

# COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Project Summary  
September 8, 2005

## **SONOMA CREEK ENHANCEMENT: PHASE II**

File No. 99-116  
Project Manager: Tom Gandesbery

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Consideration and possible authorization to disburse up to \$757,000 to the Southern Sonoma County Resource Conservation District to refine hydrologic modeling, analyze sediment transport, prepare NEPA/CEQA documents and restoration designs, as well as provide public involvement related to the restoration of lower Sonoma Creek in Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** Sonoma Creek, which flows through Sonoma County to San Pablo Bay (see Exhibit 1) about five miles south of the town of Sonoma.

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

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### **EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: Map of Project Area

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 31160 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed seven hundred fifty seven thousand dollars (\$757,000) to the Southern Sonoma County Resource Conservation District in order to refine hydrologic modeling, analyze sediment transport, prepare NEPA/CEQA and conceptual design documents and facilitate public involvement related to the restoration of lower Sonoma Creek in Sonoma County.”

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 project area is located within the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area;

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2. The proposed authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31160 *et seq.* regarding the Conservancy's mandate to address the resource goals of the San Francisco Bay Area, particularly, the goals of protecting, and restoring wetlands;
3. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001."

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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of an amount not to exceed seven hundred fifty seven thousand dollars (\$757,000) to the Southern Sonoma County Resource Conservation District refine hydrologic modeling, analyze sediment transport, prepare NEPA/CEQA and design documents and public involvement and outreach related to the restoration of lower Sonoma Creek, Sonoma County.

This project would fund studies that are necessary before proceeding with habitat restoration and environmentally sensitive flood-control measures for the portion of Sonoma Creek that flows through the Schellville area (Exhibit 1 and 2). One of the beneficial aspects to the RCD and state of implementing projects in the Schellville area is that there are relatively few land owners that would be affected by the project and the largest downstream land owner is the Department of Fish and Game. Therefore, the issue of securing landowner agreements will not be as much of a challenge as it has been with projects located in other waterways.

Anticipated habitat restoration includes periodic flooding of historic wetlands under the jurisdiction of the California Department of Fish and Game. Adjacent private land may also be recommended for purchase and restoration depending upon the outcome of studies and environmental review. Restoration measures will be designed to ensure no resulting damage to private or public property.

The proposed studies would provide the basis for a project design or a series of measures that would restore habitat and lessen flooding on lower Sonoma Creek. The Conservancy staff has ranked Sonoma Creek as a high priority for funding [Geographic/Goal Matrix, Page 58]. Also, the proposed project is consistent with the recommendations of the recommendations of the Baylands Ecosystem Goals Report of 1999 (page A-79)."

The State Water Quality Control Board lists Sonoma Creek as impaired sediment. The Board is evaluating the need for Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) requirements to address excessive sediment and related problems in the Sonoma Creek watershed. A Problem Statement was drafted in June 2005, and a sediment study is expected in Fall 2005. The project will address the underlying physical processes involved in sediment transport and thus may provide valuable information in the resolution of the impairment of the Creek.

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The Southern Sonoma County RCD received a grant from the Conservancy on May 25, 2000, to conduct preliminary hydrologic and geomorphic analysis of the study area. This proposal represents the next necessary step in identifying restoration components and feasible designs for flood control and will build on previous work. The proposed scope of work includes: hydraulics, sediment transport analysis, surveying, topographic mapping, development of feasible alternatives, project design and permitting, and continued stakeholder outreach. The District will direct the required studies and outreach to determine the preferred project alternative(s).

RCD staff has been working with local landowners for several years on ways to control flooding in the Schellville area. The staff has prepared a conceptual flood-control design, which includes a significant habitat restoration component. Preliminary studies are necessary, however, to refine the design and verify that the project is feasible.

**Site Description:** Sonoma Creek drains 170 square miles of Sonoma County, and most of the Creek's water passes through Schellville before flowing into San Pablo Bay (see Exhibit 1). The proposed studies would be concentrated on the Schellville area, which contains diked historic wetlands and where most flood-control measures are likely to be implemented. According to the Baylands Ecosystem Goals Report, 1999, "the lower reaches of Sonoma Creek are largely undeveloped and are or were formerly farmed for oat hay." The report further states that "the area provides an excellent opportunity to restore large patches of tidal marsh, some as isolated marsh islands and others with natural transitions to the adjacent uplands." Maps of potential restoration areas are attached as Exhibit 2.

**Project History:** RCD staff has been working with local landowners on ways to control flooding in the Schellville area. The staff has prepared a conceptual flood-control design, which includes a significant habitat restoration component. Preliminary studies were completed in 2003 and now in-depth hydrologic and hydraulic analyses are necessary to design various modifications and features that will alter flows and provide water for wetland restoration.

The RCD staff has worked with landowners and stakeholder agencies for over 40 years in the watershed. Many of the landowners have family history of over a century of land ownership and stewardship in the project area. These landowners have identified problems and conceptual solutions and have sought the expertise and assistance of the RCD. Landowners have seen increased flooding and creek sedimentation due to urban development in the upper watershed and other factors. The RCD's mission is to address the conservation needs and continue restoration practices. The project will focus equally on restoration and flood management. The District realizes that any long term flood control solution has a large restoration component.

