

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 15, 2024

MATILIIJA DAM ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION PROJECT: PRE-CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES

Project No. 99-099-07

Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$4,600,000 to the County of Ventura to augment a previously authorized Conservancy grant of \$358,000 for pre-construction activities associated with the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project by adding additional tasks to support and inform environmental compliance and programmatic design planning, and to conduct community engagement in Ventura County.

LOCATION: Ventura River Watershed, Ventura County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [February 2, 2023, Staff Recommendation](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

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

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed four million six hundred thousand dollars (\$4,600,000) to the County of Ventura (the “grantee”) to augment a previously authorized Conservancy grant of \$358,000 for pre-construction activities associated with the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project by adding additional tasks to support and inform environmental compliance and programmatic design planning, and to conduct community engagement 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 revised detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
 2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
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Findings:

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

1. The proposed authorization remains consistent with Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding protection and restoration of fish and wildlife habitat in coastal watersheds.
2. The proposed project remains consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends authorization to disburse up to \$4,600,000 to the County of Ventura (the “County”) to augment a previously authorized Conservancy grant of \$358,000 for pre-construction activities associated with the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project by adding additional tasks to support and inform environmental compliance and programmatic design planning, and to conduct community engagement in Ventura County. The term “project” in this staff recommendation refers to the additional tasks to support and inform environmental compliance and programmatic design planning and to support community engagement. On February 2, 2023, the Conservancy authorized a grant of an amount not to exceed three hundred fifty-eight thousand dollars (\$358,000) to the County to conduct pre-construction activities associated with the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project (MDERP), including hydraulic and sediment modeling, environmental compliance, and design planning in Ventura County. The grantee does not require additional funds to complete the tasks associated with the February 2, 2023 authorization. The additional funds are necessary to add new tasks to address critical data gaps for design development and environmental compliance, to incorporate findings from the previously authorized activities in ongoing planning, to advance tribal engagement initiatives, to expand outreach, and to undertake a comprehensive assessment of risk and associated mitigation strategies. For the purposes of the project, programmatic design planning (design planning) refers to activities that are integral to the design of the MDERP but are not part of the engineered design, such as adaptive management, risk, and real estate.

This project is part of ongoing series of grant-supported efforts to design and implement downstream components of MDERP, and to prepare associated plans to support a proposed downstream release of sediment as early as 2030 should hydrologic conditions allow, and subsequent dam removal. This project consists of multiple new pre-construction tasks that are described below. The Conservancy’s February 2023 authorization funded multiple simulations of sediment behavior during initial sediment release and following removal of the dam. Review of these data on sediment behavior revealed limitations in the models which required adjustment and further model runs.

The first new task consists of additional technical studies and modeling related to sediment transport, and acquisition of new LiDAR data for multiple river reaches. This task will inform further refinement of design planning studies for the Camino Cielo bridge and the Robles Diversion, the final Real Estate Plan, the Risk Assessment process and Adaptive Management planning. This task will also establish an expert review panel to guide efforts to synthesize a wide range of past hydraulic and sediment modeling results as well as ongoing sensitivity analyses for effective use in current and planned California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) updates as well as stakeholder outreach.

The second new task is part of design planning and consists of the development of a comprehensive risk assessment for the MDERP. The foundation for this assessment will be a risk register that identifies the range of potential risks to the implementation of the MDERP, the associated solutions or mitigations to those risks, estimated costs, and the likelihood of occurrence. The risk register will leverage the existing draft Real Estate Plan (December 2022), the results of the previous Conservancy funded sediment sensitivity modeling in 2023, and the results of ongoing landowner and stakeholder outreach (both funded and proposed). Associated with this task, the County will establish an MDERP Risk Evaluation Group to inform timely decisions on final design planning and incorporate relevant experience of other large dam removal projects.

The third new task, which is also related to design planning, consists of the development of a monitoring and adaptive management plan. The monitoring and adaptive management plan will be informed by previous work from the MDERP's 2004 Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Report, with focused updates for project components informed by the current planning process that reflects the new preferred dam removal alternative with natural sediment released through the system. The monitoring and adaptive management plan will also address risks identified in the risk register.

The fourth new task is also part of design planning and consists of due diligence associated with multiple easement parcels for downstream flood protection improvements that are requisite for dam removal. County Real Estate Services will meet with landowners, negotiate purchase and sale agreements, and complete surveys and preliminary appraisals for future timely acquisition from willing sellers of both temporary construction access rights-of-way and permanent access and/or maintenance easements.

