

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SEA GRANT PROGRAM
CALL FOR PRELIMINARY PROPOSALS**

2026-2028 OMNIBUS FUNDING CYCLE

Preliminary Proposals Due: March 7, 2025 by 5 pm PST

Full Proposals Due: June 23, 2025 by 5 pm PST

Planned Research Start Date: February 1, 2026

The University of Southern California Sea Grant Program (USCSG) is soliciting preliminary proposals for research projects of one or two years' duration beginning February 1, 2026. Projects should focus on topics pertaining to the "Urban Ocean," USC Sea Grant's primary focus. University faculty and academic staff at California academic or research institutions are eligible to apply, and we encourage interdisciplinary and inter-institutional projects.

USC Sea Grant's "Urban Ocean" research program supports projects directed at solving the particular problems associated with urbanization on and adjacent to the coastal zone.

The program's overall aims are to foster the use of sound scientific information to advance our understanding of coastal and ocean resources, to examine the ways we conserve and use these resources, and to support tools for evaluating issues and socio-economic trade-offs that comprise coastal decision making. USCSG works closely with funded researchers to ensure research results will have a broad reach to diverse California constituencies, with particular attention to communities in the Los Angeles region.

Proposal Submission Timeline

1 pm PST February 11, 2025	Webinar for potential applicants
5 pm PST March 7, 2025	Preliminary proposal submission deadline
May 9, 2025	Encouragement to submit full proposals sent to PIs
5 pm PT June 23, 2025	Full proposal submission deadline
Mid September, 2025	Notification of funding decision sent to PIs
February 1, 2026	Project initiation (subject to the availability of funds)

Research Priorities

Successful Sea Grant projects involve both a substantial intellectual question and the promise of useful application to real-world, "Urban Ocean" problems. Proposals should contain a well-developed rationale and potential for broad application, and a strong theoretical basis with a clear, testable hypothesis. Clarity of expression and of organization are extremely important in your submission.

USCSG seeks proposals from the natural sciences, social sciences, and engineering of the highest quality and relevance to those strategic focus areas identified in the *USC Sea Grant Strategic Plan for 2024-2027*, which can be accessed [here](#). USCSG supports research, extension, and education goals across four strategic areas: Healthy Coastal Ecosystems; Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture; Resilient Communities and Economies; and Environmental Literacy and Workforce Development. We encourage interested applicants to review the [USCSG website](#) to learn about previously funded work and program directions.

In line with these USCSG focus areas, input from the USC Sea Grant Advisory Council, and State needs outlined in the [California Ocean Protection Council's Strategic Plan](#), the following areas have been identified as priority topical areas for this 2026-28 funding cycle to help advance real-world applications of scientific research to information needs across California.

If you have any questions about whether your topic of interest falls into our priority areas, please contact Phyllis Grifman (grifman@usc.edu)

1. Healthy coastal ecosystems

- Economic and ecological value of ecosystem resources, tools, technologies, and knowledge services that informs decision making
- Marine wildlife populations, health, and biodiversity assessments (e.g. new methods including eDNA, AI, remote sensing; aquatic invasive species threats in a changing climate)
- Ecosystem resilience, management, and adaptation in response to global change; urban impacts on ocean acidification, hypoxia, and ecosystem changes (e.g. HABs)
- Terrestrial-aquatic interface (e.g. post-fire and drought impacts on watersheds); restoration ecology strategies
- Water quality impacts on the coastal and marine environment or human health and well-being (e.g. bacteria, viruses, marine debris, contaminants, ecotoxicology, detection methods, etc)
- Legacy (e.g., DDT, PCBs) contaminants and contaminants of emerging concern (including pharmaceuticals, microplastics, Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances), ecotoxicology, bioaccumulation, and development of methodology for detection
- Macro and micro plastic pollution, particularly related to pathways, prevention strategies, and effects on habitats and wildlife

2. Sustainable fisheries and aquaculture

- New resources, tools, and technologies to support growth in fisheries and aquaculture literacy, permitting, production, harvesting and processing

- Assessment of social, cultural, and/or political attitudes towards fisheries and aquaculture, understanding associated gaps, risks, needs, and goals.
- Approaches to improve the safety, resilience, and equitable consumer access to domestic seafood supply

