

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

May 24, 2007

RANCHO CALERA (BIG SUR) ACQUISITION

File No.

Project Manager: Trish Chapman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse \$250,000 to the Trust for Public Land for acquisition of the Rancho Calera property in Big Sur, Monterey County.

LOCATION: Big Sur, Monterey County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement and Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Site Brochure](#)

Exhibit 3: [Comment Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 and 31400-31409 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000) to the Trust for Public Land (TPL) for acquisition of the Rancho Calera property (Monterey County Assessor Parcel Numbers 418-021-052, 418-021-053, 418-021-051, and 418-021-055) in Big Sur, as shown on Exhibit 1 to the accompanying staff recommendation, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for acquisition, TPL shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) all relevant acquisition documents, including but not limited to the appraisals, environmental assessments, purchase agreements, escrow instructions, and documents of title necessary to the acquisition of the property.
 2. TPL shall permanently dedicate the property to habitat and resource protection, open space preservation, and public access in a manner acceptable to the Executive Officer.
 3. TPL shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
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4. The property shall be restricted for non-exclusive use as a trail connection from Brazil Ranch to the Mill Creek Preserve in a manner acceptable to the Executive Officer.
5. TPL shall acknowledge Conservancy funding by erecting and maintaining on the property a sign that has been reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer.”

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 the purposes and criteria in Chapters 6 and 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270 and 31400-31409) regarding resource enhancement and public access.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. TPL is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue code, whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
4. The proposed project provide for greater-than-local need.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed project would provide a \$250,000 grant to the Trust for Public Land (TPL) for acquisition of four parcels totaling 460 acres of the Rancho Calera property in Big Sur. Rancho Calera lies between the Brazil Ranch (also known as the Bixby Ranch) owned by U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Mill Creek Preserve owned by the Monterey Peninsula Regional Park District (MPRPD; see Exhibit 1). The acquisition would create a continuous corridor of public lands from the ocean to the crest of the Santa Lucia Mountains. After purchase by TPL, the property will be conveyed to USFS for inclusion in Los Padres National Forest.

The Rancho Calera property has a diverse range of habitats including grasslands, redwood forests, and riparian areas, and supports several species of concern (see Site Description below). Given its location, the property represents a vital habitat linkage for the northern Big Sur ecosystem, closing a 1.5-mile gap in a wilderness corridor stretching from the rugged coast inland to the Los Padres National Forest. Rancho Calera lies within an area recommended for protection as a "core focal species watershed" by the California Wilderness Coalition in its July 2002 report, *Wildlands Conservation in the Central Coast Region of California*. This report identifies habitat and linkage areas important for the survival of the three mammal species, including mountain lion which are found on the property.

Rancho Calera will also provide a critical trail connection that will link the coastal trails of Brazil Ranch to trails in other parts of the Los Padres. The property offers spectacular views of the Big Sur coastline and Pacific Ocean (Exhibit 2).

TPL began negotiations for the Rancho Calera property at the request of the USFS. TPL and USFS have partnered together in the past to preserve hundreds of acres in the Big Sur region.

Site Description: The Rancho Calera property lies adjacent to the eastern boundary of Brazil Ranch and the western side of Mill Creek Preserve. The property's grasslands are used for cattle grazing and have been since before 1900. There is a radio repeater installed at the summit of Bonifacio Hill on the property which is currently maintained by the Big Sur Volunteer Fire Brigade. There are no buildings on the property.

Approximately half of the property is covered by open grassland. Approximately 100 acres are evergreen forest, consisting primarily of dense redwood groves that include old growth trees up to 20 feet in diameter. The mixed forest on the property includes madrone and sequoia. The rest of the landscape is comprised of scrub and chaparral habitat (including maritime chaparral), mixed forest, and riparian habitat. Much of the property drains to Sierra Creek, which supports a healthy population of steelhead trout just downstream of the property. Sensitive species found in the area include the California tiger salamander, the Southwest pond turtle, Smith's blue butterfly, and the California red-legged frog. Mountain lion and bobcat are also found on the ranch. The presence of mountain lion, which is an umbrella species, indicates the likelihood of many other species that are critical to the health of the Big Sur ecosystem. The property's grasslands provide forage for black-tail deer and hunting ground for golden eagles and probably California condor.

