

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 8, 2007

**SAN MATEO CREEK STEELHEAD RECOVERY PROJECT  
PHASE IV**

File No. 07-008

Project Manager: Christopher Kroll

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$160,000 to Trout Unlimited to begin implementing the recommendations of its Conservation Strategy Plan for exotic aquatic and terrestrial animal and plant species management in the San Mateo Creek watershed.

**LOCATION:** The San Mateo Creek watershed is located in southern Orange, northern San Diego and western Riverside counties and encompasses part of the Cleveland National Forest (CNF), the north end of Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base, and surrounding private lands. (see Exhibit 1).

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Project Location Maps

Exhibit 2: September 15, 2004 Staff Recommendation

Exhibit 3: Conservation Strategy Plan

Exhibit 4: Letter of Support

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**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 authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred sixty thousand dollars (\$160,000) to Trout Unlimited to begin implementing the recommendations of its Conservation Strategy Plan to support recovery of

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the steelhead trout and other native fish populations in the San Mateo Creek watershed. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds, Trout Unlimited 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. The names and qualifications of all contractors to be used for the project.
  - c. Evidence of all permits and approvals for the project.
2. Trout Unlimited shall review its proposed non-native fish and bullfrog removal techniques on-site with a knowledgeable representative of the California Department of Fish and Game prior to using them.
3. Trout Unlimited shall provide written evidence to the Executive Officer that permission has been received from landowners from each owner of land, public or private, on which work is to be done.
4. Trout Unlimited shall acknowledge funding from Proposition 12 and the Conservancy on all documents/reports prepared under this authorization.”

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. The proposed authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31252 as the project area was identified in the San Mateo Creek Enhancement Plan as an area requiring public action to resolve existing resource protection problems. The enhancement plan was deemed consistent with the Coastal Act by the California Coastal Commission in 2002.
4. Trout Unlimited 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 action recommends a grant of up to \$160,000 to begin to implement a long-term strategy for reducing exotic aquatic and terrestrial animal and plant populations that limit the potential for restoring steelhead trout and other native fish populations

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in the San Mateo Creek watershed. In September 2004, the Conservancy authorized a grant (see Exhibit 2) to Trout Unlimited (TU) to develop the Conservation Strategy Plan (CSP). In 2005 and 2006, several actions were taken to address this goal including: 1) development of the CSP, which establishes restoration goals, strategies and direction for implementation phases of the project; 2) purchase of equipment and securing of a storage facility at San Onofre State Beach to support future field survey and monitoring work; and 3) development of a public outreach and education campaign geared to landowners with ponds (presumed source of exotic fish) in the upper watershed within Cleveland National Forest.

TU now proposes to begin implementing some of the recommendations from the CSP (Exhibit 3). For 2007-08, TU is proposing several actions including:

- Macroinvertebrate survey
- Additional habitat/exotic species assessment surveys
- Water quality surveys
- Water quality monitoring program
- Estuary monitoring
- NEPA/CEQA document preparation
- Pond inventory program
- Pond weir development
- Additional pond workshops/brochures

These recommendations have been reviewed and approved by a technical advisory committee consisting of representatives of state and federal resource agencies, Camp Pendleton, Cleveland National Forest, San Diego Trout and TU. A general habitat assessment and evaluation of exotic animal species removal techniques (exotic species monitoring/survey) were completed in 2004. The proposed authorization would include additional exotic animal species removal testing and monitoring to help determine an effective removal technique to significantly reduce and control the non-native fish and bullfrog population in the watershed. The grant would also include the preparation of environmental documentation needed to implement the CSP.

The “Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000” (Proposition 12) specifically allocates funds to be administered by the Conservancy for restoring fish to San Mateo Creek. Exotic animal species, including largemouth bass, brown bullhead, green sunfish, and bullfrogs, are major predators of the native steelhead and partially armored threespine stickleback, and have invaded San Mateo Creek (Creek) in large numbers. Invasive plants, including giant reed (*Arundo donax*), tamarisk, pampas grass, castor bean, and others also have gained a foothold in the watershed, encroaching on the native habitat necessary to support indigenous fish populations.

**Site Description:** San Mateo Creek, one of the last undammed streams in southern California, flows 22 miles from its headwaters in the Santa Ana Mountains to the Pacific Ocean just south of the city of San Clemente. The majority of the upper watershed lies

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within Cleveland National Forest. Large portions of the lower watershed fall into Camp Pendleton. More than 90% of the watershed is publicly-owned as part of the national forest or Camp Pendleton. In the 1970s, San Onofre State Beach was created through a lease from Camp Pendleton to the California Department of Parks and Recreation. The state park includes the beach area, marsh and lagoon, as well as the land along the creek inland and up Cristianitos Creek to the Orange County boundary.

