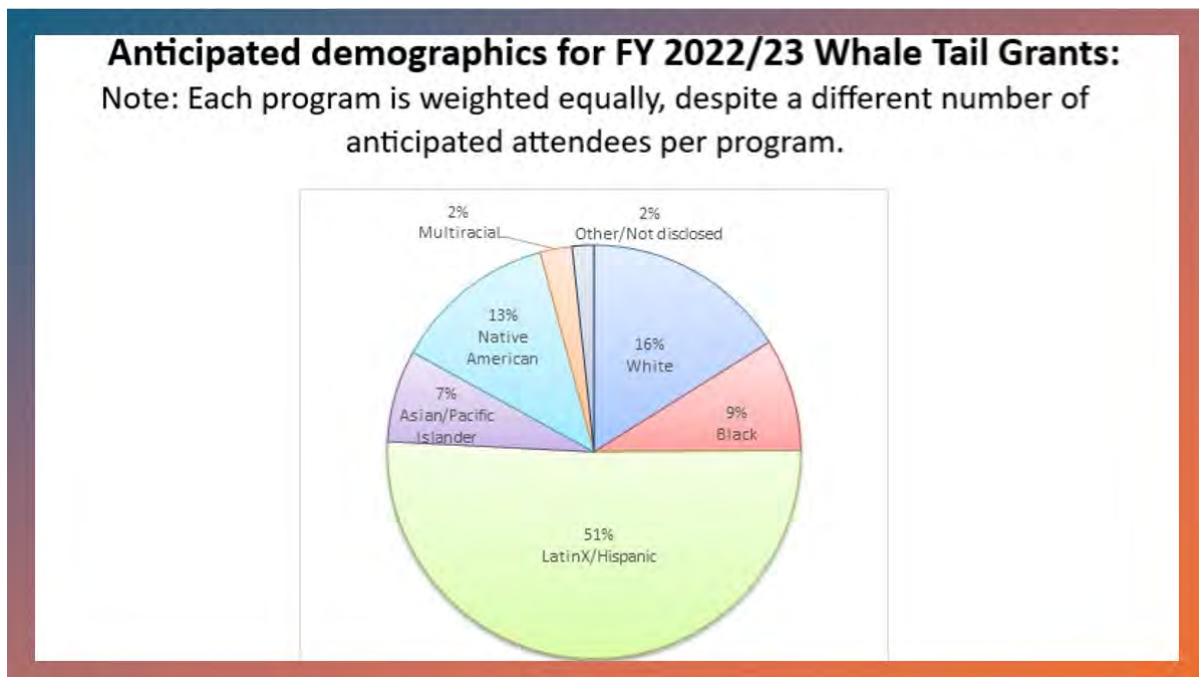
Noting that the funding formula is not on par with other specialty plates, during the annual Public Education report at the December meeting, Commissioners expressed concerns with the long-term solvency of the WHALE TAIL® Grant Program. Commissioners directed staff to look into the potential for bringing parity to the Whale Tail funding allocation structure to ensure the long-term viability of the program.

Happily, the Commission's *other* grant funding source, the [voluntary tax check-off program](#), sends 100% of the contributions the WHALE TAIL® Grant Program. This year's tax-deductible donations in the amount of \$298,995 came from 19,969 individuals who "checked the coast" on their 2023 state tax forms, and helped to fund a variety of [creative, impactful grant proposals](#).



Despite the concern over long-term funding trends, the 2022/23 [WHALE TAIL® Grants](#) cycle was robust, with over \$2 million distributed to 56 grantees. This was due to a one-time, \$10 million-dollar budget augmentation in FY 20-21 which the Commission has five years to spend. An [equity analysis](#) conducted after this year's grantees were

selected revealed the success of ongoing efforts to reach disadvantaged communities in the entire grant cycle, from outreach and applicant support to grant management. Fiscal Year 2022/2023 grant projects were awarded in 24 counties and the greater San Francisco Bay region. Forty-nine of the projects focus on engaging low-income communities, 39 focus on communities of color, 22 support dual language learners, 13 engage inland communities, 9 focus on tribal communities, 9 engage newcomers and migrant communities, 7 take place in Designated Rural Regions, 7 engage unhoused communities, and 3 focus on LGBTQ2S+ communities. Other identified focus demographics include highly pollution-burdened communities, carceral system impacted, people with disabilities, youth in the foster system, flood vulnerable communities, wildlife impacted, elders, families, and teachers. The overall universe of individuals anticipated to be engaged through these grants is 82% non-white, from a variety of disadvantaged communities.



Kids' Ocean Day, an annual event funded through the Whale Tail program for nearly 30 years, once again brought thousands of students to the beach for a statewide collective action on May 25. For many, it was their first visit to the ocean. Per tradition, the day ended with unique, themed [aerial art](#) formations. The 2023 theme was "Give Nature a Chance." To commemorate the post-Covid return of the annual event, the Ocean Day organization released video, titled "Joy in Nature" which is available on the Commission's [YouTube](#) page. The students' enthusiasm is a reminder that the human spirit and the joy of connecting with nature are eternal, unstoppable forces.



The 39th annual [California Coastal Cleanup Day](#) took place on Saturday, September 23rd. This is the largest, longest-running volunteer event of its kind. While continuing to rebuild capacity after interruptions caused by COVID-19, coordinators around the state organized 696 cleanup sites across the state in 55 of California's 58 counties. All told, 44,352 volunteers turned out over the month of September to remove 360,521 pounds of trash and recyclables from over 2,055 miles of coastal and inland shorelines. And with 1,883 total cleanup events, California led the world in cleanup activity in September.



