

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
October 1, 2015

**SAN DIEGO CANYONS PLAN**

Project No. 15-015-01  
Project Manager: Julia Elkin

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to San Diego Canyonlands to complete public access and habitat restoration design plans for twelve urban canyons owned by and located in the City of San Diego.

**LOCATION:** City of San Diego, San Diego County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection

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**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Canyon Locations](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [Existing Canyon Conditions](#)
  - Exhibit 4: [Example Canyon Improvements](#)
  - Exhibit 5: [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 approves the disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to San Diego Canyonlands to complete public access and habitat restoration design plans for twelve urban canyons owned by the City of San Diego. Prior to the disbursement of funds, San Diego Canyonlands shall submit for review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer 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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection.
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2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
  3. San Diego Canyonlands 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.”
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### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of \$300,000 to San Diego Canyonlands to complete public access and habitat restoration design plans for each of twelve selected urban canyons within the City of San Diego (“City”) (See Exhibit 2).

### **Project Description**

Working with local stakeholder interest groups that have been established for each selected canyon site, San Diego Canyonlands will complete ongoing community-based trail mapping workshops (see *Site Description* below). San Diego Canyonlands will use the community input solicited by those workshops to inform its public trail access and habitat restoration plans for each of the twelve canyons, with the goals of reducing renegade trails that disturb habitat, promoting public safety, and increasing ecological function.

As part of the site design planning process, San Diego Canyonlands will also develop up to ten conceptual designs for feasible and cost-effective low impact development (LID) projects to reduce polluted runoff reaching natural drainage systems and/or provide streambed stabilization, runoff velocity reduction, and potential wetlands expansion opportunities. These LID plans will be available for incorporation into the design plans for the canyons, as appropriate.

In support of future environmental review of the public trail and habitat restoration design plans produced under the proposed project, San Diego Canyonlands will analyze, and produce a report on, existing environmental conditions at the twelve selected canyon sites.

### **Background:**

The City’s unique geography of developed mesas adjoining City-owned, open space canyons provides an opportunity for distributed, highly efficient, natural filtration of storm water runoff from the upper reaches of watersheds down to the coastal zone and San Diego Bay. However, the volume and velocity of runoff through these canyons has caused severe erosion and incision in many canyon streams, degrading their ability to slow down stormwater runoff, settle out sediment, and filter pollutants. Native vegetation and trees with deep roots can provide a sponge-effect by absorbing urban runoff, but in many of the City’s canyons the natural plant community has been displaced by non-native species and the proliferation of trash, damaging storm water flows and increasing the pollutant load delivered by runoff.

Restoration and rehabilitation of natural vegetation and hydrologic functions in the City’s canyons can help solve these regional water quality challenges, and simultaneously provide opportunities to improve the habitat and recreational functions of these urban open spaces. Developing a suite of canyon enhancement design plans across twelve different canyons is

intended to create momentum for developing and implementing further improvements across the City’s canyon areas. These design plans and anticipated future implementation will enhance native habitat and biological diversity, improve water quality, expand safe public access to urban open-spaces and inland trails while benefiting underserved communities, improve public enjoyment and stewardship of natural open spaces, and restore the hydrological integrity and natural vegetation communities of numerous urban canyons and creeks.

**Site Description:**

Canyon lands within the City are either held entirely by the City or the City owns right of way easements that allow the City to provide for public access and habitat improvements. The twelve (12) target canyon areas this project focuses on are listed below.

<b>Project Canyon/Creek</b>	<b>Est. Stream Feet</b>	<b>Project Acres (City-Owned &amp; Right of Way)</b>
1. Ruffin	5,000	106
2. Shepherd	21,000	240
3. Rueda	14,000	364
4. Navajo	12,800	155
5. Juniper	7,800	76
6. Florida	3,600	128
7. Chollas	12,200	111
8. Manzanita	3,700	28
9. Switzer	2,500	26
10. Maple	2,687	12.28
11. Mission Hills	2,857	15.62
12. Gonzales	5,654	455.1
<b><u>TOTALS:</u></b>	<b><u>93,798 stream feet</u></b>	<b><u>1,717 acres</u></b>

These combined 17.76 miles (93,798 feet) of stream corridors are generally surrounded by steep slopes of coastal sage scrub and mixed chaparral upland communities. Ten of the twelve canyons fall within the City's Multiple Species Conservation Program Subarea (MSCP) and many are located in underserved urban areas of the City, including the City Heights neighborhood and Chollas Creek. All are heavily impacted by erosion, trash, non-native/invasive plants, redundant/renegeade social trails and other human impacts. While the land is held by the City, the current impaired state of these canyons severely limits safe public access to these open spaces as well as the ecological benefits these areas provide.