3. Resilient communities and economies

- Decision support tools to assist coastal communities in assessing vulnerability and adaptation to sea level rise and coastal change.
- Changing shorelines and equitable coastal access
- Nature-based adaptation
- Role of traditional/indigenous practices in resource management
- Restoration, adaptation, and/or transition of coastal habitats
- Integrated management of coastal dependent use (e.g. offshore wind, offshore wind energy, desalination, marine transportation, marine protected areas)

4. Environmental literacy and workforce development

- Educational research, products, and services to better understand, advance, and implement environmental literacy and/or integrate multiple ways of learning, knowing, and understanding to support teaching opportunities (e.g., community-supported science, peer-learning, non-formal, intergenerational)
- Educational research, products, and services to better understand, advance, and implement systematic strategies to promote coastal and ocean workforce development

Eligibility

Proposals may be submitted by faculty of any U.S. public or private institution of higher education; the project's lead Principal Investigator (PI) must be deemed eligible by their academic institution to receive extramural funding. While non-academic researchers may be included among the co-principal investigators (co-PIs) or collaborators, awards will be made only through colleges and universities. We encourage the involvement of collaborators and researchers who are not university faculty (collaborators may be with industry, state/regional/federal agencies, tribes, non-governmental organizations, and/or other research or academic institutions). Project leads do not need to be located within California, although the project activities should be focused on themes relevant to the California Urban Ocean. NOTE: Only one preliminary proposal per lead Principal Investigator may be submitted.

USC Sea Grant encourages submissions from researchers new to USCSG and those from a variety of backgrounds. Our program serves coastal communities with a wide range of populations, needs, perspectives, and experiences. By supporting inclusive research, education,

communication, and extension efforts, we aim to address the diverse challenges and opportunities within these communities.

Duration and Funding

Proposed activities may be one or two years in duration. Continuation of a project beyond the first year is subject to demonstration of satisfactory progress by the project investigator.

We anticipate funding up to 6 projects with biennial Sea Grant College Program funds. Project budgets will range from \$10,000 to \$65,000 per year, with the average approximately \$50,000 for new research. **Additional funding** is available for graduate trainee stipends and does not need to be included in the budget (see below).

Research projects are required to provide 50% in non-federal matching funds from the PI's home institution or primary project partners. Please reach out to USC Sea Grant (grifman@usc.edu) with any questions about eligible matching funds. Direct salary support for individuals from state and federal agencies, tribal, and for-profit and foreign organizations is not allowed; however, non-federal contributions can be counted as matching or in-kind support for the project.

Graduate Trainees

Applicants may request additional funding for a graduate student trainee stipend(s) to work with principal investigators on Sea Grant funded projects. Trainee funding does not cover student tuition or fees. **This is considered additional funding that goes directly to the graduate student research assistant and does not need to be included in the proposed project budget.** Simply check the 'Trainee Requested' box in the application form. Trainees work closely with faculty conducting Sea Grant research to formulate and implement research methods, and the research is expected to provide material for their dissertations and theses.

Submission via eSeaGrant platform

Applicants must use eSeaGrant, an electronic proposal submission and management system, to submit preliminary and full proposals. Email or hard copy submissions will not be accepted. If your institution has unusual issues prohibiting access to eSeaGrant, please contact USC Sea Grant (lshore@usc.edu) for assistance or to arrange for an alternative submission method. Tardiness in attempting submission via eSeaGrant is not an acceptable excuse for avoiding use of this system.

All new users of USC Sea Grant's eSeaGrant will need to register at <https://usc.eseagrant.ecsion.com/index.php>. During the registration process a six-digit confirmation code will be sent to the email address and telephone number provided to ensure correct contact information for your account. If you have newly registered and have not received a "welcome" email with login credentials, or you have already registered and need your

password reset, please contact seagrant@usc.edu. To start a proposal or revisit/edit an existing proposal, under “Current Tasks,” find “USC Sea Grant Preliminary Proposals 2024” and click “Add Proposal.” To submit a proposal, you must work down the sequence of sections (“Start Here” through “Submission Preview”) listed on the left side of the proposal window. Follow the prompts to complete your proposal submission. Make sure to click on the “Submit” button once you have previewed your application. You will receive a confirmation email each time you submit your application. Your application is not considered complete unless you have received a confirmation email. We recommend that eSeaGrant users access the system, review submission requirements within it, and start to upload necessary documents well in advance of the submission deadline. This will give users the opportunity to obtain any necessary clarification or assistance before the deadline. The submission deadline will not be extended.