Ronnie Goyette

Once again, the winners of the 2023 [Children's Art and Poetry Contest](#) and the [Amateur Photography Contest](#) captured Californians' love and concern for the coast and ocean, and showcased the remarkable talents of the participants. Many of the winning images are found throughout this report, and are available for purchase through the [Commission's website](#). Proceeds are reinvested into the Commission's Public Education programs.

Transportation Program



Sonoma Marin Area Rapid Transit train. King Tides photo.

The Statewide Transportation Program remains at the forefront of the Commission's efforts to ensure critical infrastructure resiliency, promote smart growth/sustainability principles, and broaden multi-modal transportation.

Throughout the year, the Commission approved eight coastal development permits (CDPs) for Caltrans' projects, as well as two Emergency CDPs, eight waivers, and one LCP Amendment for the Highway 156/Castroville Boulevard in Monterey County. But long before permits come to the Commission, the Transportation Program staff coordinate with Caltrans, local government planners, resource conservation districts, and other state agencies on a wide number of transportation projects that are in the early development phase. Thanks to these ongoing partnerships the Commission can facilitate new opportunities to expand public access as components of or mitigation for needed transportation projects.



Coastal Commission photo

“Pop-up” bike lane in Eureka was successful and will be replaced with a permanent bike lane.

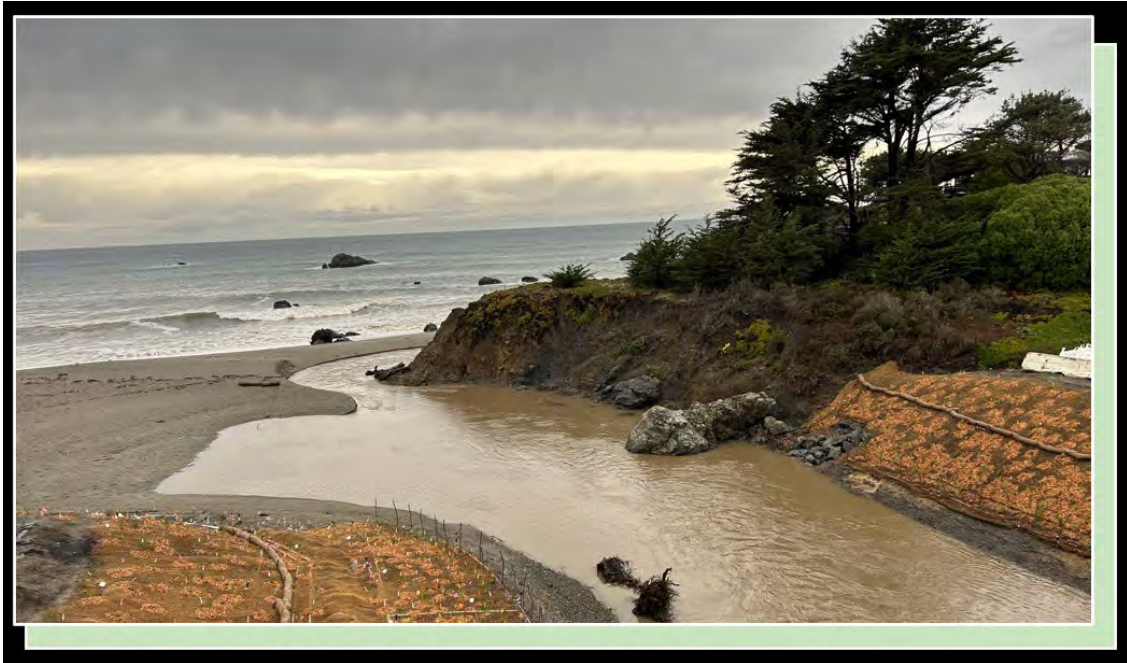
Bike lanes, complete streets, and multi-use trail projects provide excellent opportunities to further multiple Coastal Act polices. They reduce vehicle miles travelled (VMTs), expand public access, and provide lower-cost recreational opportunities. In 2023, the Commission approved several permits, waivers and planning actions that will provide significant public access benefits including a [new bike lane](#) in Downtown Eureka, a [new multi-purpose trail](#) in the City of Goleta, [ADA improvements](#) in downtown Fort Bragg in Mendocino County, [improved ADA and bicycle access](#) along a twelve-mile stretch of Highway 1 in Marin County, [a new coastal pathway](#) near Trinidad in Humboldt County, [public access improvements adjacent to Refugio State Beach and the first segment of the Coastal Trail](#) along the Gaviota Coast in Santa Barbara County and a 1.5 mile long Class I bike path and a vista point on the west side of Paradise Marsh in National City. This segment is part of the [Bayshore Bikeway](#), a 24-mile bicycle path around San Diego Bay that is a popular public coastal amenity as well as part of the California Coastal Trail.

Capping 15 years of planning and three years of construction, the long-awaited Highway 1 realignment at Gleason Beach was completed and opened for use in March. Moving this critical section of Highway 1 between the town of Jenner and Bodega Bay to higher ground included construction of a new, 850' bridge over Scotty Creek complete with bicycle lanes and a separated pedestrian walkway that are part of the California Coastal Trail. The new bridge will better withstand high flows while also improving



Scotty Creek Bridge.

riparian habitat and fish passage. A model of interagency coordination for managed retreat, the project was developed by Caltrans, Sonoma County and the Commission, and [approved](#) by the Commission in 2020.



Riparian restoration at Scotty Creek.

In November, the new [Pudding Creek Bridge](#) in Fort Bragg was completed and opened for public use. The bridge is part of the California Coastal Trail, so Caltrans and the Commission took extra care to incorporate pedestrian and bicycle access in a design that maximizes scenic coastal views. This is an excellent example of the benefits of incorporating “complete streets” concepts into major public infrastructure upgrades.