Project History: For many years the Forest Service, in association with public agency and non-profit partners, has been working to protect key resource properties throughout Big Sur in order to enhance the experience of the millions of visitors who are drawn to this incredibly scenic area each year. In 2001, TPL acquired the 1,226-acre Brazil Ranch located just south of the historic Bixby Bridge and subsequently transferred it to the USFS. The Brazil Ranch includes nearly two miles of ocean frontage and numerous coastal and mountain trails. The Conservancy contributed \$5 million to this acquisition. Following the acquisition of the Brazil Ranch, the USFS has been seeking opportunities to acquire a land connection between the Brazil Ranch and Los Padres National Forest to ensure a protected wildlife corridor and also to create a trail link from the coast to the National Forest. At the request of the USFS, TPL entered negotiations with the landowner for acquisition of Rancho Calera. TPL requested funding from the Conservancy for the acquisition in 2006.

Many people in the Big Sur community have expressed serious concerns about the continued acquisition of private property by public agencies. For much of 2006, members of federal and state agencies, land trusts, and community residents met to discuss these concerns. Staff from the Conservancy, TPL, and USFS participated in these meetings. The Rancho Calera acquisition project attempts to address the community's key concerns related to public acquisition. First, the landowner, in partnership with various agencies and conservation organizations, attempted several other approaches to achieve the access and conservation goals that would leave the property in private ownership. These included a conservation easement, trail easement, and acquisition by a conservation buyer. None of these approaches succeeded. TPL and the USFS then identified the minimum number of parcels needed to achieve their conservation goals and targeted only four of the nine parcels that comprise the ranch, seven of which have been or are being marketed by the landowner. None of the parcels proposed for purchase has any residential or other structure on them. Thus, the proposed acquisition will not affect the available housing stock, which is another key concern of the community. Finally, TPL and the USFS met with community members well in advance of the acquisition to discuss the project, answer questions

and hear concerns. Community members have strongly requested this type of communication between agencies and the community.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$250,000
U.S. Forest Service	3,400,000
Save the Redwood League	200,000
Wildlife Conservation Board	<u>1,250,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$5,100,000

The expected source for the Conservancy funds for this project is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Wildlife Protection Act of 1990 (Proposition 117), known as the Habitat Conservation Fund (HCF). Pursuant to State Fish and Game Code Section 2786, HCF funds may be used for acquisition of habitat, including native oak woodlands, necessary to protect deer and mountain lions; the acquisition of habitat to protect rare, endangered, threatened, or fully protected species; acquisition of habitat to further implement the Habitat Conservation Program; and the acquisition, enhancement, or restoration of wetlands, riparian habitat, and aquatic habitat for spawning and rearing of anadromous salmonids and trout resources. Mountain lion, deer, and several protected species can be found on the subject property; in addition, the property includes riparian habitat and drains into a creek used by steelhead trout. Given the resources on the property, acquisition of Rancho Calera is consistent with the purposes of the HCF funding.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapters 6 and 9 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code (PRC) Sections 31251-31270 regarding resource enhancement and PRC Sections 31400-31409 regarding public access, respectively.

Under Section 31251, the Conservancy may award grants to public agencies to assemble parcels of land to improve resource management. The proposed project is consistent with this section because it will link the USFS Brazil Ranch with MPRPD’s Mill Creek Preserve and the larger area of Los Padres National Forest.

Section 31252 requires that all areas proposed for resource enhancement by a local entity be identified in the local certified local coastal plan or program. The proposed project is consistent with the Monterey County Local Coastal Program (LCP) as described in the Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies below.

Under Section 31400, the Conservancy has a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the coast. The Conservancy’s funding of the proposed acquisitions is consistent with Chapter 9 because of the opportunities for trail connectivity to the coastline and to the thousands of acres of wilderness in Los Padres National Forest.

Section 31400.1 allows the Conservancy to award grants to non-profit organizations for accessways to and along the coast that serve more than local public needs. The subject of the

proposed action is located in the heart of Big Sur, a region that is a major destination point for millions of visitors each year from throughout the United States and around the world.

Section 31400.3 states that the Conservancy may assist public and nonprofit organizations in developing and implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The proposed project would further these goals by closing a critical gap in access from the coastal trails of the Brazil Ranch to the mountain trails of the Mill Creek Preserve and Los Padres National Forest.

Consistent with Section 31409, the proposed authorization for land acquisition will assist TPL in expanding an inland trail system that links to the California Coastal Trail.

