

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 30, 2004

**SAN DIEGO RIVER PARK-
LOWER SAN DIEGO RIVER HABITAT RESTORATION
DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

File No. 01-098

Project Manager: Marc Beyeler

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$250,000 to the San Diego River Park Foundation to undertake final pre-project planning for the Lower San Diego River Habitat Restoration Demonstration Project as part of the Coastal Conservancy's actions to implement the San Diego River Park, using a portion of funds provided by the State Water Resources Control Board and a \$150,000 match of Conservancy funds.

LOCATION: Southwestern San Diego County; San Diego River watershed (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Location Map

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 ratifies the Executive Officer's acceptance of \$800,000 from the State Water Resources Control Board to develop and implement an urban runoff and creek restoration/stewardship program for the Lower San Diego River; and authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000) to the San Diego River Park Foundation to identify restoration sites and develop final concept site plans for the Lower San Diego River Habitat Restoration Demonstration Project, as described in the accompanying staff recommendation, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any funds, the grantee shall submit a work program, including project tasks, project timeline and budget, and the names and qualifications of any contractors that it intends to employ, for review and approval by the Executive Officer.

2. All funds in excess of one hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$150,000) disbursed pursuant to this and any subsequent authorization relating to the Lower San Diego River Habitat Demonstration Project shall be reimbursed by the State Water Resources Control Board.”

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 project is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The San Diego River Park Foundation 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:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$250,000 to the San Diego River Park Foundation (“Park Foundation”) in funds received from the State Water Resources Control Board to undertake final pre-project planning for the Lower San Diego River Habitat Restoration Demonstration Project as part of the Coastal Conservancy’s actions to implement the San Diego River Park. This would be the first phase of an urban runoff and creek restoration/stewardship program for the Lower San Diego River funded by the SWRCB in the total amount of \$800,000, which requires a matching funds contribution from the Coastal Conservancy in the amount of \$150,000.

The Coastal Conservancy, working with its community nonprofit partner, the San Diego River Park Foundation, will implement an integrated urban runoff and creek restoration/stewardship program for the Lower San Diego River on private lands within the river corridor. The proposed project involves several different elements, including: (1) identification/enrollment of private landowner participants; (2) recruitment, training and supervision of community stewards; (3) design/installation of treatment control/habitat restoration projects; (4) and design/implementation of stewardship protocols, including project evaluation and monitoring data collection and reporting

The proposed project would involve plans to restore and enhance the creek riparian habitat resources of the Lower San Diego River on private lands in a cooperative program involving willing landowners and community volunteer stewards. The design and installation of vegetated treatment controls in conjunction with habitat restoration and enhancement will result in the installation of pollutant filter, trapping and containment facilities, and a range of natural treatment control design features, such as bioswales, the reduction in impervious surfaces, and the removal of non-native plant species and their replacement with native species.

The program is intended to improve coastal water quality in the reach of the Lower San Diego River, which empties into the Pacific Ocean at Ocean Beach in San Diego. The river mouth is directly adjacent to a popular swimming beach. The combined source reduction, bio-engineered treatment controls, and habitat restoration and enhancement efforts are intended to result in improved water quality. Upon completion of concept site plans and other final pre-project activities funded under this authorization, staff will request Conservancy authorization of specific implementation actions, using the remaining SWRCB funds.

Restoration and enhancement of creek and riparian resources along the Lower San Diego River and the addition of bio-engineered improvements to adjacent urban land uses, will result in reduced polluted runoff to the river mouth at Ocean Beach. Overall, the proposed project will achieve multiple habitat preservation goals, public safety objectives and coastal water quality improvement goals. Finally, the program will provide model demonstration project results which will be applicable to similar situations at other coastal locations.

Site Description: The San Diego River has been designed a River Parkway and active planning and implementation efforts are currently ongoing for open space and habitat preservation as well as public access and public recreation. The Lower San Diego River area extends from the river mouth near the I-5 freeway through the heavily urbanized Mission Valley portion of the City of San Diego. In this reach of the river, the San Diego River is its narrowest and improvements to private properties encroach up to and into the river channel. Many private property owners have located parking lots and other related facilities in close proximity to the river channel, negatively impacting native vegetation, contributing polluted runoff to the river and constraining the free flow of the river waters.

Project History: For the past four years the staff of the Coastal Conservancy has been working closely with local stakeholders and partners to establish (and begin implementation of) the San Diego River Parkway. The Coastal Conservancy made the first grant for initial River Parkway activities in Lakeside in June of 2001 to the County of San Diego. The Conservancy used funds for NCCP implementation to support the Lakeside grant, linking the River Parkway and NCCP program goals.

The Conservancy's initial grant for the Lakeside project was instrumental in generating interest and support for establishment of the San Diego River Parkway. In 2002, the Conservancy funded an Interagency Agreement with the Cal Poly University Foundation to produce the River Park Concept Plan, working with the San Diego River Park Foundation.

In the past year, Conservancy staff, working with the Park Foundation, has also successfully sought grant funds from the SWRCB for Coastal NPS funds for a habitat restoration project in the Lower San Diego River Valley. The SWRCB has committed \$800,000 to implementation of the program and the Conservancy is required to provide a \$150,000 match. The proposed authorization would allow the Park Foundation to initiate the grant project and identify and design the initial demonstration sites within the Lower San Diego River. Implementation of the program, including demonstration projects at the identified sites, would be funded by the SWRCB grant and would be subject to future Conservancy staff recommendation(s).

