

Estuary Program Community Project Program Proposal to Redesign the Program

Background

At its core, the Estuary Program fosters collaboration to work toward our shared goal of protecting and restoring Morro Bay and the lands that surround it. Our partnerships with agencies, nonprofits, landowners, and private citizens is crucial to our work. One aspect of this partnership has been our long-running Community Projects program. Since 2014, we have supported 14 projects with a total of \$53,192, resulting in restoration, monitoring, and education work that might not otherwise have been possible.

Challenges

While the Community Projects program is a valuable tool for the Estuary Program, it does have its challenges. Many recipients lack the infrastructure and experience to enter into contracts, manage contractors, and develop invoices and reports. Some have experience managing projects but are part of large bureaucracies that make it difficult to enter into contracts or directly pay invoices. These challenges necessitate a great deal of Estuary Program staff time to ensure successful completion of projects.

Potential Solutions

The Estuary Program is committed to continuing this valuable partnership opportunity while reducing staff time spent on contract management, increasing Estuary Program technical engagement with projects, and improving efficiency of the timing and implementation of projects. The following summarizes proposed changes to restructure the program.

Each year at a time to be determined, the process might be as follows:

- Estuary Program reaches out to partners and the community to solicit ideas and shares guidelines on our website. Meetings would ideally be held live to discuss and develop the project ideas. If staff felt that the project idea had potential, then the applicant would be invited to submit a simple application called a Concept Proposal, which would include a project description, schedule, and budget.
- Staff would review these Concept Proposals to ensure that the project, applicant, etc. were eligible to apply. Some examples of ineligible projects include those proposed by for-profit organizations for business gains or projects that do not support CCMP Action Plans.
- Staff would confer with the appropriate TACs for input on the validity and quality of the approach.
- If TAC approves, staff would conduct a capacity review with the applicant. This includes assessment of the following:
 - o Discuss partner's ability to enter into contracts. Walk them through our typical Community Projects contract so they know what is involved. Discuss shared approaches to managing contracts if needed.
 - o Partner shares grant management experience so we can get a sense of their capacity and need for support.
 - o We will go over our invoice form with the partner and confirm that they are able to complete it.

- We will review the format for the final report and confirm that they will be able to provide what we need.
 - The partner must present the expected match and a plan for documenting the match. This is crucial, as our match undergoes review during our yearly financial audit.
 - Discuss if the partner is able to work on a reimbursement basis.
 - Note that this capacity review will not necessarily eliminate a potential applicant, but it allows staff to proceed with the project with a better understanding of the actual amount of time required to manage the project, rather than discovering this after the project has been selected for funding.
- Next, the Concept Proposal goes before the Bay Foundation and Executive Committee for their review, proposed changes, and approval. Staff shares recommendations on approving projects based on the capacity review, number and intensity of other active projects that require staff capacity, and TAC recommendations.
 - If approved, then staff work with the applicant to develop the contract, final scope of work, and schedule.

For this process, we are proposing an annual budget of \$15,000 with a maximum award amount of \$10,000. (Note that this increase of annual budget will require an amendment to the Restoration Fund Five-year spending plan and/or allocation of \$5,000 from NEP grant or private donations.) If we award all of the funding for the year in one round of application review, then no other applications will be solicited for that year. Another scenario might be that we receive numerous applications with potential in the first round, and staff would prefer to develop those submitted applications for the next round rather than soliciting additional applications.

Overall, we want this process to have more staff involvement, and we'd like to be able to expand the impact of projects by increasing the maximum award amount. But this program is already very labor intensive, so the only way to do this is to more efficiently utilize staff time in administering the program.

Next Steps

If the BF and EC approve this proposal, then staff will finalize guidance for the program to incorporate these changes. We will decide on the best timing for soliciting project ideas and then reach out to partners, our committees, and our community to begin developing potential projects.

Estuary Program Community Project Process

