

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
January 20, 2011

VENTURA RIVER PARKWAY PROGRAM: HOLLINGSWORTH RANCH ACQUISITION

File No. 08-107-02
Project Manager: Bob Thiel

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$500,000 to the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy to acquire and prepare a stewardship plan for 70 acres of the Hollingsworth Ranch property along the Ventura River in unincorporated Ventura County.

LOCATION: Ventura County, north of the City of Ventura.

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Reservation of Significant Coastal Resource Areas

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project location](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Map of Ventura River watershed](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [OVLC preserves and other holdings](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [Adjacent protected lands](#)
 - Exhibit 5: [Aerial photo of Hollingsworth Ranch property](#)
 - Exhibit 6: [Site photos](#)
 - Exhibit 7: [Project letters](#)
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31111 and 31350-31356 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) to the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy to acquire and prepare a stewardship plan for approximately 70 acres of land commonly known as Hollingsworth Ranch (consisting of portions of Ventura County Assessor’s Parcel Numbers 061-0-160-070, 061-0-160-205 and 061-0-160-265) along the Ventura River in Ventura County to protect significant coastal resource areas. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for acquisition, the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy (OVLC) 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 OVLC shall pay no more than fair market value for the property.
3. The OVLC shall permanently dedicate the property for habitat and resource protection, open space preservation, and public access (to the extent compatible with habitat and resource protection) in a manner acceptable to the Conservancy's Executive Officer.
4. The OVLC shall acknowledge Conservancy funding by erecting and maintaining on the Hollingsworth Ranch property, or at another approved location, a sign that has been reviewed and approved by the Conservancy's Executive Officer.
5. Prior to disbursement of funds for preparation of the stewardship plan, the OVLC shall submit for the review and approval of the Conservancy's Executive Officer a work plan and the names and qualifications of any contractors that the grantee intends to employ to carry out that project."

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 8 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31350-31356) regarding reservation of significant coastal resource areas and with Section 31111 regarding the funding of plans.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines."
3. The Ojai Valley Land Conservancy is a nonprofit organization existing under the provisions of Section 501(c) (3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

This project would provide funds to enable the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy (OVLC) to acquire and prepare a stewardship plan for approximately 70 acres of property in and along the Ventura River in the Oak View area of unincorporated Ventura County for habitat and open space preservation. The project site, located at 9458 Santa Ana Road and commonly known as Hollingsworth Ranch, consists of portions of Ventura County Assessor's Parcel Numbers 061-0-160-070, 061-0-160-205 and 061-0-160-265.

The proposed acquisition will permanently protect 1.3 miles of important spawning and rearing habitat for endangered southern steelhead along a perennially-flowing reach of the river, one that

currently supports a resident population of steelhead. Because dams and other barriers block prime spawning and rearing habitat in upper reaches of the watershed, protection of key habitat along the mainstem is critical to the survival and recovery of the species.

The Hollingsworth Ranch property would also link other OVLC preserves upstream with protected open space under public ownership downstream (Exhibit 3 and 4) and assist the OVLC and its partners in promoting a larger community vision for a continuous swath of protected floodplain and habitat along the river. For a number of years, the OVLC, the Coastal Conservancy, the Ventura Hillside Conservancy, and the Trust for Public Land have worked together to create a river parkway program for the Ventura River---a comprehensive effort to acquire and restore a contiguous corridor of riparian habitat and open space along 15 miles of the river from Matilija Dam and the City of Ojai to the estuary. The goal is to create a greenway that would conserve habitat, protect wildlife linkages, manage stormwater, provide trails and interpretive facilities, recharge groundwater and reconnect the river to its floodplain.

The 70-acre property includes an 80-year old residence and outbuildings that the OVLC plans to convert to environmental education and interpretive facilities in the future (Exhibit 6). The site also offers significant public recreational opportunities. The OVLC intends later to develop trail connections from Hollingsworth Ranch to the adjacent Ojai Valley Trail (Exhibit 5)---a popular 9.5 mile bike, equestrian, jogging and pedestrian path that runs along the river from Fox Street in Ojai to Foster Park in Ventura, where it connects with the 6.3 mile Ventura River Trail to downtown Ventura, the estuary, and the Coastal Trail.

