State of California – Natural Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
Marine Region
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Jayme Timberlake
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City of Oceanside
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OCEANSIDE SAND NOURISHMENT AND RETENTION PROJECT
NOTICE OF PREPARATION OF A DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT
SCH #2025100834

Dear Ms. Timberlake:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) received a Notice of Preparation (NOP) of a Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) from the City of Oceanside (City) for the Oceanside Sand Nourishment and Retention Project, also known as the RE:BEACH Pilot Project (Project), pursuant the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and CEQA Guidelines.[1]

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding those activities involved in the Project that may affect California fish and wildlife. Likewise, we appreciate the opportunity to provide comments regarding those aspects of the Project that the Department, by law, may be required to carry out or approve through the exercise of its own regulatory authority under the Fish and Game Code.

DEPARTMENT ROLE

The Department is California's Trustee Agency for fish and wildlife resources and holds those resources in trust by statute for all the people of the state. (Fish & G. Code, section 711.7, subd. (a) & 1802; Pub. Resources Code, section 21070; CEQA Guidelines section 15386, subd. (a).) The Department, in its trustee capacity, has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species. (*Id.*, section 1802.) Similarly for purposes of CEQA, the Department is charged by law to provide, as available, biological expertise during public agency environmental review efforts, focusing specifically on projects and related activities that have the potential to adversely affect fish and wildlife resources. The Department is also responsible for

[1] CEQA is codified in the California Public Resources Code in section 21000 et seq. The "CEQA Guidelines" are found in Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, commencing with section 15000.

marine biodiversity protection under the Marine Life Protection Act in coastal marine waters of California, and ensuring fisheries are sustainably managed under the Marine Life Management Act.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION SUMMARY

Proponent: City of Oceanside

Objective: The objective of the Project is to address chronic beach erosion, disruption, and reduction of coastal sediment supply; increased shoreline vulnerability associated with climate change; and the need for more effective coastal management in the City. The Project consists of constructing two headlands, one offshore reef, onshore beach nourishment, and nearshore nourishment. The headlands would be positioned on the shore and designed to stabilize sand along the backshore and reduce, but not eliminate, the longshore transport of sediment in the Project location. Between the headlands, the offshore reef would be located approximately 900 feet offshore. The offshore reef would serve to dissipate wave energy and stabilize the sand bars and beach on the shoreward side of the reef. The offshore reef's design is intended to cause breaking waves to slow the rate of longshore sediment transport along the beach and create a salient sand bar that mimics natural offshore reef structures along the coast. For the onshore beach nourishment, sand would be sourced from an offshore borrow site along the beach from First Street, south of Oceanside Pier, to Oceanside Boulevard. The nearshore nourishment would supplement sediment in the surf zone.

The Project is also a component of the RE:BEACH Program, which would provide for phased implementation of coastal resilience strategies within areas south of the Project on the City's coastline. The Project would include a robust monitoring and adaptive management framework that is intended to serve as a replicable model that informs future shoreline management decisions. The results of the monitoring and adaptive management framework would inform and support implementation of additional phases under the RE:BEACH Program. The Project EIR will evaluate potential impacts associated with the Project, while the Program EIR will evaluate impacts associated with the RE:BEACH Program that would provide for phased implementation of additional coastal resilience strategies along the City's coastline that could incorporate elements of the Project. Future phases under the RE:BEACH Program may include the following:

- Additional nourishment actions onshore and/or in the nearshore;
- Additional headland features along the City's shoreline;
- Additional reef features installed offshore the City's shoreline, related upgrades to coastal accessways (i.e., stairs), public spaces, and marine safety infrastructure (e.g., lifeguard access and assets); and
- Long-term monitoring instruments.

It is anticipated that the Program EIR would assume up to two additional phases within two additional segments along the City's coastline. Similar to the Project, these additional phases would also consist of a reef, up to two headlands, and onshore and nearshore beach nourishment. However, the future phases are currently conceptual and would be informed through monitoring and performance of the Project.

