

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

May 24, 2012

VENTURA RIVER STEELHEAD PRESERVE EDUCATION AND CONSERVATION CENTER

Project No. 12-017-01

Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$111,000 to the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy to prepare a feasibility study and preliminary designs for an Education and Conservation Center at the Ventura River Steelhead Preserve in Ventura County.

LOCATION: North of the City of Ventura, Ventura County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Coastal and Marine Resources

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred eleven thousand dollars (\$111,000) to the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy (OVLC) to prepare a feasibility study and preliminary designs for the Ventura River Steelhead Preserve Education and Conservation Center. Prior to disbursement of funds, OVLC shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer:

1. A detailed work program, including budget and schedule.
2. The names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed on the project.
3. A sign plan to acknowledge Conservancy funding for the 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:

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1. The proposed project is consistent with the November 10, 2011 Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
 2. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the protection of coastal and marine resources.
 3. OVLC is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$111,000 to the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy (OVLC) to prepare a feasibility study and preliminary designs for an Education and Conservation Center at the Ventura River Steelhead Preserve along the Ventura River in unincorporated Ventura County.

The proposed project would assess the feasibility of utilizing the historic Hollingsworth Ranch house as the Ventura River Steelhead Preserve Education and Conservation Center. The house was built in 1935 and consists of a single-family residence, a bunkhouse, well house, wash room, and a garage (Exhibit 2). 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. To convert this building to an education center will require some structural work to make the rooms more useful for visitors, while retaining the building’s notable charm.

The Education and Conservation Center is proposed to be used as follows:

- **Environmental Education:** Indoor presentation and lab space to complement the “outdoor classroom” of the preserve. Currently, OVLC’s preserves in the watershed annually host hundreds of elementary school children from area schools in an existing environmental education program, and an indoor educational option would make the program more versatile and effective. On a related front, talks have been initiated with area educators about the potential for establishing a “field station” for local schools at this Education and Conservation Center to enable multi-year experiments and learning.
- **Community Meetings and Events:** The OVLC currently offers periodic educational events for the community, and these events and other conservation-related community meetings could be hosted at the Education and Conservation Center.
- **Interpretation for Preserve Visitors:** Interpretive exhibits inside the buildings as well as outdoor interpretive signage would help visitors understand and appreciate Ventura River flora and fauna, the Ventura River Parkway vision, watershed conservation issues such as the planned removal of Matilija Dam, and the historical significance of the Hollingsworth Ranch. The Hollingsworth Ranch is eligible for designation as a Ventura County Cultural Heritage Site, and this designation is being formally pursued.
- **Research:** Workspace for researchers studying climate change and riparian ecology, including local staff of state & federal agencies and other conservation organizations, will be provided.

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- **Habitat Restoration:** The Education and Conservation Center will serve as the home base for habitat restoration projects on the Ventura River.
- **Watershed Coordination:** Centrally located in the heart of the watershed, the Education and Conservation Center would be the home base for the Ventura River Watershed Coordinator who could use the Center for Ventura River Watershed Council and other related meetings.

To realize this vision, the specific objectives are:

- **Building & facility upgrades** to support the planned uses of the Center and to comply with the anticipated conditions of the Conditional Use Permit, including emergency access and utility system upgrades, restroom facilities, and structural upgrades to historic buildings or construction of a new building.
- Development and installation of **interpretive exhibits and signs**, and **modifications to the grounds** (e.g., landscaping, pathways, benches, fencing) to prepare for preserve visitation by the public.

The proposed project will consist of feasibility assessment and design planning activities related to:

- A **Historical Landmark Designation** for existing property buildings. This designation is necessary to receive a Conditional Use Permit from Ventura County for the operation of the Education and Conservation Center.
- A **Conditional Use Permit** for the Education and Conservation Center.
- **Building and Facilities Upgrade Design.** The Education and Conservation center building and facilities design will address access improvements, utility upgrades, building safety issues and amenities required by the conditional use permit and building permits.
- **Grounds Modification Design.** The grounds modification design will address access and amenities across the site, including a landscape design.
- **Exhibit / Signs Design.** The exhibit and signs design will address inclusion of indoor and outdoor interpretive exhibits and signage on the site.
- **Support studies.** Additional structural evaluation, engineering, environmental and other studies may be required by the design and permitting process.

