

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 15, 2004

**SANTA CLARA RIVER PARKWAY  
RESTORATION FEASIBILITY STUDY**

File No. 00-105  
Project Manager: Peter S. Brand

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** authorization to disburse up to \$550,000 for consultant services to prepare a restoration feasibility study for the Santa Clara River Parkway.

**LOCATION:** Ventura County (Exhibit 1)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

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**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map
  - Exhibit 2: River Parkway Status Map
  - Exhibit 3: Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan  
Staff Recommendation
  - 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 31000 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed five hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$550,000), together with funds provided to the Conservancy by the Santa Clara River Trustee Council for this purpose, to prepare a restoration feasibility study for the Santa Clara River Parkway project area as shown in Exhibit 1 of the accompanying staff recommendation.”

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 and will help to carry out the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan approved by the Conservancy on October 26, 2000,

pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31241-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources;

2. The proposed project remains consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines as determined by the Conservancy in its action authorizing further implementation of the Santa Clara River Parkway on June 25, 2001."

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## **PROJECT SUMMARY**

The proposed action is the authorization to disburse up to \$550,000 in Conservancy funds and an additional amount of \$57,290 provided by the Santa Clara River Trustee Council for consultant services in the preparation of a restoration feasibility study for the Santa Clara River Parkway.

The study is designed to assist the Coastal Conservancy and its project partners in the identification of the opportunities and constraints associated with the acquisition, management, and eventual restoration of lands within the lower Santa Clara River corridor. This study will primarily address the Santa Clara River Parkway area, which includes the 24-mile long reach from the river mouth to the Sespe Creek confluence including the 500-year floodplain, major tributaries, and upland portions of South Mountain. Some analyses such as hydrology and geomorphic processes will examine the larger Santa Clara River watershed in order to provide context for the Parkway area.

The Santa Clara River Parkway project was created by the Conservancy with two complimentary purposes: the acquisition and public management of the river corridor to allow for habitat restoration, public enjoyment and environmental education; and the restoration of the natural processes of the river to prevent continued flooding and damage to habitat, farmland and public facilities. The Conservancy and its partners, the Nature Conservancy and the Friends of the Santa Clara River, have already acquired approximately seven miles of river properties in implementation of the vision of a Santa Clara River Parkway (Exhibit 2).

The Feasibility Study will augment existing studies by providing a comprehensive understanding of both physical and biological processes (including human induced change) within the Parkway. The project will also develop a desired future condition concept for the Parkway, provide a set of general and site specific restoration strategies, and an assessment of restoration feasibility given existing constraints and implementation and management costs. Various levee and berm removal and habitat restoration options will be examined to identify the biological and flood reduction benefits that could result from reconnecting the river to the floodplain.

The goals of the Santa Clara River Parkway are ambitious: (1) to restore natural hydrologic and geomorphic processes affecting the Parkway area, while providing enhanced flood protection for adjacent private land and public facilities including removing and/or setting back levees and other permanent flood control structures within the planning area; (2) to restore aquatic and riparian habitat within the Parkway area to provide improved conditions for native species such as the anadromous steelhead; and (3) to provide for public access and environmental education including the creation of a continuous public trail system along the length of the Parkway.

Given the changes the watershed has experienced from development, agriculture, sand and

gravel mining, and dams, and given the river's flashy and very powerful flood flows, a comprehensive scientific understanding of the river physical and biological processes is required to achieve these goals. The health and perhaps the survival of seven endangered and two threatened species and thirteen other species of concern depends on the ability of the study to accurately define crucial restoration improvements to the river. The study is also necessary to fully document baseline conditions so that any improvements in watershed and riverine function as a result of restoration activities can be measured. Study elements include: hillslope and fluvial geomorphology; hydrology and hydraulics, including flood frequency, magnitude, and duration; habitat quantity, quality, connectivity, and diversity; species diversity, population status, life history requirements; composition and structure of aquatic and riparian communities; and interactions of invasive species with native species. The study will also develop predictive models that can be used to analyze the implications of purchasing land and implementing alternative restoration strategies given the long-term program goals and desired future conditions. Finally, the study will assess the feasibility and cost of implementation.

**Site Description:** The Santa Clara River is the largest river in southern California and one of the last major rivers in the region that exists in a relatively natural state. The Santa Clara originates in the northern slope of the San Gabriel Mountains in Los Angeles County, traverses Ventura County and flows into the Pacific Ocean halfway between the Cities of San Buenaventura and Oxnard. Its total length is approximately 100 miles with its watershed covering approximately 1,200 square miles.

The headwaters of the Santa Clara and all of its major tributaries originate on National Forest lands. The estuary at the river mouth is protected as a natural preserve within McGrath State Beach. The portion of the river in Los Angeles County is designated as a "significant ecological area" by Los Angeles County. While this designation does not convey protective status, it does recognize the biological importance of the upper Santa Clara River. The majority of the main river corridor is privately owned and not protected.

Elevations in the Santa Clara River watershed range from 8,831 feet above sea level on Mount San Piños to sea level at McGrath State Beach. Streamflows into the Santa Clara River are highly variable. Average discharge measured at Montalvo (three miles upstream of the estuary) ranges from no flow for many days during the summer to winter flood flows over 100,000 cubic feet per second (cfs). Major floods are common on the Santa Clara, and because the river carries high sediment loads and has a broad migrating channel, flood damage has been extensive. The most damaging flood occurred in January 1969, when a peak flood of 160,000 cfs jumped the north bank of the river and destroyed the East Side Treatment Plant, Ventura Boat Harbor, and several upstream bridges.

