

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 21, 2024

**SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WETLANDS RECOVERY PROJECT COMMUNITY WETLAND
RESTORATION GRANT PROGRAM – 2024-2025: ONCE UPON A WATERSHED AT THE WEST
CAMPUS PRESERVE**

Project No. 22-008-09
Project Manager: Kellan Warner

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$98,016 to the Concerned Resource Environmental Workers (C.R.E.W.) to implement the Once Upon a Watershed at the West Campus Preserve Project, which will restore 4.98 acres of wetland habitat situated along a tributary of the Ventura River in Ojai, Ventura County as part of the 2024 Community Wetland Restoration Grant Program.

LOCATION: Ojai, Ventura County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)
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 a grant of an amount not to exceed ninety-eight thousand sixteen dollars (\$98,016) to the Concerned Resource Environmental Workers (“the grantee”) to restore 4.98 acres of wetland habitat situated along a tributary of the Ventura River in Ojai, Ventura County (“the project”) as part of the 2024 Community Wetland Restoration Grant Program.

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.

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2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding through the Community Wetland Restoration Grant Program.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

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 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding coastal resource enhancement projects.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The proposed nonprofit organization is organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to \$98,016 to the Concerned Resource Environmental Workers (C.R.E.W) to restore 4.98 acres of wetland habitat situated along a tributary of the Ventura River, in an area informally known as the West Campus Preserve in Ojai, Ventura County (“the project”) (See Exhibit 1 for project location). This project was selected through the 2024 Community Wetland Restoration Grant Program (CWRGP) of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project. The CWRGP provides funding annually for community-based wetland and riparian enhancement and restoration projects in coastal wetlands and watersheds in the Southern and Central California regions. The details of the program were outlined in the September 5, 2024 staff recommendation, which also described three other projects recommended for funding under CWRGP for this grant round (Exhibit 2).

The 2024 CWRGP round received 11 proposals, and project selection was completed in June 2024. The Conservancy authorized funding for three of the chosen projects on September 5, 2024. The proposed project is the fourth and final project recommended for funding this year.

The project will: (1) remove weeds and trash; (2) install native plants to enrich critical wildlife habitat; (3) engage 4th and 6th graders from local Title I schools to participate in the project’s restoration and stewardship activities; and (4) train C.R.E.W. employees in ecosystem restoration implementation and tracking.

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The Ventura River Watershed has suffered from anadromous fish decline, flood damage, native species and habitat loss, beach erosion, and degraded water quality. The hands-on and experiential components of the project directly address these issues by connecting students to the natural world around them with the opportunity to participate in needed riparian ecosystem restoration and educating them about value of a healthy watershed system.

The project's restoration work includes clearing trails of recently fallen trees to provide access to the West Campus Preserve; removing non-native trees and plants in the project area, such as pepper trees and mustard; and removing trash and debris that has collected in the creek. The habitat restoration will be completed by the C.R.E.W. team members. The C.R.E.W provides leadership and job training through paid employment for staff ages 16-25. C.R.E.W members learn to build and repair trails, public and private firebreaks, and restore native habitats, which opens new job opportunities and helps set many young people on the path toward a career in natural resources. C.R.E.W. workforce training employees will also learn more about ecosystem restoration implementation and tracking processes and approaches. As this project site is adjacent to the C.R.E.W.'s headquarters, it's an ideal workforce training site.

C.R.E.W.'s Once Upon a Watershed (OUW) education programs provide public school students meaningful engagement with the restoration of the ecological health of the Ventura River Watershed. The project will implement the OUW in connection with the restoration at West Campus Preserve. The project will provide wetland restoration and ecosystem education activities to approximately 690 fourth and sixth grades students at seven Title I public schools in the Ventura River Watershed by engaging them in the restoration and stewardship of the creek on the West Campus Preserve, and students' guardians are encouraged to attend the restoration events. Students and families participating in OUW will plant native riparian and adjacent coast live oak woodland habitat and clear the creek of debris.

Site Description: The creek at the project site is a tributary of the Ventura River and lies within the 160-acre West Campus Preserve owned by the County of Ventura and managed by the non-profit Help of Ojai. The 4.98-acre project site has a creek (a perennial stream) with riparian habitat featuring sycamore, willow, and mulefat. Immediately adjacent to the creek is upland habitat, primarily coast live oak woodland surrounding a meadow previously used as an outdoor classroom. During recent prolonged drought conditions, a significant portion of the oak community failed and collapsed, blocking access to this meadow and to the main stem of the Ventura River. Established invasive non-native perennials represent 25% of the riparian cover. The adjacent meadow has been cleared and is now 100% covered in non-native grasses and other non-native annuals such as mustard and radish.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The C.R.E.W. was founded over 30 years ago as a trail crew and continues trail building and construction, restoration, and maintenance of over 100 miles of trails each year since its inception. For its OUW program, C.R.E.W. partners with the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, Ventura Land Trust, California Conservation Corps, Ojai, Ventura and Rio Unified School districts, Santa Barbara Channelkeeper, the Cities of Ojai and Ventura, the County of Ventura, Pax Environmental, and Sierra Watershed Progressive. Established with three schools in 2005, OUW now reaches youth in kindergarten, 4th, 5th, and 6th grade classes in sixteen public and two independent schools in Ventura County. In 2022, OUW served 1,349

students and 49 teachers at 15 schools. C.R.E.W. successfully completed a CRWGP-funded OUW project in 2021.

