

CALIFORNIA OCEAN
PROTECTION COUNCIL

Staff Recommendation
February 8, 2007

Reef Check California Volunteer Diver Monitoring

Developed By: **Deborah Hirst**

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Consideration of the Reef Check California Program, and possible: 1) determination that it is a high priority project and 2) authorization for the Secretary to take actions necessary to provide up to \$243,500 for its implementation.

NEAREST OCEAN or COASTAL LOCATION: Statewide, in state waters

AGENCY OR ENTITY RECOMMENDING PROJECT: State Coastal Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Map of RCCA Monitoring Sites - California](#)

Exhibit 2: [Map of RCCA Monitoring Sites - Southern California](#)

Exhibit 3: [Reef Check Volunteer Divers](#)

Exhibit 4: [Letters of Support](#)

RESOLUTION:

“The Ocean Protection Council finds pursuant to Sections 35600 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code that the Reef Check California Program, as herein described, is of high priority for ocean conservation and authorizes the Secretary to take actions necessary for its expansion to Southern California and implementation statewide, including the allocation of up to \$243,500 for the purposes of this project.”

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

Staff recommends that the Ocean Protection Council authorize funds for the Reef Check Foundation to expand the Reef Check California (RCCA) program’s community-based network of certified volunteer SCUBA divers to collect and disseminate monitoring data on nearshore subtidal resources statewide. The proposed project will support RCCA’s training, communication and volunteer dive monitoring activities in Southern California, leverage program funds already secured for diver training and data collection in Central and Northern California, and enable the design and implementation of RCCA’s interactive web-based database

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for the dissemination of statewide data to all interested parties. Reef Check California has designed a data collection protocol in collaboration with the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) with the specific intent of collecting compatible data to support the CDFG's monitoring of California's growing system of Marine Protected Areas. RCCA will recruit, train and test volunteer divers to ensure collection of scientifically sound and useful habitat, invertebrate, algae, and fish abundance survey data. RCCA will promote public awareness of California's growing network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), the need for scientific data to support resource management decisions and the opportunity for stewardship through resource monitoring activities statewide.

Background

The 1999 Marine Life Protection Act passed by the California legislature tasked the Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) with implementing an improved network of MPAs along the 1,100 mile coastline of California. To forward that effort, CDFG, the California Resources Agency and the Resource Legacy Fund Foundation developed a Memorandum of Understanding in August 2004 and launched the Marine Life Protection Act Initiative (MLPAI). Utilizing input from an extensive public process, stakeholder groups, the MLPAI Science Advisory Team and MPLAI staff, the MLPA Initiative's Blue Ribbon Task Force brought a series of recommendations to the Fish and Game Commission for the establishment of an initial system of MPAs in the Central Coast region. In August 2006, the Fish and Game Commission selected a preferred alternative and CDFG will begin working toward implementing the system of Central Coast MPAs in 2007.

The Ocean Protection Council's 5-year Strategic Plan emphasizes the fundamental importance of baseline data for the implementation of the MLPA and the Marine Life Management Act (MLMA). The MLMA Master Plan specifically recognizes volunteer divers as an important asset for conducting habitat and fish abundance surveys which in turn support the development of sustainable Fishery Management Plans (Chapter 4). The final draft *California Marine Life Protection Act Initiative Central Coast Study Region Marine Protected Area Monitoring Plan* (December 6, 2006) identifies Reef Check California as a volunteer-based organization already collecting data on the focal species necessary for CDFG's management of the Central Coast MPAs. Now completing its first year, RCCA has trained 30 divers and completed data collection dives covering 12 sites in the region, 6 of which are exclusive of current monitoring efforts (Exhibit 1 and Exhibit 2). Statewide, RCCA has trained 70 divers from Humboldt County to Palm Springs and completed 20 surveys from Sonoma, Monterey, Santa Barbara, Ventura, and Los Angeles Counties (Exhibit 3).

Toward the common goal of filling existing gaps in critical baseline data and supporting the implementation of the MLPA, Reef Check and CDFG are finalizing a Memorandum of Understanding. The MOU's objectives include the development a long-term statewide community-based subtidal monitoring network; development and implementation of a web-based data system; and collaborative effort for effective data collection and dissemination to support the implementation and management of California's marine resources, including MPAs. A letter of support from CDFG for the RCCA program is attached (Exhibit 4).

