



WHALE TAIL[®] Competitive Grants Program

2025-26 GRANT GUIDELINES



California Coastal Commission

455 Market Street, Suite 200, Room 228, San Francisco, CA 94105

www.coastal.ca.gov/whaletailgrant

Contact: Jessica Lie, Jessica.Lie@coastal.ca.gov

Funded by:



CALIFORNIA
**OCEAN
PROTECTION
COUNCIL**



The 2025-2026 WHALE TAIL[®] Competitive Grants Program is part of California Climate Investments, a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Invest, formerly known as Cap-and-Trade, dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment — particularly in disadvantaged communities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
BACKGROUND	1
OTHER RESOURCES	1
OCEAN PROTECTION COUNCIL	2
Background on OPC	2
OPC Goals and Priorities	2
OPC Funding.....	2
WHALE TAIL® GRANT PROGRAM OVERVIEW	3
Eligible Applicants	3
Tribal Set-Aside	3
Eligible Projects.....	4
Grant Size & Reimbursement.....	4
Project Timing	4
What We Can't Fund.....	5
Project Administration.....	5
APPLICATION & SELECTION PROCESS.....	6
Application Deadline	6
Filling out Your Application.....	6
Submission Process	6
Project Selection and Notification	6
Anticipated Grant Timeline.....	7
QUESTIONS?.....	7
Application Walk-Through Virtual Meeting.....	7
Contact Us.....	7
DISCLAIMER REGARDING COMMUNICATION WITH THE COMMISSION	7
CRITERIA FOR SELECTING GRANT RECIPIENTS.....	8
Attachment A: Brief Summaries of Some Recent WHALE TAIL® Grants.....	10
Attachment B: Administrative Requirements.....	12

2025-26 WHALE TAIL® COMPETITIVE GRANTS PROGRAM GUIDELINES

Read these guidelines before beginning your grant proposal. Download the grant application form at www.coastal.ca.gov/whaletailgrant.

INTRODUCTION

The California Coastal Commission's WHALE TAIL® Grants Program funds projects that connect people to the California Coast and its watersheds through education, stewardship, and outdoor experiences. Education and stewardship projects relating to climate change as it impacts the coast and ocean are eligible and encouraged. Adopt-A-Beach® programs, as well as other beach stewardship and coastal habitat restoration projects that have an educational component, are also eligible. WHALE TAIL® Grants focus on reaching communities all over California that face barriers accessing marine education and stewardship opportunities. [Attachment A](#) contains brief summaries of some recent grant projects.

BACKGROUND

The California Coastal Commission started the WHALE TAIL® Competitive Grants Program in 1998 with funding from purchases of California's [WHALE TAIL® License Plate](#). In 2014, the [Protect Our Coast and Oceans Fund](#) was added to the California state tax return's Voluntary Contributions section to provide taxpayers the option to contribute to the WHALE TAIL® Grants Program. In 2021, the state budget provided one-time funding to the program.

The Coastal Commission is a state regulatory and planning agency that operates under the 1976 Coastal Act to manage the conservation and development of coastal resources in California. The Commission's Public Education Program works to increase public knowledge of coastal and marine resources and to engage the public in coastal protection and restoration activities.

OTHER RESOURCES

The Coastal Commission offers a wide variety of free education resources and programs. Find them [here](#) and coastforyou.org.

Learn how to adopt a beach on the [Adopt-A-Beach® website](#). Contact us at coast4u@coastal.ca.gov if you want to start a program in an area that does not currently have one. [Adopt-A-Beach® Managers](#) are designated by Coastal Commission staff to operate the program locally and serve as the liaison with the Commission.

If you're interested in a grant to purchase a [beach wheelchair](#) and your organization is able to manage a public lending program, contact us at coast4u@coastal.ca.gov.

When appropriate, educators may consider integrating into their projects the [principles and concepts of ocean literacy](#), California's [Environmental Principles and Concepts](#), and applicable [California State Content Standards](#).

OCEAN PROTECTION COUNCIL

For the 2025-26 competitive grant cycle, funding is being generously provided through a partnership with the [California Ocean Protection Council](#) (OPC).