The creek was at one time an important steelhead-producing stream in San Diego County, supporting significant local sport fisheries of both juveniles and adults. Newspaper articles from 1916, for example, report a large steelhead/rainbow trout population and high fishing success in the creek. Local residents and California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) personnel have reported seeing adult steelhead ranging up to 4 feet and weighing up to 15 pounds between 1900 and 1950. After 1950 surveys began to reflect a decline of juvenile steelhead/rainbow trout in San Mateo Creek.

By 1991 one researcher classified the San Mateo Creek steelhead population as extinct. But in 1999, a fisherman reported catching and releasing a steelhead/rainbow trout from San Mateo Creek. Numerous sightings of a small population of these fish have been made since that time. Studies of individual fish by the DFG and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) have confirmed that they were anadromous steelhead. Wildlife biologists have become increasingly aware that the production capability of small coastal streams such as San Mateo Creek may be relatively small compared to large, perennial river systems, but collectively they provide a means to ensure a greater diversity of subpopulations, and are critical to range expansion and recovery after drought or other perturbations.

**Project History:** In September 2002, the Conservancy granted an initial \$50,000 to Trout Unlimited (TU) to begin planning for needed restoration activities. In April 2003, the Conservancy provided an additional \$150,000 to the initial grant when it became clear that additional funds were needed to complete a habitat assessment and evaluation of exotic species removal techniques. This initial assessment work was completed in 2004 and two reports were prepared: *Habitat Assessment Data Report*, and *Evaluation of Exotic Species Removal Techniques*. In September 2004, the Conservancy approved a \$100,000 grant for additional exotic species removal testing and development of an exotic species management strategy. The Conservation Strategy Plan was completed in February 2007.

TU has been the lead for the project in consultation with the Conservancy, U.S. Forest Service (USFS), NOAA Fisheries, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), DFG, Camp Pendleton USMC, California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), San Diego Trout, and other agencies and organizations.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

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|---------------------|-----------|
| Coastal Conservancy | \$160,000 |
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The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the “Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000” (Proposition 12) for the restoration of native fish to San Mateo and San Onofre creeks.

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

See findings and discussion in September 15, 2004 staff report (Exhibit 2)

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

See discussion in September 15, 2004 staff report (Exhibit 2)

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

See discussion in September 15, 2004 staff report (Exhibit 2)

**CONSISTENCY WITH THE COASTAL ACT:**

See discussion in September 15, 2004 staff report (Exhibit 2)

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project would include testing and monitoring of non-native fish and bullfrog removal techniques, a macroinvertebrate survey, pond inventory, public outreach campaign, and preparation of environmental documentation for implementation of the management strategy. The testing of removal techniques will result in the removal, killing and disposal of non-native fish and bullfrogs from San Mateo Creek. This action is categorically exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15301(i) which exempts “maintenance of... wildlife habitat areas... streamflows, springs and waterholes to protect fish and wildlife resources.” The testing of removal techniques and removal of non-native animals is for protection of the native fish resources of San Mateo Creek.

The project is also categorically exempt under Section 15304 as it will involve a minor alteration of land or water which will not include the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. Electro-

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shocking, seining, trapping and killing of non-native fish and bullfrogs is a minor alteration of land or water “on existing officially designated wildlife management areas [San Mateo Canyon Wilderness Area of Cleveland National Forest] which [will] result in improvement of habitat for fish and wildlife resources” consistent with Section 15304(a). Non-native fish and bullfrogs are preying on native fish, notably the endangered steelhead trout, and reducing populations of these native fish.

Testing of removal techniques and removal of non-native animals from San Mateo Creek is categorically exempt under Section 15306 as well, as it involves “basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource...” The use of removal techniques and killing of some number of non-native fish and bullfrogs in the creek will not cause a major disturbance to the creek and will, in fact, benefit the native fish species of the watershed. In addition, pursuant to Section 15306, the proposed project is categorically exempt as it is “part of a study leading to an action which a public agency has not yet approved, adopted, or funded.”

The proposed project also involves the development of a long-term management strategy for non-native species in the San Mateo Creek watershed upstream of Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base. The surveys, monitoring, and public outreach components of the project only involve feasibility and planning for possible future actions and, thus, are statutorily exempt (14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262) from the provisions of the CEQA.

Any projects later proposed for Conservancy authorization of funding for implementation will be evaluated as required by CEQA.