



Executive Committee Quarterly Meeting
Estuary Program Offices, Morro Bay, CA
via Video Conference Call

November 19, 2025
4:00 pm

Staff Report

1. Introductions and Updates
2. Public Comment
3. Agenda Revisions
4. **ACTION:** Consider Approval of August 20, 2025 Executive Committee (EC) minutes (see attached)
5. **ACTION:** Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act (IIJA) Fiscal Year 2026 Workplan and Budget (see attached)

Based on the expected IIJA/Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funding for Fiscal Year (FY) 2026, staff developed a workplan and budget totaling \$910,000. The workplan follows the structure of previous years, as most IIJA/BIL funded efforts are multi-year projects now entering their final phases.

In this final year of IIJA/BIL support, we are focused on completing and consolidating key multi-year initiatives. These include expanded water quality and groundwater monitoring, restoration projects that address invasive plant management and habitat resilience, and continued delivery of our teacher training series and curriculum development to strengthen environmental education across the region.

The workplan also supports partner efforts, such as assisting the County of San Luis Obispo with construction of a fuel canopy to prevent contamination runoff into Chorro Creek. Staffing and core capacity needs are incorporated to ensure effective delivery and oversight of these efforts.

Staff recommends approval of the IIJA FY26 workplan and budget.

6. **ACTION:** Consider approval of Consent Decree request for tidal prism analysis

Sedimentation in Morro Bay has been a topic of interest since before the Estuary Program was formed thirty years ago. One metric to improve understanding of the issue in the bay is the calculation of tidal prism, which is essentially the volume of water that the bay can hold. This metric would decrease if the bay were filling in due to excess sedimentation.

The Estuary Program and partners have funded topo bathymetric and lidar surveys to support the study of bay sedimentation, but to get the full value of these previous efforts, additional expertise is required to conduct the analysis. Staff are requesting Consent Decree funding of \$20,000 to support a contract with Dr. Stefan Talke, a Cal Poly professor whose work focuses on coastal hydrodynamic processes. He and his lab will conduct an in-depth analysis of Morro Bay's tidal prism. Over the past few years, Dr.

Talke has been collecting tide height data with support from the Estuary Program. This data will refine the existing tidal prism analysis. The proposed project will create information to support the work of the Estuary Program and partners such as the Central Coast Regional Water Resource Control Board. The Estuary Program hopes to fund an additional phase of the project with funding from the FY26 IIJA grant.

Staff recommend approval of the \$20,000 Consent Decree request for tidal prism analysis.

7. ACTION: Consider approval of Community Project (see attached)

Each summer, staff develop Community Projects with partners to advance CCMP goals. This year, a project was developed with San Luis Obispo Beaver Brigade (SLOBB), a local nonprofit focused on improving conditions for beavers which in turn supports healthy habitats. The project involves providing educational outreach for practitioners, landowners, regulators, local nonprofits, and community members on low-tech process-based restoration techniques. The project involves SLOBB hosting an all-day workshop to provide education and hands-on experience in the use of process-based restoration (PBR) techniques such as beaver dam analogs and headcut repairs. The project also includes SLOBB hosting four field tours throughout the spring and fall.

Details of the project are in the attached Community Project Summary.

The annual budget for Community Projects for FY26 is \$15,000. The cost of the proposed project is \$8,055. Depending on how much funding we distribute in the fall, we may have a second solicitation in spring 2026.

Staff recommend funding the project at the requested amount of \$8,055 to provide a workshop and field tours to share knowledge and foster implementation of PBR projects.

8. DISCUSSION: 320 Base Funding and IIJA Annual Reports (see attached)

At the half-way point of each FY, the Estuary Program submits semi-annual reports to EPA. Updated guidance from EPA requires an Annual Report at the end of the FY to provide program status on the budget and tasks laid out in our workplans. Separate annual reports are created for IIJA and for 320 base funding.

For our 320 base funding, we have expended 83% of our funding since the cumulative grant began on October 1, 2021. We have met 222% of our match requirement. Cash and in-kind match are at approximately \$7 million.

For our IIJA funding, we have expended a total of \$2,364,417, which is 65% of our four years of funding. The IIJA funding does not require match.

9. DISCUSSION: Program Highlights

Administration Updates:

- Staffing: We hired Fiona Litton, our new Monitoring Coordinator, who started in November.
- Finances: The finances for FY25 have been closed out, and staff are preparing for our annual audit scheduled for early January.

- Federal Government Shutdown: We currently retain access to the federal Automated Standard Application for Payments (ASAP) system that we use for reimbursements for our 320 base funding and IJJA grants. We've been able to continue to drawdown our reimbursements of EPA funds during the shutdown. Communication with EPA staff and federal partners may be delayed, and federally supported projects, such as marsh modelling with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), may experience temporary impacts. Our EPA contacts are currently furloughed.
- EPA Visit: Prior to the shutdown, we hosted an impromptu visit from EPA Region 9 Program Officer, Vivian Lopez, and her supervisor, Sona Chilingaryan, on September 26. Their visit included a bay tour and field visits to project sites across the watershed.

