

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 19, 2026

EXPLORE THE RIVER GRANT PROGRAM 2026

Project No. 25-048-00
Project Manager: Rodrigo Garcia

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$225,000 to two nonprofit organizations and one government agency for three projects that facilitate and enhance the public's opportunities to explore the Santa Ana River. Participants will visit locations along the Santa Ana River and various tributaries in San Bernardino, Riverside, and Orange counties.

LOCATION: Various locations along the Santa Ana River in San Bernardino, Riverside, and Orange counties.

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 two hundred twenty-five thousand dollars (\$225,000) to two nonprofit organizations and one government agency for three projects that facilitate and enhance the public's opportunities to explore the Santa Ana River. The Executive Officer of the Coastal Conservancy may authorize modifications to one or more of the three projects if the projects continue to promote the goal of facilitating and enhancing the public's opportunities to explore the Santa Ana River. The three grantees and projects are as follows:

- City of Riverside: seventy-five thousand dollars (\$75,000) to provide overnight and day-long camping experiences to approximately 1,200 participants from Riverside County with interactive activities related to the Santa Ana River.

- Inland Empire Waterkeeper: seventy-five thousand dollars (\$75,000) to provide no-cost field trips to approximately 800 youth from Riverside and San Bernardino counties with a hands-on learning experience in the Santa Ana River and within its watershed.
- TreePeople: seventy-five thousand dollars (\$75,000) to provide no-cost field trips to approximately 560 youth and their families with a comprehensive experience in the natural environments of the Santa Ana River and within its watershed.

Prior to commencement of each project, the grantee for the specific project 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.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
4. Any other applicable agreements determined necessary for the project by the Executive Officer.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, this Conservancy resolution is effective only if legislation is enacted that exempts program guidelines and selection criteria for the disbursement of funds from the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (“Proposition 4”), Public Resources Code Sections 90000-95015, from the requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act at Government Code sections 11340-11361.

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 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. Inland Empire Waterkeeper and TreePeople are nonprofit organizations organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$225,000 grant to two nonprofit organizations and one government agency for three projects that facilitate and enhance the public's opportunities to explore the Santa Ana River under the Santa Ana River Conservancy program's Explore the River (ETR) grant program. Participant numbers stated in the project summaries are approximate and may vary up to 25%. Additionally, project specifics may need to be changed due to unexpected circumstances such as closures of particular segments of the Santa Ana River or unanticipated costs, so the recommended authorization includes authority for the

Executive Officer to approve project changes as long as the modified projects continue to promote the goal of the program.

The purpose of the ETR grant program is to provide experiences for people and communities who face challenges or barriers to accessing or enjoying the Santa Ana River and its tributaries (ETR Priority Communities). ETR Priority Communities include, but are not limited to, lower-income individuals and households, people with disabilities, people of color, indigenous communities, immigrant communities, foster youth, and other historically excluded communities who face societal challenges or barriers to accessing or enjoying the river. ETR projects recommended for funding meet one or more of the following priorities: provides an enjoyable experience at the river; reduces economic, physical, operational, or societal barriers to accessing or enjoying the river; or inspires an ongoing river resource stewardship ethic through active learning and interactive activities.

Staff recommends funding the following three projects for the 2026 ETR grant program. Each individual project summary identifies the grant applicant, project name, recommended funding amount, a brief project description, geographic location, and grant applicant qualifications.

ROOTED IN RIVERSIDE	\$75,000
City of Riverside	Riverside County

The City of Riverside will host four day-long field trips and one overnight camping experience at Fairmount Park in the City of Riverside for approximately 1,200 participants from under-resourced neighborhoods in the city, including those living near the Santa Ana River corridor. The family-oriented trips will offer a thoughtfully designed outdoor experience that promotes environmental stewardship, leadership development, and family engagement through different activities led by partner organizations. Activities will include hands-on habitat restoration and education, fly fishing, foundational outdoor skills, guided nature walks, campfires, and cultural education.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The City of Riverside Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department provides innovative recreational experiences and social enrichment opportunities to address the changing needs for people of all ages and cultures. It has successfully managed previous Conservancy grants, delivering projects on time and within budget.

RIVER KATS: KIDS ACTIVISM TOGETHER WITH SCIENCE (KATS)	\$75,000
Inland Empire Waterkeeper	San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange Counties

Inland Empire Waterkeeper will host approximately 20 field trips to various parts of the Santa Ana River, at no cost, for approximately 800 youth from Title 1 schools and community youth groups throughout San Bernardino and Riverside counties. The program will provide an ecological education catered to the youths' grade level before bringing the youth to a local waterway destination or a combination of destinations, which may include wastewater treatment plants, ecological reserves, wetlands, lakes, the natural portions of the Santa Ana River, its riparian forest, and its outlet to the ocean. Participants will engage with nature

through activities such as field investigations, guided hikes, optional clean ups, and wildlife observations. Through an interdisciplinary approach, participants will get first-hand experiences with the mental and physical benefits of spending time outdoors while simultaneously learning how to care for these spaces.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Inland Empire Waterkeeper was established by the Orange County Coastkeeper in 2005 and for over 20 years has carried out its mission to protect and enhance the water quality of the Upper Santa Ana River Watershed through programs of advocacy, education, research, restoration, and enforcement. Inland Empire Waterkeeper has successfully hosted the River KATS program since 2006 in addition to many other projects that provide safe outdoor recreation, hands-on environmental education, public engagement, and long-term preservation of the Santa Ana River and its tributaries.

