

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 14, 2023

RIVERVIEW ACQUISITION

Project No. 23-043-01
Project Manager: Carol Martinez

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$400,000 to the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy to acquire a 44.38-acre property that includes the Riverview trailhead and parking area to permanently protect and restore habitat and natural resources, preserve open space, and provide public access to the Ventura River Preserve in unincorporated Ventura County.

LOCATION: 401-501 South Rice Road, Unincorporated area of Meiners Oaks, Ventura County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Project Site Map](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Project Site Photos](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [Project Support Letters](#)
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000) to the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy (“the grantee”) to acquire a 44.38-acre property (consisting of Ventura County Assessor’s Parcel Number 011-0-030-050) that includes the Riverview trailhead and parking area to permanently protect and restore habitat and natural resources, preserve open space, and provide public access to the Ventura River Preserve in unincorporated Ventura County, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer):

- a. All relevant acquisition documents for the acquisition including, without limitation, the appraisal, purchase and sale agreement, deed, escrow instructions, environmental or hazardous materials assessment, and title report;
 - b. A baseline conditions report; and
 - c. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
 3. The property acquired under this authorization shall be managed and operated for protection and restoration of habitat and natural resources, preservation of open space, and providing public access. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
 4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property or in a nearby publicly viewable area, the design and location of which are to be approved by the Executive Officer.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 8 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31350-31356), regarding reservation of significant coastal resource areas.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Ojai Valley Land Conservancy is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$400,000 grant to the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy (OVLC) to acquire the 44.38-acre Riverview property, which includes the Riverview trailhead and parking area, to permanently protect and restore habitat and natural resources, preserve open space, and provide public access to the Ventura River Preserve in unincorporated Ventura County (Exhibits 1 and 2).

The Riverview property is in the unincorporated village of Meiners Oaks, and adjacent to the Ventura River Preserve (VRP), which is owned and managed by OVLC. The Riverview property is a highly scenic, natural parcel that contains vital habitat and a vast array of accessible trails. The Riverview property has one of the most used trailheads across the VRP and further connects other OVLC owned properties in the VRP, creating over 20 miles of accessible trails. In 2003, the Conservancy provided OVLC with a grant to acquire the VRP (aka Farmont Ranch) for the purposes of conserving the 3 miles of riverfront, oak woodlands, and mature riparian habitat

found on site. In 2014, the Conservancy provided OVLC with another grant to acquire a 29-acre property (aka Hatton parcel) for habitat and resource protection, open space preservation, and public access. Securing the Riverview property will protect the property's trailhead and parking lot for public access to a network of trails at the VRP and will provide a valuable recreational resource for hikers, equestrians, and mountain bikers.

The Riverview property is currently owned by Ojai Assembly of God Church (aka Redemption Church). OVLC has had various agreements with the landowner since 2004 to use the parking lot and provide parking and trail access points to the VRP. While OVLC has agreements with the landowner to use the parking lot and trailhead, these agreements are not permanent, and they do not give OVLC access to the remainder of the 44.38 acres. OVLC now has the opportunity to acquire this property in order to permanently protect public access and protect and restore habitat on the property.

The Meiners Oaks Water District (Water District) holds an easement across a small portion of the Riverview property to access their adjacent property at the southern edge of the Riverview parcel. Rancho Matilija Mutual Water Company (Water Company) also holds an access easement that runs roughly parallel to the Water District's easement; according to OVLC, the Water Company rarely utilizes it. Use of these easements by the Water District and Water Company does not impact the public access or conservation values of the property.

The acquisition of the Riverview property will greatly enhance access to the VRP for a broad range of visitors from the community and throughout the state. The parking area at the Riverview trailhead is more accessible to the public as it is directly off the road, whereas the other well-used Oso trailhead parking lot is accessed down a narrow street with private residences and horse farms which leads to parking congestion issues. Thus, securing the Riverview trailhead and parking lot area as a second principal access point is crucial to ensuring reliable public access to the VRP. Aside from public access benefits, the acquisition would build on OVLC and Conservancy efforts to preserve wildlife habitat, protect important watershed lands and viewsheds, and mitigate flooding, by preventing development of this section of the Ventura River floodplain. This acquisition would increase the size of the VRP, allow OVLC's restoration plans for VRP to include this section of river floodplain, and further improve wildlife connectivity along the river corridor.

Because much of the river corridor has retained its rural character, there are numerous intact examples of riparian cottonwood, California black walnut, sycamore, and oak woodlands, as well as chaparral, floodplain, and grassland habitats along the river. Habitats in and near the river sustain one of the highest diversities of vertebrates in Southern California; nearly 300 vertebrate species have been seen in the lower reaches of the Ventura River alone. At least 26 special status species inhabit or utilize aquatic, riparian and wetland habitats in the watershed, including 13 species listed as threatened or endangered and 13 California species of special concern. Listed species in the watershed include southern steelhead, tidewater goby, least Bell's vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, California brown pelican, California least tern, peregrine falcon, Belding's savannah sparrow, ringtail, black-shouldered kite, western snowy plover, California red-legged frog, and the California condor. The Riverview property has

disturbed areas due to past farming and a high-quality mix of upland grasslands and scrub vegetation similar to the floodplain lands of the adjacent VRP.