Preliminary Proposal Guidelines

Prospective applicants are encouraged to contact USC Sea Grant at seagrant@usc.edu to discuss potential projects and funding. Our office can serve as a regional clearinghouse for the coordination of complementary project proposals, and as a resource for research and education contacts.

Preliminary proposals are due March 7, 2025 by 5:00 PM PST, submitted through eSeaGrant (submission instructions below). The following elements must be uploaded into eSeaGrant:

Preliminary proposals (2-page limit) that allows Sea Grant to gauge interest and topics that may be submitted. The preliminary proposal must provide the following basic information:

- Names of key personnel (PIs, co-PIs) and contact information
- Title of project
- A brief discussion of the proposed research project topic and approach, including:
 - RFP priorities that will be addressed
 - Project goals
 - Project design and methodology
 - Relevance to State management needs and other broader impacts
- Approximate total funding amount to be requested for each of the two years
- 2 page Curriculum vitae for the Principal Investigator and additional personnel.
- Total funding requested, by year (e.g., 2026-2027, 2027-2028)

A response acknowledging receipt of the preliminary proposal will be sent by email.

Preliminary proposal evaluation

Preliminary proposals are reviewed by Sea Grant’s panel of Academic Coordinators to assess how well they meet program priorities for our Urban Ocean focus..

Preliminary proposals will be reviewed and ranked according to the following equally weighted criteria:

1. Adherence to USC Sea Grant's "Urban Ocean" theme
2. Relevance to Focus Areas described in USC Sea Grant's Strategic Plan for 2024-2027
3. Assessed capability of Principal Investigators for the research described
4. Appropriate budget range for proposed work

The USC Sea Grant leadership team makes recommendations based upon panel comments, diversity and balance of proposals, availability of funding, and programmatic objectives, needs and priorities. Highly ranked preliminary proposals will be encouraged to submit a full proposal, those that do not review well will be discouraged from moving on to the full proposal stage. USCSG may suggest coordination of complementary proposals. However, all applicants that submit a preliminary proposal are eligible to submit a full proposal.

Outcomes of the pre-proposal review will be transmitted Principal Investigators by May 9, 2025. USC Sea Grant will ensure that the preliminary proposal evaluation will be free from conflicts of interest by ensuring disclosure of affiliation or financial connection with the institution or the person submitting this proposal.

Full Proposal Guidelines

Only applicants who have submitted a pre-proposal may submit a full proposal via eSeaGrant. Applications not meeting the full proposal requirements may be rejected without review. Only the requested materials should be submitted; additional documents will not be reviewed.

A full proposal should include the following components. Short descriptions of each component is provided below; please see eSeaGrant for full descriptions and forms:

1. **Signed Institutional Cover Page:** A signed cover page (blank copy downloadable from eSeaGrant) must be included with the proposal. Please provide all requested information and obtain the required signatures from your campus' Sponsored Projects Office. The completed and signed cover page must be converted to a PDF and uploaded to eSeaGrant.
2. **Proposal Summary:** A proposal summary includes the title of the project, proposed start and end dates, Sea Grant focus areas, total amount requests, whether a trainee is requested, a brief proposal summary, and a 90-2 project summary form (the form is provided in eSeaGrant).
3. **Research Proposal:** Use the provided Research Proposal Template in eSeaGrant to complete your research proposal. It includes the project title, principle and associate investigators, funding requested, statement of the problem, investigatory question, motivation, goals and objectives, methods, related research, budget-related information,

anticipated benefits, communication of results, broader impacts, and references. There is no formal limit to the number of pages in a proposal, but 15 pages is normally sufficient.