The new Pudding Creek Bridge in Fort Bragg.

Saving Iconic Landscapes

Former Executive Director Peter Douglas was fond of saying that some of the Commission's greatest accomplishments are the things you don't see: the wetlands *not* filled, the agricultural land *not* paved over. Although the Commission approves, on average, more than 95% of all the applications it receives, some projects simply can't be found consistent with the Coastal Act due to significant harm to coastal resources.



Hallowed Ground - Painting of Hollister Peak by Matt Beard.

One of those was the Pecho Coast Energy Storage Project in San Luis Obispo County, a large industrial facility proposed for construction at the base of the iconic Hollister Peak would have relied on pumped groundwater to store energy underground. Hollister Peak is a Northern Chumash Sacred site as well as an iconic landmark along the State and Federally designated Scenic Highway One south of Morro Bay. The land is zoned for agricultural use, and the Estero Valley supports some of the County's most productive agricultural soils. After numerous residents complained in 2021 that pre-construction activities had begun without a coastal development permit, the

Commission issued a cease-and-desist order. While the company halted on-site activities and continued to pursue state and federal approvals, they asserted that they were exempt from the Coastal Act. The Commission [disagreed](#), and notified the California Energy Commission (CEC). On September 27 the applicant [withdrew its license request](#) from the CEC, after the agency determined the project was “non-optimal” due in part to Coastal Act requirements. The company is pursuing an alternate location for the project outside of the coastal zone.



Sonoma County coastline near Ft. Ross.

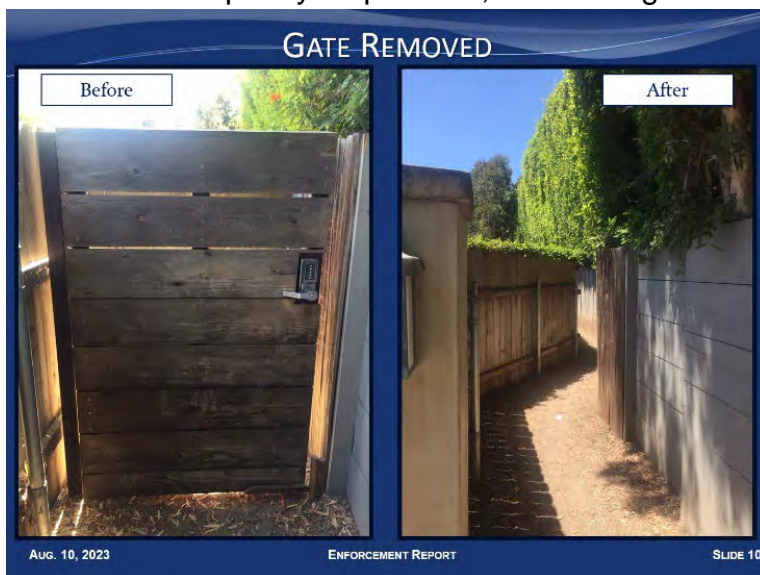
On December 19, 2023, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) announced that it had [denied an application](#) by Alabama-based Hydro Green Energy (HGE) for a [pumped energy storage project](#) near the town of Jenner and Fort Ross State Historic Park on the scenic Sonoma coast. The concept would have created a 23-acre saltwater reservoir near the top of a coastal ridge, into which sea water would be pumped during times when energy was plentiful. Then, when renewable wind and solar ebbs, the water would be released to generate hydro-electricity and discharged back into the ocean. The Coastal Commission was one of several public agencies that joined numerous elected officials in registering [grave concerns](#) about the project. The FERC denial was based in part on impacts to the federally protected offshore and intertidal resources within the California Coastal National Monument designated by President Clinton in 2000.

Enforcement Highlights

Implementation of the Coastal Act depends on the indispensable work of the Commission's Enforcement Unit. Their task is to make sure permit conditions are followed, unpermitted development is removed as quickly as possible, and damages to coastal resources are repaired.

But the most effective result of a robust enforcement program is reducing the number of new violations. In 2021, the Commission gained the authority to impose [administrative penalties](#) for Coastal Act violations, which has proven to be a strong deterrent to property owners who may be considering unpermitted development. The threat of penalties also creates a financial incentive to resolve

violations quickly and amicably. Through a combination of enforcement orders approved by the Commission, and voluntary resolutions negotiated by district staff, the Commission leveraged significant benefits for public resources in 2023, including three noteworthy Orders approved by the Commission, addressing public access violations in San Diego, Malibu and Santa Cruz County.



Malibu Beach Access

On June 7, the Commission approved [Consent Orders and Administrative Penalties](#) addressing violations in Malibu. Previous permits in the 1970s and 1980s issued to the Wildman Family Trust and Mancuso Family Revocable Trust required public access easements from Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) to Escondido Beach. The Commission's intent was to preserve public access to an existing trail down an arroyo and out to the beach, as well as public parking along PCH. But for many decades, the easements were impassable for the public, due to unpermitted fences, gates, and hedges. The vertical public easement had been recorded in the wrong place in the early 1980's, and passed over very steep bluff edges and along the top of the arroyo, instead of along the bottom where the trail had been.

