

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 13, 2007

RANCHO CORRAL ACQUISITION

File No. 07-098-01
Project Manager: Bob Thiel

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to two million five hundred thousand dollars (\$2,500,000) to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority to acquire 320 acres of the Rancho Corral property in the Santa Monica Mountains in Los Angeles County.

LOCATION: Santa Monica Mountains, Los Angeles County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement and Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)

Exhibit 2: [Regional Map](#)

Exhibit 3: [Trails Map](#)

Exhibit 4: [Acquisition Parcel Maps](#)

Exhibit 5: [Rancho Corral photos](#)

Exhibit 6: [Letters of Support](#)

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 million five hundred thousand dollars (\$2,500,000) to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) to acquire approximately 320 acres of the Rancho Corral property, consisting of Assessor Parcel Numbers 4457-005-010 and -011, and 4457-013-033, -036, -037, -043, and -044, in the Santa Monica Mountains in Los Angeles County for the purposes of coastal resource enhancement and public access. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for acquisition, the MRCA shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy all

relevant acquisition documents, including but not limited to the appraisal, environmental assessments, agreement of purchase and sale, escrow instructions, and documents of title necessary to the acquisition.

2. The MRCA shall pay no more than fair market value for the property.
3. The MRCA shall permanently dedicate the property for habitat and resource protection, open space preservation, and public access in a manner acceptable to the Conservancy's Executive Officer.
4. The MRCA shall acknowledge Conservancy funding by erecting and maintaining on the Rancho Corral property, or at another approved location, a sign that has been reviewed and approved by the Conservancy's 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 authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270 and 31400-31409) regarding resource enhancement and public access.
2. The proposed project has been undertaken at the specific request of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which is the agency having jurisdiction over the project area, consistent with Section 31117 of the Public Resources Code.
3. The proposed authorization is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
4. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed project would provide funds to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) to purchase approximately 320 acres of undeveloped property in the Santa Monica Mountains for the purposes of habitat preservation and public access. This transaction is the first phase of a larger acquisition under which the MRCA is to acquire all 645 acres of the Rancho Corral property. Under subsequent phases (scheduled for calendar year 2008), the MRCA will purchase an additional 305 acres, and as part of the subsequent transactions, it would acquire an additional 20.6 acres of Rancho Corral property through the donation of that acreage by the seller.

The 645-acre Rancho Corral property is located between Malibu Creek State Park and the MRCA's Corral Canyon Park, and its acquisition would fill an important gap between protected lands, allowing for landscape-scale conservation of habitat and resources (Exhibit 2). Corral Canyon is the last remaining coastal canyon in the Los Angeles County portion of the Santa Monica Mountains with a contiguous band of natural open space from the Pacific to the crest of the range. Rancho Corral lies along both sides of Corral Creek, which flows from its headwaters in Malibu Creek State Park to its mouth at Dan Blocker State Beach. All of the Rancho Corral

acreage lies within the coastal zone of Los Angeles County.

The primary vegetation communities found on the property are coastal sage scrub and chaparral, oak riparian woodland, and upland coast live oak woodland. Surrounding vegetation communities include coastal sage scrub, native grasslands, valley oak woodland, fresh and tidal wetland, and several forms of riparian woodland. These habitats support and maintain diverse populations of plants and wildlife, particularly amphibians and reptiles that depend on perennial streams. Some species that may potentially use the properties include steelhead trout, California red-legged frog, and southwestern pond turtle. The area is also potential habitat for mountain lions, which have been tracked traversing Malibu State Park by the National Park Service and California State Parks.

The proposed acquisition will also provide an opportunity to link the Backbone Trail (to the north of the property) to the Pacific Ocean and preserve a key link for the development of the Coastal Slope Trail (Exhibit 3). The Backbone Trail follows the crest of the Santa Monica Mountains for a distance of about 70 miles from Point Mugu State Park in Ventura County to Will Rogers Historical State Park near the city of Santa Monica (see Exhibit 2). The Backbone Trail crosses through Malibu Creek State Park, and the proposed acquisition would allow for a connector trail to be built from the Backbone Trail down to the planned Coastal Slope Trail and to the MRCA's Corral Canyon property adjacent to the coast. The Coastal Slope Trail is being planned to extend from Topanga State Park to just beyond the Ventura County line and is incorporated in both the Los Angeles County and City of Malibu General Plans. Because much of the proposed trail alignment remains under private ownership, however, the exact route will depend on the success of public agencies in acquiring property and securing trail easements. By acquiring the proposed acreage at Rancho Corral, the MRCA and its partners would secure an important one mile segment for the Coastal Slope Trail.

