

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 5, 2013

RAMIREZ CANYON ACQUISITIONS

Project No. 13-036-01
Project Manager: Kara Kemmler

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority for acquisition of approximately 104 acres of undeveloped land in Ramirez Canyon for open space, habitat and resource preservation, and public access, Santa Monica Mountains, Los Angeles County.

LOCATION: Santa Monica Mountains, Los Angeles County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Reservation of Significant Coastal Resource Areas, Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Regional Location](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Project Area Map](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Site Photos](#)
- Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31117, 31350-31356 and 31400-31409 of the Public Resources Code, regarding reservation of coastal resource areas and public access to the coast, respectively:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (“MRCA”) for fee acquisition of approximately 104 acres of undeveloped land in Ramirez Canyon, Los Angeles County Assessor’s Parcel Nos. 4465-004-045 and 4465-004-084, (collectively the “property”), subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds for the property, the MRCA shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“Executive Officer”):
 - a. All relevant acquisition documents, including without limitation, an appraisal, purchase agreement, escrow instructions, environmental assessment, and title report.
 - b. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the property acquisition.
 - c. Evidence of commitment by the MRCA to manage the property for open space, habitat and resource preservation and public access.
2. The MRCA shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
3. The MRCA shall permanently dedicate the property for open space, habitat and resource preservation, and public access, through an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property that has been reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer.”

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 Chapters 8 and 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31350-31356 and 31400-31409) with respect to reservation of coastal resource areas and public access.
3. Consistent with Public Resources Code section 31117, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy supports the Conservancy’s funding for these acquisitions (see Letters of Support, attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4.)
4. The proposed project serves a greater-than-local need.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization will provide funds to the MCRA to purchase two properties, which together encompass approximately 104 acres of undeveloped land, (Los Angeles County Assessor’s Parcel Nos. 4465-004-084 and 4465-004-045 collectively referred to as the “property”), and more specifically, are a 47.68-acre (the “western parcel”) and 56.02-acre parcel (the “eastern parcel”) (see Exhibit 2). The project area is currently zoned to accommodate four estate-sized homes, and is horizontally bisected by a paved road, Dume Canyon Motorway. Acquisition will remove the threat of development and permanently protect significant coastal resources. The majority of the funding for the eastern parcel has been secured and this authorization would provide Conservancy funds to close the gap for immediate acquisition of the eastern parcel. In addition, this authorization would provide partial funding for the western parcel, anticipated to close in Fall 2014. This authorization is part of a larger public and nonprofit effort. (See, Project History, below). Three more parcels are expected to be acquired in

the future by the National Park Service (“NPS”), for a total of approximately 110 acres held for open space, habitat and resource protection and public access in Ramirez Canyon.

Ramirez Canyon, where the property is located, is part of a movement corridor for mountain lions, deer, bobcats and coyote within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA.) The western parcel includes a portion of Ramirez Canyon Creek, a perennial stream that flows to the Pacific Ocean and provides important riparian habitat for diverse plant and animal species found throughout all phases of the Project. Ramirez Canyon Creek is a County of Los Angeles-designated Significant Watershed.

The Santa Monica Mountains are considered a biodiversity “hot spot,” supporting approximately 400 bird, 50 mammal, 35 reptile and amphibian, and more than 1,000 plant species, many of which cannot be found elsewhere. Of these, more than 100 species receive special protection or are considered rare, threatened, or endangered. The proposed multi-parcel acquisition effort represents a solution to one of the biggest stewardship and ecological challenges faced within this environmentally significant area—the checkerboard of private-public lands within the SMMNRA’s boundaries.

The SMMNRA is the world’s largest urban national park, and yet it includes more than 70,000 acres of private lands that are developed at a rate of approximately 1,300 acres per year. Due to this patchwork of private-public land ownership within the SMMNRA, development is a very real threat to managing the national park on a landscape level and maintaining vital wildlife corridors. Conservation of the 104 acres in Ramirez Canyon will build on the Conservancy’s conservation efforts in the Santa Monica Mountains, an area where the Conservancy has participated in numerous restoration projects and acquisitions to protect vital coastal watersheds and wildlife habitat.