Monitoring Updates:

- Eelgrass Mapping: We contracted with Cal Poly to conduct a drone flight in the fall to map eelgrass across the bay. The Poly project team is developing a machine learning model to automate the eelgrass classification process. They are currently testing out the model with eelgrass data sets from Elkhorn Slough and from other NEPs.
- Steelhead Tracking: The Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) is wrapping up a project to track steelhead movement through the estuary. The original impetus for the project was to determine if the dredging activity each May was possibly interfering with steelhead outmigration from the estuary to the ocean. The results are currently under final review, and ACOE will share the results when they're ready. This study is the first of its kind in Morro Bay.
- State of the Bay: Our triennial State of the Bay report card is nearing completion and is expected to be released in early 2026. Some exciting new datasets for the report include analysis of changing bay elevation with eelgrass decline and recovery; shifts in bay fish species composition following eelgrass decline and recovery; and the impacts of extreme weather events like the winter 2023 storms.

Restoration Updates:

- Sea Level Rise & Adaptation Planning: We continued our partnership with USGS on planning for sea level rise and adaptation measures. We are developing a list of possible adaptation measures to review at the next TAC meeting in December. The government shutdown has impacted the timing of this project.
- Walters Creek Floodplain Enhancement: The first phase of the project was implemented in September 2025. We are also starting our monitoring of the project through lidar flights with Cal Poly and wildlife cameras for high flow tracking.
- Historical Ecology Study: A draft report was completed in September and is being reviewed by partners. We are considering further outreach of the project through presentations, StoryMaps, etc.
- Invasive Ice Plant Removal: We have scheduled the California Conservation Corps (CCC) for additional hand removal efforts and plan for larger treatment on the sandspit in December 2025. Rain postponed efforts scheduled for early November.
- Pikeminnow Management: Staff worked with Stillwater Sciences to complete single pass e-fishing of Chorro Creek priority removal sites. The effort was a success, and specific numbers of pikeminnow removed are currently being calculated.
- Chorro Creek Invasive Species Mapping: Starting in October 2025, SLO County began treatment of *Arundo spp.* at twenty locations as the first step in addressing invasives in the area.
- Chorro Creek Ecological Reserve: We are exploring adaptive management options for the site and plan to hold a TAC meeting this winter with a likely request for cost estimates going out this spring.

- Regional Dune Workshop: We are collaborating with UCSB on a state-wide study to look at dune habitat function and vulnerability. Morro Bay is a case study site. This project has been extended to October 2026.
- Steelhead Growth and Tracking: Stillwater Sciences completed a final report, and the CCC are continuing to manage the antennas. We are hoping to be awarded a grant from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's Fisheries Restoration Grant Program (FRGP) to support the effort. Our project is currently making its way through the grant selection process.
- Cal Poly Road Crossing Improvement: Initial site surveys were completed in September by PWA with designs to be completed later this fall/winter.
- Lower Chorro Creek Floodplain: We contracted with the Coastal San Luis Resource Conservation District (CSLRCD) to complete permitting and additional designs for a suite of high priority projects that were selected as part of a larger TAC process this past year.
- Ramona Trail: We will be contracting with the Land Conservancy of SLO to support engineering and permitting of a trail along their property adjacent to Sweet Springs.

Communications, Outreach, & Education Updates:

- Nature Center Updates: With US Fish & Wildlife Service support, we designed, fabricated, and installed an interpretive sign for the overlook adjacent to Estuary Program office. A new interactive eelgrass exhibit is in the final stages of design, and we expect to have it built and installed by the end of January. We are also working with Morro Coast Audubon Society to create a bird-themed exhibit for the Nature Center. This exhibit will feature local birds and have an interactive component, such as bird wingspan outlines that visitors can compare themselves to. This exhibit will replace the wildlife panel near the window. We are working with the City of Morro Bay to relocate the wildlife panel outside.
- Outreach: We had several great events in between August and November including Biodiversity Week, Restore America's Estuary Week (which included an iNaturalist Training at the Nature Center), and a Creeks to Coast Clean-up at the Rock. We continued to host field trips. We attended two events in October: the Maritime Museum Family Fun Day where we hosted a new eelgrass-themed kid activity, and the Woods Wiggle Waggle where we focused on sharing educational messaging from our Mutts for the Bay program. In November, we tabled at the Morro Bay Triathlon, promoting our program to both locals and visitors. We also hosted a Science on Tap event at Oak and Otter Brewing in SLO, where our education program partners shared information about their education offerings. Between these events, we interacted with over 400 community members.
- Morro Bay Lighted boat Parade: We will be opening up the office for an informal gathering of staff, board members, and EC members for the lighted boat parade on December 13. More info to come.
- Field Trips: In October and early November, we hosted field trips for about 170 students, including youth from as far away as Los Angeles and Lake Tahoe. Topics included watersheds, estuaries, local species anatomy and adaptations, and trash cleanup.

10. Adjourn to next meeting of February 18, 2026 at 4 p.m., which will be hybrid with some attendees participating via Zoom and others meeting in the Estuary Program office.

Attachments:

- Minutes from August 20, 2025 EC meeting
- Draft FY26 BIL workplan
- Community Project staff report
- 320 Base Funding and IJJA Annual Reports