The sellers (the Wallevik family) and the OVLC have have negotiated an agreement in principle under which the landowners have agreed to sell the 70 acres at a bargain-sale price of approximately \$2 million. The OVLC has already been awarded a \$1.5 million grant from the Department of Fish and Game's fisheries restoration grant program to buy the property, but needs the proposed \$500,000 grant from the Conservancy to complete the transaction. If the OVLC is unable to acquire the property this year, the landowners intend to list the property for sale to others, who might develop the site in ways that would be incompatible with habitat protection and public access.

Prior to sale, the sellers and the OVLC will process a lot-line adjustment and application for a conservation subdivision to consolidate the 70 acres into appropriate legal parcels. (Under the County of Ventura's expedited Parcel Map Waiver and Conservation Subdivision process, a property owner and a qualifying conservation organization can subdivide an existing legal lot into two parcels, or make a lot line adjustment between two existing legal lots, even if one or both of the new parcels will be less than the required minimum lot size. To qualify, the newly-created conservation parcel must have significant biological resources and must be acquired and maintained as permanent, natural open space). Following sale of the 70 acres to the OVLC and the sellers secure certain landuse and zoning entitlements from the County, the sellers will donate to OVLC (or sell for nominal consideration) an additional 10 acres of buffer property located northwest and adjacent to the 70 acres.

About \$21,000 from the Conservancy grant may be used to pay for closing and other related costs associated with the acquisition, and approximately \$18,000 from the grant will help fund

preparation of a stewardship plan that would analyze the site's resources and prescribe a program for restoration and management of the entire 80-acre property. As part of its adaptive management program for the property, the OVLC intends to participate in a regional effort to monitor the impacts of climate change in the Ventura River watershed and vicinity. Among other things, the monitoring effort will track changes in phenology (such as budding and migration) and community structure.

The OVLC is a non-profit organization qualified under Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code whose objective is to preserve, protect and enhance the natural resources of the Ojai Valley, a mission it accomplishes through land acquisition, restoration, education, and recreation programs. Since its inception in 1987, the OVLC has protected and managed over 1,850 acres of habitat and open space (see Exhibit 4) and has undertaken several large habitat restoration programs, including an extensive restoration of its 58-acre Ojai Meadows Preserve. As demonstrated by its successful completion of several projects funded by the Conservancy, the OVLC has the necessary experience and expertise to implement the proposed project.

Site description

Hollingsworth Ranch is located along the Ventura River in the Oak View area of unincorporated Ventura County, about two miles south of Ojai and seven miles north of downtown Ventura. Access to the property is via a driveway from Santa Ana Road. The property lies outside the coastal zone but within the Ventura River watershed, an important coastal system that is described in detail below. The site is zoned by the County of Ventura as Open Space – 40 acre Minimum Lot Size (OS-40), a designation that is largely restricted to agricultural uses, open space and rural residential. The land uses surrounding the property reflect that zoning: open space, grazing, orchard crop production, and residential communities

The 70 acres to be acquired by the OVLC include various improvements constructed around 1935: a single-family residence, a bunkhouse, well house, wash room, and a garage (Exhibits 5 and 6). The residence, which is finished in exposed rock, includes about 2700 square feet of floor space, three bedrooms, three and a half bathrooms, and a basement. The goal of the OVLC is to eventually convert these facilities to an educational and interpretive center that could host exhibits, classes, events and field trips.

The OVLC already holds a conservation easement on about 16 acres of the portion of the Hollingsworth Ranch property for which it intends to purchase fee title; that acreage is primarily river bottom and floodplain property located in the lower southeast section of the site and is indicated on exhibits 3 and 4. Acquisition of fee title to that acreage along with the balance of the Hollingsworth Ranch property is a component of the OVLC's purchase agreement with the sellers and will enable the OVLC to better manage and restore the entire site as a single preserve.