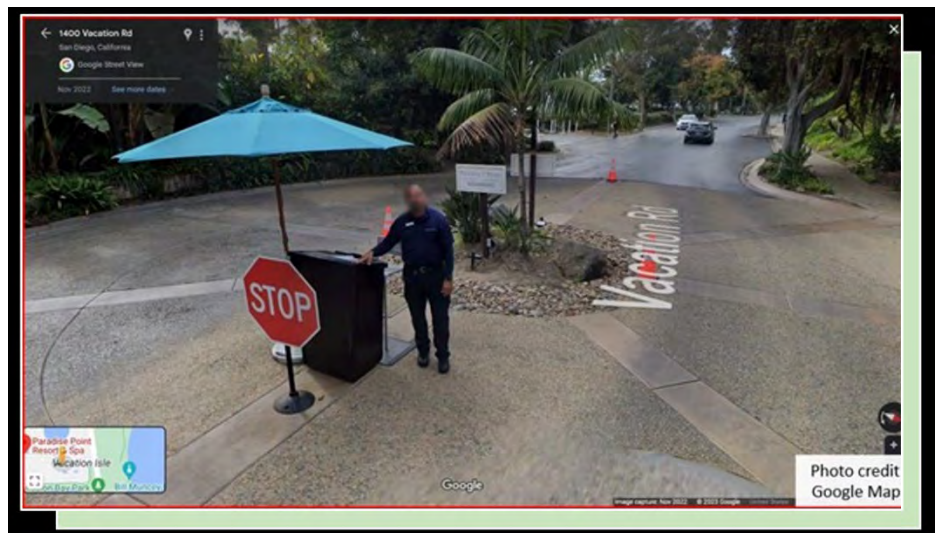
In 2017, the Commission sent Notices of Violation to the property owners and began negotiating with them toward an amicable resolution of the violations. In 2023, both property owners agreed to move the public access easements to better locations that

will be easier to construct and maintain. The Wildman Family Trust will now build the accessway and parking improvements in a much better location for the public, and Mr. Mancuso will pay a \$600,000 monetary penalty. The combined resolution is estimated to be worth well over \$4 million in value to the public for the accessway alone, and will provide much more safe and enjoyable public beach access that is also more protective of coastal resources.

Paradise Point Resort, Mission Bay, San Diego

On September 6 the Commission approved a [Consent Cease and Desist Order](#) and Administrative Penalty to address public access violations at Paradise Point Resort in San Diego. The Mission Bay Hotel operates a large resort on public trust tidelands along the shores of Mission Bay, which are leased to the resort by the city of San Diego. Although the Hotel's permit required public access to state tidelands be maintained throughout the resort, the hotel owners failed to install the required signs. They also built and staffed a guard shack specifically to deter public entry onto public lands, as well as numerous other physical barriers to block existing paths and trails. As a result, the public was largely unaware that many beaches and hundreds of public parking spaces had been legally available to them for decades.

As part of the Commission's Consent Order, the Hotel will remove the unpermitted development; discontinue the security guards; install 70 new public access signs across the property; build new public restrooms; construct a continuous Bay Trail with two new public paths to the beach;



Unpermitted security check at Paradise Point Resort.

expand the public parking area and install EV chargers for public use; provide \$500,000 to bring underserved youth and their families to the site; promote the public access opportunities on their website; train their staff to provide accurate information to visitors; and pay \$1 million to the Violation Remediation Account (VRA) to improve public access in a variety of ways. The benefits the public total well over \$3 million in value and will result in the most dramatic improvement of public access in the nearly six-decade history of the resort, transforming an area that is severely underutilized by the public to an inviting visitor experience.

On December 14, 2023, the Commission approved Unilateral Cease and Desist Orders and Administrative Penalties against the Rio Del Mar Beach Island Homeowners' Association (HOA) and adjacent property owners for Coastal Act and permit violations in Aptos. The orders and penalties were issued after a contested hearing, after which the HOA and property owners sued the Commission. The violations are located within and adjacent to a beachfront walkway near Seacliff State Beach. In 1980, the

Commission issued a permit to the HOA for a revetment in front of a concrete walkway, requiring the HOA provide public access to and along the walkway. The HOA was also required to cover the revetment, which runs in front of several dozen properties, with native dune plants. Although the HOA initially provided public access, they closed one end of the walkway in 1982, and never planted the native plants. In 2022, a trial court judge ruled that the HOA owned the walkway and therefore was

free to place barriers on it. However, the Commission maintains that regardless of who owns the walkway, the HOA was required to provide public access pursuant to the 1980 permit. Following the January storms, the HOA permanently closed both ends of the walkway to the public, while still allowing its members and their renters to use it freely. Most homeowners along Rio Del Mar, many of whom are members of the HOA, blocked the popular footpath as well as an adjacent public sidewalk, rendering it unusable for disabled persons and unsafe for others. Additionally, several properties are protected by an unpermitted seawall that occupies public beach space and blocks public access to the walkway.

The Commission attempted to resolve these violations since 2002. However, after more than two decades with no agreement, coupled with the HOA's new placement of unpermitted barriers in 2023, the Commission had little choice but to issue the orders. The orders require both parties to remove all obstructions to public access and vegetate the revetment with native dune plants as originally required. The Commission also assessed a penalty of \$4.7 million to the HOA, and \$500,000 to the neighboring property owners, which will be deposited into the Violation Remediation Account.



Public access way closed in Aptos. Photo credit: Lookout Santa Cruz.

