

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
August 5, 2010

SWAN CANYON RESTORATION

Project No. 08-090-02
Project Manager: Christopher Kroll

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$104,250 to the Endangered Habitats Conservancy for restoration of Swan Canyon in the City of San Diego.

LOCATION: Swan Canyon, San Diego, San Diego County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Aerial Photo](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [September 25, 2008 Staff Recommendation](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [Restoration Strategy](#)
 - Exhibit 5: [Restoration Map](#)
 - Exhibit 6: [Project Letters](#)
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

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

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred four thousand two hundred fifty dollars (\$104,250) to the Endangered Habitats Conservancy to restore habitat in Swan Canyon, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to disbursement of any funds, Endangered Habitats Conservancy shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer the following:
 - a. A detailed work program, including budget and schedule;
 - b. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed on the project;
 - c. A signage plan to acknowledge Conservancy funding for the project;
 - d. A monitoring and evaluation plan for the project;
 - e. Evidence that the necessary permits for the project have been secured; and

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- f. Evidence of landowner permission for the anticipated work to occur on private property.”

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 current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the protection of coastal watershed resources.
3. Endangered Habitats Conservancy is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy provide a grant of up to \$104,250 to Endangered Habitats Conservancy (EHC) to implement a habitat restoration plan for Swan Canyon by removing invasive non-native vegetation and replanting the treated areas. The Conservancy authorized planning and permitting for this project in September 2008 (Exhibit 2). The plan has been completed and permits have been secured. This authorization seeks funding to implement the plan (Exhibit 3).

Several large stands of giant reed (*Arundo donax*) are currently growing in the riparian corridor of the 30-acre canyon. Non-native grassland vegetation occurs throughout the canyon especially along the slopes of the canyon. In addition, landscaping plant species such as acacia (*Acacia* sp.), Hottentot-fig (*Carpobrotus edulis*), Peruvian pepper tree (*Schinus molle*), Brazilian pepper tree (*Schinus terebinthifolius*), zonal geranium (*Pelargonium zonale*), and oleander (*Nerium oleander*) have become established in the canyon. Giant reed (*Arundo donax*), an invasive exotic plant species, is a significant problem throughout California as it can out-compete native plant species and degrade riparian habitat.

The project will work from the top of the watershed down to eradicate *Arundo donax* and other exotic species from the canyon and prevent re-colonization of treated areas. The strategy calls for addressing non-native invasive vegetation in both the riparian and upland areas. Vegetation will be mowed, chipped or cleared by hand and left on site as mulch. Herbicide applications will be made as needed for up to five years. Revegetation with appropriate native plants will be conducted through several large community volunteer events hosted by the Ocean Discovery Institute, which will be working with EHC on the project. Monitoring will occur monthly, transitioning to quarterly after the second year of treatment. Monitoring will include a qualitative evaluation of project progression and recommendations for changes in treatment.

The removal of invasive species and restoration of Swan Canyon will decrease the hidden areas for transient encampments and criminal activity. The removal of *Arundo donax* will also

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eliminate a significant fire hazard. The project will benefit San Diego County wildlife by restoring riparian, southern maritime chaparral, southern willow scrub, mule fat scrub, and wetland habitats. These habitats support a number of wildlife species including the endangered California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica*), small mammals, raptors, and owls.

Although Swan Canyon is a relatively large open space area in the City Heights neighborhood, in its current condition, the canyon is not viewed as an asset to the community. A team of high school students, working with the Institute for Public Strategies and Ocean Discovery Institute, conducted a community survey about Swan Canyon and found that residents' perceptions of the canyon focused on trash, risk of fire and the potential for illegal activities. The project seeks to change the conditions in the canyon so that it will become an asset to the community, providing habitat, accessible open space, and an educational resource. Hamilton Elementary School is located next to the canyon and nine other public schools are within 10 blocks.

Endangered Habitats Conservancy is nonprofit organization based in San Diego whose purpose is to raise funds for acquisition, management, monitoring, and maintenance of land in Southern California for habitat protection and restoration, agricultural preservation, and other conservation purposes.

Site Description: Swan Canyon is located in the City Heights neighborhood of the City of San Diego and is part of the Chollas Creek sub-watershed of the Pueblo San Diego Watershed. Swan Canyon drains into the Auburn Creek reach of Chollas Creek. The approximately 25 square mile Chollas Creek watershed is located east of downtown San Diego. From its headwaters in the cities of La Mesa and Lemon Grove, Chollas Creek flows in three branches through the Greater Mid-City (City Heights, Eastern), Encanto, Southeastern San Diego, and Barrio Logan communities in the City of San Diego and before it drains into San Diego Bay. (See exhibits 1 & 2).