The site includes four wells. One will be retired permanently, while another will be idled indefinitely until such time as it may be needed on a temporary basis to supply small amounts of irrigation water for habitat restoration on the property. Acquisition of water rights for conservation purposes is important in this watershed where extractions already threaten the instream flows needed for steelhead and other aquatic species.

The Hollingsworth Ranch property lies next to OVLC's Confluence Preserve and several

hundred feet away from its Rio Vista Preserve (or Drapeau property). These three properties are several miles downstream of the OVLC's Ventura River Preserve, which protects roughly three miles of the river. On each of these preserves the OVLC pursues restoration goals while maintaining trails and other facilities that attract an estimated 15,000 hikers, equestrians, mountain bikers and school children each year (Exhibit 3).

Almost all of the Hollingsworth property lies within the 100-year floodplain of the Ventura River and includes 1.31 miles of wetted primary and secondary river channel. The central portion of the site contains a section of old-growth riparian forest that has been designated by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as suitable habitat for the endangered least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*). The remaining riparian sections are predominately alluvial scrub, oak savannah and oak woodland. Water flows perennially along this reach and provides over-summering habitat for one of two existing populations of southern steelhead on the main stem. While much of the main stem is comprised of highly dynamic braided channels with sub-surface summer flows, the reach along Hollingsworth Ranch contains deep cool pools and sufficient food production to support steelhead even in times of drought.

Because of the year-round availability of water and its location at the intersection of two major wildlife migration corridors (the Ventura River and San Antonio Creek), Hollingsworth Ranch is heavily used by wildlife. Other special status species besides steelhead regularly move along or inhabit this reach, such as arroyo chub, southwestern pond turtle and two-striped garter snake. Additional wildlife sightings have included stickleback, rattlesnake, gopher snake, red-sided garter snake, osprey, red-tailed hawk, California quail, hooded oriole, western kingbird, cliff swallow, tree swallow, red-winged blackbird, Bullock's oriole, western bluebird, great blue heron, black-crowned night heron, green heron, snowy egret, great egret, white-faced ibis, American coot, mallard, coyote and bobcat.

The characteristics of the Hollingsworth Ranch Property suggest that it could be particularly valuable in the face of climate change because it offers movement corridors and other linkages that would allow species to migrate or disperse to more favorable habitat as climate conditions change. In addition, the acquisition will preserve important refugia for steelhead. Climate change is projected to produce higher stream temperatures in Southern California, which could severely limit steelhead health, distribution, migration, and breeding patterns and increase their susceptibility to disease and predation. Prolonged exposure to stream temperatures above certain thresholds is lethal for both juveniles and adults. The riparian forest, deep pools and other features of the Hollingsworth property could play an important role in protecting steelhead from some of the effects of climate change along the Ventura River.

Watershed description

The Ventura River watershed encompasses about 226 square miles and is roughly 31 miles long from its headwaters in Los Padres National Forest to its outfall into the Pacific (see Exhibit 2). The mainstem of the river, which originates at the confluence of North Fork Matilija Creek and Matilija Creek, is about 15.6 miles long. Downstream of that juncture, the river's principal tributaries are San Antonio Creek, Willis Creek, Rice Creek, Coyote Creek and Cañada Larga.

Because much of the river corridor has retained its rural character, there are numerous intact examples of riparian cottonwood, California black walnut, sycamore and oak woodlands, as well

as chaparral, floodplain, and grassland habitats along the river. Habitats in and near the river sustain one of the highest diversities of vertebrates in Southern California: nearly 300 vertebrate species have been seen in the lower reaches of the Ventura River alone. At least 26 special status species inhabit or utilize aquatic, riparian and wetland habitats in the watershed, including 13 species listed as threatened or endangered and 13 California species of special concern. Listed species include southern steelhead, tidewater goby, least Bell's vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, California brown pelican, California least tern, peregrine falcon, Belding's savannah sparrow, ringtail, black-shouldered kite, western snowy plover, California red-legged frog, and the California condor.

