

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 15, 2024

MATILIJIA DAM ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION PROJECT: ROBLES DIVERSION DESIGN

Project No. 99-099-06
Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$3,200,000 to the County of Ventura to (1) augment a previously authorized Conservancy grant of \$379,350 to conduct planning and to develop design criteria, preliminary design plans, and alternatives refinement for improvements to the Robles Diversion and Fish Passage Facility, and (2) conduct additional studies and modeling, develop 10% design plans for two alternatives, and provide funding directly to the Casitas Municipal Water District to work on this project, in Ventura County.

LOCATION: West of Meiners Oaks in unincorporated Ventura County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
Exhibit 2: [December 2, 2021, Staff Recommendation](#)
Exhibit 3: [Project 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 the disbursement of an amount not to exceed three million two hundred thousand dollars (\$3,200,000) to the County of Ventura (the “grantee”) to (1) augment a previously authorized Conservancy grant of \$379,350 to conduct planning and to develop design criteria, preliminary design plans, and alternatives refinement for improvements to the Robles Diversion and Fish Passage Facility, and (2) conduct additional studies and modeling, develop 10% design plans for two alternatives and provide funding directly to the Casitas Municipal Water District to work on this project, 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 retained in carrying out the project.

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 \$3,200,000 to the County of Ventura (the "County") to (1) augment a previously authorized Conservancy grant of \$379,350 to conduct planning and to develop design criteria, preliminary design plans, and alternatives refinement for improvements to the Robles Diversion and Fish Passage Facility, and (2) conduct additional studies and modeling, develop 10% design plans for two alternatives and provide funding directly to the Casitas Municipal Water District to work on this project, in Ventura County. On December 2, 2021, the Conservancy authorized disbursement of up to \$379,350 to the County to develop conceptual design criteria, preliminary design plans, and alternatives refinement for structural and operational improvements to the Robles Diversion and Fish Passage Facility (Robles Diversion) on the Ventura River (Exhibit 2). In this staff recommendation, the term "project" refers to conducting additional studies and modeling under the previously authorized grant, developing 10% design plans for two alternatives, and assisting the Casitas Municipal Water District (Casitas).

The redesign of the Robles Diversion is a key component of the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project (MDERP) and a prerequisite to removal of Matilija Dam. The Robles Diversion consists of infrastructure that diverts water from the Ventura River to the Casitas Reservoir during appropriate flows and includes a fish passage facility that enables fish in the river to migrate upstream and downstream during diversion operations. The diversion infrastructure includes a dam that directs water to the diversion headworks and into a canal to Casitas Reservoir. Casitas operates and manages the Robles Diversion as a component of the Bureau of Reclamation's (BOR) Ventura River Project. The accumulation of sediment and debris behind the Robles Diversion dam results in costly maintenance, frequent blockage of fish passage, and diversion system outages during storms. Structural and operational improvements are needed to allow sediment from the upper watershed and sediment deposited behind the dam to be transported through or past the Robles Diversion during and after the future dam removal. These improvements are also needed to enhance fish passage, water supply reliability

(residential and agriculture), and flood protection both upstream and downstream of the Robles Diversion.

The initial work from the previous Conservancy authorization, including development of design criteria and preliminary design, has determined that further modeling and design will be required to develop consensus among the County, Casitas, BOR, and regulatory agencies on a preferred alternative. For this reason, additional support is needed to develop two design concepts that can be advanced for consideration as the preferred alternative. The preferred alternative will need to: 1) effectively pass sediment such that Casitas can divert water to Casitas Reservoir, 2) allow fish passage for the federally-endangered southern California steelhead and other species both up and down stream, 3) be feasible for Casitas long term with respect to operations, cost, and maintenance, and 4) not significantly increase flood risk to adjacent or associated properties. The County will use the preferred alternative in a subsequent phase that the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) is funding for 30% design and updated CEQA compliance.

This project is part of an 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, followed by dam removal. This project consists of: 1) an expansion of existing tasks from the previous Conservancy authorization, and 2) additional tasks identified during initial work under the previous authorization that are necessary to identify a preferred alternative for the next phase of design (as detailed above.) The expansion of existing tasks consists of continued design criteria refinement and design development for multiple alternatives. The project will also consist of the following new tasks: 1) additional hydraulic, sediment transport and other design support modeling and monitoring for the design alternatives; 2) development of 10% design plans for two alternatives that demonstrate feasible sediment transport and fish passage; 3) funding for Casitas to participate fully in the Robles Diversion Design Project, including this project, the subsequent 30% design project, and Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Ventura Watershed Plan and National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) process starting early in 2024; and 4) negotiation of an agreement between the Ventura County Watershed Protection District and Casitas regarding Casitas's role in California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) certification, future design, and project implementation. Completion of the Watershed Plan is a requisite step to establish eligibility for future NRCS implementation funding described in the "Project Financing" section below.

The **Site Description** and **Grantee Qualifications** sections for the proposed authorization remain consistent with the corresponding sections in the December 2, 2021, 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 December 2, 2021, 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	\$3,200,000
Coastal Conservancy December 21, 2021 authorization	\$379,350
California Department of Fish and Wildlife	\$6,557,926
United States Bureau of Reclamation	\$1,800,000
Project Total	\$11,937,276

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 for upgrading a facility that is downstream of an obsolete dam and for which upgrades are necessary to enable future removal of the dam, which is a coastal watershed dam, the removal of which 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. The project area is in part 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 Robles Diversion Design project includes significant funding from both state and federal sources for the planning phase of the Robles Diversion Design project. In June of 2022, DFW awarded a grant of up to \$1,557,926 to the County, the majority of which (more than 90 percent) will support and leverage the 10% design planning for Robles Diversion improvements included in the current project. Subsequently, in May of 2023, DFW awarded a grant of up to \$6,751,805 to the County with more than \$5 million for environmental review and 30% design of the Robles Diversion Project and support for the County’s Robles-related activities as part of the forthcoming NRCS Watershed Plan and NEPA process.

The US Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service has provided significant funding (up to \$700,000 to-date) for federal planning and NEPA compliance related to the Robles Diversion, Meiners Oaks levee, and downstream flood protection projects. Nearly \$300,000 of this total will be for Robles Diversion planning starting in the first quarter of 2024. This program has the potential to provide full or partial funding for implementation of multiple

component parts of the MDERP, including at Robles Diversion. Over time, the NRCS program has the potential to provide more than \$80 million in full or partial funding for future implementation of these essential MDERP components.

Additionally, in the federal fiscal year of 2023, BOR received an appropriation of \$1,500,000 to support staff engagement with the Robles Diversion Design project, including approximately \$500,000 for technical assistance focused on 10% design of the Robles Diversion, and \$1,000,000 for physical modeling to verify the future proposed 30% design.

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 [2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN](#):

Consistent with **Goal 3.2.1, Restore or Enhance Habitat**, the proposed project provides necessary studies to complete a plan to enhance a coastal watershed, restore sediment connectivity to the beach, and improve fish passage.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION, 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 December 2, 2021, staff recommendation (Exhibit 2). Accordingly, for the same reasons specified in the December 2, 2021, staff recommendation, the project remains consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, 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 December 2, 2021, staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).