

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 18, 2025

CARMEL RIVER STEELHEAD RESCUE EQUIPMENT UPGRADE

Project No. 25-017-01
Project Manager: Trish Chapman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$80,000 to the Carmel River Steelhead Association to purchase equipment for use in annual rescues of steelhead in the Carmel River watershed in Monterey County.

LOCATION: Carmel River Watershed, Monterey 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 eighty dollars (\$80,000) to the Carmel River Steelhead Association (“the grantee”) to purchase equipment for use in annual rescues of steelhead in the Carmel River watershed in Monterey 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 list of equipment to be purchased.
2. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to rescue steelhead in the Carmel River have been obtained.

The grantee shall use the equipment for annual rescues of steelhead for the duration of the useful life of the equipment.

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 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Integrated Marine and Coastal Resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Carmel River Steelhead Association 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 an \$80,000 grant to the Carmel River Steelhead Association (CRSA) to purchase equipment to be used in annual rescues of steelhead in the Carmel River watershed in Monterey County. The grant funds will come from the Carmel River Settlement Account of the Conservancy's Coastal Trust Fund, which is reserved for projects that aid in the recovery of South-Central California Coast (SCCC) steelhead (see "Project Financing" section for more details). SCCC steelhead are listed as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

In most years, water withdrawals for residential and agricultural use from throughout Carmel River watershed result in the lower reaches of the river and many of its tributaries drying up in late spring or summer. This can lead to stranding and death of juvenile steelhead. For more than 30 years, CRSA, an all-volunteer organization, has rescued steelhead from reaches that are going dry and relocated them to areas in the mainstem Carmel River that do not dry up. CRSA most commonly conducts its rescues in the Cachagua Creek tributary but they can occur anywhere in the Carmel River watershed. Since 1995, when CRSA began keeping records on their rescue results, CRSA has rescued over 225,000 steelhead. In recent years, CRSA has also begun placing pit-tags on rescued fish as part mitigation requirement of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). NMFS gathers data about fish movement and migration from scanners located at various locations in the watershed. The data gathered is helping NMFS gain a better understanding of the Carmel River Watershed steelhead population.

CRSA uses a variety of equipment to complete its rescues including two backpack electrofishers purchased in 1996, nets and aerated buckets. The electrofishers are so old that they can no longer be repaired. At this point, CRSA's ability to efficiently rescue imperiled steelhead is in jeopardy due to outdated and unreliable equipment.

The proposed project consists of purchasing new rescue equipment, in particular four backpack electrofisher units (approximately \$52,000), the necessary pit-tagging equipment for 10,000 fish (approximately \$22,000) and additional support equipment for up to 200 volunteers. With the new equipment, CRSA will be able to continue its all-volunteer rescue efforts for many more years.

Site Description: The Carmel River drains a 255-square mile watershed in the Santa Lucia range along the central coast of California. In the upper watershed, the river and its tributaries flow in steep-sided canyons. For the last 15 miles, the river flows across the relatively flat Carmel Valley floor to the Pacific Ocean. The Carmel River was once one of the premier steelhead fishing rivers in California. Water diversions from the river date back to the Spanish Mission period, and two large dams, San Clemente Dam and Los Padres Dam, were built on the mainstem of the river in the 1920s and 1940s, respectively. San Clemente Dam was removed in 2015. The river is a major source of drinking water for the Monterey Peninsula and has been adversely impacted by the withdrawals as the population of the Monterey Peninsula has increased.

Much of the Carmel River watershed is undeveloped land, including a significant portion in Los Padres National Forest. The tributaries and upper reaches of the main stem in these undeveloped areas support high quality spawning and rearing habitat for steelhead. However passage to this habitat has been impeded by the two dams plus many road crossings and other structures that have been built on the tributaries.

Most of the rescue activities will occur in Cachagua Creek. Cachagua Creek joins the Carmel River approximately 24 miles upstream of the Pacific Ocean. Cachagua Creek and its tributaries Finch and James Creeks, drain the most easterly reaches of the Carmel River watershed in the Coast Mountain range of Monterey County.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: CRSA's mission is to restore and conserve the steelhead fishery in the Carmel River and its watershed. Every year CRSA donates approximately 500 hours of volunteer time in its efforts to rescue juvenile steelhead from portions of the river that are drying up and transferring them to other areas in the watershed where there is a better chance of survival. CRSA conducts its fish rescue efforts in conjunction with NMFS, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Monterey Peninsula Water Management District, and California State Parks. In addition to the annual fish rescues, CRSA has completed a number of projects on the river including two projects to enhance lagoon habitat by placing large wood into the lagoon. The second one of these projects was funded by a \$300,000 Coastal Conservancy grant.

