

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

August 2, 2012

BLUE ROCK SPRINGS CREEK HABITAT RESTORATION

Project No. 12-023-01

Project Manager: Melanie Denninger

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$291,870 to the Solano Resource Conservation District to restore approximately 53 acres of riparian and upland habitat along approximately 1.5 miles of Blue Rock Springs Creek.

LOCATION: Blue Rock Springs Corridor, City of Vallejo, Solano County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Site Map](#)

Exhibit 3: [Letters Committing Funding for the Project](#)

Exhibit 4: [Project Photographs](#)

Exhibit 5: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed \$291,870 (two hundred seventy-one thousand eight hundred seventy dollars) to the Solano Resource Conservation District (Solano RCD) to restore approximately 53 acres of riparian and upland habitat along approximately 1.5 miles of Blue Rock Springs Creek in the City of Vallejo, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds the Solano RCD shall submit the following for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:

1. A work program, budget and schedule.
 2. The names and qualifications of any contractors that Solano RCD intends to retain to carry out the project.
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3. A written agreement between Solano RCD and the owner of any property on which restoration project work will occur, permitting the work to be undertaken and the project to be monitored and maintained for a total period of at least 20 years, and allowing for access to the property for the purposes of undertaking the work and for subsequent monitoring and maintenance.”

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 the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines last updated by the Conservancy on November 10, 2011.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31160-31165).”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of \$291, 870 to the Solano Resource Conservation District (the Solano RCD) to restore approximately 53 acres of riparian and upland habitat along approximately 1.5 miles of Blue Rock Springs Creek (the Creek) in the City of Vallejo (Exhibit 1). The project area lies within the 1.5-mile long Blue Rock Springs Corridor (the Corridor), an urban open space that borders the creek and runs past an elementary school and a high school, both of which have used the Corridor for hands-on science education, with partial funding from the Conservancy. Additional information about the site and the history of Conservancy involvement is provided in the “Site Description” and “Project History” sections, respectively, below.

Among the project goals are the following:

- Close gaps in the riparian corridor and widen it to a minimum of 50 feet, consistent with historical conditions,
- Restore 25 acres of native oak woodland,
- Create a 3.5-acre native perennial grassland demonstration site,
- Control invasive weeds in select areas and replace them with native plants,
- Address areas of erosion concern,
- Monitor bird, aquatic invertebrate and plant populations in the Corridor, in addition to chemical and physical properties of the Creek,
- Integrate and coordinate the complementary efforts of local watershed groups, restoration partners, and education programs in the Corridor, using students and volunteers for most planting and monitoring, and
- Establish a sustainable program for maintaining and monitoring restored areas.

The project predominantly involves work by hand involving the removal of non-native plants and revegetation with native plants, with no grading or removal of mature trees. Approximately one half of the over 2,200 individual plants and 31,200 plugs of grasses will be propagated from

local stock. Work will be performed by a combination of Solano RCD staff, Community volunteers, members of the California Conservation Corps, and the Greater Vallejo Recreation District (the Recreation District).

The Solano RCD staff will monitor plant survival throughout the estimated four years of the project, with all plantings being irrigated and monitored for a minimum of two years after installation. Bi-weekly irrigation in 2014 and 2015 will ensure a consistent presence at the site by restoration professionals and increase the plant survival rate. Any plants that have died as of fall 2014 will be replaced the following winter. Beyond 2016, the Greater Vallejo Recreation District and the Vallejo Watershed Alliance will take the lead on plant management and monitoring, expanding upon the management and monitoring of previous restoration sites that they currently care for.

The Solano RCD recently completed project work under a \$168,520 Conservancy grant for habitat restoration in Hanns Park and elsewhere. See the “Project History” section below for additional information. Solano RCD effectively managed and satisfactorily completed that project in a timely manner. The Conservancy’s experience with the Solano RCD on that project, the meticulous application that it submitted for the proposed project, and the team of project partners that it has assembled demonstrate the Solano RCD’s capability to manage the proposed project. The close working relationship that has developed among the Solano RCD, the Recreation District, the Vallejo Watershed Alliance, the Vallejo Sanitation and Flood Control District, the schools and others will help ensure that collaborative solutions and adaptive management of the site will be ongoing.