Project Description

The proposed Reef Check California grant will extend the program's efforts to the Southern Coast region and enhance work in the North and Central Coast regions being implemented with matching funds from the Goldman Fund and the Packard Foundation. RCCA began collecting data in locations both inside and outside MPAs in the Central Coast and plans to provide similar comparison data by region as CDFG implements the statewide MPA system by 2011. RCCA is working toward the goal of training upwards of 1,000 divers statewide and has waiting lists for its scheduled 4-day training courses. The comprehensive training and testing curriculum offers an opportunity for volunteer divers with a wide range of backgrounds to collect high quality, scientifically useful species and habitat survey data. The testing standards inherent in the training along with a comprehensive quality assurance/quality control program ensure the data collected by RCCA is scientifically robust.

While RCCA has a standard software database which allows use and sharing of its data, the proposed web-based interactive database will support wider and more efficient dissemination of survey data to resource managers, researchers and other interested users such as students and teachers. Through its outreach and communications, RCCA will engage divers, surfers, fishermen, boaters and others in raising awareness of ocean and coastal issues and the value of stewardship. RCCA offers a significant cost-benefit by engaging volunteer divers and leveraging donations and in-kind support from the community while also building public support for MPAs and the importance of scientific data for adaptive science-based resource management and ecosystem protection.

Grantee Description

Reef Check California is a program of Reef Check Foundation (RCF), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization formed in 1997 for the purpose of promoting marine conservation world-wide. RCF is now operating volunteer diver reef monitoring and ocean resource awareness raising programs in over 80 countries. Volunteer divers who have been trained by Reef Check are able to incorporate conducting the scientifically valid surveys into their normal diving activities. The data these divers collect is pooled in a central database and made available for resource managers and all interested parties. The Reef Check California program is designed "to educate, train, and engage all ocean users in the collection of scientifically sound data describing California's nearshore rocky reefs to help inform management decisions and create an informed constituency supportive of science-based management." Since its inception in 2005, RCCA has worked to coordinate with related academic, nonprofit and institutional data collection efforts. RCCA benefits from the participation of CDFG and University of California scientists on its Scientific Advisory team. The RCCA protocol was peer reviewed by the Scientific Advisory Team and is adapted from and compatible with CRANE and PISCO protocols. The extensive training program has been recognized as a specialty certification course by both NAUI and PADI, the two largest dive certification organizations.

PROJECT FINANCING

Funding Sources 2007:

Ocean Protection Council (Coastal Conservancy)	\$243,500
Packard Foundation	\$160,000
Goldman Fund	\$125,000
Anonymous Foundation	\$25,000
SIMA	\$10,000
Other sources	<u>\$7,000</u>

Total Project Cost **\$570,500**

Staff anticipates using \$243,500 in funds appropriated to the Coastal Conservancy in the California FY06/07 State Budget from the Environmental License Plate Fund for Ocean Protection. Should this proposal be approved, staff will recommend this grant for consideration by the Coastal Conservancy at the planned March 8, 2007 meeting.

The proposed project will provide funding for the first year of Reef Check’s 3-year plan for implementing the California program statewide. Reef Check California has received commitments from a number of current supporters for its 2008 budget. The organization is developing partial self-financing support through fees for training materials and dive events and is exploring other potential sources for long-term funding.

CONSISTENCY WITH OCEAN PROTECTION COUNCIL’S FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN:

The project is consistent with Section II, Priority Goals and Objectives, Goal B, Research and Monitoring, Objective 2 of the OPC Five-year Strategic Plan (June 2006) which calls for action to “support the establishment of a comprehensive monitoring program focused on Marine Protected Areas established under the Marine Life Protection Act and structured to be beneficial to other programs, including the Marine Life Management Act.” Similarly, the project is consistent with Goal E, Ocean and Coastal Ecosystems, Objective 1, Marine Life Protection Act which calls for the OPC to “make resources available to design and implement a comprehensive MPA monitoring program that can be implemented statewide, and that will measure changes in these ecosystems and inform future management decisions.” In addition, the project is consistent with Section II, Goal F, Education and Outreach, Objective 1 which highlights the importance of raising public awareness of ocean and coastal issues and encouraging individual stewardship as “a strong link exists between the public’s understanding of the natural environment and their willingness to protect and preserve natural resources.”