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 is a good investment of the Carmel River Settlement Account because it will directly support recovery of SCCC steelhead, a federally listed threatened species, in the Carmel River. The State's investment will be leveraged with hundreds of hours of volunteer time over many years.

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

CRSA's current electrofisher equipment has lasted for almost 29 years, which reflects their care and handling of the equipment. Many volunteers help to carry out the annual rescues. CRSA has been conducting these rescues for more than 30 years and will continue until the work is no longer needed for the recovery of SCCC steelhead.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The proposed project has two main benefits. The first is that by rescuing and relocating the juvenile steelhead from reaches of the river that are drying up, the program is reducing the impacts of human's on the steelhead population and aiding in the recovery of this threatened species. In addition, this broadscale volunteer effort engages the community in the care and recovery of river and its steelhead and helps raise awareness about the need to care for the fish and river ecosystem.

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

The project is carried out entirely with community volunteers. CRSA's fish rescues are overwhelmingly appreciated by landowners on Cachagua Creek. Landowners call CRSA when they see a section of their creek looking like it will dry up, and some landowners join CRSA in rescue events. In addition, the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County has been a supporter of CRSA's rescue efforts.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$80,000
Project Total	\$80,000

The anticipated source of funds for the project is the Carmel River Settlement Account ("Account") within the Conservancy's Coastal Trust Fund. The Account consists of funds paid by California American Water Company (CAW) pursuant to a settlement agreement with the National Marine Fisheries Service concerning alleged Endangered Species Act violations. The settlement required CAW to pay \$16.7 million over a twelve-year period. Originally these funds were managed by California Department of Fish and Wildlife but were subsequently transferred to the Conservancy for disbursement. The settlement funds can only be used to improve habitat conditions for, and production of, South-Central California Coast (SCCC) steelhead, or otherwise aid in the recovery of SCCC steelhead in the Carmel River watershed. In addition, these funds can only be expended for mitigation of impacts from well-pumping and water withdrawals by CAW. CRSA's program to rescue and relocate steelhead in the Carmel River watershed increases the survivorship of juvenile steelhead and thus helps mitigate the impacts

of downstream water withdrawals on juvenile steelhead. Accordingly, use of the funds for the proposed project is consistent with the terms of the settlement agreement.

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 will be undertaken pursuant to the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (PRC); in particular Chapter 5.5, PRC Section 31220, regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection.

PRC Section 31220(a) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for coastal watershed and living marine resources protection and restoration projects that meet one or more criteria of Section 31220(b). As set forth in Section 31220(b)(7), this includes projects that will reduce the impact of population and economic pressures on coastal and marine resources. By rescuing juvenile SCCC steelhead, the CRSA rescue program reduces the impacts to SCCC steelhead of water pumping from the Carmel River basin to supply water to the population of the Monterey Peninsula. Thus, the proposed project will help protect SCCC steelhead, a coastal and living marine resource, from the impacts of populations pressures consistent with PRC 31220(b)(7).

As Section 31220(c) requires, the proposed project is consistent with local and state watershed plans. This is discussed in detail below under “Consistency With Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan.” Section 31220(c) also requires that projects include a monitoring and evaluation component. CRSA has a permit from NMFS to conduct the rescue program which includes requirements for participating in NMFS’ monitoring program. NMFS carries out the evaluation component of that monitoring.

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

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project will aid in the recovery of SCCC steelhead, a federally listed threatened species.

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

Projects undertaken pursuant to PRC Section 31220 must be consistent with the following, if available and relevant: Integrated Watershed Resource Management Programs (IWRMP); local watershed management plans; and water quality control plans adopted by the state and regional water boards. The proposed project is consistent with the *Final Draft Monterey Peninsula, Carmel Bay, and South Monterey Bay IWRMP Update*, September 2019 (Monterey IRWMP), the scope of which includes the Carmel River. In particular, the proposed project is

consistent with the following objective within the Environment Protection and Enhancement Goal: “protect and enhance sensitive species and their habitats in the regional watersheds and promote steelhead run.”

The *Water Quality Control Plan for the Central Coastal Basin*, June 2019 (Water Quality Plan), adopted by the Regional Water Quality Control Board, designates several beneficial use objectives for the Carmel River, including cold freshwater habitat and habitat for rare, threatened or endangered species. The proposed project will help to ensure survival of SCCC steelhead, a threatened species that requires cold freshwater habitat, and is thus consistent with the Basin Plan’s identified beneficial uses. The proposed project does not require an NPDES permit. Thus, the proposed project is consistent with the Water Quality Plan.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act. Title 14 California Code of Regulations pursuant to Section 15306. Section 15306 categorically exempts basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. The proposed project involves tagging and relocating of steelhead and is carried out under a scientific collection permit from California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The permit conditions ensure that the activities will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. As such, the proposed project is exempt from further CEQA review.

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