

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 24, 2007

THE LOWER LOS ANGELES RIVER URBAN WATERSHED PROJECT

File No. 07-042
Project Manager: David Hayes

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to (\$310,000) to Heal the Bay for purposes of planning and permitting up to six demonstration projects to enhance the Lower Los Angeles River, in Los Angeles County.

LOCATION: Lower Los Angeles River, unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County and several municipalities.

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access, Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Area](#)

Exhibit 3: [Letters of Support](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31111 and 31251 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred ten thousand dollars (\$310,000) to Heal the Bay to plan demonstration projects that will enhance the Lower Los Angeles River area. This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, Heal the Bay shall submit for review and written approval by the Conservancy's Executive Officer, a work plan, budget and contractors they propose to use to complete the projects.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, specifically Chapter 6 (section 31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources, and Chapter 9 (Sections 31400-31409) regarding public access to and along the coast;

2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001;
 3. That Heal the Bay is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code, and has among its principal charitable purposes the preservation of land for scientific, historic, recreational, educational, and open space opportunities;
 4. The proposed projects will serve greater than local needs; and
 5. The proposed authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31252 as the project area was identified in the Los Angeles River Master Plan as an area requiring public action to resolve existing resource protection problems.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to three hundred ten thousand dollars (\$310,000) to Heal the Bay (HtB) to plan small-scale demonstration projects that will enhance the Lower Los Angeles River. HtB will complete pre-project analysis, development of site plans, environmental analysis, cost estimates, and permitting for up to six projects; conduct outreach and training work to engage community based organizations located along the lower Los Angeles River in environmental improvement projects; coordinate these activities with the Conservancy and other watershed partners; and continue to seek matching funds for implementation of the demonstration projects.

Under the proposed project, the Conservancy's primary objective is to develop small-scale multi-benefit projects that combine water-quality improvement, open space, habitat enhancement, public access, and provide environmental education and technical assistance to underserved communities. The small-scale demonstration projects will use best management practices (BMPs) and will help implement the lower Los Angeles River and Compton Creek watershed management plans. Additionally, the proposed projects will demonstrate how urban communities can improve water-quality, reduce pollution, capture additional storm water runoff, reduce pollution of rivers and streams, coastal waters, and provide upland open space for park-deficient communities and habitat for wildlife. Projects will improve existing trails and create new public access opportunities along these river corridors.

Heal the Bay will provide support to eight community organizations and develop plans for six projects, over a two year period. Each community-based organization will be responsible for attending practical training and project development exercises, including hosting clean-up events and outreach activities to help plan the demonstration projects. Additionally, where appropriate, Heal the Bay will conduct water quality monitoring and sediment assessment to provide baseline data for project BMP performance evaluation. Heal the Bay expects to partner with the Los Angeles Conservation Corps to work on some of these projects, because many of its participants are from lower Los Angeles River areas.

Site Description:

The lower Los Angeles River watershed and the Compton Creek watershed are highly urbanized areas. Land use in the area includes a mix of residential and industrial uses. Major streets, including State Route 91 and Interstate 110 freeway cross the area. The region is a park-poor area.

The lower Los Angeles watershed, parts of which were formerly marshland, covers a flat low-lying area that drains into the Los Angeles River which flows to San Pedro Bay. It is approximately 60 square miles, encompassing the cities of Compton, Lynwood, and Southgate. This watershed also includes part of the cities of Los Angeles, Long Beach, Carson, and Huntington Park in addition to unincorporated communities of East Rancho, Dominguez, Rosewood, Willowbrook, Florence, and Athens. (Exhibit 2).

Project History:

The Conservancy has long been involved in regional efforts to address improvements in the larger Los Angeles River watershed area. In the past year, the Coastal Conservancy has been an active participant in the watershed management planning process in the Compton Creek watershed. The Conservancy is a member of the Compton Creek Watershed Plan Steering Committee, composed of: the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, the L.A. Regional Water Quality Control Board, the City of Los Angeles, the Compton Creek Task Force and various Los Angeles County departments (see “Cooperation” discussion below). The Conservancy has been assisting in the planning process and supporting the implementation of the watershed management plan.