Background on OPC

OPC was established in 2004 through the [California Ocean Protection Act](#) and operates under the California Natural Resources Agency. OPC's mission is to protect California's coast and ocean by advancing innovative, science-based policy and management, making strategic investments, and catalyzing action through partnerships and collaboration. These efforts deliver significant benefits to the state while providing a global model for ecosystem-based protection and conservation. OPC is charged with safeguarding the health and resilience of coastal and ocean ecosystems for the benefit of all Californians.

OPC Goals and Priorities

In 2020, OPC adopted its [Strategic Plan to Protect California's Coast and Ocean](#), which outlined OPC's goals and priorities through 2025. OPC is currently developing its Strategic Plan for 2026–2030, which will provide an ambitious, science-based roadmap for protecting California's coast and ocean through the end of this decade.

OPC strives to engage, partner, and collaborate with environmental justice communities, underserved populations, and California Native American tribes to ensure all projects and actions provide benefits to all Californians now and for future generations. OPC's priorities are centered around coastal and ocean access for all, inclusive and accessible engagement in decision-making, and embedding equity within all OPC programs. Learn more in OPC's [Equity Plan](#) and [Tribal Engagement Strategy](#).

OPC Funding

Funding for the 2025-26 WHALE TAIL® Competitive Grants cycle comes from [California Climate Investments](#), a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Invest, formerly known as Cap-and-Trade, dollars to work. In the Budget Act of 2024 (AB 107), \$27.5 million was appropriated to OPC to support resilience projects that conserve, protect, and restore marine wildlife and healthy coastal and ocean ecosystems. More information, including links to OPC's [General Grant Guidelines](#), funding opportunities, can be found on OPC's [Funding Webpage](#).

WHALE TAIL® GRANT PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Eligible Applicants

- Non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations
- Projects of a non-profit fiscal sponsor
- Public schools or districts
- Government entities
- California Native American tribes as defined by Governor's Executive Order B-10-11

**Current Grants:* If you have an open, competitive WHALE TAIL® Grant, do not apply for a new grant until after you've completed your project and submitted your final grant report. No preference is given to previous grant recipients during the review of new grant proposals.

Tribal Set-Aside

Approximately half of total grant funds (\$1,000,000) will be set aside for projects led by California Native American tribes, tribally-led entities, and organizations directly engaging California Native American tribal communities.

Eligible applicants for tribal set-aside may include:

- **Federally recognized tribal governments:** Federally recognized tribes must provide evidence of inclusion in the annually published federal register from the Secretary of the Interior pursuant to 25 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 83, Section 104 of the Federally Recognized Indian Tribe List Act of 1994.
- **Non-profit organizations or fiscal sponsors applying on behalf of non-federally recognized tribes, inter-tribal consortia, tribal conservation districts or other organizations** directly engaging California Native American tribes or tribal communities. Qualified 501(c)(3) organizations must provide proof of partnership or support from tribal leadership.
- **School districts that directly engage California Native American students**, when the project is designed in partnership with a tribal government or demonstrates direct engagement with tribal students. Applicants must provide proof of partnership or support from tribal leadership.

For any proposals submitted under the tribal set-aside, applicants must provide proof of partnership or support from tribal leadership. Acceptable documentation may include:

- A signed letter of support from the tribe's council or chairperson.
- A tribal council resolution authorizing and consenting to the partnership or project.
- Other appropriate documentation such as, but not limited to, a governing board resolution demonstrating the organization's commitments to advancing priorities in service to California Native Americans.

(Continued on the following page)

Applicants must also provide a brief description of their relationship to the California Native American tribe(s) or tribal communities directly engaged.

Note: Organizations that cannot provide this documentation may still be eligible to apply for WHALE TAIL® grants under the general funding pool but will not be considered under the tribal set-aside.

Eligible Projects

We strongly encourage projects engaging communities that face barriers accessing coastal and marine education and stewardship. We also look for applicant organizations based in and composed of the communities they are engaging. We strive for a broad geographic distribution of projects across California.

