

**FILE NUMBER: 2025-069**

**DATE:** Tuesday, December 9, 2025

**SUBJECT: Continuance of a Local Emergency - *Caulerpa Prolifera*, and *Caulerpa Services Agreement***

**DESCRIPTION:** A.) Adopt a Resolution Proclaiming the Continuance of a Local Emergency Due to the Presence of an Invasive Alga *Caulerpa Prolifera* and B.) Adopt a Resolution Authorizing an Agreement with Marine Taxonomic Services, Ltd for As-Needed *Caulerpa* Monitoring and Management Services in an Amount Not to Exceed \$2,000,000.00

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

On November 14, 2023, by Resolution No. 2023-101, the Board of Port Commissioners (Board/BPC) adopted a proclamation of a local emergency due to the discovery of the invasive alga *Caulerpa prolifera* in the Coronado Cays, South San Diego Bay. *Caulerpa prolifera* is a highly invasive alga with the ability to rapidly expand by reproducing asexually through vegetative fragmentation from contact with vessels, fishing, and tidal exchanges. While this alga is not harmful to humans, *Caulerpa* can aggressively expand and has the potential to displace native habitats including the 1,900 acres of eelgrass in South San Diego Bay. Any impacts to eelgrass could displace numerous other species, including the 70 different fish species and the 100+ threatened green sea turtles which utilize eelgrass as foraging and resting habitat. Continuing the timely and assertive response is imperative to control the infestation of *Caulerpa prolifera*.

BPC Policy No. 777, dated June 23, 2020, (Clerks Document #71570), details the District's Emergency Management policy, which requires the Board review the need for the continuation of the local emergency at least every 60 days until the local emergency is terminated. Since the initial proclamation of a local emergency, there have been seventeen continuances of the local emergency by the Board due to the existence of the invasive alga *Caulerpa prolifera* in the Coronado Cays, South San Diego Bay. The proclamation will expire, unless continued by this action. The local emergency has and will assist in securing continued funding from federal and state grant sources to eradicate this invasive alga. Based on the continued presence and the threat presented by *Caulerpa prolifera* to San Diego Bay, staff recommends that the Board continue the proclamation of a Local Emergency consistent with BPC Policy No. 777, which will continue the local emergency for an additional 60 days to February 7, 2026.

Since the discovery, staff has been working diligently with the Southern California *Caulerpa* Action Team (SCCAT) consisting of state and federal resource agencies to implement an immediate response to prevent the spread and further infestation of this alga. In order to declare *Caulerpa* eradicated from the Bay, two years of monitoring with no new *Caulerpa* findings is required. Divers, including the District Field Operations divers, continue to survey throughout South San Diego Bay to ensure the containment of this alga. Federal, State, and District funding has been used to complete the surveys and

additional future resources are being sought to continue surveys and treatment throughout the 3,000 acres of South San Diego Bay.

To support ongoing progress towards controlling and eradication of the *Caulerpa* infestation, staff executed a Request for Qualifications for As-Needed *Caulerpa* Monitoring and Management Services and received a single bid from Marine Taxonomic Services, Ltd. Therefore, staff is recommending adoption of an ordinance authorizing a five-year agreement with Marine Taxonomic Services, Ltd. for As-Needed *Caulerpa* Monitoring and Management Services for an amount not to exceed \$2,000,000. Funds for FY 2026 have been budgeted in the amount of \$600,000. All funds required for future fiscal years will be budgeted in the appropriate fiscal year, subject to Board approval upon adoption of each fiscal year's budget.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

A.) Adopt a Resolution Proclaiming the Continuance of a Local Emergency Due to the Presence of an Invasive Alga *Caulerpa Prolifera* and B.) Adopt a Resolution Authorizing an Agreement with Marine Taxonomic Services, Ltd. for As-Needed *Caulerpa* Monitoring and Management Services in an Amount Not to Exceed \$2,000,000.

### **FISCAL IMPACT:**

Funds for this expenditure are budgeted for in the Environmental Conservation department's FY 2026 Professional Services budget (620100). Funds for future fiscal years will be budgeted in the appropriate year subject to Board approval upon adoption of each fiscal year's budget.

### **COMPASS STRATEGIC GOALS:**

This agenda item supports the following Strategic Goal(s).

- A Port that the public understands and trusts.
- A Port with a healthy and sustainable bay and its environment.

