

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
May 24, 2007

**CONTRA COSTA COUNTY HISTORICAL ECOLOGY PROJECT**

File No. 07-028  
Project Manager: Abe Doherty

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$150,000 to Contra Costa County to assist the Community Development Department in planning for the restoration, enhancement and protection of habitats and watersheds in Contra Costa County, through the Contra Costa County Historical Ecology Project

**LOCATION:** Contra Costa County

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

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**EXHIBITS**

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

Exhibit 2: [Protected Lands in Contra Costa County](#)

Exhibit 3: [East Contra Costa County HCP/NCCP Focus Area](#)

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 up to one hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$150,000) to Contra Costa County to conduct planning and documentation of the historical ecology of Contra Costa County. This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any of these funds, Contra Costa County shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, budget and schedule, and the names and qualifications of any subcontractors that it intends to employ.”

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 Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165 regarding the Conservancy's mandate to address the resource goals of the San Francisco Bay Area; and
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 4, 2001."
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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

This proposed authorization of \$150,000 to Contra Costa County will enable the County Community Development Department to implement a historical ecology project. This project will provide information on the distribution, type and size of habitats found in Contra Costa County (Exhibit 2) over the past approximately 150 years in order to guide the implementation of habitat and watershed protection, restoration and enhancement projects in this area. This historical ecology project will result in maps and documents describing how habitat patterns and their controlling physical processes have been altered in this area, which will be used to guide the design and implementation of locally appropriate habitat protection, restoration and enhancement projects.

This historical ecology information is critical at this time, since it will support the implementation of the East Contra Costa County Habitat Conservation Plan/Natural Communities Conservation Plan (HCP/NCCP). The HCP/NCCP calls for the expenditure of up to \$350 million from a variety of public and private sources to acquire and conserve approximately 30,000 acres in eastern Contra Costa County for 28 rare, threatened and endangered species, including the San Joaquin kit fox, Alameda whipsnake, California red-legged frog and California tiger salamander. The HCP/NCCP would establish a coordinated process for permitting and mitigating the incidental take of endangered species and contributes to the recovery of the species. This process would create an alternative to the current project-by-project approach, which often results in fragmentation of habitat.

The historical ecology project will also be used for the design of individual watershed restoration projects; it will provide information on the historic locations of stream channels, types of habitat and hydrologic connections. This information will help to ensure that the restoration designs and goals are locally appropriate and based on specific habitats previously present in the area. The Contra Costa County Flood Control District intends to implement restoration projects along Marsh Creek and Walnut Creek and will use the historical information to guide the design of these projects. Historical information on Mount Diablo Creek will assist in the Concord Naval Weapon Station reuse planning, since Mount Diablo Creek bisects this former naval weapon station and there is an active planning process to determine the future use of this approximately 5,000 acre area.

This historical ecology project has been identified as a primary focus for collaboration by the Contra Costa Watershed Forum, a very successful countywide partnership of watershed groups, government agencies and other interested groups and citizens that coordinate on creek and watershed issues and pursue joint projects related to maintaining creek and watershed health. The members of the Contra Costa Watershed Forum intend to use the maps and reports that will be generated by the historical ecology project to improve design of specific projects and to conduct outreach on the historical conditions of the creeks and watersheds. A presentation on

initial research on the historical ecology of creeks in the County generated significant enthusiasm and interest in acquiring more knowledge of the historical conditions. The members of the Contra Costa Watershed Forum anticipate that the historical ecology project will foster greater awareness of creek and watershed issues and interest in implementing projects to improve the functioning of creeks and watersheds in their area.

The historical ecology project will include research, reporting and mapping for the entire County and more detailed analysis, reporting and mapping for the East County (see Exhibits 1-3 for maps showing the County and East County focus area). For the entire County, the historical ecology project will include historical data collection, bibliographic database development, data compilation and georectification (to align historic maps and aerial imagery with current known locations and longitude/latitude). Primary sources of information for the data collection will include Mexican Rancho maps from the 1840s and 1850s, early aerial photographs and other records from historical societies and city and county archives. Using the results of this data-gathering and analysis, public outreach materials will be developed and distributed, including at the Contra Costa Watershed Forum and the Contra Costa County Creek and Watershed Symposium in the fall of 2007. For the East County, the project will additionally provide Geographic Information System (GIS) synthesis to create GIS datalayers of historical landscapes, analysis to assess and illustrate historical ecological and hydrogeomorphic patterns and changes and detailed reporting of the findings and resources. Future phases of the project may provide similar detailed synthesis and analysis for the rest of the County.

