

SAN FRANCISCO BAY RESTORATION AUTHORITY

Staff Recommendation
May 3, 2024

RESTORING WETLAND-UPLAND TRANSITION ZONE HABITAT IN THE NORTH BAY WITH STRAW, PHASE 2

Project No. RA-003
Project Manager: Natasha Daniels

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,936,000 to Point Blue Conservation Science to restore approximately 1.1 acres of critical wetland-upland transition zone habitat at the American Canyon Wetlands, engaging STRAW (Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed) participants on site, and to offer early career training and workforce development that focuses on historically underserved communities.

LOCATION: American Canyon Wetlands, City of American Canyon, Napa County; Measure AA Region: North Bay

MEASURE AA PROGRAM CATEGORY: Vital Fish, Bird and Wildlife Habitat Program

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Project Designs and Photographs](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority adopt the following resolution and findings:

Resolution:

The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one million nine hundred thirty-six thousand dollars (\$1,936,000) to Point Reyes Bird Observatory dba Point Blue Conservation Science to restore approximately 1.1 acres of critical wetland-upland transition zone habitat at the American Canyons Wetlands, engaging STRAW (Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed) participants on site, and to offer early career training and workforce development that focuses on historically underserved communities.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Authority the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the project.

3. A plan for acknowledgement of Authority funding.
4. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority Act, Gov. Code Sections 66700-66706.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with The San Francisco Bay Clean Water, Pollution Prevention and Habitat Restoration Measure (Measure AA).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the disbursement of up to \$1,936,000 to Point Blue Conservation Science to restore approximately 1.1 acres of critical wetland-upland transition zone habitat at the American Canyon Wetlands, to engage over 1,920 STRAW (Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed) participants on-site, and to offer early career training and workforce development through the Community College Conservation Internship (CCCI) Program over the course of five years.

The proposed project consists of design, implementation, maintenance, monitoring, and expansion of climate-smart tidal wetland to upland transition zone habitat at the American Canyon Wetlands site while educating and building a constituency of environmental stakeholders. The project will: 1) improve wildlife habitat by restoring critical wetland-upland transition zone habitat; 2) engage the community in habitat restoration and ongoing stewardship, plant establishment, and monitoring to ensure long-term success; and 3) offer early career training and workforce development specifically focused on reaching historically underserved communities. Engaging a newer demographic through the CCCI Program will expand early career and training opportunities for young Black, Indigenous and other people of color by providing work with environmental professionals in the conservation science field and building environmental leadership skills along with nourishing a strong sense of self, community and belonging.

The project will focus on restoring an area of degraded shoreline. The restoration site requires minimal planning, and is approved and ready for construction. Healthy wetlands buffer adjacent roads and buildings from storm surges and flooding, filter pollutants from runoff, and provide crucial habitat for wildlife. Restoring transition zones is a critical climate change adaptation strategy for wetlands because wildlife and water will need refugia, (i.e., areas of refuge), during storm surges and flooding.

Restoration teams, including teachers, students, and their families, along with CCCI apprentices, will plant locally sourced, watershed appropriate shrubs, grasses, and ground cover using innovative best management practices to restore 1.1 acres of wetland-upland transition zone

habitat. Using Point Blue’s climate-smart restoration planning framework and transition zone planting tool, the project will result in new high-quality habitat and high-tide refugia for wildlife, particularly for two federally endangered species, Ridgway’s rail and salt marsh harvest mouse. Point Blue and their partners have documented the presence of Ridgway’s rails and an increase in the number and diversity of birds in STRAW’s previously completed wetland-upland transition zone restoration sites.

The American Canyon Wetlands site is public property, and is accessible to underserved schools and communities, as well as the general public. With Authority funding, the City of American Canyon has been developing a planning framework for the wetlands called the American Canyon Wetlands Project. STRAW’s restoration work supports the goals and objectives of the American Canyon Wetlands Project Restoration and Public Access Plan, including restoring or enhancing wetland associated upland habitats, increasing the resilience of habitats and public access to sea level rise and flooding, and reducing long-term maintenance obligations.

Point Blue’s STRAW program has completed similar projects throughout the Bay Area for over 30 years and has developed many site-specific restoration plans that are consistent with the proposed construction activities within the Plan. In a separate partnership, the city and the American Canyon Community and Parks Foundation (ACCPF) have been advancing planning and design for the [Napa River Ecology Center](#), a proposed environmental educational center that is planned to be open to the public by 2025. ACCPF approached STRAW outside of the Ecology Center planning in order to build a new partnership and create more opportunities that support outdoor environmental education. The STRAW program recently successfully completed the first phase of a similar project to restore three different sites, which was Authority-funded.

For the American Canyons Wetlands proposed project, community partners include the City of American Canyon, the American Canyon Community & Parks Foundation, local community colleges, and K-12 school partners. Over the past five years, Point Blue has engaged with a new student demographic through their CCCI program and has established informal partnerships with professors and career centers at North Bay community colleges. Their recruitment strategy involves providing internship presentations and career exploration pathways, attending career fairs, and presenting to student clubs.