4. **Principal Investigator:** Information and 2-page (max) CV
5. **Additional Personnel:** Information and 2-page (max) CV
6. **Budget Worksheet and Justification:** Instructions and templates are provided in eSeaGrant.
7. **Work Schedule:** The Work Schedule form should list major tasks you intend to accomplish and their corresponding initiation and completion dates. A template is provided in eSeaGrant.
8. **Concurrent Grants:** A listing of concurrent grants is required from all Principal and Associate Investigators on the proposed project. The form is provided in eSeaGrant.
9. **Trainee Request Form:** If you are requesting a Sea Grant Trainee please complete the form provided in eSeaGrant and specify names and information of potential trainee(s).
10. **Data Management Plan:** Proposals must include a Data Management Plan that specifies how the project will comply with NOAA's Directive on Data Management. A typical plan is no more than two pages long, and includes the Description of data to be generated by the project, including file format, likely size, etc.; A tentative date by which data will be shared; Standards to be used for data/metadata format and content; Policies on data stewardship and preservation; and Procedures for providing access, sharing, and security. If your university or institution has established data-sharing practices and policies, you may base your DMP on theirs. If your project does not generate datasets, a simple statement to that effect is all that is necessary to satisfy the DMP requirement.
11. **Environmental Permits:** Per the requirements in the Abbreviated Environmental Questionnaire, potential PIs must include with their full proposal a list of all state and federal permits/authorizations required to complete the project, including whether these permits/authorizations have already been acquired. The Abbreviated Environmental Questionnaire form and associated permit/authorization forms are provided in eSeaGrant.
12. **Letters of Support:** A single PDF file containing all letters of support.
13. **Peer Review Recommendation Form:** Provide contact information for (3-6) peer reviewers.
14. **Demographic Questionnaire:** The Demographic data submission is voluntary and is not a precondition of award. Upon receipt of the application, demographics information will be separated from the application. This information will not be duplicated, and it will not be a part of the review process. The questionnaire is provided in eSeaGrant.

Abbreviated NEPA Environmental Compliance Questionnaire

Funded projects that include a research component entailing fieldwork, labwork, modeling work or socioeconomics research (essentially, all research projects) are required to complete the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Environmental Compliance Questionnaire and submit any required permits or information regarding the status of forthcoming permits. If your

project is selected for funding, you must fully complete and submit this form to USCSG for review of NEPA compliance. See <https://seagrant.noaa.gov/insideseagrant/Implementation> for NEPA Environmental Compliance Questionnaire. In addition, and prior to research commencing, all required state and federal permits/authorizations (including IRB, IACUC, collecting permits, etc.) must be submitted to this Sea Grant office.

Full Proposal Evaluation:

Full proposals will undergo a structured review process coordinated by USC Sea Grant. Each proposal will be subjected to at least three (3) external written reviews by people considered knowledgeable in the proposal field. Reviewers will all be external to USC Sea Grant and will be asked to complete a Conflict of Interest form prior to conducting their review. Externally reviewed proposals will then go to a Technical Review Panel of experts outside of USC Sea Grant who consider comments of the external mail reviewers and rank proposals by scientific merit. This panel will include subject matter experts, scientists, educators, and agency representatives. At their discretion, USC Sea Grant may request additional review by likely user groups of the research findings. Full proposals that are determined as technically sound are then reviewed by the California Resources Agency Sea Grant Advisory Panel (RASGAP) for relevance to state needs and interest areas. At the end of the review process, proposals are ranked for funding decisions by the USC Sea Grant leadership team considering outcomes from the full review process.

Evaluation of proposals will be based on the following criteria:

- **Project Rationale (25%):** The degree to which the proposed activity addresses the research priorities described in the USC Sea Grant Strategic Plan for 2024-2027 and the degree to which the proposed activity addresses the needs of important state and regional constituencies.
- **Technical/Scientific Merit and Innovation (30%):** The degree to which the activity will advance scientific understanding and whether the approach is technically sound, including clearly stated goals and measurable outcomes; project technical feasibility and use of appropriate methods; appropriate mechanisms to evaluate the success of the project; and likelihood of meeting milestones and achieving anticipated results in the time proposed. Reviewers will also consider the degree to the use of new approaches to solve problems or the degree to which the activity will focus on new types of important or potentially important resources and issues.
- **Management Relevance (15%):** The degree to which the proposed project has a direct linkage to information that is relevant to a manager, decision-maker, or other applicable users.
- **Qualifications of Investigators (15%):** The degree to which investigators are qualified by education, training and/or experience to execute the proposed project as evidenced by achievement with previous funding.
- **User Relationships** – The degree, to which users or potential users of the results of the proposed activity have been brought into planning of the activity, will be brought into the

execution of the activity, or will be kept apprised of progress and results. This may also consider plans for potentially impactful public outreach