A considerable restoration effort has been conducted in the upper watershed of Sonoma Creek over the last few years by the Sonoma Creek Watershed Conservancy, a partnership of the RCD, the Sonoma Ecology Center, Sonoma Valley Vintners and Growers' Alliance. The restoration is improving habitat for steelhead trout and freshwater shrimp, stabilizing eroding stream banks, promoting environmentally responsible vineyard design and cultivation, and supporting a variety of public education and monitoring programs. The effort has been supported by almost \$800,000 in grants from the CalFed Bay-Delta Program.

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The Corps, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and others are working on the potential restoration of Skaggs Island, a decommissioned U.S. Navy reservation downstream of Schellville. Restoration and flood-control measures undertaken at Schellville will affect Skaggs Island in some manner. Therefore, studies of hydrology and hydraulics proposed by this grant should provide helpful information to those involved in Skaggs Island restoration.

The current project came to Conservancy staff's attention through last fall's solicitation of grant proposals for San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program funding. Staff ranked this proposal as a high priority for funding, given the project's multiple objectives, breadth of support, and need for immediate funding for studies that will significantly influence the direction of a major North Bay project.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$757,500
Other sources	
Corps of Engineers	492,000
<u>Sonoma County Water Agency</u>	<u>150,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$1,399,500</b>

Staff expects to use funds appropriated to the Conservancy from the "California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Fund" (Proposition 40). Under Public Resources Code Section 5096.650(b), Proposition 40 funds may be used for the development of land resources in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21, as discussed below. Proposition 40 also requires the Conservancy to give priority to grant projects with matching funds (Public Resources Code Section 5096.651). The project is supported by a commitment by the Corps and the County to provide substantial matching funds for completion of the project.

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

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164, to address resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area. These goals include protecting, restoring, and enhancing natural habitats (Section 31162(b)). The project may lead to the restoration of natural areas, and the restoration cannot proceed without the studies that are integral to the project.

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

Project is consistent with *San Francisco Bay Program*, **Goal 10, Objective B** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, in that the proposed project would result in a plan to enhance wetlands, uplands, riparian habitat and other regionally significant properties.

**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:** This is the second phase of the project. Staff received a letter of support from State Senator Wesley Chesbro, dated January 13, 2005 for this second phase (Exhibit 3). The first phase of this project received support by, among others, Member of Congress Lynn Woolsey, State Senator Wesley Chesbro, Assembly Member Patricia Wiggins, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, Caltrans, the Sonoma Ecology Center, the Bay Institute, and the San Francisco Bay Joint Venture.
4. **Location:** The project site is on the shoreline of San Pablo Bay, within the jurisdiction of the Bay Area Conservancy Program. The study area is near the unincorporated area known as Schellville and runs down stream toward San Pablo Bay (Exhibit 1).
5. **Need:** Although funding from several sources is expected for the project, particularly for implementation, funding from the Bay Area Conservancy Program is needed if the preliminary studies are to proceed
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The project would add to and enhance wildlife habitat for species whose significance extends well beyond the immediate area.
7. **Additional Criteria**
8. **Urgency:** The RCD will carry out the project with assistance from the US Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps funding, which will be used for a critical component of the study will be lost if the project is not undertaken within the current federal fiscal year.

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Without the Conservancy's contribution, the project will not proceed and restoration and flood reduction will be delayed for many years.

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** This project will solve a significant flooding problem while also enhancing and restoring wetland and riparian habitat.
10. **Greater-than-local interest:** The project would add to and enhance wildlife habitat for species whose significance extends well beyond the immediate area.
11. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project would add to and enhance natural habitats while controlling flooding that causes considerable damage and inconvenience on a regular basis.
12. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above. Considerable financial support has been received, and is expected, from other sources. The State funds would receive a federal match of about 35% and a local match of about 20%.
13. **Readiness:** The preliminary studies have been completed and a focused study plan has been prepared and is ready to proceed. Implementation is expected to follow after the subject designs are completed and when funding becomes available.
14. **Return to Conservancy:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
15. **Cooperation:** The RCD has a long and successful history working with local landowners and state and federal resource agencies to bring cost-effective environmental solutions to completion. This project will include a comprehensive stakeholder process.

### CONSISTENCY WITH SAN FRANCISCO BAY PLAN:

The project is supported by the following policies of the San Francisco Bay Plan adopted by the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) in 1969, as amended:

**Fish and Wildlife:** "Specific habitats that are needed to prevent the extinction of any species, or to maintain or increase any species that would provide substantial public benefits, should be protected, whether in the Bay or on the shoreline behind dikes." Restoration of historic wetlands along Sonoma Creek would add to habitat for several species of wildlife, including endangered species.

**Marshes and Mudflats:** "Marshes and mudflats should be maintained to the fullest possible extent to conserve fish and wildlife and to abate air and water pollution." Restoration of wetlands along Sonoma Creek would add to existing marshes.

### COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is exempt from CEQA under Section 15306 of Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, which applies to data collection and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource, and which are conducted as part of a study leading to an action that a public agency has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. Staff will file a notice of exemption upon board approval.