

News | Badly damaged Topanga Lagoon east of Malibu has a chance to be restored

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LA Nature Kids Outdoor School visits Topanga Creek in Topanga on Thursday, July 18, 2024. Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project is proposing to restore the lagoon, fed by the creek and the ocean and home to endangered steelhead trout and tidewater goby, by increasing the PCH bridge and removing a makeshift hill on the beach. The plan also includes restoring the historic Topanga Ranch Motel owned by California State Parks and adjacent to the creek. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

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As motorists whir along the nearby Pacific Coast Highway, throngs of tidewater goby and steelhead trout—two species of endangered fish—find refuge in the vibrant, albeit severely deteriorated, Topanga Lagoon.

The lagoon, an area where freshwater from Topanga Creek and seawater mix, is less than one acre in size and is nestled along a stretch of the Santa Monica Bay. But what has long been whittled away was once an expansive wildlife haven, 30 times its current size.

After more than two decades of pushes by scientists and the California State Parks agency to restore the Topanga Lagoon, the planning phase of a restoration project is underway. A proposed Environmental Impact Report is available for public review until Aug. 13, and the design for the project is anticipated to be completed in 2026, with construction anticipated in 2027.

On Monday, Aug. 5, state officials held a Zoom meeting to explain the project and respond to questions and comments from the public. Barbara Tejada, a cultural resources program manager at California State Parks, showed maps of Topanga Lagoon as it depleted over time, with one map dating to 1876.

During the past 150 years, 95 percent of California's coastal wetlands were lost to development, according to the project managers. "A lot has changed, because the Malibu coast and Topanga coast have been so popular for recreation, and almost immediately after the (Pacific Coast) Highway was built, they needed to widen the highway," Tejada said.

It has taken years to secure the funding for the project, but the budget is now estimated to be more than \$100 million, according to John Ota, an environmental scientist with California State Parks.

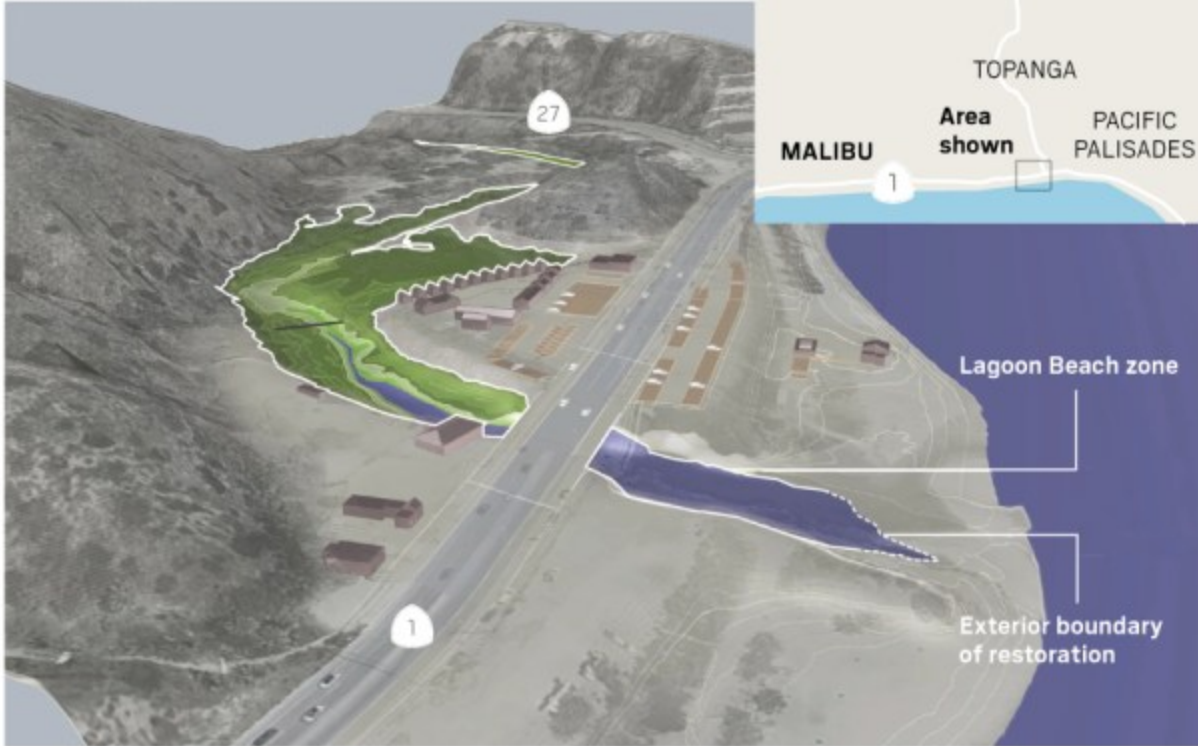
Several state and local agencies are involved in the restoration located in unincorporated Los Angeles County on land owned by California State Parks. CalTrans, L.A. County Department of Beaches and Harbors, and the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains are also involved in the project and its funding.

