

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
December 4, 2008

**SAN DIEGO RIVER WATERSHED DATA COLLECTION AND  
RESTORATION PROGRAM: IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

File No. 08-117  
Project Manager: Megan Johnson

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$76,000 to the San Diego State University Foundation to develop an implementation plan for establishing a data collection and restoration program in the San Diego River Watershed, San Diego County.

**LOCATION:** San Diego River Watershed, County of San Diego

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Watershed Restoration

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Memorandum of Intent among San Diego River Conservancy and San Diego State University](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code:

"The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to seventy six thousand dollars (\$76,000) to the San Diego State University Foundation to prepare an implementation plan for establishing the San Diego River Watershed Data Collection and Restoration Program. Prior to the disbursement of funds, the Executive Officer of the Conservancy shall approve in writing a work program, including budget and schedule, and any contractors to be employed for these tasks."

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 project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.

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2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding protection or restoration of fish and wildlife habitat within coastal watersheds, and protection and restoration of riparian areas, floodplains, and other sensitive watershed lands.
  3. The proposed project is consistent with applicable local watershed management plans and water quality control plans.
  4. The proposed project has been approved by the San Diego River Conservancy.”
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### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$76,000 to the San Diego State University Foundation (Foundation) to develop an implementation plan for establishing the San Diego River Watershed Data Collection and Restoration Program. The San Diego Watershed Data Collection and Restoration Program (Program) will provide land and water resource managers with the data they need to make informed conservation and management decisions, track successes, and identify future threats. The primary goal of the Program is to provide data that will help stakeholders identify the causes of poor water quality, flooding, and habitat degradation, and implement restoration activities that address those problems. This project will develop an implementation plan that will include a framework for the Program and analysis of potential users and long-term funding to implement it. The Foundation will work in close partnership with the San Diego River Conservancy (SDRC) and the San Diego River Park Foundation to complete the implementation plan.

The long-term viability and sustainability of our natural resources depends on our ability to understand the systems we are trying to manage. However, most land management and conservation strategies operate with a paucity of data and critical decisions are often made without scientific support. The proposed Program aims to remedy this situation in the San Diego River watershed by establishing a data collection and dissemination system that will help inform land and water resource managers, and allow them to base their decisions on real data. The primary goal of the Program is to provide data that will help stakeholders identify the causes of poor water quality and habitat degradation, and implement restoration activities that address those problems. The data could also be used to understand the impacts of land use change, track changes to the system in response to invasive species, restoration programs, or other alterations to the landscape, help make the watershed safe and accessible, and increase public awareness through publicly accessible information. The Program will evaluate a wide variety of factors that influence the watershed condition, including climate, water flow, water quality, habitat quality, and other beneficial uses.

In order to develop a functional and sustainable Program, the Foundation proposes the development of an implementation plan (Plan), which will include the following components:

- Stakeholder engagement: Engage watershed stakeholders, resource and regulatory agencies, and interested parties to inform development, implementation, and management of the Program.
- Data use plan: Identify the data gaps and the end users that have a need for watershed data, the data format required by the end users, and the ultimate uses for the data.

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- **Data collection plan:** Identify the most efficient and effective methods for collecting the data required by the end users, identify sites, and create experimental design
- **Maintenance/funding plan:** Coordinate with data users to identify a long-term funding strategy for the program.
- **Outreach and outreach plan:** Formulate a plan for sharing the data with the end users, including the general public.
- **Pilot watershed monitoring location:** Establish a wireless monitoring station at the Mission Trails Regional Park to collect water quality, meteorological, and visual data in real-time. This sensor will serve as a model for future monitoring stations in the watershed.

The Plan will be developed through a partnership between the Foundation, the SDRC, and the San Diego River Park Foundation. San Diego State University is located within the watershed of the San Diego River, including property that is owned and managed as an ecological field station. The field station is a facility that supports teaching, research and education by collecting, sharing and understanding environmental data. Foundation staff has lead several watershed and conservation programs, including the development of local watershed management plans, water quality monitoring programs, restoration projects, and endangered species conservation strategies.