Housing

California is in a housing crisis. In the coastal zone, new housing and especially more affordable housing is needed to accommodate increases in population. In particular, the Commission has long viewed the need to provide more affordable housing in the coastal zone as both a matter of public access and environmental justice. Since its inception, the Commission has encouraged construction of affordable units through its permit actions, and supported local efforts to provide for all types of housing needs through LCP amendments. In 2023, the Commission approved dozens of housing-related permits and LCP amendments over the course of the year. Here is a small sample:

At the February Commission meeting, the Commission certified amendments to the County of Humboldt's six Land Use Plans (LUPs) and its Implementation Plan (IP) to establish [streamlined standards](#) for the creation or conversion of at least one Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) per lot zoned for residential use. The Commission's [suggested modifications](#) protect resource

lands, plan for sea level rise, and protect affordable housing in the coastal zone by requiring ADUs on agricultural lands and timberlands to be clustered with other existing structures to reduce impacts from fuel modification, noise, lighting, and other disturbances. ADUs in flood hazard areas must consider sea level rise over the life of the structure and owners will disclose hazards and assume the risks of developing ADUs in hazardous areas. To ensure the new units will be available for renters and not used as vacation rentals, deed restrictions will be recorded prohibiting the use of any dwelling on the property for short-term accommodations.

Reflecting the Commission's growing concern that short-term rentals (STRs) in some popular beach towns are supplanting rental and permanent housing stock, the Commission approved the [City of Half Moon Bay's new STR ordinance](#) which authorizes unlimited "hosted" rentals where the owner lives on site, but limits stays in un-hosted STRs to 60 nights per year. This is the most restrictive STR ordinance the Commission has approved to date.



Pismo Creek Bungalows, San Luis Obispo.



Accessory Dwelling Unit. Photo courtesy of HCD.

The City of Santa Cruz has been a leader in the effort to increase affordable housing in the coastal zone. In October, the Commission approved an [amendment](#) to the City's LCP to encourage the production of more, smaller units which are affordable by design, as opposed to imposing deed restrictions or rent control. The amendment modified existing standards for single room occupancy units (SROs) and small ownership units (SOUs) and added a new small housing type known as "flexible density units." The changes reflect lessons learned from earlier implementation efforts, and are intended to facilitate increased production of naturally affordable units in one of the most expensive housing markets in the country. The Commission approved the LCP amendment on the consent agenda as submitted.

A small percentage of local actions are appealable to the Commission. An even smaller percentage actually are actually appealed. Of those, the Commission only takes jurisdiction over appeals that raise a substantial issue under the Coastal Act. Seven multi-family housing projects were appealed to the Commission in 2023.

The first, in February, was a [76-unit senior housing project](#) in Santa Cruz, in which two of the units would be affordable. The project was appealed to the Commission on concerns over impacts to Monarch Butterfly habitat and public access. Because most of the project site was outside the appeal zone, the Commission found there would be no substantial impacts from the portion located within their jurisdiction, and the local approval was upheld.

Next, in July, was a four-story, [mixed-use project](#) in Santa Cruz with 89 residential units, 10 of which were affordable. The Commission found that the appeal raised No Substantial Issue (NSI) under the Coastal Act and allowed the local approval to stand.

In September, the Commission found NSI on the appeal of a [project](#) in Imperial Beach to demolish an existing mixed-use development and replace it with a new mixed-use project that doubled the residential units from 4 to 8, and [denied](#) a proposal in Venice to convert four older, occupied, relatively affordable rental apartments with four substantially larger market rate units. The project had been improperly processed as a “remodel” which allowed the City of Los Angeles to approve it with no analysis of the impacts to lower-income households. However, the Commission found that it was essentially a redevelopment of the property, and should have been subject to a Mello Act analysis for possible 1:1 replacement of existing affordable units. In addition, the new building would have encroached into the public right of way in an area where pedestrian use is the only form of access. And finally, an existing Coastal Act violation at the site would have been perpetuated by an approval. By upholding the appeal and denying the project, the Commission sent the project back to the city to revise and reconsider.

In October, the Commission found NSI on a [281-unit multifamily project](#) in Long Beach, and an appeal to replace a vacant fast-food restaurant in Pacific with a [39-unit mixed use project](#) with 8 low and moderate income units. A 94-unit appartement building in Encinitas was also [approved](#).

Also in October, the Commission approved two LCP amendments to regulate fractional home ownership projects in the cities of [Newport Beach](#) and [Carmel](#). Both cities are seeing an influx of Fractional Ownership and Time Share-type uses of residential properties, where ownership of a single residence is shared among multiple non-related owners. This is creating a new, profitable option for transforming single-family homes into private vacation rentals. Defining fractional home ownership as a type of time-share will allow Newport Beach to confine these project to non-residential areas, and prohibit them broadly in Carmel.

In November, the Commission found NSI on an appeal of a [50-unit multi-family project](#) in Del Mar, with 10 affordable units.

The Commission capped the year with a comprehensive [briefing on housing](#) during the December meeting in the city of Santa Cruz. Former Assemblymember Fred Keely, now the Mayor of Santa Cruz, welcomed the Commission to the city with [a prescient tribute](#), reflecting on his more than 30 years of public service in service to this coastal community. His reflections on the need build more housing without sacrificing Coastal Act resource protection policies set the stage for the 4.5-hour briefing which explored the multiple factors affecting housing affordable housing in the coastal zone, as well as the current status of affordable housing policy and laws. Panelists included representatives from the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD), as well as researchers, academics and an affordable housing developer. Elected officials, advocates and the general public also weighed in. It was a respectful, substantive, occasionally passionate exchange of information and ideas that contributed

significantly to the ongoing public discussion about how and where California's coastal communities should grow.

On the heels of the housing briefing, the Commission approved the City of Santa Cruz's [Downtown Plan](#), which amended the City's LCP to further activate and revitalize the downtown area. In keeping with the city's new "[Pro-Housing](#)" designation, the Downtown Plan builds upon previous efforts to facilitate an active and vibrant downtown area comprised of a variety of uses including housing, visitor-serving uses, and commercial businesses, all with enhanced connections between the core downtown and the San Lorenzo levee pathway. Providing additional clear, objective standards for how to increase density in the downtown area while also increasing walkability will make the permitting process more efficient as well as transparent.

