

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

May 16, 2019

**SANTA CLARA RIVER PARKWAY
SESPE CIENEGA RESTORATION & PUBLIC ACCESS PLAN**

Project No. 19-004-01

Project Manager: Christopher Kroll

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to Santa Clara River Conservancy to develop a restoration and public access plan for the former California Watercress property on the Santa Clara River in Ventura County.

LOCATION: Fillmore, Ventura County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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 the disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to Santa Clara River Conservancy (“the grantee”) to develop a habitat restoration and public access plan for the former California Watercress property on the Santa Clara River in Ventura County.”

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding and Proposition 1 as the source of that funding.

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.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Santa Clara River Conservancy is a nonprofit organization organized 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 authorize disbursement of up to \$300,000 to Santa Clara River Conservancy (SCRC) to prepare a habitat restoration and public access plan for the 269-acre former California Watercress property on the Santa Clara River (see Exhibit 1). The goal of the planning effort is to develop working plans to restore riparian and wetland habitats, and natural river function to this property and to provide public access to the river for surrounding communities which are classified as disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged by the State of California.

Historically, artesian flows in the Santa Clara River near the City of Fillmore supported one of the most extensive freshwater wetland complexes in the lower watershed, referred to as the “Cienega” or “Sespe Cienega.” By 2005, the majority of the wetland area had been converted to farmland. Since 2017, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has owned a majority of the Sespe Cienega, consisting of the California Watercress property and the Fillmore Fish Hatchery. CDFW intends to restore the California Watercress property’s historic wetland and riparian habitats and improve public access once there is a plan for this site.

Restoration of riparian habitat at the project site will include willow, cottonwood, and other wetland vegetation that have largely been lost on this property. The restoration will benefit wildlife, including federally-listed species such as Least Bell’s vireo, Southwestern willow flycatcher and Western yellow-billed cuckoo and other sensitive species such as Least bittern, Yellow rail, Northern harrier, and Tricolored blackbird. In addition, the federally-listed Southern California steelhead should benefit from the removal of *Arundo donax* on the property. The 2012 Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan identifies the Santa Clara River watershed as a Core 1 or highest priority watershed for recovery of the steelhead population.

The plans for public access improvements will include design of interpretative displays and walking trails that will allow for public access to and along the Santa Clara River and that will become part of the Santa Clara River Parkway. The surrounding communities are currently

isolated from the river and have asked for increased public access to the river for some time. SCRC and CDFW hope to address some of that demand in the public access improvements on this property, which will be an important addition to the Santa Clara River Parkway, a major regional greenway (see below).

The planning process will be a joint effort among SCRC, CDFW, and the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). SCRC is taking the lead in developing the restoration plan. SCRC has applied for CDFW Proposition 1 funds for additional design development and additional data collection to support the work proposed for the Conservancy grant. SCRC will be applying to CDFW for implementation funding in latter 2019.

The restoration and public access plan will include development of baseline environmental conditions; identification of data gaps; hydrologic analysis; vegetation surveys; listed, special status and sensitive species surveys; identification of restoration opportunities and constraints; public outreach meetings; development of conceptual restoration and public access alternatives, and selection of a preferred alternative; identification of permitting and environmental review requirements; and completion of 30% (100% if CDFW Prop. 1 funds are secured) engineering design and specifications.

Site Description: The Santa Clara River is one of the least altered river systems in all of California and is one of the only river systems in southern California that remains in its natural state without significant channelization. The river flows over 100 miles from the San Gabriel Mountains in Los Angeles County to the Pacific Ocean between the cities of Oxnard and Ventura. The watershed provides habitat for numerous threatened and endangered species in addition to being a very significant agricultural area and a source of water for the surrounding communities. Major tributaries include Castaic Creek and San Francisquito Creek in Los Angeles County, and the Sespe, Piru, and Santa Paula Creeks in Ventura County. Approximately 40 percent of the watershed is in Los Angeles County and 60 percent is in Ventura County.

The Sespe Cienega site is an approximately 340-acre site that was a historically perennial freshwater marsh located just upstream of the confluence of Sespe Creek with the Santa Clara River near Fillmore. The wetlands were a major landmark and water source in the relatively dry Santa Clara River Valley. The Sespe Cienega site is made up of five properties: the California Watercress site, the Fish Hatchery site, a Nature Conservancy-owned property, and the Roth and Nature Park properties.

The California Watercress property, the 269- acre planning area for this project, has been extensively farmed since the early 1900s. Very few patches of cottonwood-willow forest remain on the property. These areas have high habitat value for wildlife, including listed species such as Least Bell's vireo, Southwestern willow flycatcher and Western yellow-billed cuckoo. *Arundo donax* (Giant Reed) has replaced native riparian vegetation in many areas and occurs to a density of 80-100% cover on some portions of the property.