CREATING NATURAL CONNECTIONS TO THE SANTA ANA RIVER	\$75,000
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TreePeople	San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange Counties
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TreePeople will provide 16 no-cost field trips for youth and their families, with a comprehensive experience in the natural environments of the Santa Ana River and within its watershed. Approximately 560 participants in the cities of San Bernardino, Rialto, and Colton will explore natural areas in the Santa Ana River watershed, such as Lytle Creek and Big Bear Lake through this program. TreePeople will include students who live in historically underserved communities of color. Field trip activities will focus on connecting to nature, self-discovery, and exploration rather than academic requirements. While on the trip, TreePeople will provide environmental information for context that highlights the biodiversity of the region, and issues in the region that affect the health of the watershed. Instruction will take the form of hands-on learning and equip participants with tools to take action on these issues. Food and materials will be provided to allow participants to fully focus on enjoyment of the experience.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: TreePeople has been serving southern California since 1973 by bringing the community to plant trees, harvest rain, and renew the region's landscapes. It has coordinated field trips for decades and has offered hundreds of trips that brought thousands of youths to the coast and natural areas to learn about conservation.

Site Description: The Santa Ana River watershed is the largest coastal watershed in Southern California and flows through several highly urbanized areas. The river is a vital natural and recreational resource for communities near the river, providing a key water source for many residents and opportunities for accessing open space. The recreational opportunities provided by the river are critical to adjacent communities in San Bernardino, Riverside, Los Angeles, and Orange counties.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed projects are 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 projects reflect good investments of state resources as they will provide a lifelong benefit of promoting stewardship for the Santa Ana River and its tributaries to approximately 2,500 individuals through educational and recreational activities at no cost to participants.

The proposed projects are consistent with the following goals of the 2018 *Santa Ana River Parkway and Open Space Plan* prepared by the Conservancy:

- Goal 2 – Create physical and figurative connections between the river corridor and surrounding communities and destinations. The proposed project will foster a connection between program participants and their communities with recreational areas along the river corridor.
- Goal 5 – Provide a diversity of opportunities for people to learn about the river corridor and its resources. The proposed project will provide educational and recreational opportunities for participants to experience nature.

The proposed projects will provide recreational and educational experiences to approximately 2,500 southern California residents with the added lifelong benefit of promoting environmental stewardship.

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

The proposed projects aim for their participants to build a connection with the Santa Ana River, and the natural environment in general. A newly developed appreciation for the Santa Ana River can lead to more respectful recreation or support for conservation efforts at a minimum. Potentially, participants with stronger inclinations for stewardship may contribute through volunteering, pursuing careers in conservation or provide financial support.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The ETR grant program creates a funding avenue for local community groups and government agencies to expose their communities to the joys of the Santa Ana River and the unique recreational and ecological opportunities it provides. The program aims to minimize barriers that have prevented systemically excluded communities from accessing this resource. The recreational, educational, and even professional development benefits of the program will potentially provide long lasting impacts on the participants.

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

The proposed projects utilize a broad network of community partners that allow them to provide these grant programs at no cost to the participants. These networks also support them in providing effective outreach to engage with priority communities.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$225,000
Project Total	\$225,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funding for these projects is a fiscal year 2025-2026 appropriation to the Conservancy from the “Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024,” also known as the 2024 Climate Bond or Proposition 4 (Public Resources Code, Section 90000-95015). Public Resource Code section 91032(d) allocates funds to the Conservancy for the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program for projects that protect and restore rivers, wetlands, streams, lakes, and watersheds, which includes actions to improve access to public open-space areas, or actions to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural, cultural, and historic resources. These projects are consistent with this funding source because they will increase public access to the Santa Ana River and facilitate enjoyment of the river’s natural resources. These projects are also consistent with the goals of the Santa Ana River Conservancy program, as discussed in the Consistency with the Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation section below.

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 projects are consistent with the provisions of Chapter 4.6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Section 31170-31180 regarding the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program. Section 31173 states that the Conservancy may undertake projects and award grants to nonprofit organizations to help achieve the goals of the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program, including “Recreational opportunities [...] in the Santa Ana River for all beneficial uses, [and] related educational use,” (Section 31173 (a)), and “public access to, enjoyment of, and enhancement of recreational and educational experience on, program lands in a manner consistent with the protection of land and natural resources,” (Section 31173(b)). The proposed projects will help achieve these goals by taking youth and their families to multiple locations along the Santa Ana River for recreational and educational experiences and will foster a sense of environmental stewardship in participants.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN:

Consistent with **Goal 1.1, Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the three projects directly benefit one or more systemically excluded communities by offering participant recreation and educational field trips to the Santa Ana River at no cost.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed projects are categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act, pursuant to Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15301 (Existing Facilities), which exempts the regular operation of existing facilities and topographical features involving negligible or no expansion of use. The proposed projects consist of the regular operation of existing facilities and topographical features that will be visited with negligible or no expansion of existing use.

Upon approval of the projects, Conservancy staff will file Notices of Exemption.