If the proposed acquisition of the Rancho Corral property is not completed, it is highly likely that the area will be developed, causing habitat fragmentation and loss of potential trail connections. The Rancho Corral property is owned by several limited-liability corporations and comprised of 18 legal parcels (Exhibit 4a), each with certificates of compliance. Residential development of the site would require construction of a road network through the property, significantly impacting existing habitat and degrading the watershed.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) currently holds an option to purchase the property as a bargain sale, but that option requires that the acquisition be completed by the end of 2007. A commercial appraisal of the property in July 2007 valued the 625 acres of the Rancho Corral property at \$32,000 per acre, or roughly \$20,000,000 for the entire property. . As currently planned, TPL would acquire all 625 acres of the property from the current owners before the end of 2007. In the first phase of the project (which would utilize Coastal Conservancy funding), TPL would convey 320 acres of the property to the MRCA---acreage which contain much of the proposed access route for the Coastal Slope Trail. The 320 acres consist of seven parcels, identified by Assessor Parcel Numbers 4457-005-010 and -011, and 4457-013-033, -036, -037, -043, and -044 (See Exhibit 4b). The seller will provide financing to TPL for the balance of the property being acquired until adequate additional public funding is secured, as outlined in the Project Financing section below.

In calendar year 2008, TPL would convey the remaining 305 acres to the MRCA, subject to the ability of the MRCA to secure other public funding for subsequent phase(s) of the acquisition. The remaining 11 parcels to be purchased by the MRCA would include Assessor Parcel Numbers 4557-005-016; and 4457-013-013, -015, -029, -038, -039, -040, -052, -053, 060, and -061 (see Exhibit 4a). As part of the second phase of the project, the remaining 305 acres will be covered by deed restrictions to protect the conservation values of the property. The current owners will also donate to the MRCA 20.6 acres within APN 4457-013-055. (That acreage lies below APN 4457-013-029 and immediately west of APN 445-013-039 on Exhibit 4b). Certain lot line adjustments will need to occur prior to that closing.

The MRCA is a local-government public entity established in 1985 pursuant to the Joint Powers Act. The MRCA is a local partnership among the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC), the Conejo Recreation and Park District, and the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District, two local park agencies established by the vote of the people in those communities.

The MRCA was created to preserve and manage local open space and parkland, watershed lands, trails, and wildlife habitat. It manages and provides ranger services for almost 60,000 acres of public lands and parks that it owns and that are owned by the SMMC or other agencies and provides comprehensive education and interpretation programs for the public. The MRCA works in cooperation with the SMMC and other local government partners to acquire parkland, participate in vital planning processes, and complete major park improvement projects. Following acquisition, the MRCA will be responsible for the maintenance and management of the Rancho Corral property, using County Proposition A funds.

Site Description:

The primary vegetation communities found on the property are coastal sage scrub and chaparral, oak riparian woodland, and upland coast live oak woodland. Oak riparian woodland and upland coast live oak woodland are considered sensitive, and California Department of Fish and Game lists coastal sage scrub as threatened. Surrounding vegetation communities include coastal sage scrub, native grasslands, valley oak woodland, fresh and tidal wetland, and riparian woodland. These habitat types support and maintain diverse populations of plants and wildlife, particularly amphibians and reptiles that depend on perennial streams. Some species that may potentially use the properties include steelhead trout, California red-legged frog (which historically occurred in Corral Canyon drainages), and southwestern pond turtle. The western newt and California chorus frog have been reported within Corral Canyon and adjacent canyons. Because Corral Canyon Creek (Exhibit 5), a perennial stream that runs through the property, is relatively undisturbed, the project area remains an ideal, moist riparian habitat for amphibians, as well as potential habitat for steelhead trout.