Also in December, the Commission approved changes to the City of Santa Monica's [Land Use Plan](#) to allow for the construction of a 120-unit hotel room with 100 residential units, 25% of which will be reserved for lower-income residents. The Commission also approved a [permit](#) for the project at the same hearing, which included a \$5.3 million in-lieu fee to provide additional lower-cost accommodations at the nearby Santa Monica Youth Hostel.

Budget & Legislation



The Commission's budget remained static [in FY 2023-24](#), although the enacted budget did include ongoing funding for two limited-term attorney positions in the Enforcement Unit which would have otherwise been discontinued.

The Legislative session, however, was much more dynamic, enacting three coastal-related bills that further the state's overarching goal of transitioning away from the fossil fuel economy toward a clean energy future, while simultaneously preparing for climate change adaptation.

[SB 704 \(Min\)](#) leveled the playing field for oil and gas projects in the coastal zone by excluding new or expanded petrochemical facilities from the Coastal Act's so called "industrial use override" (PRC Sec. 30260). While SB 704 doesn't ban new offshore or coastal onshore oil and gas production, such proposals will no longer be eligible for less rigorous approval findings and will instead be required to meet all relevant Chapter 3 policies. The bill also amended the Coastal Act's Legislative Findings to acknowledge the importance of offshore wind energy development, simultaneously de-emphasizing fossil fuel development while encouraging clean renewable energy.



[SB 286 \(McGuire\)](#) took a more direct approach to encouraging offshore wind development, by streamlining the regulatory process under both the Coastal Act and the California Environmental Quality Act CEQA). Importantly, SB 286 streamlined the process without sacrificing the safeguards of either law. By designating the State Lands Commission as the lead agency under CEQA, and specifying that the Coastal Commission will process all coastal development permits, SB 286 ensures that offshore wind development will be done efficiently, and in full compliance with the state's landmark environmental laws.

The bill also added specificity and timelines to the Offshore Wind Fisheries Working Group, which was created through the Coastal Commission's federal consistency

review last year. Senator McGuire kicked off the inaugural meeting of the Working Group in December. The highly knowledgeable group of anglers, Tribal representatives, offshore wind lessees, and public agencies will be meeting regularly in 2024 to help guide the state decisions on how to implement our offshore wind energy goals sustainably and equitably.

But no matter how quickly we transition to a carbon-free future, climate-driven sea level rise will continue to increasingly impact coastal communities. For the first time since the passage of the 1976 Coastal Act, local governments are now required to update their LCPs by a time certain to include sea level rise. [SB 272 \(Laird\)](#) sets a deadline of January 1, 2034 for coastal cities and counties to include



International Energy Agency photo.

both vulnerability assessments and implementation policies in their LCPs. Bay area cities have a similar requirement to develop shoreline resiliency plans for approval by the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC). Both coastal agencies will work with the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) and the Sea Level Rise State and Regional Support Collaborative to develop guidelines on how to prepare the plans.

A fourth bill, [SB 423 \(Wiener\)](#) established a new approach to planning and permitting housing projects in coastal jurisdictions with certified LCPs. Beginning in 2025, multi-family housing projects that provide a minimum amount affordable units will be subject only to objective planning standards in areas that are not subject 5' of sea level rise, provided they do not impact wetlands, prime agricultural soils or sensitive habitat. The Commission's permit jurisdiction in cities without LCPs will not be affected, unless the city has a certified Land Use Plan. Earlier versions of the bill would have had the effect of exempting these projects from the Coastal Act entirely. The final bill reflected a compromise between the author, coastal legislators, and the Commission.

Mapping and GIS



The Commission's Mapping Unit is responsible for graphic and cartographic production of all kinds, from LCP post-certification maps to story maps, data analysis and various research requests. The Mapping Unit has continued its efforts in implementing GIS across the organization by providing staff with access to online tools, maps, and data services and the ability to create and share custom web maps and applications. In 2023, the Statewide Planning Unit utilized the power of Story Maps to publish the [Tribal Consultation at the Commission Story Map](#) which provides an illustrated overview of the Commission's Tribal Consultation Policy.

Other notable accomplishments include the completion of the California Coastal Armoring Database (CCAD) and ongoing CCAD staff trainings, the release of a new and improved [Critical Coastal Areas Map Viewer 2023](#), and an internal data portal for staff on the Commission's intranet site that provides access to story maps, web mapping applications, training videos, and links to frequently requested mapping resources maintained by the Mapping Unit. The Mapping Unit also assisted in the development of the Middle-Mile Broadband Network Coastal Zone data visualization and analysis dashboard, an internal map-based tool to analyze environmental impacts and inform regulatory action of Broadband development in the Coastal Zone. Moving forward, the Mapping Unit is dedicated to using the latest developments in GIS technology to best support our agency and its dedicated staff, our federal, state, and local partners, and the public.

Increasing Efficiency Through Coordination



State Parks Director Armondo Quintaro and Coastal Commission Executive Director Kate Huckelbridge.

Coastal Commission staff embarked on the second year of our joint partnership effort with California State Parks to increase interagency coordination and communication. Representatives of district, technical, and executive staff from both agencies attended a series of meetings in 2023, including two in-person, facilitated workshops. In February, the group met in Ventura to deepen the understanding of each agency's mandates and constraints in context with the need to update, operate, and maintain State Parks in the coastal zone. The meeting included a site visit to McGrath State Beach where State Parks is undertaking efforts to engage the public in reimagining the campground and protecting wetland and dune habitat. In August, the group met in San Diego and learned more about State Parks' Sea Level Rise Adaptation Strategy and ongoing vulnerability assessments as well as the Coastal Commission's primary goals for its sea level rise guidance. The group visited living shoreline projects at Cardiff State Beach and San Elijo Campground to observe erosion challenges as well as changes to the living shoreline after the past season's storms. The group recommitted to frequent communication and collaborative problem solving as partnership efforts continue.

