

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
October 23, 2003

**SANTA BARBARA COUNTY FISH PASSAGE DESIGN**

File No. 03-101  
Project Manager: Mary Travis

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$453, 000 to the County of Santa Barbara to prepare engineering designs, environmental documentation, and permit applications for at least six fish passage improvement projects in coastal streams on the County's south coast.

**LOCATION:** Coastal streams in southern Santa Barbara County (Exhibit 1)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Location Map

Exhibit 2: Highway 101 culvert, Rincon Creek

Exhibit 3: Debris Dam, San Roque Creek

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed four hundred fifty-three thousand dollars (\$453,000) to the County of Santa Barbara to prepare engineering designs, environmental documentation and permit applications for at least six fish passage improvement projects in coastal streams on the County's south coast, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds, the County of Santa Barbara shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, budget and schedule, and the names of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the work.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

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

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1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria in Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
  2. The project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
  3. The project area has been identified in the certified Local Coastal Programs of Santa Barbara County and the City of Santa Barbara as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems.”
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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff is recommending that the Conservancy provide up to \$453,000 to the County of Santa Barbara to prepare engineering designs, environmental documentation, and permit applications for at least six fish passage improvement projects in coastal streams on the County’s south coast (Exhibit 1). This project would substantially aid in the recovery of the endangered southern California steelhead.

Santa Barbara County’s south coast, which stretches from Point Conception east to the Ventura County line, contains over 50 small watersheds. Virtually all of these streams contain structures such as low-flow (“Arizona”) road crossings, concrete channels, culverts, and flood control debris basins that impede or prohibit upstream migration of steelhead. Nevertheless, these coastal streams hold tremendous potential for steelhead recovery. Many retain high-quality trout habitat in their upper reaches, and several support healthy populations of resident rainbow trout that are landlocked above anthropogenic barriers. Because they lack the major dams and water supply projects that characterize large river systems, the south coast streams offer relatively straightforward recovery opportunities. These opportunities have been identified in a recent report, *Steelhead Assessment and Recovery Opportunities in Southern Santa Barbara County, California* (Matt W. Stoecker and Conception Coast Project, June 2002).

The Santa Barbara County Water Agency, a County special district, is ready to take advantage of these opportunities through a concerted effort to remove some of the area’s more serious barriers. Working with appropriate agency and nongovernmental fisheries experts, the County Water Agency would conduct a screening process to categorize potential projects into near-, medium-, and long-term priorities. The County Water Agency would use the Stoecker report, the Conservancy’s recently completed *Inventory of Barriers to Fish Passage in California’s Coastal Watersheds*, and other available information. The screening process would take into account factors such as the biological benefit of removing a given barrier, restoration efforts underway within each watershed, land ownership of project sites, permitting issues, and estimated project costs. Through this process, which is expected to take no more than three months, the County Water Agency would identify at least six high-priority passage projects, including a range of barrier types, to be implemented in the near term. For at least these six, the County Water Agency would prepare engineering designs, complete environmental documentation, and prepare permit applications. Following this phase of project development the County or other appropriate party would seek funds for project construction.

This project is a critically important step in the effort to recover the southern California steelhead Evolutionarily Significant Unit (ESU), the only steelhead population that is listed as endangered

under the federal Endangered Species Act. Removal of migration barriers to allow the southern steelhead to recolonize streams within its historic range must occur very soon if the population is to avoid extinction. The sheer number of barriers in the Santa Barbara south coast region—407, according to the Conservancy's *Inventory to Barriers*—poses a daunting challenge. There is strong local interest in removing these barriers, and there are funding sources available for project implementation, yet here, as elsewhere in the state, local entities have been hampered by a lack of sufficient funds and staffing to design and permit promising projects. The proposed Conservancy grant would help the County overcome this roadblock. It would also help develop a long-term strategy for barrier removal and modification in the south coast. And because barrier removal is still in its early stages in southern California—numerous projects are in the planning stages, but few have been completed—the proposed project is expected to help build local capacity and expertise and provide valuable lessons that could be applied throughout the region.

The County Water Agency is well positioned to manage this project. A special district within the County Public Works Department, the County Water Agency manages a number of programs, including the Conservancy-funded Project Clean Water, which addresses non-point source pollution on the County's south coast. The Water Agency also administers the Tri-County F.I.S.H. Team, a partnership between local government agencies and non-governmental organizations within San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties that was formed to develop a regional approach to salmonid restoration. Additionally, the Water Agency is working on a community-based watershed plan for San Jose Creek, is involved in barrier removal and habitat restoration in Carpinteria Creek, and participates in a number of local watershed groups as well as the Santa Barbara County Task Force of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project. Water Agency staff have biological expertise and extensive experience in public processes.