**Project History:**

Since 2009, San Diego Canyonlands has worked to enhance public access and improve habitat health in the City’s canyons. Its first project used community stakeholder participation to map and create public use plans for four urban canyons in the City Heights community. An Urban Greening Grant awarded by the City to San Diego Canyonlands allowed those plans to result in restoration and enhancement of the public trails network and fourteen acres of native habitat across those four urban canyons.

In 2010, San Diego Canyonlands received \$21,000 in Conservancy funding from the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Small Grants Program for three acres of wetland restoration in Shepherd Canyon in the San Diego River Watershed. This project’s use of watershed-wide wetland restoration permits held by the San Diego River Conservancy eliminated all permitting costs for the project and expedited the restoration project timeline. These significant financial savings led San Diego Canyonlands and the City’s Open Space Division to begin discussing how a regional approach that developed multiple canyon improvement projects simultaneously could increase public access and habitat gains while potentially lowering project administrative costs.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$300,000</b>
San Diego Canyonlands	\$25,000
City of San Diego	\$6,616
San Diego River Conservancy	\$12,000
REI, Inc.	\$5,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$348,616</b>

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (“Proposition 84”). This funding may be expended, in accordance with the Conservancy’s enabling statutes, “for the protection of San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds” as specified in section 75060(f) of the Public Resources Code (“PRC”). “San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds” includes all coastal and bay watersheds within San Diego County (PRC § 75072.6). The term “protection” is defined to include actions necessary to prevent harm to natural resources and actions that allow the continued use and enjoyment of natural resources.” PRC § 75005(m). This project is located in watersheds in San Diego County, adjacent to San Diego Bay. The project will facilitate actions that restore natural resources of canyons within these watersheds, allow public enjoyment of the natural resources of the canyons and improve the water quality of San Diego Bay. As discussed below, the project is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of Division 21. Accordingly, the proposed project is an appropriate use of Proposition 84 funds.

The project has over \$80,000 in in-kind support including field data collection and archival research from San Diego State University, the City of San Diego, and LSA Associates.

Additionally, San Diego Mayor Faulconer's office budgeted \$52,000 toward the processing of a City of San Diego Master Site Development Permit for future review of design plans developed by this project.

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

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5, Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection (Public Resources Code §31220), of the Conservancy's enabling legislation. 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 proposed project will help achieve the following subsection objectives: 1) reduce contamination of waters within the coastal zone; 2) protect and restore wildlife habitat within coastal watersheds, including permit coordination projects for watershed restoration; 3) reduce threats to coastal wildlife; 4) reduce unnatural erosion and sedimentation of coastal watersheds and contribute to the reestablishment of natural erosion and sediment cycles; 6) restore sensitive watershed lands; and 8) provide for public access compatible with resource protection and restoration objectives. The project will help achieve these objectives by producing watershed focused LID, public access and restoration design plans for each canyon site.

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 Region Basin Plan ("Basin Plan"). In addition, the Project is consistent with the Water Quality Control Plan for San Diego Basin. This is discussed in detail below under "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan."

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ACCESS PROGRAM STANDARDS:**

**Standard No. 1, Protect Public and Coastal Resources:** The project is designed to assess options for increasing safe public uses of public open space canyons while improving storm runoff water quality to downstream water bodies and decreasing erosion during high flow storm events.

**Standard No. 2, Correct Hazards:** Restoration and public access plans developed under this project will decrease public safety concerns within these areas. Canyon improvements and closure of renegade trails will decrease erosion as well as deter illicit activities and homeless encampments that currently occur in these urban public open spaces.

**Standard No. 5, Environmentally Sensitive Areas:** Environmental analyses undertaken as part of this project will provide a baseline understanding of site conditions within the City of San Diego's sensitive canyon areas.

**Standard No. 8, Trails:** This project provides for inclusive, community-based trail planning that promotes public safety and access while protecting habitat improvements by considering public trail impacts.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2013**

**STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S), AS REVISED JUNE 25, 2015 :**

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective C**, the proposed project will develop plans to preserve and enhance coastal watersheds.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective F**, the proposed project will develop plans to improve water quality to benefit coastal resources.

**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 October 2, 2014, 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. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**

*California State Water Action Plan*

Action 8: "Increase flood protection: encourage flood projects that plan for climate change and achieve multiple benefits." Habitat restoration activities designed under this project will serve to decrease damaging storm water flows through canyon bottoms, thus increasing flood protection of downstream areas.

*Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan*

*Goal 6 (e) Ocean and Coastal Ecosystems and Resources:* "Study and support investment in cost-effective green infrastructure to reduce flood risk, storm water runoff, and to maximize associated co-benefits." This project will produce up to ten conceptual designs for feasible and cost-effective LID projects to reduce polluted runoff reaching natural drainage systems and/or provide streambed stabilization, runoff velocity reduction, and potential wetlands expansion opportunities.

