

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
March 25, 2004

**SAN ELIJO LAGOON ACQUISITION:
RANCHO SANTA FE FOUNDATION PROPERTY**

File No. 01-091
Project Manager: Trish Chapman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization for the San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy to acquire the Rancho Santa Fe Foundation Property, San Diego County, to implement the San Elijo Lagoon Acquisition Program, approved by the Conservancy on June 25, 2001.

LOCATION: San Elijo Lagoon, County of San Diego

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map
 - Exhibit 2: June 25, 2001 Staff Recommendation
 - Exhibit 3: Letters of Support
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31351-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy to acquire the Rancho Santa Fe Foundation Property (San Diego County Assessor Parcel Nos. 259-191-27, 28, 29 and 259-221-13), located in an unincorporated part of San Diego County immediately south of the City of Encinitas, as more specifically described in Exhibit 1 to the accompanying staff recommendation, to implement the San Elijo Lagoon Acquisition Program, approved by the Conservancy on June 25, 2001, subject to the Conservancy’s June 25, 2001 conditions.”

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. Acquisition of the Rancho Santa Fe Foundation (RSFF) Property is consistent with the guidelines and criteria set forth in Chapter 6 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) regarding the enhancement of coastal resources.

2. Acquisition of the RSFF Property is consistent with the guidelines and criteria set forth in the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted on January 24, 2001.
 3. San Elijo Lagoon is identified in the City of Encinitas Local Coastal Plan as an environmentally sensitive habitat area which should be preserved and restored.
 4. The San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy 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."
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed project will authorize the San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy (SELC) to use up to \$440,000 of funds authorized on June 25, 2001 for the San Elijo Lagoon Acquisition Program to acquire the Rancho Santa Fe Foundation (RSFF) property. The 17-acre RSFF property is divided into two distinct sections with Escondido Creek running through the center of both sections. The entire property is within the 100-year flood plain and is subject to occasional flooding. The property is contiguous on the downstream side with the San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve, and once acquired, the property will be added to the reserve.

Approximately two-thirds of the site is covered by a riparian woodland that surrounds Escondido Creek. The remaining area is upland which serves as a buffer to the riparian area. The upland area on the southwest side is currently mowed each year for brush management, which significantly reduces its effectiveness as a wetland buffer. The site has also been impacted by its illegal use as a campsite by migrant farm workers. By acquiring the RSFF property, SELC will be able to ensure the long-term protection of the riparian corridor and will also be able to improve the overall habitat quality through enhancement projects and ongoing management. As part of the project, the Rancho Santa Fe Foundation has agreed to create a management endowment of approximately \$400,000 for the property.

SELC manages the San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve in partnership with the County of San Diego and the Department of Fish and Game. It has successfully implemented a wide range of projects including land acquisitions, wetlands restoration, and comprehensive planning. SELC is extremely qualified to undertake the proposed project.

Site Description: The 17-acre RSFF property is located approximately three miles east of the Pacific Ocean in the Escondido Creek Watershed. It is within the unincorporated area of San Diego County and abuts the community of Rancho Santa Fe on the south and the City of Encinitas on the north. Surrounding land uses include agriculture, residential, and light commercial. On the downstream side, the property is contiguous with the San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve. Immediately up stream from the site is private property that is undeveloped.

As described above, Escondido Creek runs through the property and supports a significant riparian corridor. The riparian vegetation is impacted by several invasive species including *Arundo*, pampas grass, palms, eucalyptus, and tamarisk. The continued mowing of the property primarily impacts the buffer areas. Initial surveys of the buffer show a mix of remnant saltmarsh, pickleweed (*Salicornia virginica*), *Frankenia grandifolia*, *Cressa truxillensis*, and invasive weedy plants in this area.