During the community outreach phase of the Compton Creek Watershed planning process, it became evident that there was an absence of community-based, nonprofit organizations that could support or focus on environmental projects in the underserved communities in the lower Los Angeles River and its sub-basins. In response, Heal the Bay has sponsored Compton Creek cleanup events, high school and middle school environmental awareness activities and water-quality training projects over the last five years. HtB has been working to engage and partner with existing community-based organizations to support and initiate projects that benefit lower Los Angeles River communities. The proposed project will continue this work, focusing on the development of the demonstration projects.

This proposed project will continue work that Heal the Bay started with a planning grant authorized by the Coastal Conservancy March 10, 2005. Under the previous grant, four demonstration projects were identified and planned at a concept level. This project will identify six additional projects and complete the planning for six projects, including CEQA review and permitting, so that the projects are ready for construction.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$310,000
Heal the Bay (in-kind services)	\$20,000
Liberty Hill Foundation	<u>\$18,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$348,000

The intended source of funds for the Conservancy's contribution to this project is the FY 06/07 appropriation from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water Coastal Beach Protection Fund of 2002 (Proposition 50) which allocated funds to the Conservancy for the purpose of protecting coastal watersheds, including, but not limited to, associated planning, permitting, and administrative costs, consistent with our enabling legislation. (Water Code § 79570). The proposed project involves critical planning work necessary to identify specific projects and strategies that will protect and restore coastal watershed resources.

The proposed project is part of a comprehensive effort to protect and restore the aquatic and riparian habitats in the lower Los Angeles River watershed, and develop a trail network for public access, parks, open spaces that are compatible with Conservancy coastal watershed goals. Additionally, the proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation, as discussed in the "Consistency with Conservancy's enabling legislation" section below, and with applicable local and regional watershed management plans as discussed in the "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan" section of this report. The proposed authorization is thus consistent with the funding requirements of Proposition 50.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 31251-31270) provides for the Conservancy's participation in enhancement programs of coastal resources. The proposed authorization would facilitate enhancement to riparian and upland resources by incorporating best management practices in the lower Los Angeles watershed, which would provide beneficial effects to the lower Los Angeles River and harbor area. Section 31111 authorizes the Conservancy to undertake and award grants for feasibility studies implementing these provisions.

Section 31251 of the Public Resources Code authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of improper location of built improvements, natural or human induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. The proposed projects will develop a select number of small-scale demonstration projects that will provide for access to open space, parks, establish upland habitats in urban coastal watershed areas.

Section 31251.2 authorizes Conservancy participation in projects to enhance watershed resources that are located partly outside the coastal zone, where such action protects or enhances coastal resources within the coastal zone. Loss of habitat and water quality are significant issues throughout the Lower Los Angeles watershed a result of urbanization and channelization of the Los Angeles River and its tributaries, which lie partly within and partly outside the coastal zone.

The proposed authorization would address habitat loss, public access, urban runoff, and water quality issues in the Lower Los Angeles River and San Pedro Bay/Los Angeles Harbor areas.

Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 *et seq.*) provides for the Conservancy's participation in the development of a system of accessways. Consistent with section 31400 and 31409, the project will assist in the provision of regional trail linkages to the Lower Los Angeles River and the Los Angeles Harbor area, including parts of the California Coastal Trail.

Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations to develop, operate or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coast. Consistent with the requirement that accessways serve more than local public needs, the Los Angeles area is a statewide, national, and international visitor destination, with more than 600,000 residents in the surrounding cities.

Under §31400.2, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of the initial development of public accessways provided that the Conservancy evaluates the fiscal resources of the application, current funds available for coastal accessways, the urgency of the project relative to other access projects, and consistency with other Conservancy funding criteria. HtB is a nonprofit organization that seeks to develop and manage coastal public accessways for both the local community and visitors. Without additional funding from the Conservancy, HtB will be unable to implement the watershed management plan strategy recently developed with Conservancy funding. Other criteria identified in section 31400.2 are discussed in the Project Selection and Criteria section below.