Swan Canyon is a particularly degraded area of the watershed with significant amounts of trash and large stands of *Arundo donax*, which eliminate native habitat and provide hidden areas for illegal activities. The 30-acre canyon runs north to south and is characterized by steep slopes which drain into riparian areas. One of six canyons in City Heights, Swan Canyon represents almost half of the entire open space in City Heights and most of the canyon is located within the City-owned Mid-City Open Space, a designated open space area.

Swan Canyon is heavily impacted by infrastructure such as sewer mains, storm drains, and electrical lines. During the placement of utilities, revegetation was inadequate which resulted in the invasion of exotic plants, primarily *Arundo donax*. Currently *Arundo donax* covers approximately two acres of Swan Canyon, mostly in the upper part of the canyon. The urban development surrounding Swan Canyon also brought the addition of ornamental plants into the canyon.

The native plant communities in Swan Canyon include southern maritime chaparral, southern willow scrub, mule fat scrub, disturbed wetland, and non-native grassland. Four sensitive species, Nuttall's scrub oak (*Quercus dumosa*), wart-stemmed ceanothus (*Ceanothus verrucosus*), northern harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), and California thrasher (*Toxostoma redivivum*)

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occur in the canyon. Riparian habitat (willows, mule fat) is found throughout the drainage areas. The canyon supports a number of wildlife species including small mammals, raptors and owls.

Project History: In the late 1970s, the City’s community plan for Southeastern San Diego and the Mid-City established policies to preserve and enhance Chollas Creek. In response, the City made a number of land acquisitions designed to preserve the creek as open space. More recently, community plan updates have reinforced the concept of preserving the creek as a natural system.

During the mid-1990s, using funding provided by the California Energy Commission, the City developed a detailed enhancement concept for the creek. As part of the process, existing City policies and prior plans were compiled, characteristics of each section of the creek were inventoried, ideas for prototype projects were formulated, and a community workshop was convened to confirm issues and establish a common vision.

In 1999, the Conservancy provided \$95,000 to the City for preparation of an enhancement plan for Chollas Creek, which included Swan Canyon. The plan was adopted by the City in 2002 and calls for preservation, enhancement and restoration of native vegetation in the creek channel and banks and removal of all non-native, invasive plants from the creek.

The City Heights neighborhood and its canyons have been the focus of several community groups in recent years. In 2007 the City Heights Canyons & Communities Alliance (CCA) was established to address the serious environmental and social issues facing the community and the canyons within City Heights. In September 2008, the Conservancy authorized a grant to Endangered Habitats Conservancy to develop a strategy for restoration of Swan Canyon and to obtain necessary permits to conduct that work (Exhibit 2).

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 104,250.0
City of San Diego	\$ <u>135,000.0</u>
Total Project Costs	\$ 239,250.0

The expected source for the Conservancy funds for this project is an appropriation to the Conservancy in fiscal year 2008-09 from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84). This funding source may be used for the protection of San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds, consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, as specified in Section 75060(b). Public Resources Code 75060(f) states that the term “San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds” includes “the coastal and bay watersheds within San Diego County.” Swan Canyon is located in the Chollas Creek watershed, a subwatershed of the Pueblo San Diego watershed that drains to San Diego Bay. These funds are authorized pursuant to the Conservancy’s enabling legislation as discussed below.

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CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5 (Section 31220) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection, which authorizes the Conservancy's participation in coastal watershed restoration projects.

Consistent with § 31220(a), staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board in the development of the project to ensure consistency with Chapter 3 (commencing with § 30915) (the Clean Beaches Program) of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code (the Watershed, Clean Beaches, and Water Quality Act). Section 31220(a) of the Public Resources Code authorizes the Conservancy to undertake coastal watershed projects that meet one or more criteria of Section 31220(b).

Consistent with § 31220(b)(2), which authorizes projects which protect and restore fish and wildlife habitat within coastal and marine waters and coastal watersheds, the proposed project would restore wildlife habitat within a coastal watershed by removing significant infestations of invasive non-native vegetation and revegetating the area with appropriate native plants.