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 land uses surrounding the property reflect that zoning: open space, grazing, orchard crop production, and residential communities.

The Hollingsworth Ranch property lies next to OVLC's Confluence Preserve and several hundred feet away from its Rio Vista Preserve (or also known as the 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

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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).

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. These attributes make the proposed location for the Center particularly appealing.

Project History: The Conservancy has partnered with other agencies and nonprofit organizations for many years to protect, enhance and restore the Ventura River watershed. In 2011, the Conservancy awarded a grant of \$500,000 to assist the OVLC to acquire and prepare a stewardship plan for 70 acres of the Hollingsworth Ranch property. Additionally, the Conservancy has provided over \$8.4 million to help fund studies related to the removal of Matilija Dam, the design and construction of a fish ladder at the Robles Diversion on the mainstem of the river, 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 River has been directed at assisting the OVLC in acquiring key habitat areas. Since 2003, the Conservancy has awarded a total of \$4,050,000 in grants to enable the OVLC to acquire and protect more than 1,700 acres of key habitat along the Ventura River.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	111,000.0
OVLC Capital Campaign	<u>65,000.0</u>

Total Project Costs 176,000.0

The anticipated source of funds for this project is the FY 2009/2010 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 total project cost, including future implementation, is projected to be \$450,000. The OVLC has raised \$93,000 in support for this project from the local community as of the date of this application. The OVLC's goal is to raise an additional \$57,000 to complement a grant of

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\$111,000 from the Conservancy and a future request for implementation funding, enabling completion of the project.

The in-kind contributions from which the project has already benefited include:

- OVLC staff time – (1) developing marketing materials and fundraising for the Education and Conservation Center and Steelhead Preserve opening generally; and (2) multiple meetings and site tours with (a) Ventura County staff regarding the conditional use permit and the Ventura County Cultural Heritage Site designation, (b) various structural engineers in the process of obtaining a structural evaluation, (c) the architectural firm, and (d) prospective building contractors.
- Professional services from a volunteer architect including numerous site visits, meetings with the County, hearing attendance, and creation of initial site drawings.
- Professional services from a building contractor who has served as an advisor on the permitting process and construction costs and logistics.

Expected in-kind contributions in the future include a continuation of all of the above, although OVLC expects to have to begin paying for professional services when the time demand becomes significant. OVLC has a core of stewardship volunteers who will undoubtedly help with management issues when needed, and a number of docents who will help with interpretation and guided tours. It is estimated that in-kind services to date would be valued in the tens of thousands of dollars.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 31220) relating to the protection of coastal and marine resources. This project is consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31220(b)(9), which allows the Conservancy to provide grants for the construction or expansion of nature centers or research facilities that emphasize conservation education or research activities focusing on the marine portion of the coastal zone or the land and ocean interface. OVLC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that is developing the Ventura River Steelhead Preserve Education and Conservation Center as a regional center to educate visitors about the nature of the Ventura River Watershed and its interface with the coastal and marine environment. The educational curriculum of the center will focus on ocean science education, scientific research, and environmental stewardship. Finally, as required by subsection (c) of Section 31220, as a condition of grant funding, OVLC will be required to develop a monitoring and evaluation component for the project. This monitoring and evaluation component will be incorporated into the work program required by the grant agreement. Subsection (c) also requires compliance with various water-related plans, where those plans are relevant and available. See CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN, below.

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

Consistent with **Goal 3, Objective 3C** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will support the planning and design of an environmental education center that will emphasize coastal, watershed, and ocean resource education.