**Site Description:** The San Diego River runs 52 miles from its headwaters in the Cleveland National Forest in east San Diego County, through Mission Valley and the first settlement in California at Old Town, before it empties into the Pacific Ocean at Ocean Beach (Exhibit 1). With a land area of approximately 440 square miles, the San Diego River Watershed is the second largest in San Diego County. It is also the most heavily populated of the County's watersheds.

The San Diego River winds its way through a complicated matrix of natural, urban, and agricultural lands, where it is threatened by development, increases in sediment transport, changes in water volume, and a myriad of water pollutants. While the upper reaches of the watershed, which are mostly within the Cleveland National Forest, are largely undeveloped, the lower portions have experienced heavy urban development and use. Despite these concerns, the San Diego River serves as an essential cultural and natural resource. The river corridor is known to support a rich diversity of wildlife, including several threatened and endangered species. Within this urban environment, the San Diego River also provides a one-of-a-kind resource for education and recreation, which could be a foundation for community involvement and support. Despite the existing natural resources and continued threats, a watershed-wide monitoring and restoration program does not exist for the San Diego River.

**Project History:** On April 18, 2008 San Diego State University, the SDRC, and the San Diego River Park Foundation signed a Memorandum of Intent to create a new partnership (Exhibit 2) to improve the health of the San Diego River as well as advance an appreciation and understanding of its remarkable historic, cultural, natural and recreational attributes. The signing partners agreed that the San Diego River Watershed Data Collection and Restoration Program (previously referred to as "RiverNet") would be one of first projects undertaken by this partnership. The Program is building on the goals developed through the San Diego River Watershed Management Plan (2005) and the SDRC Strategic Plan (2006). The Watershed Management

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Plan was created by the San Diego River Watershed Work Group, which was comprised primarily of public agencies and non-governmental organizations, with the goal of identifying watershed issues of concern and the steps necessary to resolve them. The SDRC's Strategic Plan outlines the policies and principles that guide their actions.

The Program will integrate with several projects currently underway along the river. The San Diego River Park Foundation has two projects related to the Program. The first, the River Watch Team, is a volunteer-driven data collection program that has 17 water quality monitoring sites along the river. The second, the Integrated Water Quality and Watershed Information System, is a data organization and dissemination platform that could be used as the framework, or a component of, the Program's data dissemination. A hydrology study, being conducted by the SDRC and the Bureau of Reclamation, which will make recommendations for restoring the river floodplain, will also be integrated with the Program.

### **PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$76,000
SDSU	30,000
SDSU College of Sciences	25,000 (in-kind)
<u>Regional Water Quality Control Board</u>	<u>\$40,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$171,000</b>

Staff expects to use funds appropriated to the Conservancy in fiscal year 2007-08 from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84) for projects approved by the SDRC. This funding source may be used for the protection of San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds. Proposition 84 allows for the utilization of funds for expenditures pursuant to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, as specified in Section 75060(b), and for projects that protect San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds, as specified in Section 75060(f). Pursuant to Section 75060(b), funds may be allocated to the improvement and protection of coastal and marine water quality and habitats, so long as the project is compliant with Division 21 of the Public Resource Code.

The \$40,000 anticipated from the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board is the result of a Supplemental Environmental Project that the San Diego County Water Authority has agreed to fund and the SDRC has agreed to accept (Exhibit 3). This matter is scheduled for approval at the November 12, 2008 San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board hearing.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5, Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection (§31220), of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31220(a) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for coastal watershed projects that meet one or more criteria of Section 31220(b). Consistent with §31220(b), the Program will help achieve the following objectives: 2) protect and restore fish and wildlife habitat within coastal and marine waters and coastal watersheds; 3) reduce threats to coastal and marine fish and wildlife; 4) reduce unnatural erosion and sedimentation of coastal

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watersheds or contribute to the reestablishment of natural erosion and sediment cycles; and 6) acquire, protect, and restore coastal wetlands, riparian areas, floodplains, and other sensitive watershed lands. Consistent with §31220(a), staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board and the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board in the development of the project to ensure consistency with the San Diego Basin Plan. As Section 31220(c) requires, the Program is consistent with local watershed plans. This is discussed in detail below under "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan."

Section 31111 gives the Conservancy the authority to fund plans and feasibility studies in order to implement the purposes of Division 21.