Site Description: Blue Rock Springs Creek rises in the hilly rangeland in the northeastern section of the City of Vallejo that is part of the lower Napa River watershed (Exhibit 1). The Creek flows approximately three miles from the Solano Land Trust’s Vallejo Swett Ranch (protected with Conservancy funding assistance), through Blue Rock Springs Park and Golf Course, along a flat valley floor past Wardlaw Elementary School and Jesse Bethel High School, and through Hanns Park to its confluence with Rindler Creek above Lake Chabot (Exhibits 1 and 2).

The site of the proposed project, known as the Blue Rock Springs Corridor (the Corridor), extends approximately 1.5 miles from the lower end of the golf course downstream through Hanns Park (Exhibit 2). The Corridor includes the Creek and the surrounding valley floor and hillsides and varies in width from approximately 0.125- to 0.25-mile. For most of the year, the Creek flows sluggishly through the Corridor, fed by urban and golf course run-off. An intermittent swath of lush emergent and riparian vegetation follows the course of the Creek, with cattails, tules and sedges in the flattest areas and willows and alders characteristic of slightly higher banks. While no exhaustive study of the historical ecology of the immediate area has been completed, the topography, soils and hydrology strongly suggest that prior to the advent of farming and urban development, the profile and cross-section of the Creek were similar to the current condition and the valley floor supported a freshwater marsh and a continuous riparian corridor. The slopes that rise to houses sitting some 25 to 150 ft. above the Creek support native live oak and buckeye trees, but mostly lack the typical understory of shrubs and grasses due to mowing for fire prevention. Patches of Himalayan blackberry and other non-native plants are scattered throughout the Corridor.

Within the Corridor, the Creek channel appears to follow a natural course. However, extensive disturbance of the natural hydrology and vegetation are evident from the culverts delivering urban runoff to the Creek, a weir near the downstream end of the Corridor, non-native shrubs, trees and grasses interspersed with native plants, and mowing of grassy hillsides done to reduce the danger of wildfires. No listed species or species of concern are known to inhabit the corridor.

For some 10 years, the City, which owns the Corridor, the Recreation District, which manages it, and other local agencies, students and other members of the community have been improving the Corridor little by little by removing invasive non-native plant species, planting and maintaining native vegetation, installing bird boxes, picking up litter, and working with the golf course and neighbors to reduce nutrients and pollutants reaching the creek. Additional information about these community efforts—and the Conservancy’s prior involvement—is provided in the “Project History” section below.

A fully accessible paved path, well-used by walkers and bicyclists, runs the length of the Corridor and connects to the Bay Area Ridge Trail upstream. Major entries to the Corridor are in the vicinity of the golf course, the adjacent schools, and Hanns Park. Both of the schools have integrated the Creek and the surrounding Corridor into their curricula.

Project History: The recent history of the proposed habitat restoration project began with a Conservancy grant of \$165,000 to the Solano RCD for hands-on community-based habitat restoration in Hanns Park and at two other sites in Vallejo. That project, which was completed in April 2012, both built upon previous community actions to restore riparian and upland habitat along the Creek and, according to Solano RCD staff, helped galvanize even broader interest and greater determination among public and private stakeholders to mobilize for more extensive habitat improvements in the Corridor and for including even more students in Creek-oriented hands-on science education. Solano RCD worked with its partners to develop a plan and a funding and volunteer program and, in early 2012, submitted the grant application that is the basis for this staff recommendation.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$291,870
Solano RCD (committed)	3,787
Vallejo Sanitation and Flood Control District (committed)	40,000
PRBO Science (committed)	<u>17,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$352,657

Letters demonstrating commitment of both matching funds and in-kind services by the Solano RCD, the Vallejo Sanitation and Flood Control District and PRBO Science are attached as Exhibit 3.