The major issue within the watershed has been the dramatic decline of southern steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), a federally listed endangered species. Until the late 1940's the river ran essentially unimpeded to the ocean, and 4,000 to 5,000 adult steelhead would migrate up the river each year to spawn and rear, creating within the Ventura River one of the largest steelhead runs in the state. But in 1948, the Ventura County Flood Control District built the 198-foot high Matilija Dam to control flooding and alleviate persistent water supply shortages that supposedly plagued the watershed since the 1920s. The dam included no fish passage facility and as a consequence cutoff access to more than half of the historic steelhead spawning habitat in the watershed.

Matilija Dam is a 620-foot wide, concrete arch dam located inland of the coastal zone, about 16 miles upstream from the Pacific and just over half a mile from the confluence of Matilija Creek with the Ventura River. The dam is responsible for a variety of adverse effects on stream ecology and wildlife. The sediment trapped by the dam has deprived downstream reaches of the sand, gravel, and more coarse-grained materials needed to sustain a suitable substrate for fish, such as riffle and pool formations, sandbars, and secondary channels. The dam blocks flows from the upper watershed and has altered natural stream and habitat dynamics.

A broad coalition of local, state, federal, and private agencies (including the Conservancy) have been working for the past decade to study the feasibility of removing Matilija Dam, finalize engineering designs, and secure the funding and congressional support needed to complete the project. Removal of the dam would restore fish passage to more than 17 miles of historic spawning and rearing habitat in the upper watershed. It would also restore natural sediment transport downstream and improve sand replenishment at beaches along the coast. The Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Program is one of the largest dam removal projects in the country, as well as one of the largest ecosystem restoration projects ever undertaken by the Army Corps of Engineers west of the Mississippi River. When the project is fully implemented, the Ventura River watershed and its related estuarine and ocean habitats offshore will more closely resemble historic conditions.

Project history

The Coastal Conservancy has partnered with other agencies and nonprofit organizations for many years to protect, enhance and restore the Ventura River watershed. Those efforts include over \$8.4 million in Conservancy grants to help fund the evaluation project, dam removal feasibility study, and habitat restoration program for Matilija Dam, as well as grants to other agencies or organizations for such projects as the design and construction of a fish ladder at the

Robles Diversion on the mainstem, water quality monitoring and habitat restoration planning in the lower watershed, and a managed retreat project at Surfer's Point just east of the Ventura River estuary.

A major part of the Conservancy's efforts along the Ventura have been directed at assisting the OVLC in acquiring key habitat areas. In 2003 the Conservancy awarded a \$3.1 million grant to enable the OVLC to acquire the 1,556-acre Farmont Ranch along the river, a site now known as the Ventura River Preserve. A year later, the Conservancy provided a \$450,000 grant to assist the OVLC in purchasing fee title to 14 acres and a conservation easement over 16 acres to create the OVLC's Confluence Preserve along the river at its junction with San Antonio Creek. That property includes almost one-half mile of the river and creek, as well as a mature riparian, cottonwood, and sycamore forest. And in 2008, a Conservancy grant enabled the OVLC to purchase the Drapeau Property, 53.5 acres of river bottom and riparian habitat that is now known as OVLC's Rio Vista Preserve (see Exhibit 3).

Each of those acquisitions have been components of the Conservancy's Ventura River Parkway Program, a multi-phased effort to acquire and restore a series of key riparian parcels to create a contiguous corridor of habitat and recreational open space along the lower 15 miles of the river from Ojai to the estuary. Because of the regional importance of the Ventura River corridor, a comprehensive river parkway program would help conserve habitat linkages and connectivity, reconnect creek and river corridors to their floodplains, restore riparian and aquatic habitat, remove invasive species, and stabilize streambanks through environmentally-sensitive measures. In support of that effort, the Conservancy has also provided funding to the Trust for Public Land to conduct preliminary planning, stakeholder coordination and property analyses for the River Parkway Program along the lower six miles of the river from Foster Park to the estuary.