Location: The Project site is located at the seaward terminus of Tyson Street and Wisconsin Avenue in Oceanside, San Diego County. The specific locations for future phases of the RE:BEACH Program have not been finalized.

Timeframe: Permitting and design for the Project is anticipated to occur between 2025 and 2027. Depending on permitting and fundraising, reef and headland installation and nourishment activities are anticipated to occur in 2028.

BIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Discussion and Comment: San Diego County waters support many resident and migratory fish and special status wildlife such as seabirds, marine mammals, and sea turtles. San Diego County waters also support commercially and recreationally important fish and invertebrate species such as California grunion (*Leuresthes tenuis*), California halibut (*Paralichthys californicus*), California spiny lobster (*Panulirus interruptus*), and the Northern anchovy (*Engraulis mordax*), which is an important forage fish.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department offers the comments and recommendations below to assist the City in adequately identifying and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct, and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife resources.

Beach Nourishment

Comments: Beach nourishment, or beach and/or nearshore sediment placement, may cause increased turbidity, decreased light availability, and/or potential burial of sensitive marine species and their habitats via direct sediment placement or subsequent littoral drift causing substantial adverse effects. Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC), a subset of Essential Fish Habitat, are habitats of special importance to fish populations due to their rarity, vulnerability to development and anthropogenic degradation, and/or ability to provide key ecological functions. Rocky reefs, canopy kelp, and seagrass beds are several habitats that have been designated as groundfish HAPC by the Pacific Fisheries Management Council under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. These habitats may occur at the potential sediment placement sites. Additionally, commercially and recreationally important fish and invertebrate species may be impacted by nearshore sediment placement activities via direct burial/smothering, increased turbidity, and/or decreased light availability.

The Department understands that the beach south of the pier, where the Project site is located, has become predominantly rocky due to significant erosion. The Department is concerned that the placement of new sediment may harm existing communities in the rocky intertidal habitat and nearshore habitats.

The NOP notes that sand would be sourced from an offshore borrow site along the beach from First Street, south of Oceanside Pier, to Oceanside Boulevard for the onshore beach nourishment. However, the NOP did not indicate whether the nearshore nourishment sediment would be sourced from the same offshore borrow site or another location.

Recommendations: For onshore and nearshore sediment placement, the Department recommends that the DEIR quantify the amount of HAPC and other sensitive marine habitats that could be lost due to the Project and potential alternatives for nearshore sediment placement. Potential HAPCs and sensitive habitats for this Project area may include rocky reef, canopy kelp, and seagrass bed habitats. Project plans should be developed to avoid and minimize potential impacts to the nearshore marine environment, including HAPCs, to the maximum extent feasible. This includes avoiding and minimizing direct burial/smothering, vessel anchoring, turbidity, and/or decreased light availability within the nearshore environment. The Department also recommends that post-construction monitoring of any nearshore sediment placement should occur to ensure sensitive marine habitats and the commercially and recreationally important species that inhabit them are not impacted. The Department recommends consulting with the Department and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), on the Project's impact analysis and all proposed mitigation measures for HAPC and other sensitive marine habitats.

The Department recommends that potential impacts from onshore and nearshore beach nourishment activities to marine invertebrates, mammals, and fish, including both commercially and recreationally important species, should be identified and analyzed in the DEIR and any significant impacts should be avoided and minimized to below a level of significance. The analysis should include the benefits, risks, and trade-offs of creating a sandy beach habitat via beach nourishment in lieu of keeping the rocky intertidal habitat that is currently present along the coast at the Project site.

Additionally, the Department recommends that all proposals for sediment placement be reviewed by the Southern California Dredged Material Management Team (DMMT) prior to placement. The DMMT is comprised of regulatory and trustee agencies (i.e., United States Army Corps of Engineers, United States Environmental Protection Agency, Regional Water Quality Control Boards, California Coastal Commission, NMFS, and the Department), and responsible for managing dredging activities and reviewing technical issues associated with proposed dredging and dredged material disposal projects. The DEIR should include information on the sediment source location(s) for both the onshore and nearshore nourishment activities.