Projects must engage communities in California and include education about coastal and marine environments. This may include classroom-based programs, field trips, climate change education and stewardship, coastal habitat restoration or shoreline cleanup programs with community involvement, community or participatory science, cultural and ancestral practice preservation, workforce development, and much more. Projects can engage participants of any age.

If a project will take place in an inland area or on a bay, the proposal should address how the project includes coastal and marine educational content, including how the connection to the coast and ocean will be emphasized.

Please see [Attachment A](#) for brief summaries of some recent WHALE TAIL® Grants.

Grant Size & Reimbursement

Approximately \$2,000,000 will be awarded in total, with approximately \$1,000,000 reserved for projects led by California Native American tribes, tribally-led entities, and organizations serving and/or engaging California Native American tribal communities. Please see [Tribal Set-Aside](#) for details on eligibility.

You can request any amount up to \$50,000. At least 25% of funded projects outside of the tribal set-aside will be small grants of up to \$25,000.

This is a reimbursement grant with the possibility for non-profit organizations and tribes to request advance payment. Expenses will be reimbursed no more than once per month upon submission of an invoice by the grantee, for hours already worked or purchases already made. Grantees must submit receipts for expenses when invoicing. If you request advance payment, you may have additional reporting requirements. Please see [Attachment B](#) for information on advance payment.

Project Timing

Grant project tasks must *begin* between May 15 and October 1, 2026. Project funding must *end* by November 30, 2028. (If your project begins on or before June 30, 2026, your project must end by April 17, 2028. If your project begins on or after July 1, 2026, your project must end by November 30, 2028.)

You cannot apply for a new grant if you have an open, competitive WHALE TAIL® Grant and have not completed your project by the application deadline. Please keep this in mind when determining your project end date if you intend on applying for a future grant. Application deadlines have traditionally been in the Fall.

What We Can't Fund

Grants will not be awarded to fund:

- Political advocacy work
- Projects that include religious content in their programming
- Travel outside of California
- Purchase of vehicles
- Purchase of insurance
- Purchase of laptops, tablets, cell phones, or similar equipment
- Purchase of prizes, incentives, gift cards, cash gifts, or items that will be sold
- Only an organization's general, ongoing administrative costs without a defined project

Please refer to the Grant Project Budget Form at the end of the application form packet from www.coastal.ca.gov/whaletailgrant for more details on what we can and cannot fund.

Project Administration

You must assume responsibility for administering the project, including employing any necessary staff or consultants, maintaining complete accounting and time records, providing fiscal management, and submitting required reports. Please refer to [Attachment B](#) for administrative requirements if a grant is awarded.

APPLICATION & SELECTION PROCESS

Application Deadline

Monday, December 15, 2025 at 8:00pm California time

Filling out Your Application

Download the WHALE TAIL® Grant application form from www.coastal.ca.gov/whaletailgrant.

Submission Process

There are three options for submission: email, file upload, OR postal mail. **Choose one.**

- **Email:** Send your packet as one or more attachments to whaletailgrant@coastal.ca.gov by 8:00pm California time on December 15, 2025. Do not zip your files. Do not submit your proposal as a cloud document link, such as a Google Drive link. Do not attach more than 30 Mb to an email. You may send attachments in multiple emails if needed. If your grant proposal is a PDF, save it as “Reduced Size PDF” to reduce your file size. If you still have items larger than 30 Mb, consider using the upload option rather than email.
- **File Upload:** If you prefer to upload your packet, make sure all files have your organization name in the file name and upload them to this [Dropbox folder](#) by 8:00pm California time on December 15, 2025. Uploading a folder rather than separately uploading multiple documents is best. Do not zip your files. Coordinate with your team so that one person is responsible for uploading your documents. We recommend that you do not wait until the last minute to upload your proposal, because uploading files may take time.
- **Postal Mail:** If you choose to use postal mail, your package must be *postmarked* no later than December 15, 2025. You do not need to pay for rush shipping. Mail application to:

Whale Tail Grants
California Coastal Commission
455 Market Street, Suite 200, Room 228
San Francisco, CA 94105

Do not include binders, folders, plastic overlays, or other extra packaging. If you want to email or upload your packet but have a curriculum sample or other supplementary material that you need to mail, you can do that separately (by the same deadline as above). Include a note with the applicant organization name and project title.