Consistent with § 31220(b)(6), which authorizes projects which protect and restore riparian areas, and other sensitive watershed lands, including watersheds lands draining to sensitive coastal or marine areas, the project would restore a riparian area draining to San Diego Bay, a sensitive coastal area.

Finally, as required by § 31220(c), the project is consistent with an adopted local watershed management plan, the Chollas Creek Enhancement Program, and the San Diego Water Quality Control Board's Basin Plan, as discussed previously and in detail below.

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

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective 5B** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will restore an area of coastal habitat (stream corridor, coastal sage scrub) in a coastal watershed.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective 5D** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will implement a project that will control and eradicate non-native invasive species that threaten important coastal habitats in Swan Canyon.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective 6B** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will restore an area of the Pueblo San Diego watershed, a coastal watershed draining to San Diego Bay.

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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 June 4, 2009, 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:** The proposed project is supported by the City Heights Canyons and Communities Alliance (CCA), the City of San Diego, Senator Denise Ducheny, Assemblymember Lori Saldana and San Diego City Councilmember Todd Gloria (Exhibit 4)
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located in the Chollas Creek watershed, a subwatershed of the Pueblo San Diego watershed. The Pueblo San Diego watershed is a coastal watershed partly within and partly outside the coastal zone. Removal of invasive non-native vegetation from Swan Canyon, at the top of the Chollas Creek watershed, will help prevent the spread of this vegetation downstream.
5. **Need:** *Arundo donax*, an invasive exotic plant species, is a significant problem throughout California as it can out-compete native plant species and degrade riparian habitat. At present, *Arundo donax* stands occur only in the northern part of Swan Canyon. If these stands are not removed in the near future, *Arundo* could spread widely throughout the canyon and downstream towards San Diego Bay. The City of San Diego has agreed to pay over half of the cost of the project but these funds are contingent on EHC securing matching funds.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** San Diego's canyons, like Swan Canyon, still contain regionally significant, if degraded, habitat communities. Four sensitive species are known to occur in Swan Canyon.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** Swan Canyon is located three miles inland of San Diego Bay in an area not considered vulnerable to future sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

8. **Urgency:** If the *Arundo donax* problem is not addressed, the invasive plant will continue to spread throughout the watershed. The proposed project will lead to the elimination of all existing *Arundo donax* stands at the top of Swan Canyon and prevent further infestation downstream.
10. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
13. **Readiness:** With the assistance of the Conservancy planning grant, EHC is now ready to move forward with implementation of the habitat restoration project.
18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** EHC intends to minimize the use of mechanized equipment as much as possible and some work will be done by hand. By restoring and enhancing a riparian corridor, the project will serve as a net carbon sink.

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Converting the monotypic non-native plant cover to native riparian habitat with a highly diverse canopy structure will increase the riparian corridor's ability to convert carbon dioxide and maintain sequestration over the long term.

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

Projects undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of Public Resources Code Division 21 (Section 31330) must be consistent with the following, if available and relevant: Integrated Watershed Resources Management Programs (IRWMP); local watershed management plans, and water quality control plans, adopted by the state and regional water boards. The San Diego Water Quality Control Board's Basin Plan was completed in 1994 and includes designated beneficial uses for specific inland surface waters, including Chollas Creek. Beneficial uses are one of the bases of water quality protection under the Basin Plan as water quality objectives are established in response to the designation of beneficial uses. Two of the designated beneficial uses for Chollas Creek are 1) warm freshwater habitat (preservation or enhancement of aquatic habitats, vegetation, fish or wildlife) and 2) wildlife habitat (preservation and enhancement of terrestrial habitats, vegetation, wildlife or wildlife water and food sources). The proposed project is consistent with the goals of the Basin Plan to enhance aquatic and terrestrial habitats by removing *Arundo donax* from the riparian corridor of Chollas Creek and revegetating the area with appropriate native plant species.

The Chollas Creek Enhancement Program was adopted by the City of San Diego on April 30, 2002. The plan calls for preservation, enhancement and restoration of native vegetation in the creek channel and banks and removal of all non-native, invasive plants from the creek.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The California Department of Fish and Game, acting as a lead agency, determined that the Swan Canyon restoration project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act, pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15333, as it is a small habitat restoration project. Staff have reviewed the project as outlined in the plan which would restore 4.88 acres of riparian habitat, and have determined that the project would not result in the significant adverse impact on endangered, rare, or threatened species and will not result in significant adverse impacts when viewed in light of past, present and future projects in the area. Upon Conservancy approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.