

Staff Report 62 (Informational)

PARTY:

California State Lands Commission

PROPOSED ACTION:

Informational update on the Commission's Abandoned Vessels Program.

BACKGROUND:

Abandoned or derelict vessels (ADVs) dramatically affect California, with the state's substantial industries of maritime commerce, fishing, and recreational boating spread over thousands of miles of Pacific coastline and interior waters. For at least the past 15 years, the California legislature has grappled with ADVs. Senate Bill 595 (Wolk, 2011) provided the Commission authority to find that vessels trespassing on state waterways are abandoned and to remove and dispose of these vessels. (Pub. Resources Code, §§ 6302.1, 6303.2, and 6302.4.) A few years later, Assembly Bill 1323 (Frazier, 2015) granted state and local agencies the authority to remove and dispose of marine debris from public waterways. (Harb. & Nav. Code, §§ 550, 551.)

The Commission has become a leader in abating ADVs based on these authorities. Abating ADVs is a natural fit with the Commission's commitment to sustainability, preservation, and restoration and its jurisdiction over the state's natural, navigable waterways. However, the Legislature did not provide funding to develop a program or implement the authorities, and the Commission was restricted by its existing resources to participating in ADV removals when other agency funds were available or in emergency situations. In 2019, the Commission adopted its [Abandoned Commercial Vessel Removal Plan](#) (Delta ADV Plan or Plan) ([Item 100, June 28, 2019](#)). The Plan, outlined the elements of a permanently funded

commercial abandoned and derelict vessel (CADV) removal plan for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Region, including vessel identification, prioritization, budgeting, and staffing, among other components.

The Commission's capability changed when the Legislature appropriated \$12 million to the Commission to remove ADVs from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta ([Budget Act of 2021; Ch. 69, Stats. 2021](#)). This funding fueled an active Delta CADV Program (Program) based on the Delta ADV Plan. The funds are restricted by statute to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region. Staff has interpreted the "Delta region" to mean the legal Delta, as defined in California Water Code section 12220, an area extending roughly from Sacramento on the north to Lathrop and Tracy on the south and from Interstate 5 on the east to the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers on the west. Program funds must be spent before July 1, 2027, or they will return to the state's General Fund.

Program funds are not explicitly restricted to commercial ADV, but the Commission's Program is focused on CADV because [other state grant funds](#) are available to remove recreational vessels. Commercial vessels tend to be large, heavy-duty vessels such as tugboats and work barges that are difficult and expensive to abate, but there is no regular funding for CADV abatement. Nevertheless, the Commission has used its authority to declare recreational vessels abandoned when other agencies have funds to dispose of the vessel. For instance, the Commission partnered with the Solano County Sheriff in 2024 ([Item 59, December 17, 2024](#)) to take title to, remove and dispose of a recreational sailboat.

The Program exists within the Land Management Division, with staff support from the Legal Division, the Business Services Unit, and the Administrative Services Division. Because of time-limited funding, hiring additional staff was not feasible. Instead, existing Commission staff were assigned to the Program in addition to their other duties. Management has committed time to the Program because of staff's passion for the work and the Program's alignment with the Commission's mission.

PROGRAM UPDATE:

As described in the Commission's Delta ADV Plan, Program staff prepared a survey of the Delta and prioritized vessels in four "tiers" based on threats to public safety, navigation, and the environment. The Commission has authorized the abatement of higher priority vessels, with staff issuing removal work orders to the Commission's on-call contactors. At time of writing, the Program has removed nine CADV

directly, and abatement actions for several CADV are currently in progress. In addition, the Program has caused the removal of at least ten additional CADVs by engaging with responsible parties.

SURVEY AND PRIORITIZATION:

The Commission's contractor surveyed the legal Delta for CADV from November 2023 through June 2024, spending 19 days on the water in addition to desktop work and analysis. Staff determined that not all the identified sites contain CADV and that some sites contain multiple ADV, either commercial or recreational. Not all surveyed waterways are state owned land under the Commission's jurisdiction.

After analysis, the survey identified 53 CADV sites within the legal Delta. The total number of CADV is approximately 80. Staff was already aware of the largest CADV sites, but the survey identified many CADV that were previously unknown to staff. The survey also gathered facts critical to prioritizing the CADV, such as observed pollution.

Through the inventory, staff have organized the CADV risks into four tiers, as follows:

Tier 1 – Emergency or High Risk: The CADV within this tier are known to discharge pollutants; are drifting or in danger of sinking; have been reported as a high priority by local agencies; or are known navigation hazards. Staff rated 10 CADV sites as Tier 1.

Tier 2 – Moderate Risk: The CADV within this tier are likely to contain pollutants and are unattended and deteriorated; are floating or grounded on state-owned land; or are part of a significant accumulation of vessels and debris on state-owned land. Staff rated eight CADV sites as Tier 2.