Project Selection and Notification

See page 8 for the criteria we will use to review proposals.

After reviewing all proposals, we expect to make funding recommendations to the Coastal Commissioners at their April 2026 public meeting. We will notify all applicants by email and postal mail following the Commission vote. If your project is recommended for funding, you will be notified by email prior to the Coastal Commission meeting. Emails will be sent from whaletailgrant@coastal.ca.gov.

Anticipated Grant Timeline

2025-2026 Grant Round Milestones	Timing
Release of WHALE TAIL® Grant application and guidelines	Early October 2025
Application walk-through virtual meeting (register here)	November 6, 2025, 3:30-5:00pm CA time
Application deadline	December 15, 2025 by 8:00pm CA time
Application review	December 2025 – March 2026
Recommended awards presented to Coastal Commissioners for approval	April 15-17, 2026 (exact date TBD)
Applicant notification	By end of April 2026
Projects start	Upon execution of the Grant Agreement (May 15 – October 1, 2026)

QUESTIONS?

Application Walk-Through Virtual Meeting

We will host a virtual meeting on **Thursday, November 6, 2025, 3:30-5:00pm**, for a detailed walk-through of the WHALE TAIL® Grant application and guidelines, including time for you to ask questions about the process. You can register for the webinar [here](#). If you miss it, the presentation will be posted on the [grant webpage](#).

Contact Us

If you're considering applying for a WHALE TAIL® Grant, we encourage you to contact us with any questions or to discuss your project idea. Contact Jessica Lie at Jessica.Lie@coastal.ca.gov.

DISCLAIMER REGARDING COMMUNICATION WITH THE COMMISSION

Applicants and grantees are notified that all communication to and from the Commission is subject to public release under the state's Public Records Act (PRA). That communication includes, but is not limited to, messages, documents, pictures, and financial details listed in spreadsheets. Please avoid using any personal data (home addresses, personal cell phones, personal emails) in your communications with us. Do not assume your communication or any aspect of it is confidential. If you have concerns about specific material, please request a phone call from staff.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING GRANT RECIPIENTS

Grant proposals will be reviewed based on the following criteria, using the information you provide in your application. There are **100** possible points.

1. Educational Impact and/or Environmental Improvement (25 points)

Proposals will be assessed on the degree to which they:

- Demonstrate educational impact featuring the marine or coastal environment and/or improvement of coastal or marine habitats through community involvement.
- Include methods and pathways for achieving positive outcomes, such as experiential, hands-on learning and stewardship; positive nature experiences; longer and/or repeated experiences with opportunities for reflection; pre-field trip preparation; age-appropriate content and delivery; strategies for long-term positive impact (which might stem from educational outcomes, or elements such as leadership development opportunities or family involvement in youth programming); and/or strong evidence for ecological need and projected improvement with community involvement.

2. Audience (15 points)

Proposals will be assessed on the degree to which they engage communities that face barriers accessing marine education and stewardship opportunities.

3. Project Concept (30 points)

Comprised of:

- **Purpose (10 points):** Projects will be assessed on the degree to which they are connected to a specific issue, interest, and/or need (which might be educational, ecological, social, cultural, etc.), and why the project is likely to be successful in addressing it. Proposals should explain the issue, interest, and/or need; how it was identified for the project audience; and why the project is of value to the community being engaged.
- **Relevant and Creative (10 points):** Proposals will be assessed on the degree to which they demonstrate that the project is relevant and appropriately designed for the audience, and the degree to which it incorporates creative ideas and innovative strategies.
- **Continuing, Building Capacity, or Creating Tools for Others (5 points):** Proposals will be assessed on whether a project will be continued after the grant ends, and the degree to which it builds organizational capacity, builds lasting collaborations, and/or creates useful tools for others in the field.
- **Reasonable Cost (5 points):** Proposals will be assessed on whether they have a reasonable budget that is clearly connected to the project goals.