The proposed project is consistent with the SDRC's enabling legislation, Division 22.9 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 32630-32661. Consistent with Section 32633 (a) the proposed project will help protect and restore wetlands and maintain and improve the quality of the waters in the San Diego River and its watershed.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would fund the development of a plan to preserve and restore coastal watersheds and create river parkways, and would promote public outreach and community involvement.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 20, 2007, 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:** This project enjoys the support of the state and local public officials and community groups represented on the SDRC board, and the City of San Diego (Exhibit 2). In addition, the project is supported by the San Diego River Park Foundation and the President of San Diego State University (Exhibit 3).
4. **Location:** This project is located partly within and partly outside of the coastal zone. By working to restore watershed health, the project will benefit coastal wetlands and marine species currently affected by poor water quality and habitat degradation occurring in waters draining to the ocean.
5. **Need:** Conservancy funding is needed to match the other funding already approved for this project.

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6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The San Diego River is arguably the most historic river in California, home to the first European settlement in the State. Protecting water quality and habitat in this watershed, along with providing opportunities for recreation, scientific research, historic preservation of the first aqueduct in the United States, and educational and cultural activities, are of value to California and the nation. The Program will help support management of significant resources, including habitat for rare and endangered species.

### **Additional Criteria**

8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will provide data and information that will help identify issues and potential solutions for improving water quality, habitat protection, flood protection, and restoration, public outreach, and educational.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Readiness:** The Foundation has on-going watershed monitoring programs in place and is ready to begin the planning process for the San Diego River as soon as funding is available.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Program would provide data and information necessary to implement the San Diego River Watershed Riparian Restoration Program, a Tier 1 project on the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project’s Work Plan.
15. **Cooperation:** The proposed project is a collaboration between an academic institution, a state agency, and local non-profit organizations.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

This project is partially within and partially outside the coastal zone. However, the whole project will have a positive impact on the coastal resources located at the terminus of the San Diego River Watershed. By facilitating watershed restoration projects that will control erosion, improve water quality and urban runoff, enhance wetlands, provide education and outreach on watershed issues and develop and implement a watershed monitoring program, the proposed project will help to satisfy the following priorities listed in the Ocean Beach Precise Plan and Local Coastal Program (LCP) addendum (adopted November 25, 1980), which serve as the City of San Diego’s certified LCP for communities within the San Diego River Watershed that fall within the coastal zone:

- Preserve the natural features and beauty of the coastline adjacent to Ocean Beach
- Provide protection of environmentally sensitive habitat areas in the vicinity of... the Famosa Slough Channel
- Seek Conservancy assistance for the protection and enhancement of sensitive coastal resource areas and degraded or less than pristine wetlands

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

The proposed Program will facilitate the implementation of several recommendations from the San Diego River Watershed Management Plan (2005). These recommendations include the following:

- Identify stakeholders that need to coordinate, cooperate, and communicate on issues within the San Diego River Watershed
- Coordinate with watershed stakeholders to determine the feasibility and recommended structure for a watershed data repository
- Identify various target groups for effective outreach efforts; determine the most effective mechanism for measuring the effectiveness of outreach
- Support and augment the efforts initiated by the San Diego River Park Foundation in developing and populating an inventory of the various monitoring efforts occurring throughout the watershed
- Establish hydrologic monitoring stations
- Conduct hydrologic, hydraulic, sediment transport, and water quality analyses to estimate the significance of existing and future hydromodifications impacts on riparian and aquatic resources and water quality within the San Diego River Watershed
- Prioritize habitat restoration priorities
- Evaluate conservation lands or targeted lands for opportunities to conduct beneficial restoration

Because the project will facilitate the restoration of wildlife habitat in coastal watersheds and wetlands, it is consistent with the Water Quality Control Plan for the San Diego Basin (adopted by the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board in 1994 and reviewed every three years). The project will further the following beneficial use objectives:

- Warm freshwater habitat
- Cold freshwater habitat
- Estuarine habitat
- Wildlife habitat

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:** The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of CEQA under 14 California Code of Regulations, Section 15262 exempting feasibility studies for possible future actions that the Conservancy has not approved, adopted or funded and which do not require preparation of an EIR or negative declaration. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the proposed project.