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.

This project contributes to protecting stream and adjacent habitats in Southern California. These areas are under intense stress from urbanization and face impacts from historical and ongoing stressors, and must be bolstered for predicted future stressors, like climate change. This project will have long-lasting restoration impacts and the site will continue to be maintained after the project is completed. Additionally, the project budget is reasonable, and the project goals are feasible.

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.

C.R.E.W. collaborates with a Chumash ethnographer, who provides Chumash names for the native plants that will be used in this project. C.R.E.W. also collaborated with a Chumash elder on the fourth-grade program titled "Story of our Oaks", which will be used in the project. Finally, C.R.E.W. collaborates with the Ventura County Indian Education Consortium, which will be invited to participate in restoration activities at the West Campus Preserve.

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

The project includes components of removing non-native species and reinstating native species, which will bolster the long-term wildfire resistance of project site. The current land manager of the project site, Help of Ojai, has a lease to manage the project site until 2040, guaranteeing continued protection and access through this period. The site is owned by the County of Ventura, who supports the restoration work and use of the project site as a restoration and education hub.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The proposed project was selected for both the restoration component of the project as well as significant community engagement. Through work to restore the wetland habitats, community members will actively participate in the project and will learn more about the importance of wetland ecosystems.

Additionally, the proposed project was selected for its work to engage and benefit CWRGP Priority Communities.

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

The proposed CWRGP project engages meaningfully with its community. One of the main purposes of the CWRGP is to build local capacity to plan and implement wetland restoration projects and to promote community involvement in wetland restoration. Projects funded through the program must include educational and community involvement elements as strong components of the project.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$19,616
Wildlife Conservation Board (via grant to the Conservancy)	\$78,400
Project Total	\$98,016

The CWRGP 2022-2027 is partially funded by a grant to the Conservancy from the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) for \$500,000 to fund the CWRGP for five years. The San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC) also granted \$300,000 to the Conservancy to fund the 2022-2027 CWRGP. The Conservancy is providing \$275,000 of match funding over 5 years for a program total of \$1,075,000.

The WCB funding will contribute \$78,400 and the Conservancy will contribute the remaining \$19,616 for this project. The expected source of the Conservancy funding is the FY 2022/2023 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of “urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs” (The Budget Act of 2022, SB 154, as amended by the Budget Act of 2023, SB 101). The coastal resilience funds are available for the purposes 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 coastal resilience projects along the coast and in coastal watersheds. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will improve coastal resilience by improving the capacity of the Ventura River watershed to respond to climate change and maintain healthy functions.

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 authorization for the project is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21, Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code, regarding resource enhancement projects.

Section 31251 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations “for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of indiscriminate dredging or filling, improper location of improvements, natural or human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values.” Grants shall be used for, among other things, corrective measures that will enhance the natural

and scenic character of the areas. The proposed project consists of corrective measures that will enhance natural resources that have been degraded by human activities.

Section 31252 requires that all areas proposed for resource enhancement by a state agency, local public agency, or nonprofit organization shall be identified in a certified local coastal plan or program as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems or shall be so identified in other local plans which the commission determines to be consistent with the policies and objectives of Division 20 (commencing with Section 30000). In addition, to enhance natural coastal resources within the coastal zone, Section 31251.2 authorizes funding of projects outside the coastal zone to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside the coastal zone.

The project is not located within the coastal zone, but by restoring a tributary to the Ventura River, the project will enhance the Ventura River, which is a watershed resource that is partly in the coastal zone. The project is consistent with multiple policies of the California Coastal Act/California Coastal Management Program, including Chapter 3 policies of providing recreational opportunities for all people (Public Resources Code section 30210) and restoring the biological productivity and quality of coastal waters (Public Resources Code section 30231). The project will provide public access and recreation by engaging children from families whose incomes have limited their awareness of access to riparian habitats and stewardship actions and building their knowledge of and comfort level with wetland open spaces; and the project will protect the biological productivity of coastal waters by enhancing and restoring riparian habitat along a river that affects the water quality of coastal waters.

Consistent with Section 31253, the recommended amount of funding is determined by evaluating the total amount of funding available to the Conservancy for coastal resource enhancement projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, the urgency of these CWRGP projects relative to other similar projects, and the application of other factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority. The Conservancy's funding was deemed appropriate for this project through a competitive grant process that included selection because of the project's significant benefits to coastal habitat. The proposed project includes an important public education component.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project aims to engage and include participation with people from systemically excluded communities.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project will restore or enhance coastal habitats, riparian areas. Approximately 4.98 acres of habitat will be restored or enhanced.

CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT (CEQA) COMPLIANCE:

The project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15333, which exempts habitat restoration projects that do not to exceed five acres to maintain, restore, enhance, or protect the habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife provided that there will be no significant adverse impact on endangered, rare or threatened species or their habitat pursuant to section 15065; there are no hazardous materials at or around the project site that may be disturbed or removed; and the project will not result in impacts that are significant when viewed in connection with the effects of past projects, the effects of other current projects, and the effects of probable future projects. This project is categorically exempt under Section 15333 because it is a 4.98-acre habitat restoration and enhancement project that will not result in the impacts mentioned above.

Upon approval of the project, staff will file a Notice of Exemption (NOE).