From a biological perspective, the river is unmatched in southern California. Extensive patches of high quality riparian habitat are present along the entire length of the river. These patches serve as "stepping stones" for migratory birds traveling between riparian areas and wetlands on the south coast.

The river is also home to many species in decline throughout the southern California region. The federal listed endangered least Bell's vireo and unarmored threespine stickleback are two such species. Projections in the draft recovery plan for the vireo indicates that approximately 4,500 acres of riparian habitat on the Santa Clara River

could support 625 territorial male vireos, more than any other southern California river, making the Santa Clara the site for a new population stronghold. Likewise, two reaches of the river in Los Angeles County are designated as essential habitat for the stickleback. Without these areas, the sticklebacks, vireos, and the other endangered or candidate species (*e.g.*, least tern, tidewater goby, *etc.*) will face localized extinction and possible extirpation from the region.

The Santa Clara River is a highly dynamic system susceptible to episodic flood events, most recently in 1969, 1978, and 1995. Natural processes such as flooding and fire, and historic land use practices such as grazing, agriculture, urban development, and aggregate mining have influenced the geomorphic characteristics of the watershed. Use of the watershed has changed from grazing to agriculture and urban development in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties over the past two centuries. In the 1900s the trend of narrowing the river for agricultural land reclamation and increasing urban development up to the river banks have created a narrower river/riparian corridor with a greater potential for erosion damage. Local efforts at bank stabilization have required frequent maintenance and raised concerns that the methods used for channel stabilization at one location could be aggravating bank erosion at another location.

**Project History:** In 2000, after discussions with river landowners and with the support of the adjoining cities, State and local politicians and environmental groups, the Conservancy proposed the establishment of the Santa Clara River Parkway, which would result in the acquisition and restoration of a 20 mile-long corridor from the mouth of the Santa Clara River to the Sespe Creek confluence. The Santa Clara River Parkway was established with two complimentary purposes: the acquisition and public management of the river corridor to allow for habitat restoration, public enjoyment and environmental education; and the restoration of the natural processes of the river to prevent continued flooding and damage to habitat, farmland and public facilities. In 2001, initial funding of \$9.2 million was appropriated by the legislature to the Coastal Conservancy for this project.

At that time, the Nature Conservancy was analyzing the potential to protect the most threatened natural communities of the region. Their scientists having determined the biological significance of the river corridor, the Nature Conservancy began collaboration with the Coastal Conservancy to help implement the Santa Clara River Parkway project and at the same time begin to achieve the Nature Conservancy's goals for the ecoregion.

The Conservancy approved the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan and authorized the first acquisition in October 2000. Land acquisition began in March 2001, with the purchase of the Camp property, 225 acres (approximately one and a half miles of the river) including 150 acres of orchard that will ultimately, after levee removal, be converted back to riparian habitat. Since then nine other properties have been acquired with Coastal Conservancy grant funds, for a total of 1,400 acres and seven miles of river. The Nature Conservancy will hold and manage the properties until the majority of the acquisition goal of continuous ownership has been achieved and the Coastal Conservancy is prepared to implement a comprehensive levee removal (or setback) and habitat restoration effort (a result of this Feasibility Study). At that time, it is anticipated that a joint-powers authority may be established to construct and manage the improvements and public trail access. The Friends of the Santa Clara River has also acquired one property, Valley View Ranch, with Coastal Conservancy funds and is preparing plans for revegetation and removal of exotic plants.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$550,000
Santa Clara River Trustee Council	\$57,290

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is Proposition 50, the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act of 2002. These funds are available to provide coastal watershed protection consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation, specifically Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, including associated planning.

The Santa Clara River Trustee Council, which administers oil spill settlement funds, has approved a grant to the Conservancy of \$57,290 in matching funds for vegetation mapping of the river, a component of the feasibility study.

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

On October 26, 2000, the Conservancy adopted the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan pursuant to its authority under Division 21 of the Public Resources Code; in particular Chapter 6 (Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270), and authorized funding for the initial acquisition of property necessary to establish a continuous river corridor along the Santa Clara River (see Exhibit 1). The proposed authorization would continue that effort consistent with the Plan and with goals, objectives and authorities of Chapter 6.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective E**, the project will acquire and improve regional trails and river parkways along rivers and creeks connecting inland populations to the coast.

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective A**, the project will plan for conservation of natural communities and scenic and recreational resources in order to acquire significant coastal resource properties.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective A**, the project will plan for the preservation and restoration of coastal wetlands and dunes.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective B**, the project will preserve and restore habitat corridors between core habitat areas from coastal habitats to inland areas.

**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, as was determined by the Conservancy in its action authorizing further implementation of the Santa Clara River Parkway on June 25, 2001.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The proposed project remains consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act, as determined in the Conservancy's October 26, 2000 approval of the Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan (Exhibit 3)

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The disbursement of funds for planning, feasibility studies, and property studies are statutorily exempt from the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262). Wetland restoration plans and studies will consider environmental factors and will be subject to CEQA review and analysis prior to implementation. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption with regard to the restoration feasibility plan following Conservancy authorization.