Offshore wind continues to be a priority for the state in its efforts to reduce greenhouse gases and transition to renewable energy. Commission staff spent a significant amount of time in 2023 working closely with other state agencies to develop the California Strategic Plan for OSW. Required by [AB 525 \(Chiu, 2021\)](#), one of the goals of the strategic plan is to provide a roadmap for permitting OSW projects, including identification of measures to streamline and increase efficiencies. A draft of the strategic plan will be available for public review in early 2024. In May, the Commission hosted an OSW informational briefing which featured updates on federal and state agency coordination efforts, recent research efforts to understand potential impacts to marine habitats and wildlife, introduction to the California lessees, and a robust discussion about how to better include communities and especially environmental justice communities in planning for OSW.



The State's [Middle Mile Broadband Network](#) (MMBN) project continues to move toward its ambitious goal of installing 5,000 miles of broadband infrastructure along state highways throughout the state to make high-speed internet service broadly available throughout California, particularly in unserved and underserved areas. The project is supported through funding by Senate Bill 156, which provided a \$7 billion investment and required the issuance of permits by the end of 2024 and the completion of construction by the end of 2026. These compressed timelines have required Commission staff to engage in extensive early coordination efforts and advanced planning through a streamlined consolidated permit process. Commission staff have developed specific guidelines for



work in the Coastal Zone, provided feedback to Caltrans on how to strategically locate broadband “hub” buildings, and formulated a plan for CDP consolidation across Caltrans’ districts. In 2023, the Commission approved two waivers for MMBN segments through the Tom Lantos Tunnel in San Mateo County and along Interstate 5 in San Diego County. Additional permits for other MMBN segments are expected to be approved by the Commission in early 2024.

Following coordination with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, CDFW and the Morro Bay National Estuary Program, the Commission was able to issue a [permit waiver](#) for the removal of invasive ice plant and the restoration of 87 acres of native dune vegetation on the Morro Bay Sandspit. Coastal Commission ecologists worked with their state and federal counterparts to ensure that most of the ice plants will be removed by hand with minimal chemical application to protect sensitive species.



Photo Credit – Morro Bay National Estuary Program

Morro Bay Sandspit.

Identifying mitigation opportunities early can streamline the permitting process for large infrastructure projects, saving time, reducing project costs and realizing public benefits sooner. The Coastal Commission and Caltrans’ continued collaboration on advance mitigation in 2023 was critical in the development of a Regional Advance Mitigation Needs Assessment, as well as the establishment of a new mitigation bank in Mendocino

County. This approach ensures that mitigation efforts are well-designed and monitored as part of a comprehensive approach to protecting sensitive species, allowing critical public infrastructure projects to move ahead expeditiously and responsibly.

Commission staff also continued to participate in the Transportation Permitting Task Force, also known as the State Transportation and Environmental Partnership for Permitting Efficiency (STEPPE). Created in 2017 by AB 1282 (Mullin), the Task Force is charged with exploring ways to improve permitting efficiency for transportation projects while protecting our state's natural, historic, and cultural resources. While the Task Force's Final Report was delivered to the Legislature in October 2020 implementation of the roughly 40 specific recommendations is an ongoing process so that the state can deliver needed infrastructure projects while furthering the missions of both transportation and environmental protection agencies.

In August, the State Transportation and Environmental Partnership for Permitting Efficiency (STEPPE) team, comprised of staff from Caltrans, the Coastal Commission, California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), and the Regional Water Quality Control Boards (RWQCB), provided an "Early Engagement for Permitting" training for 250 staff from the four agencies. The training provided an overview of the newly developed Early Engagement Guidance, which developed pursuant to [AB 1282 \(2017, Mullen\)](#). Although the Commission and Caltrans have emphasized early engagement through various means for many years, this guidance document and process will improve collaboration between additional state regulatory agencies, and provide more resources to Caltrans for early engagement in the project planning. Goals include greater certainty of permit requirements, reducing costs and delays, avoiding project changes, reducing permit processing time, establishing reasonable deadlines for permit decisions consistent with existing statutes and regulations, and improving environmental outcomes.

Federal Program: Building a Deeper Bench

Building and maintaining a talented, committed workforce from diverse backgrounds and experiences is critical to keeping the Coastal Commission vibrant, dynamic and relevant. One of the most important pathways to coastal careers is through fellowships and internships. The Commission has been fortunate to serve as a host agency for California's Sea Grant Fellowship and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Coastal Management Fellowship Programs for many years. These fellowship programs serve as an invaluable recruitment tool for the agency. The Commission's overarching goal in hosting fellows is to provide these emerging environmental leaders with a fulfilling post-graduate learning year, including providing significant new professional development opportunities. As a result, the Commission has a proud history of welcoming former fellows onto our full-time professional staff.



Camila Pauda



Liz Plascencia

The Commission's 2023 California Sea Grant Fellow, Camila Pauda, and NOAA Coastal Management Fellow, Liz Plascencia, worked on a wide variety of issues throughout the year, supporting the Statewide Planning, Environmental Justice, Energy, Ocean Resources & Federal Consistency, and Ecology units. Their work products included [a memo on Tijuana River pollution crisis in San Diego County](#) which was part of the Commission's October 2023 Informational Briefing on the Trans-boundary Crisis in the Tijuana River Valley and Tijuana River Valley, the creation of a [Tribal Consultation Story Map](#), and bilingual resources to increase access to the Commission's hearing process for Spanish-speakers.