### **DISCUSSION:**

On September 21, 2023, an in-water pre-construction eelgrass/*Caulerpa* dive survey was conducted as an Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) permit condition for the Antigua Village Dock Replacement project in the Coronado Cays. During this survey, divers identified an approximately 24 square meter patch of *Caulerpa prolifera* growing underneath and adjacent to the boat docks. Additional diver surveys in October 2023 found 0.25 acres of *Caulerpa prolifera* along the northern side of Antigua Village and in April 2024 diver surveys found a 15 square meter patch of *Caulerpa prolifera* in the South San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). In Spring 2024, divers completed the placement of benthic barriers over the known infestation areas in Antigua Village, Coronado Cays and the Refuge. In April 2025, a small patch of *Caulerpa prolifera* was found adjacent to the existing *Caulerpa prolifera* patches. In August 2025, three new patches of *Caulerpa* measuring a total of 8 square meters

were found in the Refuge, adjacent to the existing patches. All patches of *Caulerpa* have been covered with salt, netting, and benthic barriers to prevent the spread of the alga and to assist with eradication efforts.

*Caulerpa prolifera* is invasive alga that has not previously been identified in San Diego Bay, despite routine monitoring since the early 2000s. *Caulerpa prolifera* typically occurs in subtropical and tropical soft-bottom locales and, when introduced, can aggressively displace native habitats including critical eelgrass habitat. The presence of *Caulerpa* has caused significant and expensive damage to coastal waters in California and the Mediterranean Sea, warranting immediate action to eradicate any observed presence of the alga. *Caulerpa* infested part of Huntington Beach and Carlsbad in the early 2000s, which is now eradicated, and eradication efforts in Newport Bay have been ongoing since 2021.

South San Diego Bay is home to 1,900 acres of eelgrass, an extremely important habitat that could be overgrown and displaced by *Caulerpa prolifera* without aggressive action. Any spread of *Caulerpa prolifera* into the south bay eelgrass beds, if left untreated, has the potential to impact the bay's 70 fish species and 60-80 threatened green sea turtles which reside in or forage on eelgrass. *Caulerpa prolifera* impacts on eelgrass could cause the loss of the main food source for the bay's turtles. Impacts to fish include the elimination of hiding places from predators along with their food source. Eelgrass is also vital due to its ability to absorb carbon which offsets greenhouse gas emissions, and it also improves water quality by filtering sediment, reducing turbidity, and removing possible contaminants.

Due to its highly invasive and destructive nature, it is illegal to possess, sell, or transport any seaweed in the genus *Caulerpa* within the state of California. The most likely source of *Caulerpa prolifera* in the Coronado Cays was release from a home aquarium.

Upon observing *Caulerpa prolifera*, notification was provided to the Southern California Caulerpa Action Team (SCCAT), a multi-agency group that includes representatives from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife (FWS), National Marine Fisheries Service, RWQCB, USACE, California Coastal Commission, and State Lands Commission, among others. The SCCAT meets monthly to determine the extent and magnitude of the observed *Caulerpa prolifera* in the Coronado Cays, select survey areas, and implement the eradication plan to eliminate the infestation, including the need for permits and funding to complete any eradication efforts.

### Eradication Efforts

On October 9, 2023, the infestation of *Caulerpa prolifera* found in the Coronado Cays within the District's jurisdiction was treated by the placement of a benthic barrier to prevent its spread. The District funded the eradication and survey work in the amount of \$92,000 using funding from the Environmental Conservation non-personnel budget. Benthic barriers consisting of thick plastic, typically used to line man-made ponds, were placed and secured with rebar and sandbags to create a sealed barrier to kill the alga by excluding any light, oxygen, and water circulation. The barriers are still in place.

In March 2024, benthic barriers were placed over the 0.25 acres of *Caulerpa prolifera* along the northern portion of Antigua Village and in April 2024 benthic barriers were placed over the 15-meter patch spread over 0.25 acres in south San Diego Bay. An additional small patch of *Caulerpa prolifera*, which is now covered with barriers, was found adjacent to the 15-meter south San Diego Bay patch. In April 2025, an additional 1-meter patch was found in the Refuge with smaller pieces found in the Cays. In August 2025, three new patches of *Caulerpa* measuring a total of 8 meters squared was found in the Refuge, adjacent to the existing patches. All known areas of *Caulerpa* have been treated with salt, netting, and benthic barriers to prevent any additional spread.