**Site Description:** The proposed project area, Santa Barbara County's south coast, is more formally described as the Santa Barbara Coastal Hydrologic Unit, an area that corresponds to the south face of the east-west trending Santa Ynez Mountains (Exhibit 1). It stretches some 60 miles from Point Conception east to the Ventura County line, and extends from the steep crest of the mountains, at elevations of up to 4,700 feet, south to the Santa Barbara Channel, a distance of six or seven miles. Although the Santa Barbara Coastal Hydrologic Unit is often classified as a single watershed, in fact it comprises 50 to 60 individual stream systems. These watersheds are relatively small, ranging in area from under 2,000 acres to about 13,000 acres (approximately 20 square miles), with total stream lengths that rarely exceed 30 miles.

Along the Gaviota Coast, between Point Conception and the western edge of Goleta, land use in the coastal watersheds is generally limited to parkland and open space, cattle ranching, and farming of orchard crops, with scattered large-lot residential development. Between the cities of Goleta and Carpinteria, the watersheds have a more pronounced urban character. The upper portions of most of these streams are within Los Padres National Forest and retain high-quality riparian habitat, but in the Santa Ynez foothills, streamside vegetation has been cleared from many streams to make way for orchards or subdivisions, while on the coastal plains, urban development has diminished, to a greater or lesser extent, the habitat value of most streams.

Despite their small size, many of Santa Barbara's coastal watersheds historically supported significant runs of steelhead, which spawned in the middle and upper reaches of the streams and tributaries. Many streams still support healthy populations of resident rainbow trout in their upper reaches. But the steelhead runs have dwindled or disappeared as a consequence of human modifications to the creeks and their drainage basins. In almost every one of the coastal streams

there are culverts, inappropriate road crossings, or other structures that impede or preclude steelhead migration to upstream spawning grounds. Two types of migration barriers characteristic of the region are especially problematic. At the creek mouths, concrete box culverts under Highway 101—many of them hundreds of feet long—completely block steelhead access into several streams between Gaviota and the Ventura County line (Exhibit 2). Farther upstream, on several creeks in urbanized areas, the County Flood Control and Water Conservation District maintains a number of debris basins (Exhibit 3). These were typically constructed after wildfires to prevent flooding by trapping the high levels of sediment and debris expected to wash down from denuded slopes. Most debris basins are complete barriers to fish passage, and in many cases they impede access to the best spawning and rearing habitat.

**Project History:** The 1997 listing of the southern steelhead under the federal Endangered Species Act gave momentum to local efforts to restore steelhead to Santa Barbara County streams. The Conservancy has participated in some of these, including implementation of the Lower Santa Ynez River Fish Management Plan and planning and design of fish passage projects in Arroyo Hondo and Carpinteria Creek. The release last year of the Stoecker report has provided further impetus as well as the basis for a systematic approach to removing barriers from south coast streams. The report, which was funded by the California Department of Fish and Game and the Wendy P. McCaw Foundation, provides a habitat assessment of 27 “focal watersheds” on the south coast—identified on the basis of steelhead presence and/or recovery potential—and, within each focal watershed, identification and assessment of migration barriers to the natural upper limits of anadromy. It also includes a ranking of streams for their recovery potential and a priority ranking of “keystone barriers,” the most downstream barrier in each stream that blocks or seriously impedes upstream migration.

Currently there is tremendous local interest in carrying out the recommendations of the Stoecker report. So far, however, very few fish passage improvement projects have reached even the initial planning stages, in large part because of the difficulties local agencies and nonprofit organizations face in designing and permitting these projects. Conservancy staff, while preparing the *Inventory of Barriers to Fish Passage*, identified this problem as a major obstacle to construction of much-needed fish passage improvements along the coast. Additionally, in southern California, neither local governments nor private consultants have the expertise with fish passage design and implementation that their counterparts in northern California have developed.

Over the past several months Conservancy staff has been working with a number of local entities to devise strategies for moving much-needed projects toward construction. This has led to Conservancy approval in August 2003 of a grant to Trinity County for engineering, environmental documentation, and permitting of a batch of fish passage improvement projects within four North Coast counties. In Santa Barbara County, staff identified the County Water Agency as the entity best able to manage a similar project.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

**Pre-construction:** Engineering design, environmental documentation, and permitting:

Coastal Conservancy	\$453,000
County of Santa Barbara	<u>10,000</u>
<b>Total pre-construction cost:</b>	<b>\$463,000</b>

**Project construction (future):**

County of Santa Barbara (committed)

\$200,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for this project is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the “Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000” (Proposition 12) for salmonid habitat recovery.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270), regarding enhancement of coastal resources.

Under §31251, the Conservancy may award grants for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of natural or human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. Consistent with this section, the proposed project would lead to improvements in the quality and availability of habitat in Santa Barbara County's coastal streams for the benefit of endangered southern California steelhead, an important coastal resource whose numbers have dwindled because structures such as culverts and road crossings have impeded passage to historic spawning and rearing habitat.