Project products will include a number of valuable georeferenced data sets and GIS layers that can be used by local groups involved in conservation, and a widely applicable report applying historical ecology findings to local conservation. The report will be well designed to support current conservation activities and concerns.

The Contra Costa County Community Development Department plays a lead role in organizing and supporting the Contra Costa Watershed Forum, which is viewed throughout the Bay Area as a model for watershed collaboration and communication. Past projects of the Forum include the Contra Costa County Watershed Atlas, the Contra Costa County Volunteer Creek Monitoring Program, the Countywide Creek and Watershed Signage effort, and periodic public workshops and symposia. The Contra Costa County Community Development Department will play a key role in ensuring that the historical ecology project is developed in a manner that will most directly support the design and implementation of habitat protection, restoration and enhancement projects in the county.

**Site Description:**

Contra Costa County has an area of approximately 456,000 acres and the area in East County which is covered by the HCP/NCCP is approximately 175,000 acres. The East Contra Costa County HCP/NCCP area contains habitat for 28 rare, threatened and endangered species, including the San Joaquin kit fox, Alameda whipsnake, California red-legged frog and California tiger salamander.

The population of Contra Costa County was estimated to be 1,018,00 in 2005 and is predicted to increase by 127,000 by 2025. A significant portion of this growth is expected to occur in East Contra Costa County, leading to potential conflicts between the need for housing and protection of endangered species and open space. The East Contra Costa County HCP/NCCP seeks to

minimize this conflict by establishing a coordinated, regional approach to conservation and regulation. The HCP/NCCP is designed to protect natural habitats and minimize impacts from development while streamlining the regulatory process. One of the goals of the HCP/NCCP is to purchase, restore and permanently protect large, interconnected and biologically rich blocks of habitat. The HCP/NCCP is designed to result in a Preserve System of 23,800-30,300 acres of protected habitats.

**Project History:**

The Conservancy has provided funding for many acquisitions in Contra Costa County, including the Mangini, Fernandez, Cowell, Silva and Dutra properties. Information developed from the historical ecology project will be helpful in planning enhancement and restoration of habitats on these properties.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$150,000
Contra Costa Flood Control District	\$100,000
Department of Fish and Game	\$40,000
U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, CVPIA Funds (pending)	<u>\$100,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$390,000</b>

It is anticipated that the Conservancy’s funding will come from appropriations for the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Fund (Proposition 40). These funds can be used for acquisition, development, restoration and protection of land and water resources (including their identification, evaluation, documentation and interpretation) pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Use of Proposition 40 funds for the historical ecology project is consistent with the purpose of this funding source, since the project will support planning and design of habitat protection, acquisition, restoration and enhancement projects in Contra Costa County.

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

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165, to address resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area. The project area is all of Contra Costa County, which is one of nine counties which make up the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, as described in Section 31162 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation.

Under Section 31162(b), the Conservancy may undertake projects and award grants to achieve the goal of protecting, restoring and enhancing natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance. This project helps to achieve this goal by providing historical information and analysis to assist in the design and planning of habitat protection, restoration and enhancement projects. The project will especially support the implementation of the East Contra Costa County HCP/NCCP, which is designed to improve the protection of habitat for 28 rare, threatened and endangered species, including the San Joaquin kit fox, Alameda whipsnake, California red-legged frog and California tiger salamander.

By providing a grant to fund this project, the Conservancy is also achieving the goal set forth in Section 31162(c), to assist in the implementation of the adopted plans of local government and

special districts. This project will assist in the implementation of the East Contra Costa County Habitat Conservation Plan/Natural Communities Conservation Plan, which has been adopted by Contra Costa County, the East Bay Regional Park District, and the Cities of Brentwood, Clayton and Oakley. The plan is also pending adoption by the City of Pittsburg, the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which will consider it in April 2007.