OVLC will maintain the site as part of their overall maintenance plan for the VRP. OVLC plans to keep the property in its natural state, and any potential future improvements will include planting native plant species to restore habitat. OVLC is involved with the revisioning plan to restore the flow of the river upon the removal of the Matilija Dam which will impact the entire VRP. In addition, OVLC intends to leverage additional private funding to improve traffic flow and security at the property. To that end, OVLC will evaluate whether to add a gate to prevent unauthorized overnight camping as well as review the current design to determine whether there is a better option for maximizing parking spaces. Those potential improvements are still in the conceptual stage and there are no definitive plans yet. However, any improvements to existing infrastructure will not require any new roads or excavation. Finally, OVLC anticipates engaging with local Tribal members to develop interpretive signage and programming for the purposes of cultural public education at the proposed acquisition site. OVLC may also add an interpretive kiosk or other informational display to highlight Indigenous culture and history.

This acquisition further protects the investments that the Conservancy has already made in the VRP as well as broader watershed-level restoration efforts. For several years, the OVLC, the Conservancy, the Ventura Hillsides Conservancy, and the Trust for Public Land have worked together to create a river parkway program for the Ventura River— a comprehensive effort to acquire and restore a contiguous corridor of riparian habitat and open space along the river from Matilija Dam and the City of Ojai to the estuary at the mouth of the river. The goal is to create a greenway that would conserve habitat, protect wildlife linkages, manage stormwater, provide trails and interpretive facilities, recharge groundwater, and reconnect the river to its floodplain. With the planned future removal of the Matilija Dam and the long-term restoration goals for the Ventura River, adding this section of the river floodplain to the VRP will further aid conservation efforts. The trailhead would also ultimately provide access to any anticipated Matilija Dam recreational area.

Site Description: The Riverview property is located at 401-501 South Rice Road in Ojai, along the Ventura River in the Meiners Oaks area of Ventura County (Exhibit 3). The property could best be characterized as riparian scrub habitat and was previously a kiwi farm. The property has a 15,000 square foot sand and gravel parking lot and a hiking trail. There are no structures other than a fence around the parking lot and remnants of infrastructure associated with the former orchard, such as fence posts and irrigation pipes. OVLC plans to assess whether restoration actions are needed on the property, including removal of farming infrastructure remnants and to raise private funding for such work. The Ventura River has historically been one of the largest runs for Southern California steelhead and OVLC has been part of a years-long efforts to restore habitat. These efforts include the restoration of Matilija Canyon to improve access for the migratory fish to vest areas of suitable spawning habitat. This acquisition is part of the matrix of real estate acquisitions that are tied to the future Matilija Dam removal. In addition, the river is an important riparian habitat for a suite of species; Southwestern Pond turtle and California red-legged frog have been observed in the area. The river is an important connectivity corridor for wildlife; several mountain lions have been observed on the preserve this year so this acquisition would further secure their habitat from encroachment.

Much of the property lies within the 100-year floodplain of the Ventura River and is relatively undisturbed and hosts a high-quality mix of upland grasslands and scrub similar to the floodplain lands of the adjacent VRP. Conservation of this property could be particularly valuable in the face of climate change because it ensures the availability of a migration corridor to upland habitats. The subject property is currently owned by the Ojai Assembly of God Church (aka Redemption Church).

If this authorization is approved, the Riverview property will be added to the 1600-acre VRP, the location of some of the most popular recreational trails in the Ventura River Watershed.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The OVLC is a non-profit organization qualified under Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code with organizational objectives to preserve, protect and enhance the natural resources of the Ojai Valley, a mission it accomplishes through land acquisition, restoration, education, and recreation programs. Since its inception in 1987, the OVLC has protected and managed over 1,850 acres of habitat and open space and has undertaken several large habitat restoration programs, including an extensive restoration of its 58-acre Ojai Meadows Preserve. As demonstrated by its successful completion of several projects funded by the Conservancy, the OVLC has the necessary experience and expertise to implement the proposed project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

Selection Criteria

1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.

See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Strategic Plan" section below.

2. Project is a good investment of state resources.

The proposed project to acquire 44.38 acres adjacent to the Ventura River Preserve is a good investment of state resources because (1) it will provide important public access benefits to Californians, (2) it will help protect and enhance the biodiversity of habitats for state and federal threatened and sensitive species, and (3) it will improve wildlife passage corridors.

3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.