Grantee Qualifications: SCRC is a nonprofit organization formed in 2009 whose mission is to conserve, restore and enhance the natural and community resources of the Santa Clara River Watershed. SCRC is currently leading a 30-acre non-native vegetation removal project, a habitat restoration and interpretive project at the Fillmore Fish Hatchery, and an environmental education program for third grade students in Ventura County. SCRC is working on two additional projects with The Nature Conservancy and UCSB to remove *Arundo donax* from over

400 acres of riparian habitat on the Santa Clara River with funding currently totaling over \$1.8 million.

Project History: In 2000, after discussions with river landowners and with the support of the adjoining cities, state and local politicians and environmental groups, the Conservancy proposed the establishment of the Santa Clara River Parkway. Development of the Parkway will eventually result in the acquisition and restoration of a 40 mile-long corridor from the mouth of the Santa Clara River to the Ventura County/Los Angeles County line and the Parkway will connect with trail systems in Los Angeles County. The Santa Clara River Parkway project was established with two complementary purposes: acquisition and public management of the river corridor to allow for habitat restoration, public enjoyment and environmental education; and restoration of the natural processes of the river to prevent continued flooding and damage to habitat, farmland and public facilities. In 2001, initial funding of \$9.2 million was appropriated by the legislature to the Conservancy for the Parkway project. Since 2001, the Conservancy has funded the acquisition of 16 properties along the river, several watershed-focused reports, and some habitat restoration projects.

The Sespe Cienega was historically among the most extensive perennial wetlands in the Santa Clara River floodplain, enabling the construction of the CDFW Fillmore Fish Hatchery in the 1940's. For decades, the hatchery outflow fed a series of watercress production ponds on the adjacent California Watercress property. The property was purchased by the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) and transferred to CDFW in 2017. It has been a high priority for restoration since it was acquired.

SCRC submitted a grant proposal for the current project to the Conservancy through the Conservancy's Spring 2018 Proposition 1 Request for Proposals. The project received favorable reviews and was recommended for funding.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$300,000
California Department of Fish & Wildlife (tent.)	<u>237,500</u>
Project Total	\$537,500

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project are funds appropriated to the Conservancy from the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 ("Proposition 1", Water Code Sections 79700 et seq.). These funds derive from Chapter 6 of Proposition 1 and may be used "for multi-benefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects for the watersheds of the state" (Section 79731). Section 79732 identifies specific purposes of Chapter 6 including: protect and restore aquatic, wetland and migratory bird ecosystems, including fish and wildlife corridors; restore river parkways throughout the state; protect and restore coastal watersheds; and assist in the recovery of endangered, threatened or migratory species by improving watershed health, instream flows, fish passage and coastal or inland wetland restoration. The proposed project will help achieve these Chapter 6 purposes by identifying restoration opportunities for riparian and wetland habitats and

planning to restore habitat for endangered and threatened species, to improve instream flows, and to facilitate a river parkway.

As required by Proposition 1, the proposed project provides multiple benefits. The proposed restoration plan will identify methods to restore degraded wetland and aquatic habitat, improve water quality, and restore watershed health.

The proposed project was selected through a competitive grant process under the Conservancy's Proposition 1 Grant Program Guidelines adopted in June 2015 ("Prop 1 Guidelines"). (See *Id.* § 79706(a)). The proposed project meets each of the evaluation criteria in the Prop 1 Guidelines as described in further detail in this "Project Financing" section, the "Project Summary" section and the "Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines" section of this report.

Proposition 1 prioritizes projects that leverage other funding sources (Section 79707(b)). This project will leverage an anticipated contribution from CDFW. In-kind contributions from SCRC for project management and other tasks have been valued at \$52,000. In addition, this project is consistent with water quality plans and statewide water quality plans, as discussed below, and the 2018 State five-year infrastructure plan (sections 79707(h) & (i)).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resource Code Section 31220, regarding Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection. Section 31220(a) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for projects that improve and protect coastal and marine water quality and habitats, including through coastal watershed protection and restoration. Such projects must achieve one or more of the objectives identified in Section 31220(b).

Consistent with Section 31220(a), the property that is the subject of the proposed planning project is located on the Santa Clara River Watershed, a coastal watershed, and the proposed project would address degraded water quality and aquatic habitat issues that will enhance water quality and benefit endangered southern steelhead populations which travel upstream from the coastal zone to spawn.

Consistent with §31220(a), staff has consulted with State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) in the development of the project to ensure consistency with the Clean Beaches Program, Chapter 3 (commencing with §30915) of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code.