Consistent with Sections 31253 and 31400.2, the proposed Conservancy funding was determined based on the total amount of funding available for projects, the fiscal resources of TPL, and the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects.

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

Consistent with **Coastal Trail Goal 1 Objective E**, the proposed project will acquire property that can be used to close a critical trail gap between Los Padres National Forest and the coast.

Consistent with **Public Access Goal 2 Objectives A and B**, the proposed project will protect 460-acres of open space and provide public access to a previously closed area.

Consistent with **Resource Conservation Goal 4, Objective A**, the proposed project will link together three publicly owned parcels to create a larger area of protected wildlife habitat and a habitat corridor from the coast to the crest of the Santa Lucia Mountains.

Consistent with **Resource Conservation Goal 5, Objectives A and B**, the proposed project will preserve 460 acres of coastal habitat and create a wildlife corridor from the coast to the inland forest 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, 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 is supported by Monterey County Supervisor Dave Potter, the Big Sur Land Trust, Save the Redwoods League, Ventana Wildlife Society, and the Sierra Club. Comment letters are provided in Exhibit 3.

4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Monterey County.
5. **Need:** The USFS will provide 67% of the \$5.1 million needed for this acquisition. TPL has raised an additional \$1.45 million or 28%. Conservancy funding is needed to close the funding gap and enable TPL to exercise its option.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Millions of people visit the Big Sur region each year from all over the world. Increased access between the coast and Los Padres National Forest will serve regional and national interests. Preservation of the habitat areas used by listed species on the site is also of regional importance.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** TPL must exercise its option to acquire the land by June 2007. The property is currently being marketed to private parties in case TPL cannot complete the acquisition.
8. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
9. **Readiness:** TPL is prepared to close escrow on the property in July 2007 if all of the funding can be secured.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Big Sur Land Use Plan is adopted Local Coastal Program for this region of Monterey County. Resource Policy 3.3.1 states that “all practical efforts shall be made to maintain, restore, and if possible, enhance Big Sur's environmentally sensitive habitats.” Environmentally sensitive habitats found on Rancho Calera include riparian habitat areas as well as habitats used by rare, threatened, and endangered species such as Smith’s blue butterfly and California red-legged frog. Policy 3.3.2.6 calls for the County to retain significant and, where possible, continuous areas of undisturbed land in open space use in order to protect environmentally sensitive habitats and the high wildlife values associated with large areas of undisturbed habitat. The proposed acquisition is consistent with this policy since it will connect protected areas to create a larger area of protected habitat. The acquisition is also consistent with Forest Policy 3.5.1 which states that “the primary use of forested land in Big Sur shall be for recreational and aesthetic enjoyment and for educational, scientific, watershed, and habitat protection activities.”

Public Access Policy 6.1.3 states, “the rights of access to the shoreline, public lands, and along the coast, and opportunities for recreational hiking access, shall be protected, encouraged, and enhanced.” The proposed acquisition would protect and enhance access between the coast and public lands. Policy 6.1.4.1 states that areas not already used by the public which are “suitable for public access should also be protected for such use. At such time as new access is provided, or existing access is formalized or increased, an appropriate public agency must assume management responsibility for public use, or agreements concerning such responsibility must be reached with landowners.” The USFS will assume management responsibility for the property and will work with the Monterey Peninsula Regional Park District to develop trail connections from Brazil Ranch through Mill Creek Preserve to the rest of Los Padres National Forest. Policy 6.1.4.7 requires that “the provision of new access or formalization of existing access is to be guided by detailed management plans, including implementation responsibilities...” The USFS

will prepare a management plan for the property before opening new areas to public access. Finally, Policy 6.1.5.C.12 states that “The California Coastal Conservancy is encouraged to participate in trails planning and to provide financing and general assistance to the agencies involved.”

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Acquisition of the subject property is categorically exempt from review of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Sections 15313 and 15325 14 Cal. Code of Regulations (CCR). Section 15313 exempts acquisition of lands for fish and wildlife conservation purposes including preserving access to public lands and waters where the purpose of the acquisition is to preserve the land in its natural condition. The proposed project is also exempt pursuant to Section 15325 because it is an acquisition of land to preserve the existing natural conditions, and for open space and park purposes. Upon Conservancy approval of the proposed authorization, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.