MEMO

From: Jessica Cañizares, Coastal Restoration Project Manager, The Nature Conservancy
Date: July 9, 2024
RE: Executive Summary of NOAA Transformational Habitat and Coastal Resilience Grant at Rocky Neck State Park

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Overview

The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut (TNC) is anticipating a $4M grant through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Transformational Habitat and Coastal Resilience Grant to design improvements at Rocky Neck State Park (RNSP) in East Lyme, CT. This memorandum provides a summary of the project, planned activities under the grant, project team, and project schedule. This provides a general overview of the terms of the grant. Additional details regarding grant terms or the proposed project can be provided upon request.

Project Context

Rocky Neck State Park is home to exemplary recreational features and ecological systems. It is one of the most visited parks in the state and in 2022, welcomed over 625,000 visitors. Running the length of the park is Bride Brook, a tidally influenced watercourse that supports the largest run of anadromous alewife in Connecticut, dozens of other fish species, and 82 acres of tidal marsh. Currently, there are six flow modifications within the lower reaches of this tidal creek. These modifications have disrupted the system's natural state by altering the hydrologic regime, restricting tidal flow, accumulating sediment, and ultimately leading to extensive marsh degradation and loss.

The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut – in close collaboration with CT DEEP – has secured $4M to advance planning, design, and permitting for restoration and public improvements. The funds were awarded through NOAA's Transformational Habitat and Coastal Resilience Grants made possible by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act. The main goals of the project are to:

1) re-establish full tidal connectivity between Bride Brook and Long Island Sound,
2) Implement large-scale, climate-resilient marsh restoration, and
3) Improve public access to and from the beach, facilities, and marsh, and enhance park visitor learning, and recreational opportunities.

Project Team

The project is being managed by TNC, in partnership with CT DEEP. In addition to these entities, the Project Team includes Save the Sound, CT National Estuarine Research Reserve, Ducks Unlimited, and Restore America's Estuaries. Additional support for the effort will be provided by paid consultants, including but not limited to: coastal hydrologists and engineers, project engineers, social scientists, and other relevant disciplines required to complete the project's deliverables. Financial reporting, accounting, and grant administration will be overseen by TNC.

Project Schedule

Project activities will run from Oct 1, 2024 through Sep 30, 2027 and include:

Activity	Deliverables
Stakeholder & community engagement	• Identify two Community Liaisons • Host at least 8 hybrid public information sessions/workshops • Launch public-facing project website • Host one public celebration event at RNSP • Host one training for restoration professionals at RNSP
Recreational study	• Publication of recreational study report of park use
Monitoring	• Pre-implementation monitoring including Tier 1 metrics and any permit requirements to document and compare pre-restoration conditions with post-restoration regulatory agency monitoring requirements
Existing conditions analysis	• Publication of an Existing Conditions Report that documents the results of data gathering, analysis, and pre-restoration modeling
Alternatives analysis	• Publication and review of project alternatives with relevant stakeholders • Hydrologic and hydraulic monitoring of project alternatives • Selection of preferred alternative • Basis of Design document • Publication of a Dynamic Adaptive Policy Pathway (adaptive management plan)
Technical Design	• Signed and sealed bid documents
Permitting	• All permits from coordinating agencies approved and signed

Relevance to Regional and Local Initiatives

Restoration of RNSP closely aligns with regional and local planning initiatives focused on habitat conservation and restoration, aquatic connectivity, wetland ecosystem services, hazard mitigation, climate resiliency, local community engagement, and equitable access to outdoor recreation areas. This project demonstrates transformative potential for RNSP, Connecticut, and Long Island Sound by addressing critical ecological and social concerns. The results will have lasting impacts beyond the project site as it will provide a roadmap for similar sites across Connecticut and New England, particularly those facing concerns with tidal restrictions caused by transportation infrastructure and/or aspire for more resilient and equitable access to a public resource.