

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

January 29, 2004

MALIBU CREEK WATERSHED HABITAT RESTORATION

File No. 03-149

Project Manager: Marc Beyeler

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$400,000 to Heal the Bay to undertake riparian and fisheries habitat restoration and enhancement activities along Malibu Creek focused on restoring native coastal and riparian habitat and eliminating barriers to fish passage for the southern steelhead trout within the Malibu Creek Watershed.

LOCATION: Malibu Creek Watershed, Los Angeles County (Exhibit 1). The Malibu Creek Watershed encompasses approximately 110 square miles in Ventura and Los Angeles Counties.

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Regional Location and Overview

Exhibit 2: Potential Restoration Sites

Exhibit 3: Photographs

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

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 the disbursement of an amount not to exceed four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000) to Heal the Bay to undertake habitat restoration activities along Malibu Creek within the Malibu Creek Watershed in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties to restore riparian habitat and eliminate barriers to fish passage for the southern steelhead trout, more specifically described in the accompanying staff recommendation, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any funds, Heal the Bay shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Coastal Conservancy:
 - a. A final work program, schedule and budget for the project;

- b. All contractors to be employed for the project;
 - c. Evidence of all permits and approvals for the project; and
 - d. A program for the installation of sign(s).
2. Heal the Bay shall enter into an agreement with the Conservancy sufficient to protect the public's interest pursuant to PRC Section 31116(c)."

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:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270 regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. Heal the Bay is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Conservancy staff is recommending Conservancy authorization to disburse \$400,000 to Heal the Bay to undertake habitat restoration activities along Malibu Creek focused on restoring riparian habitat and eliminating barriers to fish passage for the southern steelhead trout within the Malibu Creek Watershed (see Exhibit 2).

Heal the Bay seeks to undertake habitat restoration projects along Malibu Creek within the Malibu Creek Watershed following up on work recently completed utilizing Proposition 12 funds provided by the Coastal Conservancy. Heal the Bay has used Stream Team data collected over the past three years to identify several small habitat projects that can be cost effectively implemented using the volunteer corps developed over the past three years. The use of an established volunteer corps will allow extensive riparian habitat and fish passage improvement projects to be undertaken in areas difficult to access for a relatively small investment. The restoration effort will involve three elements: (1) invasive vegetation removal; (2) the removal of fish barriers; and (3) the removal of large debris.

Included in the three elements will be the removal of two minor facilities that currently block fish passage to useable steelhead trout spawning and rearing habitat. The first project is the "Texas Crossing" located within Malibu Creek State Park (Exhibit 3, Page 1). This minor facility is dilapidated and will be completely removed. This will provide steelhead trout access to an additional one mile of high quality steelhead trout habitat. The second fish barrier is the small check dam structure at White Oak Farms (Exhibit 3, Page 2). It is also located within Malibu Creek State Park on Las Virgenes Creek. The removal of this small check dam will provide steelhead trout access to an additional three miles of high quality steelhead trout habitat.

Grants funds will also be used to create an invasive vegetation removal and native plant revegetation team. The volunteer corps will be used to access invasive vegetation sites previously mapped. Volunteers will hand remove all vegetation at these locations. The vegetation removal team will focus on areas along the Las Virgenes and Malibu Creeks and it is estimated that they can remove up to three linear miles of exotic invasive vegetation.

The volunteer teams will revegetate these areas with native plants provided by California Department of Parks and Recreation and harvested from local species. The volunteer team will also conduct bank stabilization projects on collapsing stream banks previously mapped within this area. Las Virgenes and Malibu Creeks were both recently listed by the State Water Resources Control Board as impaired for sediments. The largest source of these sediments identified during the Stream Team mapping was unstable and collapsing stream banks. It is estimated that up to a linear mile of stream banks can be stabilized during the course of this project. Finally, grant funds will also be used to clean up at least five debris sites that either contribute to water quality problems and or endanger wildlife.