The project to be implemented with this grant would fund another component of the River Parkway project and complement the Conservancy's other efforts in the Ventura River watershed. The project would also support other work underway along the River, including the preparation of a Conceptual Area Protection Plan for the watershed by the OVLC and Ventura Hillside Conservancy and the work of the community-based Ventura River Watershed Council, which serves as the vehicle for establishing objectives and prioritizing projects for the County's Integrated Regional Water Management Planning (IRWMP) program.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$500,000
Federal Pacific Coast Salmonid Recovery funds (administered under the California Department of Fish and Game's fisheries restoration grant program	\$1,500,000
Total project cost	\$2,000,000

The anticipated source of funds for this project is the FY 2008/2009 appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 84---the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Pub. Resources Code sections 75001 *et seq.*). These funds may be used to "protect and restore the natural habitat values of coastal waters and lands" and "promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state" in

accordance with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. (See Pub. Resources Code § 75060.) The acquisition of the Hollingsworth Ranch Property will permanently protect 1.3 miles of important natural habitat in the Ventura River watershed, as well as promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state. As discussed below the project is consistent with Chapter 8 of Division 21.

In evaluating acquisition projects for the purpose of natural resource protection under Proposition 84, the Conservancy is directed by Section 75071 to give priority to projects that meet one or more of the five criteria specified in Section 75071. Acquisition of the Hollingsworth Ranch Property by the OVLC would meet at least three of those criteria:

1. “Properties that link to, or contribute to linking, existing protected areas with other large blocks of protected habitat. . .” (Pub. Resources Code § 75071(a).) As discussed above, the acquisition of the Hollingsworth Ranch Property would help protect a critical wildlife corridor along the Ventura River, linking the OVLC’s upstream preserves with protected public lands located downstream.

2. “Projects that contribute to long-term protection of and improvement to the water and biological quality of the streams, aquifers, and terrestrial resources of priority watersheds of the major biological regions of the state. . .” (Pub. Resources Code § 75071(b).) The acquisition would protect the floodplain and critical steelhead habitat of the Ventura River, a priority watershed in Southern California.

3. “Properties for which there is a non-state matching contribution toward the acquisition, restoration, stewardship or management costs.” (Pub. Resources Code § 75071(e).) As shown above, 75 percent of the acquisition costs would be funded by federal monies from the Pacific Coast Salmonid Recovery Fund, which the Department of Fish and Game administers under its fisheries restoration grant program.

As also mandated by Section 75071(f) of the bond act, Conservancy staff has submitted to the Resources Agency, and has posted on the Conservancy’s website, an explanation of how the proposed acquisitions meet the criteria established in Section 75071.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 8 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31350-31356), regarding reservation of significant coastal resource areas.

Public Resources Code section 31350 vests authority in the Conservancy to ensure the reservation of significant coastal resource areas that would otherwise be lost to public use. Under Section 31351, the Conservancy may cooperate with nonprofit organizations (such as the OVLC) to ensure the reservation of interests in real property for the purpose of “recreation, and fish and wildlife habitat” in order to meet the policies and objectives of a certified local coastal plan or other local plan in coastal areas not within the coastal zone.

The Hollingsworth Ranch property is located outside the coastal zone. But as discussed below under the section “Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies,” this acquisition would be

consistent with the policies of the City of Ventura's certified Local Coastal Program that stress protection of the natural attributes and wildlife of the Ventura River; protection of sensitive wetland, riparian, and oak woodland habitat areas; and both preservation of the Ventura River in its existing semi-natural state and its restoration to natural conditions. In addition, the proposed acquisition would help further goals in the Ojai Valley Area Plan of the County's General Plan (2005), specifically those to "protect significant biological resources within the Ojai Valley in order to maintain natural ecosystems and also preserve the natural beauty of the area" [Goal 1.4.1 (1)]; and to "balance the preservation of wetland habitats with the need to adequately protect public safety and property from flooding hazards" [Goal 1.4.1 (2)].

The proposed authorization is consistent with PRC §31352, which states that the Conservancy may award a grant to a nonprofit organization for a purpose specified in Section 31351 if (as is the case with this project) that organization is unable, due to limited financial resources, to acquire such property. Without the Conservancy funding proposed here, the OVLC would lack the funding needed to acquire the Hollingsworth Ranch property.