Consistent with Section 31220(b), the project is specifically intended to restore fish and wildlife habitat within a coastal watershed and restore riparian areas, floodplains and other sensitive watershed lands. The project also proposes to plan for public access that is compatible with resource protection and restoration objectives.

As Section 31220(c) requires, the proposed project is consistent with local and state watershed plans, as discussed below under "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State

Water Quality Control Plan.” As a planning project, monitoring requirements will be integrated into later portions of the project.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#)
GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective C** of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop a plan to enhance a coastal watershed.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective 16A** of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project is located in a disadvantaged community.

Also, the Strategic Plan states that opening up access points along the Santa Clara River will be a major focus of the Conservancy in the South Coast. The proposed project will design a new access point to facilitate public access to the property and the river consistent with this regional objective.

**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:** By funding restoration planning for Sespe Cienega, a significantly important Santa Clara River watershed resource, the proposed project will implement the following state plans:
 - *California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft). The “Preserve and Steward State Lands and Natural Resources” section calls for working to increase biodiversity and helping natural systems recover from disruption. Action #3 calls for building resilience in natural systems and specifically calls out the need for well-maintained watersheds and floodplains.
 - *California Water Action Plan* (California Natural Resources Agency, 2014). Goal #4, “Protect and Restore Important Ecosystems,” identifies restoration of coastal watersheds as a priority action.

- *California Wildlife Action Plan* (California State Department of Fish and Game, 2005). The proposed project will further the following statewide recommended actions: d) the state should increase efforts to restore coastal watersheds; and g) federal, state, and local agencies and nongovernmental conservation organizations, working with private landowners and public land managers, should expand efforts to restore and conserve riparian communities.
4. **Support of the public:** See Exhibit 2: Project Letters.
 5. **Location:** The Sespe Cienega site is located approximately 25 miles from the coast. The Santa Clara River Watershed is a major southern California coastal watershed. The proposed project will benefit coastal resources and ocean resources by planning for the restoration of aquatic habitat that serves southern steelhead migration in the river.
 6. **Need:** Additional CDFW funds for restoration planning and design are not available at this time. Conservancy funding now will allow restoration planning to proceed as SCRC works with CDFW to secure implementation funding for the restoration plan.
 7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The degraded Sespe Cienega wetland was historically one of the most significant perennial wetland areas in the often dry Santa Clara River Watershed. Restoration of this area will be of great benefit to the wildlife and water quality while also restoring a very important watershed resource. The project site will also become part of the Santa Clara River Parkway, a regional greenway that ultimately will extend from the Pacific Ocean 100 miles to the origin of the river in Los Angeles County.
 8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project site is located approximately 25 miles from the coast and is, therefore, not vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
10. **Cooperation:** The proposed project will build on established and new partnerships for watershed restoration among SCRC, UCSB, CDFW, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and others.
11. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** *Arundo donax*, which is invading native riparian woodlands along the river, is very fire-prone and as the climate warms the danger of more wildfire in the river corridor is increasing. A major goal for this project is to plan for restoration of native riparian habitat on this property.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the 2014 Integrated Regional Water Management Plan of the Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County. The project furthers the following goals of the Plan:

- Goal 4. Protect and restore habitat and ecosystems in watersheds. The proposed project will plan for the restoration of habitat consistent with Goal 4.
- Goal 5. Provide water-related recreational, public access, stewardship, engagement and educational opportunities. The proposed project will plan for public access and educational opportunities consistent with Goal 5.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the following specific Coastal Act policies: Public Resources Code Section 30231 states that the “biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries and lakes appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms...shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored...” The proposed project will plan for the restoration of the biological quality of the Santa Clara River, a coastal stream.

Public Resources Code Section 30240 states that “environmentally sensitive habitat areas shall be protected against any significant disruption of habitat values, and only uses dependent on those resources shall be allowed within those areas.” The proposed project will develop a plan to restore environmentally sensitive habitat areas on the Santa Clara River, a coastal stream.

The certified Local Coastal Programs of the cities of San Buenaventura and Oxnard and the County of Ventura identify the Santa Clara River as an environmentally sensitive resource that should be protected and restored.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project involves only feasibility and planning studies and it may include basic data collection, resource evaluation, and research for possible future action which has not yet been approved, authorized, adopted, or funded by the Conservancy or another agency.

Planning carried out as part of this project will consider environmental factors as required by Section 15262. Therefore, the proposed project is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to California Code of Regulations Title 14, Section 15262. Therefore, the proposed project is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to California Code of Regulations Title 14, Section 15262.

In addition, the project is categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Section 15306. Section 15306 provides that basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to environmental resources are categorically exempt from the provisions of CEQA.

Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.