Site Description: The project will restore a portion of the American Canyon Wetlands, which is located along the shoreline following the San Francisco Bay Trail. The STRAW project site is northeast of the future Napa River Ecology Center, a project of the American Canyon Community & Parks Foundation and will enhance wetland-upland transition zone habitat north and east of the center. The land is owned and managed by the City of American Canyon. The American Canyon Wetlands are part of a larger wetland complex within the Napa River watershed and are bordered to the east by a residential area of American Canyon and to the west by the Napa River and the Napa-Sonoma Marshes Wildlife Area, which is owned and managed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The larger wetland complex consists of diked baylands, mudflats, and tidal marsh. The transition habitat is located along the eastern edge, where the restoration site sits. Portions of the American Canyon Wetlands provide resources for migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway and provide habitat for the endangered salt marsh harvest mouse and Ridgway’s rail as well as other wildlife. Although the broader wetland habitat functions well, portions of the shoreline such as the restoration site are degraded and serve as poor habitat.

PROJECT FINANCING

San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority	\$1,936,000
Project Total	\$1,936,000

STRAW’s extensive use of volunteers is expected to result in an in-kind contribution of over \$413,400.

CONSISTENCY WITH AUTHORITY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION, THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY RESTORATION AUTHORITY ACT:

Under Gov. Code section 66704.5(a), the Authority may award grants

to public and private entities for eligible projects in the counties within the Authority’s jurisdiction. Consistent with this section, Point Blue Conservation Science is a 501(c)(3) private nonprofit corporation and the project is in Napa County, along the shoreline, in the Authority’s jurisdiction.

Gov. Code section 66704.5(b)(1) provides that for a project to be eligible, it must achieve certain objectives, including “Restore, protect, or enhance tidal wetlands, managed ponds, or natural habitats on the shoreline of the San Francisco Bay area.” Consistent with this section, this project will restore degraded wetland-upland transition zone habitat along the North Bay shoreline. The project includes plant propagation, site-specific planning, restoration and construction; site maintenance, and monitoring and reporting; per 66704.5(e) these activities are all eligible for the use of Measure AA funds.

CONSISTENCY WITH MEASURE AA PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES:

The project would help implement the *Vital Fish, Bird and Wildlife Habitat* by engaging with 1,920 volunteers to restore approximately 1.1 acres of upland transition zone habitat, which will support a high diversity of shorebirds, waterfowl and other wildlife. The project will include planting and maintenance of roughly 1,500 native forbs and shrubs to increase deep-rooted vegetation and canopy cover and will be designed to ensure successful establishment and self-propagation of vegetation so will not need substantial ongoing maintenance.

CONSISTENCY WITH MEASURE AA PRIORITIZATION CRITERIA:

1. **Greatest positive impact.** The restoration will result in high quality habitat and high-tide refugia for wildlife, especially for two federally endangered species, Ridgway’s rail and salt marsh harvest mouse. Point Blue’s STRAW program has a scientifically proved track record of success in establishing wetland-upland transition zone in degraded areas and has worked in the North Bay for many years. All installed plants will be locally collected and propagated using innovative practices for disease prevention and climate change resiliency, ensuring their genetic integrity. Some 1,920 teachers, students, and their families will receive specific education enhancing their understanding of the importance of a healthy functioning San

Francisco Bay ecosystem. Communities from the surrounding city and community college students from the North Bay will participate in these projects, including communities that traditionally do not have access to these types of activities.

2. **Greatest long-term impact.** The project will be designed using Point Blue’s climate-smart restoration planning framework and transition zone planting tool. Point Blue defines climate-smart restoration as the process of enhancing ecological function of degraded, damaged, or destroyed areas in a manner that prepares them for the consequences of climate change. Each STRAW restoration project increases the number and diversity of birds. The number of bird species detected at STRAW restoration sites has gone from as low as 0 pre-restoration to as high as 30 within 15 years.
3. **Leveraging resources and partnerships.** Point Blue has a strong history of developing partnerships with government agencies at all levels, community-based organizations, and local schools and communities and will partner with the City of American Canyon, which owns the land; the American Canyon Community & Parks Foundation, which is advancing planning and design for the Napa River Ecology Center; and Santa Rosa Junior College, which offers support to the CCCI program. All of these entities have provided project letters (Exhibit 3). STRAW participants will provide \$413,400 in volunteer labor.
4. **Economically disadvantaged communities.** Approximately 40% of the schools Point Blue will partner with are located in low-income communities (data from the Authority’s 80% Area Median Income Map and/or having 50% or more students eligible for the USDA free or reduced meal program). These teachers will receive on-going professional development in watershed science that will benefit their students beyond the grant period. Students and families who participate in the STRAW restoration will gain a greater understanding of their watershed and be more inclined to serve as environmental stewards in their communities.
5. **Benefits to economy.** STRAW employs 39 restoration experts and educators. With this grant, they will work with 1,920 STRAW participants and support the CCCI interns and apprentices who will be trained in climate-smart conservation principles and may go on to pursue careers in conservation.
6. **Engage youth and young adults.** Point Blue will partner with local K-12 schools in the area and work with approximately 1,920 volunteers, most of whom are youth and young adults. STRAW participants will receive watershed education and training and experience in restoration. In 2014, HLJ Research evaluated the program and found that STRAW improved students’ basic understanding of watersheds and provided students with a broader global context of watersheds and their importance to the environment. During the project, STRAW will also work with CCCI interns and apprentices who will receive training in climate-smart conservation. Many of the interns go on to work at conservation nonprofits or government agencies and apply this training to their future work in natural resource protection.
7. **Monitoring, maintenance, and stewardship.** Based on 12+ years of experience in this specific habitat type, STRAW will construct a project that minimizes long-term maintenance needs, encourages self-propagation, and maximizes habitat value. Monitoring of previous sites demonstrates the success of these practices. For example, previous work at Bahia Wetland from their first Measure AA grant has resulted in an 87% survival rate average over