Jamie King, one of the project managers for the Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project, said the project's goal is to expand the lagoon to roughly eight acres.

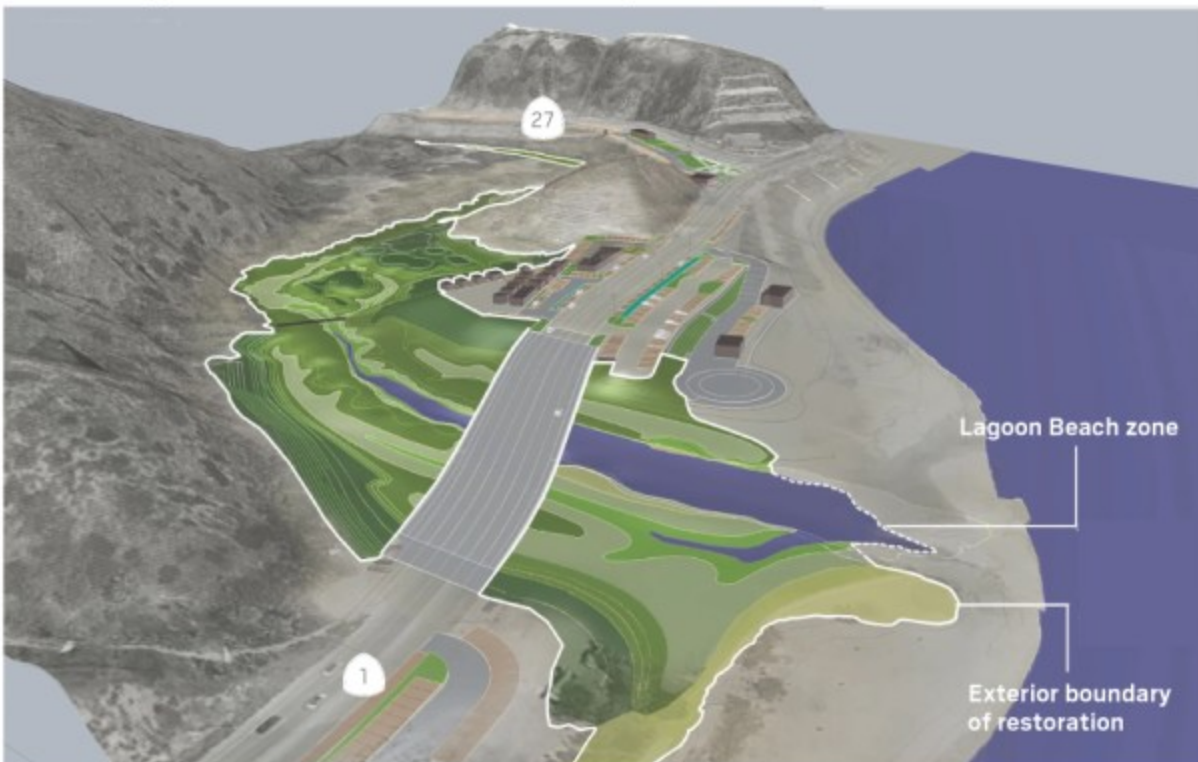
Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project

The Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project is a multiagency cooperative effort that seeks to protect and restore precious biological and cultural resources, create an integrated program for coastal access, emergency response and interpretation, and proactively address the effects of sea level rise.

Lagoon in its current state



What the lagoon would look like with a more complete restoration



The lagoon and Topanga Creek are unique and host two endangered fish species, including tidewater goby and steelhead trout. King added that within Santa Monica Bay, steelhead trout breed only in Topanga Creek.