4. Proposal Content and Project Implementation (30 points)

Comprised of:

- **Organization and Staffing (10 points):** Proposals will be assessed on the degree to which the organization and staff is suited to carry out the project and work with the intended audience. *(Continued on the following page)*

- **Project Clarity, Feasibility, and Completeness (15 points):** Proposals will be assessed on the degree to which they demonstrate the project is feasible and fully thought-out with clear, realistic goals and objectives; a realistic plan for reaching the intended audience; a workable project design; and a clear plan for implementation.
A strong proposal will demonstrate how the project objectives and goals will be successfully achieved, will include detailed and accurate cost information with eligible expenses, and will include all applicable elements of the application packet.
- **Tracking and Assessment (5 points):** Proposals will be assessed on the degree to which their plan for tracking and assessing the project's success is appropriate and tied to the goals and objectives. A strong proposal will be clear, complete, and feasible, and will explain how the results will be used.

ATTACHMENT A

Brief Summaries of Some Recent WHALE TAIL® Grants

Save California Salmon **\$20,000**

Project Title: *North Coast Tribal Youth Environmental Education Program*
Project Location: *Del Norte, Humboldt, Mendocino, Siskiyou, and Trinity Counties*

North Coast tribal community members will enjoy an Indigenous Science camp at Sue-Meg State Park, Yurok Tribal members will enjoy a traditional Canoe Camp, and North Coast schools will take part in field trips focused on dam removal impacts, estuaries, and tidepools.

River Jim Learning Solutions **\$19,204**

Project Title: *Mountains to the Sea*
Project Location: *Glenn County*

Middle school students will explore rivers and reservoirs during canoe and camping trips as they learn about the Sacramento River watershed and their interconnectivity with the Pacific Ocean.

Sweetwater Spectrum **\$3,678**

Project Title: *Sweetwater Spectrum Ecology Club*
Project Location: *Sonoma County*

Residents of an independent living community for autistic adults will take part in a series of environmental learning workshops with watershed art projects and film screenings, organize beach and creek cleanups, and enjoy educational hikes, nature observation, and other outdoor recreation activities.

EGE Foundation **\$16,300**

Project Title: *EGE Out! Natural Resource Education Program*
Project Location: *Sacramento County*

A weekly afterschool program will engage students over three months as they explore STEAM careers, coastal and marine habitats, nonpoint source pollution, and coastal stewardship, including field trips to the beach and the Delta.

YES Nature to Neighborhoods **\$20,000**

Project Title: *Coastal Conservation Corps Educational Activities*
Project Location: *Contra Costa County*

Teens will plan and implement two bioblitz events in Richmond for youth, adults, and families to investigate coastal ecosystems and learn about the species that inhabit them, leading to conservation efforts to protect the local shoreline.

Coastal Watershed Council	\$50,000
----------------------------------	-----------------

Project Title: *River Stewards Program*
Project Location: *Santa Cruz County*

People experiencing homelessness will be offered weekly environmental education, stewardship opportunities, and services via a partnership with Downtown Streets Team. Training will emphasize plant and wildlife identification, stewardship principles related to habitat, and plant care as team members remove debris and invasive species, plant new native species, weed, water, and perform other site maintenance activities along the San Lorenzo River.

Elkhorn Slough Foundation	\$46,313
----------------------------------	-----------------

Project Title: *Water Stories: Building Connections with Elkhorn Slough through Natural Dyes and Intergenerational Interviews*
Project Location: *Monterey and Kern Counties*

Fourth and fifth graders from Las Lomas, undergraduate environmental science students from CSU Monterey Bay, and elder members of an Arvin art collective will contribute to this project to collect and communicate intergenerational “water stories” through interviews, art exhibits, and natural textile dyes, and an investigation of the response of natural dye colors to local water pollutants.

Barbareño Band of Chumash Indians (fiscally sponsored by CLAWS)	\$32,480
--	-----------------

Project Title: *Ikmen – Waves of Connection: Deepening our Relationship with Ocean, Community and Homeland*
Project Location: *Santa Barbara County*

Coastal place-based, culturally responsive programming for Barbareño Chumash community members will include Chumash storytelling, traditional food practices, cultural history sharing, sacred site visits, and tule boat making and racing.