Consistent with Section 31163(c), the historical ecology project is a priority since it serves a regional constituency, can be implemented in a timely way, provides opportunities for benefits that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented and includes matching funds from other sources, as described in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines” section of this staff recommendation.

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

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective B** of the Conservancy’s Strategic Plan, the proposed project will help the Conservancy and others develop plans for protection, restoration and enhancement of natural habitats, connecting corridors and watersheds for 30,000 acres in East Contra Costa County and for 409 miles of streams within the area of the East Contra Costa County Habitat Conservation Plan/Natural Communities Conservation Plan.

**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 project is supported by Senator Tom Torlakson, Assemblymember Loni Hancock, Assemblymember Mark DeSaulnier, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Contra Costa Flood Control and Water Conservation District, the Contra Costa Resource Conservation District, the San Francisco Estuary Institute, the Watershed Project, the Urban Creeks Council of California, the Natural Heritage Institute, Friends of Alhambra Creek and Friends of Marsh Creek. Refer to Exhibit 4 for letters of support for this project.
4. **Location:** This project encompasses all of Contra Costa County, which is located entirely within the San Francisco Bay Area, consistent with Section 31162 of the Public Resources Code.
5. **Need:** The project will not occur without Conservancy funding and is necessary to support the implementation of the East Contra Costa County HCP/NCCP, which will improve the protection and restoration of habitats of protected species.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** In creating the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, the legislature identified San Francisco Bay as the central feature in an interconnected open-space system of watersheds, natural habitats, scenic areas, agricultural lands and regional trails of statewide importance. In Public Resources Code Section 31162(b), the legislature identified one of the goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy as protecting, restoring and enhancing natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance. This project will help guide the design of protection, restoration and enhancement projects in Contra Costa County. In addition, the project's support for the implementation of the East Contra Costa County HCP/NCCP represents a greater-than-local interest, since the HCP/NCCP is designed to protect habitats for 28 rare, threatened and endangered species.

**Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** It is important that the historical ecology project happen now, to provide information to support implementation of the recently adopted East Contra Costa HCP/NCCP, which is designed to protect habitat for 28 rare, threatened and endangered species, in an area with significant development pressure.
8. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
9. **Conflict resolution:** This project will help guide implementation of the East Contra Costa County HCP/NCCP, which seeks to minimize conflicts between development pressures and rare species habitat by establishing a coordinated, regional approach to conservation and regulation.
10. **Innovation:** Historical Ecology is a relatively new field and is becoming a valuable tool for conservation efforts in the region. By providing information on the actual habitats, species assemblages and hydrologic regimes that existed historically, this project will support the development of restoration projects with more locally appropriate designs.
11. **Readiness:** The Contra Costa County Community Development Department is eager to begin this project as soon as possible, in order to have preliminary results for the Contra Costa County Creek and Watershed Symposium in November 2007 and to help guide the expenditure of funds to implement the newly adopted HCP/NCCP.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** This project will support the Bay Area Upland Goals Project, which the Conservancy is funding. The project will also generate information that could be used to help guide enhancement and restoration on the many acquisition projects that the Conservancy has previously funded in Contra Costa County.
13. **Cooperation:** The Contra Costa Watershed Forum has identified the Historical Ecology study as a primary focus for collaboration in the near future. The Contra Costa Watershed Forum is a countywide partnership of watershed groups, government agencies and other interested groups and citizens that coordinate on creek and watershed issues and pursue joint projects related to maintaining creek and watershed health.

**CONSISTENCY WITH ADOPTED PLANS:**

The Historical Ecology project is consistent with and supports the implementation of the East Contra Costa County HCP/NCCP, which has been adopted by Contra Costa County, the East

Bay Regional Park District, and the Cities of Pittsburg, Brentwood, Clayton and Oakley. The plan is also pending adoption by the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, in that it would involve only planning studies and feasibility analyses for possible future action not yet adopted by the Conservancy. Preparation of the historical ecology study does not legally bind the Conservancy to future implementation of protection, restoration or enhancement projects that are designed using the historical ecology study. The project is also categorically exempt under Section 15306, which exempts basic data collection and resource evaluation activities leading to an action which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project