Permanent protection of this property will also expand recreational opportunities to the millions of annual visitors to the Santa Monica Mountains. The property will be flanked on three sides by public lands and is critical to MRCA’s and NPS’s future trail development plans within the Ramirez Canyon section of the SMMNRA. Once acquired, trail extensions through the property will immediately help to fill a gap in public access by connecting two parcels currently owned by MRCA, which bracket the eastern parcel to the north and south (See Exhibit 2). The acquisition of the two new parcels will provide a trailhead from Kanan Dume Road to the Zuma/Trancas Canyon portion of the adjacent NPS-managed lands. The existing access road that bisects both parcels provides access to the Backbone Trail just to the north (See Exhibit 2). A new trailhead within Ramirez Canyon will make the local trail network much more publicly accessible. Access opportunities on the proposed parcels would improve public access to the coast and to the Backbone Trail which traverses the scenic Santa Monica Mountains.

Site Description: Ramirez Canyon is a coastal canyon which leads to Santa Monica Bay in the Malibu/Santa Monica Mountains area. The subject parcels are located within the coastal zone in the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County north of the City of Malibu (Exhibit 1).

The property contains oak woodlands, identified in the California State Wildlife Action Plan as an under-protected ecological community (See Exhibit 3, Site Photos). Some of the species observed on the property include sharp-skinned hawk, black phoebe, Bewick’s wren, ruby-crowned kinglet, western wood-pewee, orange-crowned warbler, mountain lion and coyote. Many listed and sensitive plants and animals found within the Point Dume quadrangle, where the

project is located, have a high probability of occurring on this property. The site contains essential habitat requirements for species including: San Diego horned lizard, two-striped garter snake, Cooper’s hawk, Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow, and dudleya species such as the Santa Monica Mountains dudleya. Located between the Zuma/Trancas Canyons and Malibu Creek State Park, the Ramirez Canyon property will help to maintain a broad intra-mountain range habitat linkage between the 12,000-acre Zuma/Trancas Canyons core habitat area and the 8,000-acre Malibu Creek State Park core habitat area.

Project History: LA County Supervisor Yaroslavsky hosts a regular meeting to discuss preservation priorities in the Santa Monica Mountains area. Conservancy staff participates in this effort along with other regional resource partners including State Parks, NPS, MRCA and The Trust for Public Land (“TPL”). The larger Ramirez Canyon acquisition project represents a collaborative partnership between the MRCA, NPS, and TPL. All three organizations have coordinated to garner support for conservation of the whole 110 acres, which includes five separate parcels (three smaller parcels to be transferred to NPS and two larger parcels subject to this authorization to be transferred into MRCA ownership). Since May 2009, TPL holds a purchase option on all five parcels.

MRCA is a joint powers agency formed in 1985 to manage open space and parkland, watershed lands, trails and wildlife habitat in Los Angeles and Ventura counties. MRCA has been integral to the effort to reserve coastal resource areas in the mountains for the public and future generations. On this proposed project it is working with TPL and NPS to acquire the two larger parcels, as this property is adjacent to two other MRCA owned properties MRCA’s collaborative work with agencies and environmental organizations to protect coastal resources and create access opportunities continues to be critical to the Conservancy’s resource preservation and access and recreation goals in the Santa Monica Mountains.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$200,000
LA County	\$1,000,000
MRCA	\$250,000
TPL	\$24,325
WCB/Federal Lands Access Program (pending)	\$1,200,000
Total Project Cost	\$2,674,325