- **Project costs and justification (5%)** The above criteria will be evaluated against the proposed budget and budget justification in explaining the need for resources. The proposed scope of work and benefits will be assessed against funding levels requested.
- **Data Management Plan (10%)** Adequacy of the Data Management Plan to meet NOAA data sharing agreements.

Selection Criteria

Both pre- and full proposals will be ranked by the review panels in categories of

- Excellent (generally top 10% reserved for truly outstanding proposals),
- Very Good (top third below the Excellent proposals),
- Good (middle third), Fair (lower third) and
- Poor (proposal found to have serious deficiencies and not fundable).

At the end of the external panel reviews, fundability/unfundability of each proposal is determined. The USC Sea Grant leadership team conducts a final review of the proposals and considers the recommendations of all review elements. The Director and Research Coordinator, who may also consult other relevant USC Sea Grant staff, will make the final recommendations based on the proposal rankings, unless proposals are recommended for funding outside of rank order based on the following selection factors:

- 1) Availability of funding
 - 2) Strategic priority
 - 3) Diversity of institutions, geography, research topics, career stage, and end user groups
 - 4) Duplicates or similarities of projects funded previously by USC Sea Grant or other agencies
 - 5) Prior award performance including adherence to the Expectations and Reporting requirements outlined in past RFPs and publication of research findings and data
- Consequently, awards may not necessarily be made to the highest-ranked applications. Investigators may be asked to answer questions; and/or remove or reduce objectives, work plans, and/or budgets (including overall funding level) to address the issues raised by the reviewers or USC Sea Grant before an award recommendation is made. Final recommendations are submitted to the National Sea Grant Office for approval.

Expectations and Reporting Requirements

NOAA requires Sea Grant programs to report the impacts, accomplishments and metrics of each proposal it funds, and sets strict deadlines and formats for these reports as part of its robust and integrated Planning, Implementation and Evaluation Report System. These products include annual reports and performance measures that are used to review the program and ensure it is meeting the expectations as set forth by Congress. Programs are evaluated in three general areas: 1) on their approach to management; 2) on the scope and success of their engagement with interested parties; and, 3) on the impact their program has on society from both an environmental and a socio-economic perspective. In other words, program

viability and future funding is based on highlighting the positive impacts funded research is having on the people of California and the nation. As a result, funded researchers are expected to:

- Assist Sea Grant communications staff with newsletter articles or press releases related to the funded research, or any other communications products.
- Update your USC Sea Grant staff liaison every 6 months throughout the project on engagement and outreach efforts.
- Submit annual progress reports while the project is underway and a final report when completed, during the springtime of each year.
- Publish the results of the research in peer-reviewed journals and provide the program with prepublication notice of manuscripts or products intended for public dissemination.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

The National Sea Grant College Program is a nationwide activity of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Department of Commerce, authorized by Congress and conducted by universities, in cooperation with federal and state agencies and often marine industries and users. USC Sea Grant is one of 34 university-based programs that form the core of the network, involving some 300 universities and colleges. The Program's objective is to increase the understanding, assessment, development, utilization, and conservation of the nation's ocean and coastal resources by providing assistance to promote a strong educational base, responsive research and training activities, and broad and prompt dissemination of knowledge and techniques. California is one of only two states in the nation with more than one Sea Grant Program. If you have marine related research interests outside of USC Sea Grant's "Urban Ocean" emphasis, we encourage you to contact the California Sea Grant College System, University of California, San Diego, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, CA 92093-0232 (619-534-4440). The web address is: <https://caseagrant.ucsd.edu/>. The National Sea Grant College Program champions diversity, equity, and inclusion by recruiting, retaining and preparing a diverse workforce, and proactively engaging and serving the diverse populations of coastal communities. USC Sea Grant is committed to serving diverse Urban Ocean communities by building inclusive research, extension, communication, and education programs.