The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA), which surrounds the project site, is the nation's largest urban national park, encompassing 153,000 acres of scenic mountains and coastline within Los Angeles and Ventura counties of southern California. The SMMNRA is home to a number of rare and endangered species, such as steelhead trout; it also provides habitat for over 450 vertebrate animal species, including mountain lion, coyote, and

bobcat. The park includes more than 500 miles of recreation trails and 47 miles of beaches, all adjacent to a metropolitan region of more than 17 million people. The SMMNRA was created in 1978 as a unit of the National Park System but it is managed through a cooperative partnership among federal, state, local, private, and nonprofit groups who share in the stewardship of the Santa Monica Mountains. Parks within the National Recreation Area draw over 33 million annual visitors. People of all ages and backgrounds visit to hike, horseback ride, bicycle, camp, surf, and escape the confines of urban living.

Project History:

Preservation of the Santa Monica Mountains has long been identified as an important environmental goal for the State. Malibu Creek State Park was in the initial group of outstanding areas in California recommended by Frederick Law Olmstead in 1929 for acquisition by the Department of Parks and Recreation. In 1978 Congress created the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, and over the past 30 years, more than \$400 million has been spent to preserve lands within the National Recreation Area. There are now more than 70,000 acres of protected lands in the Santa Monica Mountains, and this project will connect two of its large, existing preserves.

There are a number of plans that prioritize conservation activities within the Santa Monica Mountains, including the Santa Monica Mountains Comprehensive Plan, the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area Land Protection Plan and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Work Program. This project is consistent with all of these plans.

The Coastal Conservancy has been working with the SMMC, the office of Third District County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, TPL, the National Park Service, and other partners for the past several years on the potential acquisition of key sites in the Santa Monica Mountains, including the Rancho Corral property. The Coastal Conservancy has been a partner in efforts to protect the Santa Monica Mountains and the North Santa Monica Bay watersheds since the late 1980s. Staff of the Coastal Conservancy participated in early efforts to create the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project. The Conservancy has also been a project partner in numerous projects to protect and restore the North Santa Monica Bay watersheds, including fish passage projects in Solstice Creek watershed, public access projects at Dan Blocker Beach, acquisition projects to preserve important resources in the Cold Creek and Malibu Creek watersheds, and restoration of Malibu Creek and Malibu Lagoon.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Initial Purchase of 320 acres (2007)

Coastal Conservancy	\$2,500,000
Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy	4,000,000
Total	6,500,000

Subsequent Purchase of remaining 305 acres (2008)

Los Angeles County (requested)	500,000
Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission (requested)	500,000
Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (requested)	3,100,000
Wildlife Conservation Board (requested)	2,000,000
Total	6,100,000

Total Project Cost **\$12,600,000**

The anticipated source of funds for this project is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal & Beach Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 50). Proposition 50 funds are appropriated to the Conservancy to restore and protect coastal watersheds through projects undertaken pursuant to the Conservancy's enabling legislation (Division 21 of the Public Resources Code) to acquire, restore or protect water and land resources (Water Code Section 79570). The project is consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation as described below. As required by Proposition 50, the proposed project is consistent with local and regional watershed plans as discussed in the Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan section below. (Water Code Section 79507). The balance of the funds provided under this authorization is to be provided by grants or other funding from the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, County of Los Angeles, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, and the grantee. Finally, the properties will be acquired from willing sellers. The proposed authorization is thus consistent with the funding requirements of Proposition 50.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) provides for the Conservancy's participation in a program of coastal resource enhancement. The proposed authorization would facilitate the preservation of significant coastal natural resources, including Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas that exist on the property. This project will protect an important habitat corridor between the coast and the mountains and the water quality and aquatic ecosystem health within the Corral Canyon watershed.

Consistent with Section 31251, the Conservancy is awarding a grant to a public agency for the purposes of restoring and enhancing coastal resources. Consistent with Section 31117, the Conservancy is partnering with the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy on this project. And consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31253, the Conservancy is providing funds that will contribute to the total cost of acquisition.

Consistent with Section 31252, the proposed project has been identified as a high priority in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area Land Protection Plan and is consistent with

the Santa Monica Mountains Coastal Zone Plan Local Coastal Program, as described in the discussion regarding “Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies” below.