The Solano RCD estimates that in-kind services valued at \$69,450 will be provided as follows:

\$ 900	Plant propagation volunteers with Solano RCD
6,750	Community field days with Solano RCD
12,600	Community work days with Vallejo Watershed Alliance
6,000	STRAW (Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed, a program of PRBO Conservation Science) planting volunteers
<u>43,200</u>	Student stream bio-monitoring and restoration days
\$69,450	Total estimated in-kind services

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is an appropriation to the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84) (Public Resources Code Sections 75001 *et seq.*). Consistent with Section 75060, the proposed project will protect and restore natural habitat values of the Napa River watershed that drains to the San Francisco Bay and is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21, as discussed below in “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation.” Proposition 84 also requires that for restoration projects that protect natural resources, the Conservancy assess whether the project meets at least one of the criteria specified in Section 75071(a)-(e). The proposed restoration project satisfies two of the specified criteria. In accordance with Section 75071(b), the project will contribute to long-term protection and improvement of the Napa River watershed, a priority watershed within the San Francisco Bay Area biological region. In accordance with Section 75071(e), the project has a non-state matching contribution toward the restoration and management costs of \$57,000 in cash and estimated \$69,450 in in-kind services. Finally, as required by Section 75005 and described in “Project Summary” above, the proposed project includes the planning, monitoring and reporting necessary to ensure that project objectives are met.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165, to address resource goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. Under Section 31162(b), the Conservancy may award grants to “...restore, and enhance natural habitats of regional importance.” Consistent with this section, the project will result in restoring and enhancing both the riparian habitat and the adjacent uplands in the 1.5-mile-long Corridor. Given that San Francisco Bay region has lost some 90% of its riparian corridors and even more of the historic riparian corridors flanked by upland habitat, the riparian and upland habitat restoration that will result from the proposed project is of regional importance.

Under Section 31162(c), the Conservancy may award grants to “assist in the implementation of the policies and programs...of the adopted plans of local governments and special districts.” One of the three main strategies of the Public Health and Safety section of the 2008 Solano County General Plan is “promoting development that works with nature to slow global climate change...” Habitat restoration, such as that proposed by this project, can enhance carbon stocks and is part of a suite of local solutions to the global problem of climate change. The Solano County Water Agency’s 2005 Strategic Plan aims to “promote land use practices that could

improve or protect water quality,” “assume a more proactive/progressive role in control of invasive species” and “increase coordination between agencies,” all of which are directly addressed by the proposed project.

Under Section 31162(d), the Conservancy may award grants “to promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes.” Consistent with this section, the proposed project will assist the Solano RCD with the restoration and enhancement of the natural habitat and beauty within the Corridor for the enjoyment of the surrounding urban population of Vallejo and of the greater Bay Area. The project will also provide for significant educational opportunities related to natural resources, since it will involve student participation in the restoration and monitoring aspects of the project.

Pursuant to Section 31163(c), the Conservancy must “give priority to projects that, to the greatest extent,” meet five listed criteria. The proposed project meets four of the five criteria in that it is supported by adopted local or regional plans, as described above in this section; serves a regional constituency for restoration of riparian and upland habitat; can be implemented in a timely way by a grantee that has amply demonstrated its competence and has an established working relationship with the proposed project partners; and includes matching funds as described above in “Project Financing.”

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

The proposed project is consistent with several goals and objectives of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, as follows:

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective F**, the proposed project will result in restoration and enhancement of approximately 53 acres of upland habitat.

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective H**, the proposed project will result in restoration and enhancement of approximately 1.5 miles of riparian habitat.

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective K**, the proposed project will result in control or eradication of invasive non-native plant species, including artichoke thistle, pampas grass, and Himalayan blackberry.