Section 31251.2(a) states that, at the request of a local public agency that has jurisdiction over the project area, the Conservancy may award grants to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside of the coastal zone in order to enhance coastal resources within the coastal zone. The proposed project would address fish passage in coastal watersheds that lie partly within and partly outside the coastal zone with the goal of enhancing these watersheds for the benefit of the anadromous steelhead, which utilizes entire stream systems, both within and outside the coastal zone, to complete its life cycle. The project ultimately may help bring about an increase in the southern steelhead's numbers and distribution. The County has requested Conservancy involvement in this project.

The proposed authorization is consistent with §31252, in that the certified Local Coastal Programs of both Santa Barbara County and the City of Santa Barbara identify coastal streams as requiring public action to resolve resource protection problems, as described in the “Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies” section below.

The proposed authorization is consistent with §31253, which states that the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project would promote coastal resource conservation by leading to modification or removal of barriers to fish passage from Santa Barbara County coastal streams. As a result of this project, steelhead would gain access to many square miles of spawning and rearing habitat.

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project would lead to the development of at least six projects that would restore the habitat value of Santa Barbara County's coastal watersheds for anadromous steelhead.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** Supporters of this project include Assemblymember Hannah-Beth Jackson, the California Department of Fish and Game, the Santa Barbara County Task Force of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project, and the Southern California Steelhead Coalition. Letters of support are attached as Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The proposed authorization would address fish passage in coastal streams on Santa Barbara County's south coast. Although some of the selected project sites may lie outside of the coastal zone, the project would aid in the recovery of the anadromous southern steelhead.
5. **Need:** The County of Santa Barbara is eager to undertake removal and modification of migration barriers but lacks sufficient funds and staffing to design and permit projects. Conservancy funding for this phase of project development would enable the County to prepare much-needed passage projects for implementation and position itself to obtain construction funds from other sources.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The public trust value of the endangered southern steelhead is of great interest to all and a legacy too precious to lose. Restoring access to and quality of spawning and rearing habitat in Santa Barbara County's south coast streams will be critical to the recovery of the population.

**Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** The southern California steelhead ESU is the only steelhead population to have received endangered status under the federal Endangered Species Act, and it has experienced the most dramatic decline of all steelhead populations in the country. The State Department of Fish and Game has identified recovery of southern steelhead as a top management priority. Restoring access to spawning and rearing habitat will be crucial in achieving recovery.
12. **Readiness:** The County Water Agency is ready to begin the project immediately. The Water Agency expects to complete the screening process within three months, following which it will begin immediately to design and permit projects.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy's preparation of the report *Inventory of Barriers to Fish Passage in California's Coastal Watersheds* signals this agency's focus on and commitment to the improvement of fish passage in coastal streams. This proposal provides a means of expanding the Conservancy's efforts in this area and expediting the development of fish passage projects.

15. **Cooperation:** In developing this project the County Water Agency will work closely with the State Department of Fish and Game, NOAA Fisheries, the Santa Barbara County Task Force of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project, the Southern California Steelhead Coalition, and other organizations.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the certified Local Coastal Program (LCP) of Santa Barbara County. Section 3.9.2 of the County’s LCP defines environmentally sensitive habitats as including those areas in which plant or animal life or their habitats are rare or especially valuable because of their special nature or role in an ecosystem. Section 3.9.2 specifically identifies as environmentally sensitive “rare and endangered species habitats” and “specialized wildlife habitats which are vital to species survival.” Such habitats are to be preserved and protected. Further, Section 3.9.5 states, “Public action is needed to restore South Coast streams that have been interrupted or altered by culverts along Highway 101.” Consistent with these sections, the goal of the proposed project is to improve habitat within south coast streams for the endangered southern California steelhead.

Section 3.3.4 of the County’s LCP notes that watersheds “have potential for impacts on coastal streams, wetlands, [and] estuaries,” and states that protection of watersheds is necessary to “insure continued biological productivity of coastal streams and wetlands.” Thus, although some of the specific project sites to be addressed under the proposed authorization may lie outside the coastal zone, the project is consistent with LCP policies calling for protection of entire watersheds because of their hydrologic and biologic links to coastal zone resources.”

Projects selected for design and permitting under this authorization may include sites within the City of Santa Barbara. Policy 6.1 of the City’s certified LCP provides that the City “shall protect, preserve, and, where feasible, restore the biotic communities designated in the City’s Conservation Element of the General Plan.” More specifically, Policy 6.8 of the City’s LCP provides, “The riparian resources, biological productivity, and water quality of the City’s coastal zone creeks shall be maintained, preserved, enhanced, and, where feasible, restored.” Designing fish passage improvement projects for City creeks would greatly enhance these streams and help restore their steelhead runs, and is therefore consistent with the City’s LCP.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project design, environmental review, and permitting activities are statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262, in that they would involve only feasibility analyses for projects that have not yet been approved. Consistent with that section, the environmental effects of the proposed future fish passage projects would be considered. The proposed activities are also categorically exempt under §15306, which exempts basic data collection and resource evaluation activities. Upon Conservancy approval of this project, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.