Upping Equity, Inside



In keeping with the commitment to incorporate justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) into the fabric of our daily work, hosting several internal trainings. Additionally, the Commission took several deliberate steps to improve accessibility to Commission hearings for populations that have been historically overlooked. 2023 saw an increase in targeted, bi-lingual outreach to EJ Communities and organizations that serve Spanish and non-English language speakers. Executive Director Huckelbridge instituted a new practice of quarterly EJ Partner calls to talk with EJ community leaders and NGOs, and staff developed a streamlined contract procedure for procuring simultaneous translation services, which was used for several hearings in throughout the year. The Commission also instituted improved virtual hearing procedures for non-English language speakers and developed new bi-lingual banners for hearings. Meeting participants continued to benefit from the assistance of Commission staff members who are certified for Spanish translation who translate internal documents and assist at hearings.

The Commission's EJ and HR staff collaborated on new JEDI language which is now included in the duty statements for all new planners and analysts. This ensures that a percentage of their time will be dedicated to equity work, making it clear that advancing environmental justice is a core value of our work.

Finally, Commission staff are actively working to integrate the principles of environmental justice into the agency's sea level rise policy and adaptation work. This federally funded effort builds on the Commission's existing EJ Policy and will provide guidance on how to meaningfully engage with EJ communities to address impacts and identify benefits when planning for sea level rise adaptation. In early 2023, Commission staff selected eight EJ and sea level rise subject matter experts to serve as project advisors. Thanks to funding from NOAA the Commission was able to pay these invaluable advisors a just stipend for their contributions. Throughout the year, staff hosted several sessions with advisors on the consequences of sea level rise for EJ communities and Coastal Act resources. This feedback will be incorporated into an updated EJ section in the existing Sea Level Rise Policy Guidance, which will be released for public input mid-2024.

Partnerships: Stronger Together



The Commission is not alone in the role of protecting and restoring habitat and expanding public access. Effective coastal management depends on effective public agency partnerships. We couldn't carry out our work without deep collaboration with our local, state and federal agency partners. Despite chronic staffing shortages, the Commission continued to participate in nearly 100 multi-agency committees, task forces, technical advisory committees, panels and working groups statewide. Subjects include sea level rise; ecological resources; public access; water quality; transportation; interagency enforcement; energy; ocean resources and numerous project-specific working groups. Through this interagency coordination, Commission staff add value to myriad guidance documents, restoration projects, and high-level policy discussions to ensure that coastal resources and Coastal Act policies are incorporated at every level of state action and consideration.

Happy Trails, and [Auld Lang Syne](#)



In February of 2023, the Commission held a joyous, belated group retirement party for colleagues who had left during the Covid pandemic. They offered words of wisdom to their successors, shared stories of hard-won coastal victories, and absorbed their share of toasts and accolades. The CCC Alumni Association is growing by leaps and bounds, and bulging with talent. And a new generation of coastal stewards are rising the ranks to fill their shoes.

But the “Silver Tsunami” which has pulled so many career staff into retirement in recent years finally seems to be ebbing. Between 2018 and 2022, the Commission experienced a total of 38 staff retirements with a combined total of 1,109 years of service. This year, only two Commission staff stepped away from the agency in 2023. We bid a fond farewell to Paul Langley, an Associate Government Program Analyst who had been with the Commission for 30 years, and Ginger Hertz, a Senior Accounting Officer who had been at the Commission for 16 years. And we will miss them. They both contributed significantly to California’s coastal protection legacy through their work in administration and accounting services. The Commission can’t function without the team of professionals constantly working behind the scenes to ensure bills are paid, staff reports are published, and reports are filed. Their contributions to coastal protection are not always obvious from the outside, but work is critical to the agency’s mission. We wish them both a long and fulfilling next chapter.

A Peaceful Transition of Power

...is the cornerstone of democratic institutions everywhere. At the beginning of the December meeting, Commission Chair Donne Brownsey passed the gavel to Vice Chair Dr. Caryl Hart, who was elected unanimously by her fellow commissioners. Linda Escalante was elected as Vice Chair. Commissioner Brownsey announced she would be stepping down at the end of the year, having served 7 years on the Commission, and two years as the Commission's Chair. Her leadership over that time will go down in Commission history as one of the most effective, engaged, and hardest-working Chairs in the history of the agency. Her replacement, Susan Lowenberg, will be sworn in at the first Commission meeting of 2024.

Donne Brownsey



Susan Lowenberg



Caryl Hart Brownsey



Linda Escalante

Where We Go From Here



In the coming year the Commission is sure to increase its involvement in efforts to deploy California's ambitious new floating offshore wind energy generation projects. Sea Port and transmission planning will likely take center stage, as the state readies for the manufacture, assembly and maintenance of the world's largest installation of this new technology, and the 5 lessees pursue their Construction and Operations Plans (COPs).

Coastal communities' planning efforts for sea level rise resiliency is also expected to tick upward, as SB 272 (Laird) planning requirements go into effect January 1, 2024.

Public interest in housing and especially affordable housing will undoubtedly remain high, and the Commission will continue to monitor new legislation to ensure coastal protection and increased housing production remain co-equal, complimentary policy goals.

And, as in years past, the Commission will continue to strive to uphold the Coastal Act's promise of coastal resource protection and public access for all, with an emphasis on building relationships with and bringing equity to environmental justice communities, Tribes and underserved groups.