**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 November 10, 2011, 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 Ventura River Watershed Coalition member organizations including County Supervisor Steve Bennett, City of Ventura Water, California State Parks Channel Coast District, the Matilija Coalition / Surfrider Foundation, Oak Grove School, Once Upon a Watershed environmental education program, and others. (See Exhibit 4: Support Letters).
4. **Location:** The proposed project is outside the Coastal Zone, 8 miles upstream from the estuary of the Ventura River. The Education and Conservation Center will focus on watershed education and research, including coastal and marine environments.
5. **Need:** Without Conservancy funding, it would likely take OVLC an additional 3-4 years to raise this funding and begin the 1-2 year construction process, so a 5-7 year timeline in total. But even that lengthy timeline would be optimistic and uncertain. The requested funds from the Conservancy would allow the project to proceed through the permitting process in order to complete the project in the near future.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Steelhead Preserve and the Education and Conservation Center in particular will benefit western Ventura County and beyond. The popular Ojai-Ventura Trail, utilized by an estimated 240,000 people per year, parallels the property. Currently, hundreds of school children per year use the Steelhead Preserve and other OVLC preserves for environmental education programs. These children come from schools in Ventura and the Ojai Valley, and communities in between, including disadvantaged communities. The central location of the Steelhead Preserve makes the siting of an Education and Conservation Center here advantageous from both an environmental education standpoint and a general community outreach standpoint.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project area is at an elevation of approximately 350 feet, 8 miles inland, well out of reach of a rising sea.

Additional Criteria

10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
13. **Readiness:** OLVC is prepared to start work on the proposed project in July, 2012 with an estimated completion date, including implementation, of June, 2015.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
17. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** One of the primary objectives of the Education and Conservation Center is to provide an opportunity to study the adaptation of the Ventura River’s flora and fauna to the effects of climate change. Because it is one of the few places on the Ventura River with perennial pools, it may be one of the places that provides refuge for steelhead and other species as climate change pushes other parts of the system to extremes.

Direct impacts to the Education and Conservation Center facilities as a result of climate-driven factors are not anticipated on this elevated site which is reasonably protected from the elements.
18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The public access contemplated for this project will likely be visitors from other nearby areas within the Ventura River watershed, a high proportion of which will likely access the property on foot or by bicycle via the Ojai-Ventura Trail which passes through the property. Visitors that drive to this property are expected to come from the other natural areas in the region. Even if driving only to the Center, a net increase in miles travelled would likely not be significant since the Center expects to cater to educational groups, including school groups, who travel in buses or carpools. The anticipated increase in new vegetation on this nature preserve resulting from active restoration or natural processes and the elimination of the potential for use of the property for agriculture will most likely make this project at least GHG neutral, if not a net benefit.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is not located in the Coastal Zone. However, the proposed project would provide institutional and educational support for the following ecosystem objectives of the *Ventura County General Plan Coastal Area Plan*:

Public Resources Code § 30230

"Marine resources shall be maintained, enhanced, and where feasible, restored. Special protection shall be given to areas and species of special biological or economic significance. Uses of the marine environment shall be carried out in a manner that will sustain the biological productivity of coastal waters and that will maintain healthy populations of all species of marine organisms adequate for long-term commercial, recreational, scientific, and educational purposes."

Public Resources Code § 30231

"The biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries, and lakes appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms and for the protection of human health shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored through, among other means, minimizing adverse effects of waste water discharges and entrainment, controlling runoff,

preventing depletion of ground water supplies and substantial interference of ground water flow, encouraging waste water reclamation, maintaining natural vegetation buffer areas that protect riparian habitats, and minimizing alteration of natural streams."

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

The facilities associated with the proposed project will provide institutional and educational support for several objectives of section 5.2.3 of the *Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County Integrated Regional Water Management Plan*, "Ecosystem Protection and Restoration Strategies," including the following:

- Protect and enhance native ecosystem diversity;
- Control, remove and prevent invasive species;
- Protect existing habitats from degradation;
- Create new wetlands in appropriate hydrologic settings;
- Protect, restore and enhance existing wetlands and waterbodies;
- Promote urban stream restoration and revitalization.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed planning project is statutorily exempt from CEQA pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, because it involves only planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted or funded. Environmental evaluation of the proposed project is part of this planning process. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project upon Conservancy approval.