“These two fish rely upon this area,” King said. “By restoring this lagoon we’re giving these two species more protection and greater opportunities in case there’s fire and in case of sea level rise.”

King added, “So the urgency is (driven by) seeing these trends of these species being imperiled throughout their range in California, so this project is a big opportunity to help it.”

The project is not just about saving fish and other species. It also calls for replacing and lengthening the PCH bridge that runs over the lagoon. The PCH carries about 40,000 vehicles each day.

In addition, there’s no visitor center or parking lot near the lagoon or along the nearby section of the PCH. The project seeks to build a visitor pavilion, restroom and some other amenities to allow visitors better access to the beach and park.

The project would also focus on expanding the historic Topanga Ranch motel. Built in the 1930s, it’s on state park property, and has “cabins that are in a unique configuration, (from) back in the day when you used to drive around the car, you pull up right in front of your hotel. These cabins are a unique example of a motor court motel,” King said.

King said her team is looking into preserving 15 of the units and “(using) them for some sort of public benefit such as a museum, a day-use facility or low-cost overnight accommodation.”

For Topanga Town Council President Carrie Carrier, the prospect of “preserving and conserving Topanga Lagoon is important.” She said the project managers “have involved the community and really do care about being a good neighbor.”

“This community is an environmentally-oriented, environmentally-conscious area,” Carrier said. “Almost everybody lives here because we value trees, open space, water, wildlife, clean air. We generally support the expansion of these preserved areas.”

Carrier added, however, that she worries about traffic caused by the project or any potential pesticide use.

“We want to restore the environment, but there doesn’t need to be a whole bunch of bells and whistles or an expanded developed footprint,” Carrier said.

Some surfers have said they’re concerned about impacts to the way the waves break, as well as beach access, in Malibu.

The surfing group Friends of Topanga Point said of the proposed Environmental Impact Report, “We understand and generally support the salutary objectives of the project,” but added, “our advocacy goals were, and continue to be, focused on avoiding unintended adverse consequences to the surf break, the beach and to beach access.”

“Surf break” refers to the area where the waves crash along a shoreline, and the surf break can be affected by the composition of the sea bottom as well as the local geography.

The group thanked the project managers for conducting “technical studies assessing potential impacts to Topanga Beach and to Topanga Point’s surfing waves.”

“We’ve worked with local surfers,” environmental scientist John Ota said. “It’s an important surf spot and the beach has roughly millions of visitors a year and we don’t want to deprive people of such an important recreation spot.”

Ota added, “We’ve made efforts to make sure some portions of the beach may be closed at any given time (during the restoration project), but we made sure the beach is never fully closed off and the parking is never fully closed off.”

Local Indigenous groups have been contacted as part of the project’s planning process. The group that the project managers have primarily worked with is Gabrielino Tongva, who have provided input and guidance.

“One of our big messages has been that we don’t want to do any harm with this project,” Ota said. “We’re aware that there are important tribal artifacts and the significance that they have to the native community. We are making sure we’re not digging in those areas.”

The Kizh Nation of the Gabrielino Band of Mission Indians is another local tribe with longstanding historic ties to the Topanga Lagoon area. The tribe’s chairman, Andrew Salas, said his tribe is often “treated like outsiders trying to look in” when it comes to projects affecting the tribe’s historic land, including this one.

“No one knows the areas and their sensitivities better than us, and we should be at the forefront,” Salas said. “We’ve always been left out, for generations.”

He added that his tribe does not support the project, saying, “At the end of the day, they need to give the land back to the people. To our people, whose ancestors were stewards of this land.”

California’s coastal wetlands have been severely depleted over time, affecting plants and animals that rely on these habitats, according to Doug Hammond, a professor of earth sciences at USC.

“There are lots of animals attracted by lagoons, particularly birds,” Hammond said. “And they need that habitat in order to flourish.”

Dozens of residents of Malibu, Topanga and surrounding neighborhoods submitted public comments on the restoration project.

Lucinda Mittleman, a longtime Topanga resident and Topanga Canyon volunteer tour guide, wrote, "If the goal of this project is to restore the lagoon, then do it in a way that will have the most positive impact on the lagoon ecosystem. What a wonderful enhancement to our coast it will be to have the restored lagoon, and what a nice addition to Topanga State Park."

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