Site Description: The 110-square-mile Malibu Creek Watershed is the second largest subwatershed within the larger 400-square-mile Santa Monica Bay Watershed. It is the most ecologically significant watershed in Los Angeles County and the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA). The Malibu Creek Watershed provides a wide variety of habitats for threatened and endangered species and has long been a popular locale for public access and public recreation. A large percentage of the watershed remains in natural habitat. It encompasses unincorporated portions of Ventura and Los Angeles Counties, and seven cities—Malibu, Calabassas, Agoura Hills, Thousand Oaks, and Westlake Village and portions of Simi Valley and Hidden Hills. The Malibu Creek Watershed extends north from Santa Monica Bay and through the Santa Monica Mountains to the Simi Hills and Santa Susanna Mountains providing a vital habitat and species corridor of regional and statewide significance.

Project History: Since the late 1980s the Coastal Conservancy has been a partner in efforts to restore the Malibu Creek Watershed and Santa Monica Bay, including land acquisition projects in the Cold Creek drainage of the watershed. In 1991 the Conservancy funded the preparation of a restoration plan for a portion of the Malibu Creek Watershed and its coastal lagoon. Staff of the Coastal Conservancy participated in early efforts to create the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project through the 1990s.

In 1995, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project (SMBRP) completed the *Bay Restoration Plan*, which among other program elements, included a draft action plan for the Malibu Creek Watershed. The *Malibu Creek Watershed Natural Resource Plan*, adopted by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, also contains action items for watershed improvements which parallel the actions identified in the Bay Restoration Plan. The combined action items now comprise the *Bay Restoration Plan's Malibu Creek Watershed Action Plan*, including items to protect and restore natural habitats in the watershed, increase habitat monitoring activities by utilizing citizen volunteers, and improve watershed water quality.

Between 1998 and 2000 the Coastal Conservancy funded two projects to help implement the *Bay Restoration Plan's Malibu Creek Watershed Action Plan*. In the first action, Heal the Bay was awarded a \$118,000 grant to conduct a watershed study and design a citizen volunteer monitoring program to address the specific issues of concern and data gaps in the Malibu Creek Watershed. The Malibu Creek Watershed Stream Team has been in continuous operation since No-

vember 1998. The Stream Team program utilizes a three-pronged approach to measure water quality and identify problems that are impacting riparian habitat and/or preventing the upstream migration of the endangered steelhead trout. Since its inception more than 5,000 volunteers have been trained to conduct water quality and/or Stream Habitat Surveys. The Stream Team Program has been highly successful and is being emulated in at least four other watersheds: Topanga Creek, Ventura River, Calleguas Creek, and Carpinteria Creek. In addition, The Malibu Creek Watershed Stream Team Field Guide and Stream Team Equipment Kit, which were created out of this grant, have been adapted for use throughout the entire southern California region and an extensive marine monitoring component was added. Finally, the Stream Team equipment kit and monitoring protocol has radically improved the accuracy and reliability of citizen monitoring data and its use among resource management agencies.

The second action involved funding of the Lower Malibu Creek Resource Enhancement and Management Study. The UCLA study made specific enhancement recommendations including restoration and circulation improvement of the existing Malibu Lagoon focused monitoring of riparian habitat and water quality throughout the watershed, and high priority properties to acquire for water quality and habitat quality enhancement.

In 2001 the State Coastal Conservancy awarded Heal the Bay \$350,600 of funds from Proposition 12 to implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan to expedite Stream Team data collection and expand the water quality monitoring. The Stream Team program was expanded from seven water quality and macroinvertebrate monitoring sites to 18. In addition, a professional field crew was created to conduct detailed stream habitat and riparian habitat surveys five days a week. The habitat surveys include the monitoring of invasive vegetation to improve the effectiveness of Conservancy funded *Arundo donax* and invasive vegetation removal projects within the watershed. Further, stream habitat assessments identified and mapped point and non-point source pollution sources so that they could be targeted for removal, eroding stream banks for restoration planning and prioritization, and barriers that prevent the upstream migration of the endangered steelhead trout.

Heal the Bay has conducted detailed stream surveys on more than 70 miles of creeks throughout the watershed and has begun prioritizing restoration projects that will enhance water quality, enhance steelhead habitat quality and quantity, and improve riparian habitat. Data collected by Heal the Bay during this grant have been successfully used to create the bacteria and nutrient TMDL's that are the strongest in the country. All data collected by the Stream Team is integrated into GIS and will be used by the Conservancy and other agencies to cost effectively prioritize future restoration projects in the watershed.