The expected source of Conservancy funds for the proposed project is fiscal year appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Wildlife Protection Act of 1990 (Proposition 117), known as the Habitat Conservation Fund (“HCF”), Fish and Game Code §2780 *et seq.* HCF funds may be used for the following purposes: 1) acquisition of habitat necessary to protect mountain lions and deer; 2) acquisition of habitat to protect rare, endangered, threatened, or fully protected species; 3) acquisition of aquatic habitat for spawning and rearing of anadromous salmonids; and 4) acquisition of riparian habitat (See Fish and Game Code§2786). As discussed

above, this proposed project will protect habitat that serves as a wildlife corridor for mountain lions and deer. The property also contains essential habitat requirements for rare species including the San Diego horned lizard, a listed species of concern. The proposed acquisition is consistent with purposes of the HCF.

Conservancy funds would provide the \$50,000 needed to close the funding gap for the acquisition of the eastern parcel and an additional \$150,000 for acquisition of the western parcel. TPL has applied to WCB and the Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) for the balance of the funds needed for the purchase of the western parcel (\$1,200,000).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (PRC), specifically with Section 31117, and Chapters 8 and 9 regarding reservation of significant coastal resources and public coastal access, respectively.

PRC §31350 vests in the Conservancy the authority to ensure the reservation of significant coastal resource areas that would otherwise be lost to public use. Under Section 31351, the proposed project is consistent because the Conservancy is cooperating with other public agencies and nonprofit organizations to ensure the reservation of property for park, recreational and wildlife habitat purposes in order to meet the objectives of the Coastal Act. The proposed acquisition is consistent with the habitat and access protection policies of the Coastal Act. (See “Consistency with the Coastal Act,” below).

The proposed authorization is consistent with PRC §31352, which states that the Conservancy may award a grant to an agency or nonprofit organization for a purpose specified in Section 31351 if (as is the case with this project) that entity would otherwise be unable, due to limited financial resources, to acquire such property. Without the Conservancy funding proposed here, the MRCA would lack the additional funding needed to acquire the two Ramirez Canyon parcels.

Under §31400, the Conservancy has a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the coast. The Conservancy’s funding of the Ramirez Canyon property acquisition is consistent with Chapter 9 because of the opportunities for trail connectivity to the Coastal Trail and to the scenic trails that transverse the Santa Monica Mountains area, including the Backbone Trail.

Under §31400.1, the Conservancy may award grants to any public agency to acquire land for public access purposes to and along the coast if the Conservancy has determined that the access way will serve more than local public needs. As discussed in the “Project Summary” section above, the SMMNRA is host to 33 million visitors each year from all over the world.

Under §31400.2, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of the acquisition of interests in land by a public agency, with the amount of funding determined by the total amount available for coastal access projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, and the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects. Consistent with this section, the amount of proposed Conservancy funding for the acquisitions has been determined with an understanding of the balance of Habitat Conservation funds available to the Conservancy, the resource value of the sites, the readiness of the seller relative to other properties in the Santa Monica Mountains, and

the financial limitations of the MRCA.

The proposed Ramirez Canyon acquisition would reserve significant coastal resources and protect and provide enhancement opportunities for public access and is therefore, consistent with Chapters 8 and 9 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2013
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with the Conservancy's 2013-2018 Strategic Plan **Goal 2, Objective 2A**, which seeks to expand opportunities for access to and along the coast and coastal trails, and **Objective 2G** to acquire land to allow for development of new coastal accessways, the proposed acquisitions are poised to enhance the trail network that leads to the coast and to other inland trails along the coastal mountains.

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective 4A**, the proposed authorization will enable MRCA, working in concert with TPL, to protect two significant coastal and watershed resource properties totaling 104 acres. Consistent with **Objective 4C**, the acquisition and preservation of these properties will preserve wildlife corridors, namely for mountain lions, deer and coyotes, between coastal and inland habitat areas and core habitat areas in the Santa Monica Mountains.