Latino Outdoors (fiscally sponsored by Community Initiatives)	\$8,800
--	----------------

Project Title: *Connecting Latinos to Whales*
Project Location: *Los Angeles County and San Diego County*

Community members will enjoy an English/Spanish whale watching boat tour, with a post-tour debrief.

San Diego Children and Nature	\$37,018
--------------------------------------	-----------------

Project Title: *Promoting Coastal Health by Engaging Teachers in Watershed Exploration*
Project Location: *San Diego County*

Over a period of nine months, a cohort of formal educators will visit and explore six local ecosystems, with a focus on ocean, climate, and watersheds, by directly engaging in science practices to increase environmental literacy and improve outdoor teaching techniques.

ATTACHMENT B

Administrative Requirements

This attachment specifies some of the rules and requirements for WHALE TAIL® Grant awards.

BUDGET AND REIMBURSEMENTS

Payment shall generally be on a cost-reimbursement basis with documentation of all expenses, and the grant agreement shall specify the maximum dollar amount payable by the agency. The grant budget must set forth in detail the reimbursable items, unit rates as applicable, and extended total amounts for each line item. Monthly, weekly, or hourly rates as appropriate and personnel classifications should be specified when salaries and wages are a reimbursable item.

Reimbursable rates for personnel must not exceed salaries payable to State personnel for similar classifications. Any reimbursable salary that exceeds State rates must have a compelling reason for the higher rate and an explanation of how the awarding agency's interests are served by the grant agreement.

Meals and travel shall be reimbursed based on rules specified in the grant award. See the budget form in the grant application for more information. No travel outside the State of California shall be reimbursed.

ADVANCE PAYMENT

Projects of non-profits and tribes may request an advance of up to 25% of the total grant amount. Advance payments must be deposited in a federally insured, interest-bearing account with the ability to track interest earned and withdrawals. The account must be under the grantee's name and not in the name of any of its directors or officers. All interest earned by funds in the advance payment account are deemed additional grant moneys and must be documented just like the original grant funds.

The grantee must submit documentation of advanced funds **at least quarterly**, providing backup documentation and a progress report on use of the advanced funds. Proof that all the money advanced has been spent is required prior to advancing further funds.

The grantee must repay all unused advance payment funds, which are defined to include interest, and all inadequately documented advance payment funds.

SUBCONTRACTORS

Grantees shall receive prior authorization in writing by the Commission before reimbursement for any subcontract exceeding \$10,000.00. Grantees seeking contractors to perform any services exceeding the cost of \$10,000.00 shall select those contractors pursuant to a process that seeks three competitive quotations or adequate justification for the absence of bidding.

PROPERTY PURCHASED

Grantees shall receive prior authorization in writing by the Commission before any purchase exceeding \$10,000.00. Grantees shall provide in the request for authorization all particulars necessary for evaluation of the necessity or desirability of incurring such cost and the reasonableness of the price or cost.

Grantees agree to continue using items purchased under the grant agreement for the purposes outlined in the agreement, or similar activities, until fully distributed, damaged, worn-out, or obsolete.

FUNDING CREDIT

You must credit the California Coastal Commission's WHALE TAIL® Grants Program and the California Ocean Protection Council as part of your project implementation, such as when doing outreach for, promoting, or presenting grant-funded programming. You must put the [funding credit logos](#) on any printed or online content produced for the project, including linking from the logos to the Commission and Council's websites as appropriate.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Grant awards will include Standard Conditions and Special Conditions. Standard Conditions include items such as an indemnification requirement, an agreement to be audited, and a non-discrimination clause. Special Conditions include items such as a requirement to provide funding credit.

ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

Applicants should be aware that Government Code Section 11135(a) states in part that no person shall be unlawfully denied full and equal access to the benefits of any program or activity that is funded or receives any financial assistance by the State on the basis of sex, race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, ethnic group identification, age, mental disability, physical disability, medical condition, genetic information, marital status, or sexual orientation.

GRANTEE CERTIFICATION CLAUSES

All grantees must sign GCC 1015, which includes clauses such as a drug-free workplace requirement and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

LIABILITY

You must agree to hold the California Coastal Commission harmless.