District staff was informed by representatives from the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) and other granting agencies that the proclamation of a local emergency is required to fund eradication efforts and to receive funding from the SWRCB Cleanup and Abatement Account. SWRCB provided \$500,000 in funding from the Cleanup and Abatement Account for the eradication of *Caulerpa prolifera* and for conducting surveys. This funding is exhausted.

Additional federal funding was secured to place benthic barriers at north Antigua Village over the known 0.25 acres of *Caulerpa prolifera*. This funding is also being used to determine the extent of the *Caulerpa prolifera* infestation including surveying the south bay, on the east side of the Coronado Cays. The total cost for eradication and surveys is estimated at \$3 million dollars. To assist in offsetting these costs, FWS, with assistance from the District, was awarded \$550,000 in grant funding from the Rapid Response Fund for Aquatic Invasive Species, \$19,546 from Station Funds and \$267,661 from Region 8 Strike Team funds. This funding is also exhausted. Additionally, the District expended \$400,000 for surveys in fiscal year 2025. Additional funding has also been requested from the Regional Invasive Species Grant \$250,000 and Refuges Region 8 funds \$49,814. These funding sources also requested a declaration of a local emergency.

The District was recently awarded grant funding from the California Department of Food and Agriculture's rapid response fund for \$100,000. The District's Field Operations divers are currently conducting surveys of the Coronado Cays utilizing this grant funding.

While all known patches of *Caulerpa prolifera* are covered with benthic barriers, divers continue to conduct *Caulerpa* surveys in south bay. Additionally, the known patches of *Caulerpa prolifera* will be surveyed again this fall. In order to declare that *Caulerpa* has been eradicated from the Bay, two years of monitoring with no new *Caulerpa* findings is required.

#### Authorizing Agreement for As-Needed *Caulerpa* Services

On August 21, 2025, pursuant to BPC Policy No. 110, the District issued a Request for Qualifications (RFQ #25-16MB) for As-Needed *Caulerpa* Monitoring and Management Services. The RFQ notification was sent to 383 vendors via PlanetBids and the District received one responsive proposal. Staff reviewed the lone proposal and evaluated using criteria established in the RFQ. Based on review of the proposals, staff recommends authorizing agreement with the lone firm.

Marine Taxonomic Services Ltd. and their subcontractor Merkel & Associates are the only firms in Southern California with *Caulerpa* Surveyor qualifications and large enough certified dive teams to perform all the survey and treatment work required for the San Diego Bay *Caulerpa* infestation. For other *Caulerpa* infestations in Newport Bay, Agua Hedionda Lagoon, and Huntington Barbor, Marine Taxonomic Services Ltd. and Merkel & Associates performed all the survey, treatment, and reporting services for those infestations while also studying the growth habits of *Caulerpa* to further our scientific understanding of the genus. These two firms successfully eradicated *Caulerpa* from two other Southern California waterways and have performed the majority of survey and treatment work on the San Diego Bay infestation.

\$600,000 was allocated in the Fiscal Year 26 budget for *Caulerpa* monitoring and management, and it is anticipated that annual survey costs will decrease if the infestation is managed effectively. The \$2,000,000 capacity of this five-year agreement is divided into survey, treatment, and reporting tasks. All priority survey areas and timelines shall be determined in coordination with the District and the SCCAT.

### Emergency Proclamation

BPC Policy No. 777, dated June 23, 2020, (Clerks Document #71570), details the District's Emergency Management policy, which requires the Board review the need for the continuation of the local emergency at least every 60 days until the local emergency is terminated.

BPC Policy No. 777, details the District's Emergency Management policy and defines an "Emergency" as the actual or threatened existence of conditions of disaster or peril to the health and safety of persons and/or property within the District including, but not limited to, those caused by such conditions or hazards as fire, flood, storm, tsunami, earthquake, epidemic, pandemic, hurricane, tornado, civil disturbance, significant technology or infrastructure disruption, act of terrorism, hazardous material spill, effect(s) of climate change or other conditions, including conditions resulting from war or imminent threat of war, or labor controversy.

BPC Policy No. 777, also defines a "Local Emergency" as the duly proclaimed existence of such conditions that are, or likely to be, beyond the control of services, personnel, equipment, and facilities of the District, and which may require the supplemental efforts and available resources of other local government entities, the state and/or federal government, and/or disaster relief organizations to help alleviate the damage, loss, hardship or suffering caused thereby.