*Goal 8 Water:* "Rehabilitate upper watershed areas...provide more natural functions that slow, spread, capture, and infiltrate flood waters throughout a watershed." Planning for habitat restoration in the City of San Diego's canyons directly supports future rehabilitation actions that will provide for the slowing, spread, capture, and infiltration of storm water flows in the watershed.

*California @ 50 Million: the Environmental Goals and Policy Report*

*Preserve and Steward the State's Lands and Natural Resources:* "increase ecosystem services and biodiversity." Public access and habitat restoration design plans will increase the health of currently degraded canyon lands and increase local native plant

biodiversity through planning for removal of invasive species and reestablishment of native habitat.

4. **Support of the public:** For the past six years San Diego Canyonlands has cultivated relationships with public stakeholders and residents through formation of local canyon friends groups, which this project actively engages in canyon-by-canyon trail planning workshops. San Diego Canyonlands also works with a wide range of public agencies, non-profit organizations and elected officials. This project has received support from the City of San Diego Open Space Division, Ocean Discovery Institute, San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer, and numerous member organizations of the San Diego Bay Council. See Project Letters, Exhibit 5.
5. **Location:** The twelve canyons addressed by this project are located outside of the Coastal Zone. However, the cumulative impact of the project will benefit coastal resources by providing for project planning that aims to reduce storm water flows and erosion, improving natural water retention and filtration, and thereby improving downstream water quality in the coastal zone.
6. **Need:** While the City of San Diego has earmarked funds for future permit processing of canyon enhancement projects brought before it by San Diego Canyonlands, Conservancy funding is needed to complete initial design of these canyon enhancement projects.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** Developing public access and habitat restoration design plans not only benefits the safety and ecological health of resident communities adjacent to the sites specific to this project, but improves water retention and filtration functions in watersheds' canyon areas that have been severely impaired due to ecological degradation which is a greater-than-local interest. The MSCP identifies many of these canyons as vital components of the regional landscape and recognizes their value to rare and endangered species.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project area is not located close to a shoreline and is not vulnerable to sea level rise. Specific canyons that are included in the project are located significantly inland and all are located above sea level.

### **Additional Criteria**

10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project would provide for development of innovative low impact designs for increasing storm water retention and filtration, restoring vital canyon habitat, and increasing safe public access across and between urban open spaces.
11. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
12. **Innovation:** Conceptual designs for LID storm water management features produced under this project may further the suite of techniques used by the City of San Diego in improving its canyon resources. Also, the project's regional approach of developing twelve simultaneous, site specific conceptual designs may create a unique opportunity for comprehensive review of canyon public access and enhancement projects by the City of San Diego, resulting in significant time and cost savings.

- 13. Readiness:** San Diego Canyonlands is prepared to start the project immediately after receiving Conservancy funding. Stakeholder groups are already formed and began community-based trail planning workshops across ten of the twelve canyons identified in this proposal. The City of San Diego has set aside funds earmarked for future project permitting.
- 14. Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
- 15. Cooperation:** The project is a result of cooperation between San Diego Canyonlands and the City of San Diego Open Space Division, and is supported by cooperation of regional non profits and community stakeholder groups.
- 16. Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The project areas are vulnerable to climate change impacts. The proposed project designs will take into consideration canyon ecosystem functioning under projected climate change scenarios. Two basic trends are likely to occur: more extreme rainfall events and associated flooding (which exacerbates canyon erosion and subsequent sedimentation downstream) and dry periods that exacerbate wildland fire risk. Planning for low impact design features that can increase natural water retention within watersheds’ canyons has the potential to reduce flooding and erosion, while restoring native canyon vegetation has the potential to reduce wildland fire risk.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

All of the twelve canyons addressed by this project are located outside of the Coastal Zone and therefore there are no LCP policies that directly consider these project areas. However, the twelve LCPs in place within the City of San Diego’s jurisdiction all emphasize protecting biologically sensitive slopes and canyons within each watershed for their recreation, scenic and open space values. Thus, this project and its promotion of public trail access planning and habitat restoration is directly consistent with, and in support of, the intent of the region’s LCPs.

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

The baseline environmental studies that will be completed as part of the project are consistent with Basin Plan *Policy Five* which states “*detailed and comprehensive knowledge of the beneficial uses, water quality, and activities affecting water quality throughout the Region shall be maintained.*” Such detailed and comprehensive knowledge will be generated through the data collected in assessing the environmental conditions of these twelve canyons.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of CEQA under 14 Cal Code of Regulations, Section 15262, because the project will only involve preparation of planning documents that will consider environmental factors. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the proposed project.