Under §31400.3, the Conservancy may provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal access ways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of Division 21. Consistent with this section, the HtB will provide in-kind services necessary to organize the community in the protection and enhancement of trails around the lower Los Angeles River.

Consistent with §31409, the proposed authorization would enable the Conservancy to expand capacity building and enable community-based organizations to engage in developing an inland system of trails that could connect to the Coastal Trail and provide new recreational opportunities.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

The proposed authorization is consistent with **Goal 1, Objective E**, as they will identify and plan the development of regional trails and river parkways, which will connect inland populations to the Coastal Trail.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective A**, the proposed authorization will assist in the creation of new open spaces, habitat and parks in areas of significant need and expand recreational opportunities to disadvantaged populations that would create parks in areas of significant need.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective A**, the proposed authorization will result in final detailed project plans; promote public outreach and community involvement in watershed coordination processes.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective B**, the proposed authorization will lead to the development of projects that will, improve water-quality and benefit urban watershed areas in the lower Los Angeles River watershed and its tributaries.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted on January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** See letters of support. (Exhibit 3)
4. **Location:** Project area is located in unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County and several small municipalities that historically have been a mix of industrial land uses and have dense residential developments. The proposed project area lies partly within and partly outside the coastal zone. The urban runoff in the Lower Los Angeles River watershed drains to the San Pedro Bay and the Los Angeles harbor area.
5. **Need:** No other funding source is available at these multi-faceted projects. This authorization will build on the momentum of Heal the Bay's current work in the Compton Creek area, significant delays in funding would impact Heal the Bay's ability to implement these projects. Without Conservancy funding, community-based participation that would implement the watershed plan will not go forward.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The combined watershed areas of Lower Los Angeles River represent important areas that have not been the focus of coastal resources or coastal access improvements. The State has set policies to address under-served communities regarding open space and access to the coast. The Proposed project will be a broad-base initiative, by developing multiple small-scale projects that collectively provide habitat enhancements and new public recreation, regional trail access, parks and open spaces that represent regional and statewide priorities, and can improve the quality of life in this area of the Los Angeles region.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** If funding is not made available at this time loss of momentum will result, watershed plan implementation will be delayed and loss of project funding opportunities may result.

8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Authorization will provide community-based organizations and local municipalities to address the need for parks, open space, habitat enhancement, restoration, and trail links to the coast and urban runoff issues, which will likely improve water quality in the Lower Los Angeles River and San Pedro Bay/Los Angeles harbor areas.
9. **Readiness:** If authorized by the Conservancy, Heal the Bay is prepared to start the proposed activities within the next 30 days and complete the project in approximately twenty-four months.
10. **Innovation:** This is an innovative approach to watershed plan implementation and project development because it incorporates capacity development activities for community-based organizations in areas where there is an absence of environmentally-focused organizations. The project also addresses the needs of local municipalities that have limited resources to develop watershed implementation projects or compete for state and federal funding.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
12. **Cooperation:** The proposed project will be carried-out in cooperation with the Coastal Conservancy, the Los Angeles & San Gabriel Rivers Conservancy, the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, the Los Angeles Watts Economic Development Council, Los Angeles County and the California Regional Water Quality Control Board and many community based organizations.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/ STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

As discussed in the Project Summary, the proposed project is consistent with and helps achieve objectives in the watershed management plans for the Lower Los Angeles River and tributary watershed plans. The project is consistent with the mission and goals of the Los Angeles River Master Plan in that projects will be designed to “preserve, enhance and restore environmental resources in and along the [Los Angeles] river,” to “promote the river as an economic asset to the surrounding communities” and to provide “a variety of recreational opportunities along the river”.

The project is also consistent with the Compton Creek Watershed Plan and its implementation strategy by “expanding partnerships with government, develop[ing] a watershed course of study for stakeholders” and will “identify projects that meet Compton Watershed Plan goals and connect[ing] them with funding”.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

This project is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act under 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262 because it involves only feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions and will not have a legally binding effect on later activities. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.