Project History: At its June 25, 2001 meeting, the Coastal Conservancy approved a grant to SELC to implement the San Elijo Lagoon Acquisition Program (see Exhibit 2). Under this program, SELC in partnership with the County of San Diego would acquire properties identified as high priorities for inclusion in the San Elijo Ecological Reserve, to protect and restore San Elijo Lagoon. One condition of the June 25, 2001 authorization was that the Conservancy would approve acquisition of any specific parcel. In 2002, the Conservancy approved \$483,000 of Conservancy funds and \$650,000 of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service funds to acquire the Manchester Property. In 2003, the Rancho Santa Fe Foundation approached SELC about acquiring the subject property and offered to provide a substantial endowment for management of the site.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	<u>\$440,000</u>
Total Acquisition Cost	\$440,000

Summary of Acquisition Program Financing to date (including proposed project)

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 923,000
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	650,000
County of San Diego	667,000
San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy	<u>1,400,000</u>
Total for Acquisition Program	\$3,640,000

The project will be funded with monies appropriated to the Coastal Conservancy for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP) and previously granted to SELC for the San Elijo Acquisition Program. The San Elijo Acquisition Program has been identified as a priority on the WRP Work Plan and is therefore consistent with the funding source. Over the course of the acquisition program, Conservancy funding has leveraged almost three times more money in federal, local, and private funding. In addition, the Rancho Santa Fe Foundation will provide approximately \$400,000 to SELC to create a management endowment for the property.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The San Elijo Lagoon Acquisition Program would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resource Code Sections 31251-31270. Pursuant to §31251, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations to enhance coastal resources. This project will enhance the biological and hydrological resources of San Elijo Lagoon by increasing the riparian habitat corridor connected to the lagoons and improving the water quality and hydrologic functioning of the lagoon's main tributary.

Pursuant to §31251.2, the Conservancy may award a grant to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside of the coastal zone. The RSFF property is located outside the coastal zone. Consistent with this section, the County of San Diego requested the Conservancy's assistance with the Acquisition Program.

Pursuant to §31252, the proposed project is consistent with the City of Encinitas Local Coastal Program as described in the "Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies" section below.

Consistent with §31253, the amount of funding recommended for the proposed project is based on the total amount of funding available for coastal resource enhancement projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant and its project partners, and the urgency of the project relative to other eligible coastal resource enhancement projects.

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

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A**, the proposed project will increase Coastal Resource Conservation by preserving 17 acres of riparian and buffer habitat and will further the goals of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project.

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 project has been identified as a Tier 2 priority of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project. The project is strongly supported by the County of San Diego and the California Department of Fish and Game. See support letters in Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located outside the coastal zone along Escondido Creek, approximately three miles inland. The property is contiguous with the San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve and upon acquisition would be added to the reserve. The proposed project will benefit the lagoon's coastal resources by providing additional wetland, riparian and transitional habitat for resident and migratory wildlife using the lagoon. In addition, restoration of wetland and riparian habitat on the site will help improve water quality in the lagoon by reducing sediment flows and removing some nutrients and contaminants.
5. **Need:** Neither SELC or the County currently have the funds to undertake this acquisition. Without funding from the Conservancy, the project could not occur at this time.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** San Elijo Lagoon is one of the largest coastal wetlands in southern California and provides important habitat to endangered species and migratory birds. The proposed project is part of an ongoing enhancement effort to preserve and restore the lagoon's ecosystem.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
12. **Readiness:** The acquisition can be completed by April 30, 2004.

13. Realization of prior Conservancy goals: See the “Project History” section above.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The City of Encinitas Local Coastal Program (LCP) outlines several policies that relate to the preservation and restoration of San Elijo Lagoon and Escondido Creek, these include: Policy 10.4 – “The City will develop a program to acquire or preserve the entire undeveloped riparian corridor within the City that drains into the San Elijo Lagoon . . .”; Policy 10.9 – “The City will encourage the preservation and the function of San Elijo Lagoon . . . as viable wetlands, ecosystems and habitat for resident and migratory wildlife . . .”; Policy 10.10 – “The City will encourage and cooperate with other responsible agencies to plan and implement an integrated management plan for the long-term conservation and restoration of wetlands resources at San Elijo Lagoon.” The proposed project will help preserve and restore the wetlands resources in San Elijo Lagoon and is therefore consistent with all of these policies.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Land acquisition for the purpose of preserving the land in its natural condition and providing public access is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15313, acquisition of land for wildlife conservation purposes. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.