two years. Monitoring informs STRAW's adaptive management strategies and design refinements, as it is part of Point Blue's commitment to using data collection and analysis to inform conservation practices. Over the course of the five-year project, STRAW will use established monitoring protocols for vegetation establishment success that gets at short-term, construction performance. To evaluate wildlife habitat benefit, birds will be monitored as indicators of habitat health. Point Blue will monitor Ridgway's rails at the marshes adjacent to the restoration site, using standard time-tested protocols developed by Point Blue and partners. This data will feed into the Ridgway's rail monitoring efforts to assess population levels and the impact of various restoration practices around the San Francisco Bay.

8. **Coastal Conservancy's San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.** The project is consistent with the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy's Program Criteria, as follows:
 - a. The project is supported by regional plans including: Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for the San Francisco Estuary, State Coastal Conservancy Strategic Plan, California Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk, California Essential Habitat Connectivity Strategy for Conserving a Connected California, US Fish and Wildlife Service's Recovery Plan for Tidal Marsh Ecosystems of Northern and Central California, Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Science Update, City of American Canyon General Plan, and others.
 - b. The project expands education efforts to improve public understanding, use, and stewardship of coastal resources.
 - c. Through restoration of wetland-upland transition zone habitat, the project protects and enhances natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance in the Bay Area.
 - d. The project provides benefits to underserved communities through early career training and workforce development through the Community College Conservation Internship Program.
 - e. STRAW participants and volunteer interns will provide in-kind labor valued at \$413,400.
9. **San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission's Coastal Management Program.** The project is consistent with and meets the following priorities of the plan:
 - a) Tidal Marshes and Tidal Flats, Policy 6: The project design will be based on analysis of fish and wildlife, sediment erosion and accretion, and resilience to sea level rise and climate change.
 - b) Fish, Other Aquatic Organisms and Wildlife, Policy 2: Native species, including candidate, threatened, and endangered species and any species that provides substantial public benefits, as well as specific habitats that are needed to conserve, increase, or prevent the extinction of these species, should be protected.
 - c) Water Quality, Policy 7: Whenever practicable, native vegetation buffer areas should be provided as part of a project to control pollutants from entering the Bay.

- d) Environmental Justice and Social Equity, Policy 3: Equitable, culturally relevant, community outreach and engagement should be conducted by local governments and project applicants to meaningfully involve potentially impacted communities for major projects and appropriate minor projects in underrepresented and/or identified vulnerable and/or disadvantaged communities.

10. **San Francisco Bay Joint Venture's Implementation Strategy.** The project is consistent with the SFBJV's Implementation Strategy for 2022, by helping to meet the goals to enhance the Estuarine Upland Transition Zone Habitat and satisfies all ten of the SFBJV priorities: Conservation, Scientific Foundation, Communications, Coordination, Collaboration, Funding, Proactivity, Monitoring, Climate Change, and Equity. The primary benefit this project will provide is that it will successfully create new high-quality habitat and high-tide refugia for wildlife. The project is in the process of being added to the priority project list and is scheduled for adoption by the SFBJV Board on May 21, 2024.

CONSISTENCY WITH AUTHORITY'S INTERIM TRIBAL CONSULTATION

POLICY: Per the Authority's Tribal Consultation Policy, Resolution 108, 8 letters were sent to tribes of Napa County on March 27, 2024. No responses were received.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The implementation component of the project is exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code Regs. section 15333 (Small Habitat Restoration Projects). This section exempts projects not to exceed five acres in size to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife provided that there is no significant adverse effect on endangered species or their habitat, no hazardous materials at the site, it and will not result in significant impacts when viewed in connection with other projects. This project will restore 1.1 acres, there are no hazardous materials on site, and it will not result in significant impacts when viewed in connection with other projects.

The maintenance, training, and monitoring components of this project are exempt from CEQA review pursuant to 14 Cal. Code Regs. § 15304, which exempts minor alterations in the condition of the land, water, and vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry or agricultural purposes. These maintenance, training, and monitoring activities will have only minor effects on the condition of the land and will not involve the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees.

Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.