Offshore Reef

Comments: Fish and Game Code sections 6420-6425 establishes the California Artificial Reef Program (CARP). A comprehensive CARP Plan is under development that will provide guidance on best practices for creation and management of artificial reefs developed to improve biological productivity. Completion of the Plan is scheduled for the end of 2026, and the Department has developed the Interim Artificial Reef Project Review Framework (Framework) (Attachment 1) for artificial reefs that are not related to compensatory mitigation. The Framework includes applying an approach for artificial reefs that is limited in scale and scope while the CARP Plan is in development. Additionally, it encourages taking an experimental approach for projects to collect data and gain knowledge about the best approaches to siting, materials, design, function and performance that can be used to develop best practices for artificial reefs.

The Project description for the offshore reef is largely focused on effecting sediment dynamics for this project. There are opportunities when siting and designing reefs to serve multiple purposes, including duplicating conditions that increase biological productivity and produce high quality habitat for reef-associated species. Materials or design elements that could provide benefits to biological production may be possible to incorporate into the design while still ensuring the Project achieves its purpose of addressing chronic beach erosion, disruption, and reduction of coastal sediment supply to reduce shoreline vulnerability associated with climate change. However, the NOP did not include information on the type of material or design specifications that are proposed for the offshore reef component of the Project.

Recommendations: The Department recommends that the City consider the Framework when developing the proposed offshore reef. According to the Framework, any artificial reef should be well-designed and sized appropriately for a pilot or experimental project to support the scientific evaluation of data gaps related to artificial reef siting, materials, design, impact, benefits, and functioning. The DEIR should establish the following for the offshore reef: quantitative performance metrics, performance period, monitoring plan, and removal metrics developed in consultation with technical experts as appropriate from regulatory authorities with jurisdiction over the project site or other research institutions, agencies, and consultants with relevant expertise.

The Department recommends that the DEIR clarify what type of materials and design will be used for the offshore reef development. Materials should only be considered if they possess characteristics that allow them to safely meet the established goals and objectives for the proposed offshore reef and present no risk to the marine environment in which they are being placed. Materials used to construct the offshore reef should be durable, inert, and non-toxic. If soft substrate materials are proposed, the Department recommends that the City conduct extensive modeling to determine how long the soft substrate would remain in place and where substrate may be transported to. The assessment should also include any associated impacts to surrounding habitats associated with transport of soft substrate and smothering habitats.

ENVIRONMENTAL DATA

CEQA requires that information developed in environmental impact reports and negative declarations be incorporated into a database which may be used to make subsequent or supplemental environmental determinations. (Pub. Resources Code, section 21003, subd. (e).) Accordingly, please report any special status species and natural communities detected during Project surveys to the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDB). The CNNDB field survey form can be filled out and submitted online at the following link: https://wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDB/Submitting-Data. The types of information reported to CNDDB can be found at the following link: https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDB/Plants-and-Animals.

ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENT FILING FEES

The Project, as proposed, would have an impact on fish and/or wildlife, and assessment of environmental document filing fees is necessary. Fees are payable upon filing of the Notice of Determination by the Lead Agency and serve to help defray the cost of environmental review by the Department. Payment of the environmental document filing fee is required for the underlying project approval to be operative, vested, and final. (Cal. Code Regs, tit. 14, section 753.5; Fish & G. Code, section 711.4; Pub. Resources Code, section 21089.)

CONCLUSION

The Department appreciates the opportunity to comment on the NOP to assist the City in identifying and mitigating Project impacts on biological resources. Questions regarding this letter or further coordination should be directed to Leslie Hart, Environmental Scientist at R7CEQA@wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

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Marine Regional Manager

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ATTACHMENT

Attachment 1: California Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2024. Interim Artificial Reef Project Review Framework.