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 November 10, 2011, 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 project has extraordinarily broad community support. Exhibit 3 includes letters committing matching both cash and in-kind services from the Vallejo Sanitation and Flood Control District, PRBO Conservation Science, and the grantee. In addition, Exhibit 5 includes support letters from Congressman George Miller, Jr., State Senator Noreen Evans, Assemblymember Michael Allen, County Supervisor Barbara Kondylis, the Vallejo Watershed Alliance (also committing in-kind services) three teachers at Wardlaw Elementary School, and the Willis Linn Jepson Chapter of the California Native Plant Society.
4. **Location:** The project is located within the watershed of the Napa River in Solano County, one of the nine Bay Area counties and, thus within the jurisdiction of the Conservancy's San Francisco Bay Area Program.
5. **Need:** Without Conservancy funding assistance, the Solano RCD will be unable to capitalize upon the community interest and momentum for well-integrated and –coordinated restoration of the Corridor. At best, the restoration would be completed over a much longer period, at greater cost due to the necessity to start and stop work.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Some 90 percent of riparian habitat that existed in the Bay Area prior to urban and agricultural development has been lost. The proposed project and the Corridor where it is located provide an unusual opportunity to restore a riparian corridor and its surrounding uplands for the benefit of wildlife and the enjoyment of urban dwellers, and providing educational opportunities for a wide range of entities.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project is not vulnerable to rising sea level, as it is situated approximately 150 feet above current sea level.

Additional Criteria

10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Innovation:** While many Conservancy-funded restoration projects include a number of interested parties, the proposed project takes inter-agency cooperation and community participation to a new level with the number of committed and actively participating entities. The Solano RCD and its partners have each identified their own strengths and abilities and, with strong and capable leadership, have developed an exemplary team.
13. **Readiness:** As shown in the letters committing matching cash and in-kind services, the Solano RCD and its partners are ready to proceed if awarded the proposed Conservancy grant.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** In addition to the recent Conservancy grant to the Solano RCD which is mentioned in “Project History” above, the proposed project would help the Conservancy realize its prior goals—demonstrated in a great number of projects throughout the Bay Area—of restoring Bay Area riparian and upland habitat and providing related opportunities for the enjoyment of the urban population and educational opportunities.
16. **Cooperation:** See “Support of the Public” in “Required Criteria” above.
17. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The planting of some 2,223 trees and shrubs will reduce localized warming and urban heat island effects and

is an important component of local climate change adaptation efforts. All plant species selected for restoration efforts are native to the local watershed, many of them will be propagated from local stock, and all are very drought tolerant, surviving on either a few years of initial irrigation or simply winter rain water. The establishment of a diversity of native trees and shrubs and a rhizomatous understory of natives will increase ecosystem resilience to dramatic winter weather events, such as floods, while also reducing soil erosion into the creek. Migratory birds are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The expansion of a riparian forest corridor will benefit those migratory—and resident—species which rely on forested areas for food and nesting. In addition, the preservation of wild lands and planting of native species as carbon sinks are both identified as priorities in Solano County’s Climate Action Plan (2010).

18. Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions: According to the Solano RCD’s detailed estimate, the proposed project’s net effect on greenhouse gas emissions will be to sequester some 52 times as much carbon dioxide as it produces during construction and over the ensuing 20 years. The Solano RCD has no plans to seek carbon credits for this work.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA: In accordance with Section 15304 (14 California Code of Regulations), the proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act because it will consist of only minor alterations to land.

The project site is in a small valley bordered by housing on both sides. Extensive disturbance of the natural hydrology and vegetation are evident from the culverts delivering urban runoff to the Creek, a weir near the downstream end of the Corridor, non-native shrubs, trees and grasses interspersed with native plants, and mowing of grassy hillsides done to reduce the danger of wildfires. A paved multi-use trail runs the length of the Corridor. No listed species or species of concern are known to inhabit the corridor. The project involves propagation of native plants and site-work by hand involving the removal of non-native plants and revegetation with native plants, with no grading or removal of mature trees.

Following project approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.