Since 2000 the Conservancy has been a partner and funder in establishing a River Parkway in the San Diego River watershed. Currently, the Coastal Conservancy is a project partner, and/or project funder, in several important coastal resource protection projects in the subject watershed, including the eradication of non-native invasive plant species, the restoration and enhancement of coastal wetlands, riparian habitat restoration, and the provision of public access and recreational facilities.

In October 2003, the Coastal Conservancy approved funding to acquire the first 80 acres of the 100-acre CalMat property along the San Diego River. On December 23, 2003 the first phase acquisition was completed. Staff is recommending the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of funds from the Wildlife Conservation Board to acquire the remaining 20 acres of the CalMat property.

The CalMat property is to be acquired by the Lakeside Conservancy and restored as riparian habitat. The Lakeside river district is an important riparian habitat linkage in the MSCP. In addition, the CalMat acquisition is the first in a county-wide effort to create a San Diego River Park extending the length of the river, which is designed to restore habitat and provide public access to the river. The 100-acre CalMat property will be acquired as part of a 250-acre San Diego River Park in Lakeside. The Lakeside Conservancy intends to restore the site to its former riverine and riparian habitats to benefit several threatened and endangered species and to restore the historic floodplain offering the community flood protection and water quality benefits. This effort is more fully described in the Lakeside NCCP Enhancement Plan approved by the Conservancy in June 2001 (Exhibit 3).

The City of San Diego's MSCP is one of the most important regional plans which make up the State of California's NCCP Program. Since 1998 the Conservancy has been an active partner in implementing the NCCP program in the coastal areas of San Diego and Orange counties, including the MSCP. The NCCP program is a cooperative effort to protect habitats and species. The program, began in 1991 under the state's Natural Communities Conservation Planning Act, is intended to conserve natural communities at the ecosystem scale while accommodating compatible land uses.

In June 2003, the Coastal Conservancy and the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) entered into an Interagency Agreement (IAA) in a cooperative effort to facilitate the acquisition of real properties as part of the state's NCCP Program, whereby the WCB granted approximately \$36 million to the Coastal Conservancy.

The Conservancy also received funds through the Resources Agency from the River Parkway program to implement the San Diego River Park program. These and other funds were used to acquire a portion of the CalMat property as the first phase of this project pursuant to the Conservancy's authorization of October 2003. The SDRPLC is now acquiring Phase 2 of the property to complete the acquisition of the CalMat holdings in Lakeside.

PROJECT FINANCING:

SWRCB	\$800,000
Coastal Conservancy	\$150,000

The SWRCB has provided a grant to the Conservancy for this program using funds derived from the Safe Drinking Water, Clean Air, Watershed Protection and Flood Control Protection Act of 2000 (Proposition 13) for projects that protect and restore the water quality and environment of coastal nearshore waters, consistent with the state's Non-Point Source Pollution Control Plan.

The Conservancy's contribution to the proposed project is anticipated to be funded through funds allocated to the Coastal Conservancy from the Habitat Conservation Fund (HCF). The Habitat Conservation Fund can be used for the acquisition, enhancement or restoration of wetland, riparian and related coastal habitats. The restoration of riparian and riverfront lands in the San Diego River watershed to protect coastal natural resources and implement the state's Non-Point Source Pollution Prevention Program is consistent with the purposes and requirements of these funding sources.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations for the enhancement of significant coastal natural resources. Protecting riparian resources along the San Diego River is essential to ensuring the sustainability of the riparian ecosystem of the San Diego River.

Consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31252, the area proposed for resource enhancement has been included in the San Diego River Park Concept Plan as an area requiring public action to address a resource problem, in this case coastal water quality and habitat degradation. Consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31253, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. The Conservancy funds are to be leveraged with funds provided by the SWRCB and in-kind services of the San Diego River Park Foundation.

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 riparian 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.

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective B**, the proposed project will increase Coastal Resource Conservation by the enhancement and 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 proposed project provides essential habitat lands linking habitat corridors within the larger San Diego River Park area.

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objective A**, proposed project will improve water quality, habitat, and related coastal habitats within a priority coastal watershed, developing projects that preserve and restore coastal watersheds and create river parkways.

**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. The River Parkway program has multiple agency involvement, including federal, state, regional, and local. In addition, the project involves community nonprofit organizations and members of the general public. See letters of support in Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** Located in the lower portion of a priority coastal watershed, restoration of the subject properties for purposes of natural resource protection is essential to contribute to the restoration and enhancement of significant coastal resources, including riparian and watershed resources.
5. **Greater-Than-Local Interest:** The location of the property within a priority watershed is significant both locally and statewide. Significant public land holdings are either adjacent to, or near the proposed restoration area.

Additional Criteria

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.
9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the "Project History" section above.
15. **Cooperation:** The proposed projects involve the cooperation of state, local, regional agencies, as well as interested stakeholders and members of the general public.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The project is categorically exempt from the provisions of California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Sections 15306, which exempts planning, feasibility and resource evaluation activities. The proposed authorization would allow the Park Foundation to undertake final pre-project planning and feasibility analyses of demonstration projects. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.