**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 the support of elected officials including Congressman Henry Waxman, Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, public agencies, including the National Park Service, the California Department of Parks and Recreation, and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. (See Exhibit 4, Letters of Support).
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Los Angeles County.
5. **Need:** The MRCA and TPL are unable to acquire the property at this time without Conservancy funds. If not publicly acquired, the current property owner could pursue residential development consistent with the zoning.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** As discussed in various sections above, an estimated 33 million people from all over the world visit the SMMNRA each year. It is the nation's largest urban national park. The park includes more than 500 miles of recreation trails and 47 miles of

beaches, all adjacent to a metropolitan region of more than 17 million people. It is a highly popular scenic and recreational destination. In addition, the Santa Monica Mountains area hosts a diverse population of rare and sensitive wildlife species, such as the steelhead trout, and provides habitat for over 450 vertebrate animal species, including coyote, bobcat, and mountain lion.

7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project site’s vulnerability to sea level rise is very low because of its distance from the shoreline and elevation.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** MRCA and TPL have secured almost all of the funding for the eastern parcel acquisition and will use the Conservancy’s funding to leverage additional funds to fill the funding gap for the western parcel acquisition (TPL has submitted applications for the additional funding, see “Project Financing,” section, above).

10. **Readiness:** TPL has options on the subject property and with Conservancy funds will be able to proceed with the acquisition of the eastern parcel. TPL has applications pending for the remaining funding for the acquisition of the western parcel.

12. **Cooperation:** TPL, MRCA and NPS are cooperating on these acquisitions to gain support and secure funding to ensure the protection of all five Ramirez Canyon properties.

17. **Vulnerability to Climate Change Other Than Sea Level Rise:** Ramirez Canyon faces significant and immediate threats from human activities, which are intensifying due to increased urban growth within the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Threats associated with development, which are worsened by climate change factors such as rising temperatures, include catastrophic fires and water and air quality degradation; landslides and soil erosion; habitat fragmentation; and hazards to sensitive flora and fauna resulting from traffic, pollution, and chemicals used in nearby home sites. Nitrogen deposition from air pollution especially impacts sensitive plant communities within the SMMNRA, such as rare lichens and coastal sage scrub, furthering the loss of native habitat important for numerous species. The proposed project ensures that the property won’t be developed, reducing the potential effects of these threats, especially as part of a landscape-level effort to consolidate private land ownership within the SMMNRA.

The conservation of this property will add to the amount of protected core habitat area available for species to adapt to changing climate conditions. Ensuring large habitat blocks and connectivity between those blocks is the best strategy for increasing ecosystem resilience. The diverse topography of the site also facilitates vertical migration of plant communities.

18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** Acquisition in fee will eliminate the potential for residential development on the site and its associated emissions generated by site preparation, construction and use.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE COASTAL ACT

The proposed project is located within the Santa Monica Mountains area in the coastal zone. The properties lie within an area that does not have a certified LCP. Thus, the project will be analyzed for consistency with Coastal Act policies.

The proposed project is consistent with the Coastal Act. PRC §30210 states that “maximum

access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with the public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse.” Further, §30233 states that upland areas necessary to support coastal recreational uses shall be reserved for such uses, where feasible. Public acquisition of the Ramirez Canyon properties will protect the existing access along the paved motorway that bisects the property and also provide opportunities for enhanced access by linking the adjacent MRCA-owned property to the coast and inland trail network in the area.

Regarding land resources, §30240 provides that environmentally sensitive habitat areas (“ESHA”) shall be protected against any significant disruption of habitat values, and only uses dependent on those resources shall be allowed within those areas. The acquisition of these properties will ensure that the designated ESHA will be protected in perpetuity.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Acquisition of the Ramirez Canyon Properties is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations §15325 in that the acquisition constitutes a transfer of ownership to preserve open space and habitat. The proposed project also is exempt under §15313, which exempts the acquisition of lands for fish and wildlife conservation purposes. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.