Tier 3 – Low Risk: The CADV within this tier may contain pollutants and are unattended and deteriorated; are floating outside Commission jurisdiction; are sunk and near traffic; or are part of a significant accumulation of vessels and debris. Staff rated 25 CADV sites as Tier 3.

Tier 4 – No Immediate Risk: The CADV within this tier are not likely to contain pollutants; are sunk but away from traffic; are on land; or are infeasible to remove. Staff rated 10 CADV sites as Tier 4.

ON-CALL CONTRACTS:

In January 2023, staff solicited offers for five on-call ADV services based on vessel length. Seven responses met the basic criteria. Staff awarded the contracts based on paper submissions and interviews according to objective scoring criteria. The successful offerors were Vortex Marine Construction, Inc. (small vessels); Silverado Contractors, Inc. (small-medium vessels); Lind Marine LLC (medium vessels and separate contract for medium-large vessels); and Global Diving and Salvage (large vessels). Staff encumbered \$2 million on each contract for a total of \$10 million.

VESSEL ABATEMENTS

The first expenditure of Program funds helped avert an emergency. In January 2022, [the tugboat *Valiant*](#) drifted into the San Joaquin River navigation channel. The *Valiant* is one of several CADV from the “Skarry” CADV site, named after the former owner of the vessels. A coalition of state, federal, and local agencies captured the vessel and removed petroleum hazards. The Commission paid to demolish the *Valiant* once it had been moved to Mare Island. Later in 2022, the Commission removed and disposed of the second Skarry CADV: [tugboat *Standard No. 2*](#). Many agencies, including the United States Coast Guard and the California Department of Toxic Substances Control, had been involved with this floating vessel before the Commission’s action. Abatement of the remaining Skarry CADV began on May 2, 2025, and will continue through mid-June.

By summer 2023, with the CADV survey completed and on-call contractors ready, staff were prepared for Program implementation. The Commission has now directly removed seven CADV (in addition to the two Skarry tugboats), assisted with the City of Stockton’s removal of the *Aurora*, and caused responsible parties to remove over 10 additional CADV.

TIER 1

Staff has abated seven Tier 1 vessels:

- *Ruth Elaine*, a tugboat located near McDonald Island, February 2024 ([Item 83, June 5, 2023](#))
- An unnamed floating barge with shop near Mandeville Tip, February 2025 ([Item 53, October 17, 2024](#))
- An unnamed small wooden tugboat in White Slough, March 2025 ([Item 63, August 29, 2024](#))
- *Vaquero II* cattle barge near Bethel Island, March 2025 ([Item 58, December 17, 2024](#))

- An unnamed sunken barge posing a navigation hazard in Little Potato Slough, April 2025 ([Item 64, August 29, 2024](#))
- An unnamed dredger at Windmill Cove Marina, disposed of by the vessel owner after staff inquiries
- *Aurora*, derelict cruise ship, privately owned submerged land

At approximately 300-feet-long, and five decks deep, the *Aurora* was the largest vessel known in the Delta. It sank on privately owned submerged land near the City of Stockton's water intake in May 2024. The City determined that the vessel must be removed to safely operate its water intake. The Commission provided \$1,000,000 from Program funds in aid of this critical project to secure clean water for over 200,000 residents in an environmentally disadvantaged Delta community. Removal and demolition of the *Aurora* cost approximately \$9,000,000, on top of petroleum and hazardous materials response performed by federal and state agencies.

The remaining Tier 1 vessels are:

- Three remaining CADV at the Skarry site ([Item 45, April 2, 2025](#)), which will be in process of abatement by the date of this Commission meeting.
- A sunk barge near Winter Island, being considered for removal on this Commission meeting.
- A tugboat and barge on the Sacramento River; staff is confirming that the vessel owner has removed the vessels from state property or is properly maintaining them.

TIER 2

Staff has abated approximately 12 Tier 2 vessels, all from the site of Salt River Construction Corporation's debris site in Broad Slough, Sacramento County.

The Salt River site contained approximately 24 CADV, the most substantial CADV site in the Delta and perhaps statewide. The Commission directly removed two Salt River CADV, the crane barge *Mink* and tugboat *Double Eagle*, June 2024 ([Item 59, August 17, 2023](#)). Salt River Construction Corporation (Salt River) removed approximately 10 of its own derelict vessels pursuant to an agreement with the Commission. However, Salt River has failed to complete its obligations under the agreement, and the Commission may remove additional vessels directly ([Item 64, June 7, 2024](#)).

Salt River and the Sacramento County District Attorney entered a consent judgment requiring removal of the remaining Salt River CADV by November 2025. Program staff are deferring action until that time. The Commission has sued Salt

River to recover the approximately \$1 million expended in disposing of the *Mink* and *Double Eagle*.

Another substantial accumulation of CADV and debris known to belong to Claus Von Wendel, located in Mayberry Slough, Sacramento County, prioritized in Tier 2. The Commission has authorized removal of three CADV from this site ([Item 46, April 2, 2025](#)). Staff intends to proceed with these removals later in 2025.