### Continuance of Local Emergency

On November 14, 2023, by Resolution No. 2023-101, the BPC adopted a proclamation of a local emergency due to the discovery of the invasive alga *Caulerpa prolifera* in the Coronado Cays, South San Diego Bay.

Since the initial proclamation of a local emergency, there have been seventeen continuances of the local emergency by the Board due to the existence of the invasive alga *Caulerpa prolifera* in the Coronado Cays, South San Diego Bay.

Board Approval - Continue Proclamation of Local Emergency	Resolution No.	Emergency Proclamation Expiration Date
December 5, 2023	2023-112	February 5, 2024
January 18, 2024	2024-002	March 18, 2024
March 12, 2024	2024-017	May 12, 2024
April 3, 2024	2024-037	June 2, 2024
May 14, 2024	2024-050	July 13, 2024
July 9, 2024	2024-067	September 7, 2024
August 13, 2024	2024-074	October 12, 2024
September 20, 2024	2024-087	November 19, 2024
November 13, 2024	2024-112	January 12, 2025
December 10, 2024	2024-124	February 8, 2025
January 14, 2025	2025-008	March 15, 2025
March 11, 2025	2025-025	May 10, 2025
May 6, 2025	2025-048	July 5, 2025
June 6, 2025	2025-065	August 5, 2025
July 15, 2025	2025-077	September 13, 2025
September 9, 2025	2025-095	November 8, 2025
November 4, 2025	2025-114	January 3, 2026

The proclamation of a local emergency will expire unless continued by this action.

#### Conclusion

Due to the presence and threat presented by *Caulerpa prolifera* and to receive funding from federal and state grants to support the eradication of *Caulerpa prolifera* in the Coronado Cays and South San Diego Bay, District staff recommends that the Board continue the proclamation of a local emergency in conformance with BPC Policy No. 777, for another 60 days until February 7, 2026, and adopt a resolution authorizing an agreement with Marine Taxonomic Services, Ltd. for As-Needed Caulerpa Monitoring and Management Services in an Amount Not to Exceed \$2,000,000.00.

#### General Counsel's Comments:

The General Counsel's Office reviewed this agenda and approved the proposed agreement as presented to it as to form and legality.

#### Environmental Review:

The proposed Board actions, including without limitation a proclamation for the continuance of a local emergency are Categorical Exempt pursuant to California

Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Sections 15307 and 15308: Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of Natural Resources (Class 7) and Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment (Class 8), respectively, as found in Section E.3. of the District's Guidelines for Compliance with CEQA because the project would consist of: 1) proclaiming a local emergency; and 2) the subsequent actions necessary to eradicate the invasive *Caulerpa prolifera* infestation. These are appropriate because *Caulerpa prolifera* can over-run natural habitats, disrupt the ecosystem, and displace native plants and the animals that rely on them. Further, this species grows very quickly, one centimeter per day and has the potential to swiftly overtake native species in the project area. Invasions have happened in several locations in southern California, as well as across the globe. The project applicants must rapidly remove this invasive species and it is critical that the response begin immediately to prevent additional spread, and to minimize the cost of the response effort while the infestation site is still geographically limited. The District has determined none of the six exceptions to the use of a categorical exemption apply to this project (CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2). A CEQA Notice of Exemption was filed on October 2, 2023, for this emergency action.

The proposed Board actions comply with Section 87(a)(7) of the Port Act, which allows for the establishment and maintenance of Tidelands for open space, ecological preservation, and habitat restoration. The Port Act was enacted by the California Legislature and is consistent with the Public Trust Doctrine. Consequently, the proposed Board actions are consistent with the Public Trust Doctrine.

The proposed Board actions are considered excluded development pursuant to Section 8.a, Existing Facilities, of the District's Coastal Development Permit Regulations because this infestation of *Caulerpa prolifera* requires emergency action by the District and its partners to rapidly remove this invasive species. On September 28, 2023, the District submitted a Categorical Determination in accordance with Section 30717 of the California Coastal Act, which listed this Exclusion, to the California Coastal Commission (CCC) staff. That Categorical Determination indicated the emergency condition due to *Caulerpa prolifera* and the need to take immediate remedial actions. The approval became effective after the 10-working day appeal period after September 28, 2023, as no appeal was filed with the CCC within that time frame.

**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Program:**

Not applicable.

**PREPARED BY:**

Heather Carroll  
Director, Environmental Conservation

Attachment A: As-Needed Agreement with Marine Taxonomic Services, Ltd