The proposed authorization is also consistent with Public Resources Code §31111, which authorizes the Conservancy, in implementing Division 21, to award grants to nonprofit organizations to prepare plans. As a private, nonprofit organization qualified under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, OVLC is qualified to receive a grant from the Conservancy.

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

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would protect more than 70 acres of significant coastal watershed land. Consistent with the strategies identified in the Strategic Plan, this project would assist in connecting existing protected lands to help provide large, contiguous blocks of habitat and protect habitat and wildlife corridors for landscape-level conservation of natural communities and scenic or recreational resources. The OVLC 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 wildlife corridors from coastal to inland habitat areas along the Ventura River.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would assist the OVLC and other partners in the creation of a river parkway for the Ventura River.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY

The proposed project is consistent with the *Coastal Conservancy Policy Statement on Climate Change*, adopted on June 4, 2009, which recognizes that "protection, restoration, and enhancement of habitats, ecosystem processes, and open space is essential to minimizing threats

from global warming to California's biodiversity. . .” By protecting floodplains, steelhead habitat and landscape linkages along the Ventura River, the proposed acquisition will protect potential migration corridors, promote the survival of listed and other native species and biodiversity, and help preserve key ecosystem processes within the Ventura River watershed.

The Policy Statement on Climate Change also directs Conservancy staff to consider climate change in evaluating which projects to fund and the manner in which projects are selected. Staff has taken into account the relevant considerations in connection with its proposal to fund acquisition of the Hollingsworth Ranch Property, as detailed in the discussion in both the “Site Description” section above and in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” section, below.

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 June 4, 2009, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

- 1. Promotion of the Conservancy’s statutory programs and purposes:** See the above discussion on “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation.”
- 2. Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
- 3. Support from the public:** The project is supported by Ventura County Supervisor Steve Bennett, State Senator Tony Strickland, the Ventura River Watershed Council, and the County’s Watershed Protection District, as well other public officials, agencies and community groups in the Ojai and Ventura area. Letters of support are provided in Exhibit 7.
- 4. Location:** Although the proposed project is located outside the Coastal Zone, it would add another segment to the Ventura River Parkway Program and help support the goal of that program to create a contiguous corridor of habitat and recreational open space along the river from Ojai to the estuary. Conservation of the Hollingsworth Ranch property would benefit coastal resources by protecting coastal drainages and providing habitat for special status species that are dependent on areas in the Coastal Zone.
- 5. Need:** Without the proposed grant from the Coastal Conservancy, the OVLC would lack the funds needed to acquire the Hollingsworth Ranch property.
- 6. Greater-than-local interest:** This project will add to and connect with other components of the OVLC’s Preserve network, as well as with other parts of the Ventura River Parkway. The OVLC’s Preserves provide critical habitat for special status species in the Ventura River watershed. They are also the site of nature walks, community restoration work, and natural history educational programs conducted by the OVLC, area schools, and other regional partners.

- 7. Vulnerability to sea level rise:** At an elevation of approximately 350 feet above mean sea level and a location eight miles inland from the coast, Hollingsworth Ranch is outside the area considered vulnerable to future sea level rise by the end of this century.