The fifth new task is to continue and expand the MDERP community engagement effort. The County's ongoing outreach with landowners, other stakeholders, and the broader community has been very successful. The project will continue multiple outreach efforts including listening sessions, site visits, and collaboration on identification of potential mitigation measures. These efforts are intended to increase the potential for voluntary agreements to address property specific mitigations or interventions. This will also have the potential to facilitate future stewardship associated with MDERP.

Finally, the sixth new task will support a variety of affirmative engagement efforts to engage local Chumash (tšumaš) leaders and/or other Tribal entities as part of the MDERP. This work will focus on support to Tribal entities for their involvement with MDERP projects of mutual interest, support for the Tribes' capacity to engage with the MDERP in ways that work for them,

and support for the County’s capacity to engage more effectively with Tribal interests. The County will ensure tribal members are compensated for their time spent and knowledge shared on the project, either through direct hiring of tribal members as consultants and/or stipends for meetings.

The **Site Description** and **Grantee Qualifications** sections for the proposed authorization remain consistent with the corresponding sections in the February 2, 2023, staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project remains fundamentally consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, for the same reasons specified in the February 2, 2023, staff recommendation (Exhibit 2). Although additional tasks have been added with a significant augmentation of funds, the additional tasks serve to refine and expand upon the previously authorized project but do not fundamentally change the project.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$4,600,000
Coastal Conservancy (prior authorization)	\$358,000
California Department of Fish and Wildlife	\$6,401,618
California Wildlife Conservation Board	\$9,356,000
Pre-Construction MDERP Planning Project Total	\$20,715,618

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2023/24 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy to address "urgent sea-level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based solutions or other strategies" (The Budget Act of 2023, Chapter 38, Statutes of 2023 (AB 102)). The coastal resilience funds are available as described in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the coastal resilience funds, including projects that “remove outdated or obsolete dams and projects that upgrade associated downstream infrastructure to increase climate resilience, enhance natural habitat transport, or improve wildlife and fish passage.” (Section 52(a)(5).) The project is consistent with this funding source because it will plan a coastal watershed dam removal that will increase coastal resilience to sea-level rise by reconnecting sediment supply to the coast. The project area is an area of geographic vulnerability because adjacent shorelines to the river mouth have been impacted by the interruption of sediment supply due the barrier upstream and these impacts are projected to become stronger with sea level rise. A portion of the project area is considered a disadvantaged community according to the State Water Board’s mapping. There are opportunities for federal financial support for this project, as described below.

In addition to the previous authorization and this proposed project, the broader MDERP includes significant funding from both state and federal sources for the pre-construction phase of the MDERP. For the purposes of this proposed authorization, the Pre-Construction MDERP Planning Project refers to pre-construction planning for the MDERP exclusive of design planning

and environmental compliance for the Robles Diversion and Camino Cielo Bridge projects, which are addressed in previous Conservancy authorizations. Project partners are engaged with Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Operations Program within the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. This program has the potential to provide more than \$80 million in full or partial implementation funding for multiple component parts of the MDERP, including this project.

The pre-construction planning phase of the MDERP has involved significant funding from both the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and the California Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB). DFW authorized grants of \$3,300,504 (2017), \$1,731,114 (2022), and \$1,370,000 (2023) to the County for activities including 65% design of dam removal and environmental review, and 30% design of the Meiner's Oaks levee. WCB authorized grants of \$5,025,000 (2020) and \$4,331,000 (2023) for final design planning of dam removal and for final design planning and CEQA compliance for flood protection improvements to protect the Casitas Springs, Meiners Oaks, and Live Oaks Acres communities.

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, CONSERVANCY'S 2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S), AND CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

Although costs have increased significantly, and additional tasks have been added to the proposed project, the project remains consistent with the description and intent of the project detailed in the February 2, 2023, staff recommendation (Exhibit 2). Accordingly, for the same reasons specified in the February 2, 2023, staff recommendation, the project remains consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation, the Conservancy's strategic plan goals and objectives, and with the local watershed management plan/state water quality control plan.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project remains statutorily and categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Sections 15262 and 15306, respectively. Section 15262 provides that feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded are exempt from the requirement to prepare an environmental document although environmental factors must be considered. Section 15306 provides a categorical exemption for basic data collection and resource evaluation activities that do not result in serious disturbance to an environmental resource. The proposed project qualifies for these exemptions because it consists of planning, environmental evaluation, and information collection for a potential subsequent project, which has not yet been approved or funded as described in this report and the February 2, 2023, staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).