The Coastal Conservancy is currently a project partner, and/or project funder, in several important coastal resource protection projects in the Malibu Creek Watershed, including the eradication of non-native invasive plant species, the restoration and enhancement of Malibu Lagoon, the feasibility analysis of removing the Rindge Dam, riparian habitat restoration, the elimination of barriers to fish passage directed at the restoration of historic steelhead runs to the headwaters of the watershed, the acquisition of Ahmanson Ranch, and continued acquisitions to complete the multi-year restoration plan for Cold Creek, a tributary of Malibu Creek.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy

\$400,000

The anticipated source of funds for this project is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks, and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40). Funds for restoration of riparian habitat within coastal draining watershed lands in Malibu Creek Watershed to protect coastal natural resources and enhance coastal water quality is consistent with the anticipated funding source.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) provides for the Conservancy's participation in a program of coastal resource enhancement. Consistent with §31251, the Conservancy is awarding a grant to a public agency for the purposes of restoring and enhancing coastal resources. The proposed authorization would facilitate the preservation of significant coastal natural resources. Protecting and enhancing the riparian resources of Malibu Creek is of critical importance in ensuring the sustainability of riparian ecosystems of the creek, and providing for healthy creek habitat to promote the restoration of steelhead habitat. Maintaining degraded riparian habitat will adversely affect water quality and aquatic ecosystem health within the larger Malibu Creek Watershed.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A**, the proposed project will increase Coastal Resource Conservation by the restoration of coastal-draining watershed lands that will protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas. Objective A directs staff to preserve, restore and enhance important coastal habitats including coastal stream corridors, coastal sage scrub, and oak woodlands. The proposed project contains significant natural resources including coastal stream habitat, and oak woodlands.

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective B**, the proposed project will increase Coastal Resource Conservation by the restoration of coastal-draining watershed lands that will protect, restore and enhance habitat corridors both between core habitat areas along the coast and from coastal habitats to inland habitat areas. The Malibu Creek Watershed provides an essential habitat and species linkage and corridor extending from the Santa Monica Mountains to the San Gabriel Mountains.

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objective A**, proposed project will improve water quality, habitat and related coastal habitats within a priority coastal watershed, the Malibu Creek Watershed, and the ocean resources associated with Santa Monica Bay. The proposed project will contribute to the multiple goals of 1) assisting in the recovery of anadromous fish (southern steelhead trout); 2) assist in the implementation of the state's non-point source water pollution control plans, in this case implementing the goals of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan; and 3) assist in the implementation of endangered species recovery plans.

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:** The proposed project has widespread community and agency support, as well as support from the scientific community. Copies of support letters are included in Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** Located within the Malibu Creek Watershed, restoration of the property for purpose of natural resource protection is essential to contribute to the restoration and enhancement of significant coastal resources, including riparian and watershed resources.
5. **Need:** Restoration and enhancement of riparian habitat and the elimination of fish barriers will be critical to efforts to promote the health of native coastal resources and to restore native steelhead trout runs.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** This watershed land is particularly valuable because Malibu Creek provides habitat for two federally endangered fish species, the tidewater goby and southern steelhead trout, contributing to species conservation and recovery beyond the project boundaries. In addition, the Malibu Creek Watershed provides habitat and species linkages of regional and statewide significance.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The proposed grant will significantly aid current efforts to protect natural resources at risk from several encroachments and threats, including non–point source pollution. In addition, the removal of fish barriers will be critical to restoring native steelhead trout runs.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will address coastal resource protection, habitat quality and species protection, water quality and watershed resource protection, as well as public recreation.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the “Project History” section above.
15. **Cooperation:** The project involves the cooperation of both Heal the Bay and the California Department of Parks and Recreation, as well as the Malibu Creek Watershed Council, made of nearly two dozen governmental organizations and community nonprofit organizations.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The project is categorically exempt from the provisions of California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15304 because it involves only minor alterations to the condition of land and vegetation and does not involve the removal of mature, scenic trees. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.