Additional Criteria

- 8. Urgency:** The OVLC has been advised that unless escrow closes on the proposed purchase of the property by the end of 2011, the sellers will seek another buyer.
- 9. Resolution of more than one issue:** Acquisition of the Hollingsworth Ranch property will help address issues of natural floodplain management, watershed and coastal resource protection, habitat protection and restoration, endangered species recovery, and public recreation and access.
- 10. Leverage:** As noted in the “project Financing” section above, 75 percent of the funding for the proposed project would be contributed by the federal Pacific Coast Salmonid Recovery Fund, which the Department of Fish and Game administers under its fisheries restoration grant program.
- 11. Innovation.** The continued implementation of a river parkway program for the Ventura River provides a creative and exemplary approach to address a variety of resource and recreational issues along one of the most important river systems in Southern California.
- 12. Readiness:** The OVLC and the sellers have negotiated a purchase and sale agreement for the properties and are prepared to close on their sale by mid 2011 if adequate funding can be secured.
- 13. Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** For over a decade, the Coastal Conservancy has been involved in helping protect and restore the Ventura River watershed. In addition to its considerable investment in the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Program, the Conservancy has assisted the OVLC in acquiring its Ventura River, Rio Vista (Drapeau), and Confluence Preserves. The Conservancy has also been one of the driving forces behind the development and implementation of a river parkway program for the Ventura River.
- 14. Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The proposed project involves only a transfer of title to existing open space and would not directly contribute to the generation of greenhouse gas emissions. The preservation of the Hollingsworth Ranch Property as habitat and open space will help sequester carbon in the Ventura River watershed, although in amounts that are difficult to estimate at this time.
- 15. Vulnerability from climate impacts other than sea level rise:** As noted in the “Project Summary” section above, the OVLC intends to participate in an extensive regional monitoring and adaptive management program to address climate change. That program will include monitoring changes in phenology and community structure over time and the early detection and rapid response to invasive species to promote resistance and resilience to climate impacts.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the policy goals of the certified Local Coastal Program (LCP) of the City of San Buenaventura (the City of Ventura), as amended in 1990. The City's LCP includes policies which stress protection of the natural attributes and wildlife of the Ventura River (3.1), protection of sensitive wetland, riparian, and oak woodland habitat areas (e.g., policies 12.1, 12.4 and 12.6), and both preservation of the Ventura River in its existing semi-natural state and its restoration to natural conditions (Policy 13.1).

The project would also promote several major regional goals and Ventura County objectives in the Regional Strategy of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project. The project would promote at least four of the six Regional Goals of the Wetlands Recovery Project: restoring stream corridors in coastal watersheds, recovering native habitat and species diversity; integrating wetlands recovery with other public objectives; and promoting public access and education related to coastal watersheds. The project would also help fulfill a key Ventura County objective in the Regional Strategy: preserving the existing floodplain of the Ventura River and reconnecting the river to its floodplain where feasible.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the objectives and strategies for the Ventura River watershed in the Integrated Regional Watershed Management Plan (IRWMP) of the Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County (2006). They include objectives and strategies to protect and restore viable ecosystems, restore habitat connectivity and integrate floodplain management with ecosystem and recreational objectives. One of the principal regional priorities for the Ventura River watershed in the IRWMP is the development and implementation of projects to acquire land for habitat protection, landscape linkages and natural floodplain management.

Acquisition of the Hollingsworth Ranch property is also consistent with the Los Angeles RWQCB's Basin Plan for the Coastal Watersheds of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties (1994), whose regional objectives for wetlands mandate (a) the protection of natural hydrologic conditions necessary to prevent significant adverse effects on aquatic flora and fauna; and (b) the preservation of existing habitats and associated populations of wetland flora and fauna, including the protection of wildlife corridors, food supplies for fish and wildlife, and natural substrate characteristics to support flora and fauna.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The funding of the acquisition of the Hollingsworth Ranch property is categorically exempt from the requirement for the preparation of environmental documents under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the California Code of Regulations (CCR), Title 14, sections 15313 and 15325. 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 acquisition is similarly exempt pursuant to Section 15325 because the project involves a transfer of ownership in order to preserve existing natural conditions and open space.

The funding of the preparation of the stewardship plan is also exempt from review under CEQA because it involves only data gathering, planning, and feasibility analyses for possible future actions that have not yet been authorized or approved by the Conservancy or another agency and is thus statutorily exempt from the CEQA pursuant to 14 CCR section 15262. Planning carried out as part of the project will, however, consider environmental factors, as required by Section 15262. In addition, data collection and resource evaluation activities conducted for this project are categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to Section 15306. This categorical exemption applies to activities that consist of basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Preparation of the stewardship plan involves analysis of the property's resources and creation of a program for restoring and managing the site. Thus, funding of this plan falls within these exemptions from CEQA.

Upon Conservancy approval of the proposed authorization, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.