Public Resources Code Section 31400 directs the Conservancy to have a principal role in the implementation of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. To this end, §31400.3 authorizes the Conservancy to "provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of this division." Funding this project is consistent with these provisions as well as with §31400.1, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to a public agency for purposes of developing lands suitable for public access to and along the coast, when they will greater than local needs. The project would serve the recreational needs of the estimated 33 million annual visitors to the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation area, as well as local residents.

Consistent with §31400.2, the amount of funding provided by the Conservancy has been determined by the total amount of available for coastal public access projects, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2007
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective G** of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would secure property to facilitate development of the Coastal Slope Trail and an inland connecting Coastal Slope Lateral Trail linking the coast to the Backbone Trail.

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective A** of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would ultimately protect over 645 acres of significant coastal watershed lands. Consistent with the strategies identified in the strategic plan, this project would connect existing protected lands to provide large, contiguous blocks; protect habitat and wildlife corridors; and help implement existing regional plans. The MRCA has been identified as an appropriate entity to own and manage the property.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective C** of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would preserve a wildlife corridor from the coast to inland habitat areas.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 20, 2007, 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 project is supported by Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, State Senator Sheila Kuehl, Assembly Member Julia Brownley, US Congressman Henry Waxman, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the National Park Service, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, and many environmental organizations. Letters of support are provided in Exhibit 6.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of Los Angeles County.
5. **Need:** If Rancho Corral is not acquired and protected, the site will likely be developed, as certificates of compliance have been obtained for the property. Without funding from the Coastal Conservancy, this acquisition might not be possible in time to exercise the option that TPL holds.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** This project will add to and connect with preserves within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, the nation’s largest urban national park. The park includes more than 500 miles of recreation trails and 47 miles of beaches, all adjacent to a metropolitan region of more than 17 million people. Parks within the national recreation area draw over 33 million annual visitors. The Santa Monica Mountains also support a number of rare and endangered species, such as the Steelhead trout, and also provides habitat for over 450 vertebrate animal species, including coyotes, bobcats, and mountain lions. This project will preserve an important habitat corridor that is especially important for large predators, such as mountain lions.

Additional Criteria

7. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
8. **Readiness:** The TPL has negotiated a bargain sale for the acquisition of this property if the purchase can be completed in 2007. If approved, it is expected that the acquisition will close by the end of the year.
9. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
10. **Return to Conservancy:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Cooperation:** The project will be completed as a cooperative effort among the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, the Trust for Public Land, the County of Los Angeles, and other agencies.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

Acquisition and preservation of the property is consistent with the proposed and current Santa Monica Mountains Coastal Zone Plan and the Los Angeles County General Plan. The County of Los Angeles is currently in the process of updating the Santa Monica Mountains Coastal Zone Plan. The proposed plan identifies the Rancho Corral property as including Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas, which require protection under the Coastal Act. The proposed plan also identifies the project area as part of the “Corral Canyon Significant Watershed,” and discusses its

importance as an element in the protection of two significant ridgelines and segments of the Coastal Slope and Coastal Slope Lateral Trails. As specified in the plan, protection of Rancho Corral would help implement three key policies for the watershed: (1) a priority for resource protection over development; (2) preserving access to coastal resources; and (3) protecting water quality.

This project will preserve this habitat and open space, consistent with both the existing and proposed plans. It is also consistent with the land-acquisition priorities of the Santa Monica Mountains Comprehensive Plan and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Work Program. This property is ranked as a high priority in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area Land Protection Plan and is within the proposed Significant Ecological Area boundary identified in the Los Angeles County General Plan Update of 2006.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/
STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:**

As a small, undeveloped watershed, Corral Canyon Creek has not been the subject of a specific watershed management plan. However, the Rancho Corral property is included within the proposed Significant Ecological Area boundary identified in the Los Angeles County General Plan Update (2006), as well as within the Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Area of the proposed Santa Monica Mountains Coastal Zone Plan (2006). Rancho Corral is also listed among the highest priority acquisition properties in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area Land Protection Plan.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The acquisition of the Rancho Corral property is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Sections 15313 and 15325 of 14 Cal. Code of Regulations (CCR). Section 15313 exempts acquisition of lands for fish and wildlife conservation purposes and for 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 similarly exempt pursuant to 14 CCR Section 15325 because it involves a transfer of ownership in order to preserve existing natural conditions and open space. Upon Conservancy approval of the proposed authorization, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.