OVLC is very open to collaborating with Tribes to connect them to the lands that it manages, such as supporting Indigenous stewardship projects, sharing of traditional knowledge, cultural and educational events, and co-stewardship of lands. OVLC is eager to develop a relationship with the local Tribes and Tribal organizations and has proactively reached out to Tribal members to initiate a dialogue and schedule site visits at known archeological sites so that they can advise on cultural resource protection. Furthermore, OVLC anticipates developing

interpretive signage and programming with representatives of the local band for the proposed acquisition site.

4. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.

This property would be held in fee by OVLC for permanent conservation. Not only will the acquisition protect intact floodplain habitat, since portions of this property and the bulk of the VRP are within the Ventura River floodplain, but it will also reduce flood risk from extreme storm events as well as create opportunities for groundwater recharge. The preservation of this property would strengthen resilience to expected climate change impacts including extreme heat, flood, and drought.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The acquisition of the Riverview property provides many benefits including protection of open space and wildlife habitat, increased resilience to future climate change impacts such as drought, extreme heat, and floods, as well as opportunities for public education via cultural interpretive signage, and enhanced public access and recreation along the river floodplain.

The OVLC's preserves provide critical riparian habitat for a variety of special status species such as southern steelhead, tidewater goby, least Bell's vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, California brown pelican, California least tern, peregrine falcon, Belding's savannah sparrow, ringtail, black-shouldered kite, western snowy plover, California red-legged frog, and the California condor. The Riverview property would be added to the VRP which has dozens of miles of trails and is one of the most popular recreational areas in western Ventura County, hosting over 100,000 visitors annually. The project will enhance public access to the VRP by providing uninterrupted use of the parking lot at the trailhead which is easily accessible from Ojai and the surrounding area.

6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.

The project has broad community support from local and state legislators: Matt LaVere, County of Ventura Supervisor; Steve Bennett, State Assemblymember; Monique Limón, State Senator; Derek Poultney, Concerned Resources Environmental Workers (C.R.E.W); Russell Marlow, California Trout; Paul Jenkin, Surfrider Foundation; and Mark Capelli, National Marine Fisheries Service. See Exhibit 4 for project letters.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$400,000
Ojai Valley Land Conservancy	\$85,210
Project Total	\$485,210

Conservancy funds are anticipated to come from an appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of climate resilience (The Budget Act of 2022, SB 154). These funds are available as described in Section 52 of SB 155, Chapter 258, Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the climate resilience funds, including projects that protect coastal watersheds and increase the resilience of coastal ecosystems to

climate change impacts. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source as it will permanently protect 44.38 acres of a coastal watershed that includes wildlife corridors and resilient habitat that will provide important refuge for wildlife as the effects of climate change intensify.

The OVLC will contribute \$85,210 to the proposed project, as well as in-kind services toward the project in the form of volunteer work crews.

Unless specifically identified as “Required Match,” the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 8 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31350-31356), regarding reservation of significant coastal resource areas.

Public Resources Code section 31350 authorizes the Conservancy to acquire, hold, protect, and use interests in key coastal resource lands that would otherwise be lost to public use. Without the purchase of this property by OVLC with the Conservancy’s assistance, the property will likely be sold to a private developer and a significant conservation opportunity would be lost.

Under section 31351, the Conservancy may cooperate with nonprofit organizations (such as OVLC) to ensure the reservation of interests in real property for purposes of Division 21, as well as objectives of local plans. The proposed acquisition will provide for public access compatible with resource protection and restoration objectives, consistent with Chapter 5.5 (integrated coastal and marine resources protection). Also consistent with Chapter 5.5, acquiring the Riverview property will protect wildlife habitat within a coastal watershed and floodplain of the Ventura River, which drains to the sea. The proposed acquisition will also help further goals in the Ojai Valley Area Plan of the County’s General Plan (2020). Specifically, it will serve to “protect significant biological resources within the Ojai Valley in order to maintain natural ecosystems and also preserve the natural beauty of the area” [Goal OV-36]; and to “to Ensure that recreational uses in sensitive Open Space areas preserve natural resources in balance with the provision of opportunities for the use and enjoyment of those resources” [Goal OV-46].

Section 31352 provides that the Conservancy may award a grant to a nonprofit organization for a purpose specified in section 31351 if that organization is unable to acquire a property due to limited financial resources or other circumstances. Without the Conservancy funding proposed here, the OVLC would lack the funding needed to acquire the Riverview property.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN](#):

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project includes facilities such as the designated parking lot at the trailhead to maximize barrier free access to open space.

Consistent with **Goal 3.1 Conserve Land**, the proposed project will protect 44.38 acres of land identified in regionally led and scientifically based planning efforts to protect high quality resources and increase habitat connectivity.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2, Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project will add land to the VRP and protect the wildlife corridor along the Ventura River floodplain.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed funding authorization is categorically exempt from the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations Section 15325 because the project involves the transfer of ownership interests in land to “preserve open space or lands for park purposes.” (Section 15325(f).)

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