The remaining Tier 2 sites include

- A barge with unknown ownership in the Sacramento River near Walnut Grove; staff expects to recommend removal at the August 2025 Commission meeting.
- A barge at Quimby Island; the owner has applied for a lease.
- A barge in Steamboat Slough; staff are working with the owner to submit an application.

Staff estimates that Program funds will be consumed during abatement of all the Tier 1 and most of the Tier 2 CADVs in 2025 and 2026.

TIER 3 AND 4

Staff has not abated any Tier 3 or 4 CADVs. Because of resource constraints, staff does not propose to abate any Tier 3 or Tier 4 vessels at this time.

PROGRAM BUDGET:

The legislature allocated \$12 million for Delta ADV removals. The Commission's 2023–24 Delta CADV survey cost \$250,000. Abating the *Valiant* and *Standard No. 2* cost a total of \$321,957.67. The remaining \$11,428,042.33 has been encumbered on the Commission's five on-call contracts. After the initial contract awards, Staff encumbered an additional \$1,428,042.33 to Lind Marine LLC's contracts to support the *Aurora* removal project and is shifting funds among the contracts to attack the largest high-priority sites, such as the Skarry CADV site ([Item 45, April 2, 2025](#)). Staff expects the Program budget to be depleted towards the end of 2026. Any unspent funds will be returned to the general fund in July 2027.

Table 1. CADV Program On-Call Contracts

Contractor	Contract Amount	Expended	In Process (approx.)	Balance
Vortex	\$2,000,000	\$494,728.85	---	\$1,505,271.15
Silverado	\$500,972.48	\$500,972.48	---	\$0
Lind Marine	\$2,428,042.33	\$1,061,786.01	---	\$1,366,256.32
Lind Marine	\$3,000,000	\$999,932.10	---	\$2,000,067.90
Global	\$2,700,000	---	\$2,700,000	\$0
	Total Expended	\$3,057,419.44	Total Remaining	\$5,670,622.89

CONCLUSION:

The cost of CADV abatement depends on the facts of each vessel, including: its size, location, construction, presence of hazardous materials, whether it has sunken, and whether it can be floated to the disposal site. But the work is expensive. Program staff has experienced abatement costs from \$133,000, for a wooden cattle barge, to \$9,000,000, for the *Aurora* cruise ship (of which the Commission paid only \$1,000,000). Direct contract costs for an “average” CADV abatement are from \$250,000 to \$500,000. However, the largest CADV—typically sunk crane barges, of which there are at least three remaining in the Delta—can top \$1,000,000 each. Staff costs for program management add to the total costs.

While removal of these vessels is expensive, CADVs frequently contain significant pollutants including fuels and oils, lubricants, greases, asbestos, lead paint, mercury and heavy metals, batteries, and trash, which pollute state lands and waterways. The vessels themselves directly impede navigation and disrupt habitats. People sometimes attempt to live on, scavenge, or salvage CADV, putting themselves and others in danger. Staff believe that the tugboat *Valiant* drifted into the San Joaquin Shipping Channel after people attempted to steal the *Valiant* but could not manage the large vessel.

Program staff projects that abating all the Tier 1 CADV and most of the Tier 2 CADV will consume the \$12 million currently available by the end of 2026. Portions of the large CADV clusters at the Salt River and Claus Von Wendel sites will likely remain.

Staff has made efficient use of the allocated funds to bring a substantial benefit to the Delta, that the Commission and the people of California can be proud of.

Fully abating the Tier 2 sites may require, at a bare minimum, another \$3 to \$5 million allocation, and clearing all the sites identified in the Delta survey would require an estimated \$25 to \$30 million. (Program staff would not necessarily recommend abating all Tier 3 or 4 vessels because of the relatively low hazard presented; an expanded geographic scope for application of additional funds would be more beneficial.) After Program funds are consumed or returned, the Commission will still be available to partner with funded agencies to abate vessels.

The Commission does not have funds for CADV abatement outside of the Delta even though its authority and jurisdiction is statewide. Program staff has reports of CADVs in Suisun Bay, San Pablo and San Francisco Bays, Humboldt Bay, Bodega Bay, Noyo Harbor, Pillar Point Harbor, and Morro Bay. Staff has less information on the ports and harbors of southern California, but it can reasonably be expected that these waterways are similarly blighted by CADV.

If the legislature considered a statewide CADV program, program costs would scale up depending on the goals of the program and targeted vessel types. One program model would be a relatively modest annual budget of \$3 or \$5 million for abatement operations and additional program staff. This would allow the Commission to respond to emergencies or to survey other parts of the state and work through a priority list over several years. Annual funding would allow the Commission to target and clear Tier 1 and Tier 2 CADV's and to hire permanent, dedicated Program staff, a necessity for an expanded or ongoing Program. Annual funding would also result in financial efficiencies from predictability and prevention, by intercepting vessels before they sink or release pollution into the environment.