

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 25, 2015

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY CONSERVATION BLUEPRINT

Project No. 15-010-01
Project Manager: Rachel Couch

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$75,000 to the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County to prepare a county-wide conservation plan in cooperation with other conservation organizations and interested entities.

LOCATION: Santa Barbara County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Planning and Feasibility Studies

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

Exhibit 4: [Prospective Stakeholder List](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

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

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of up to seventy-five thousand dollars (\$75,000) to the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County to prepare a Santa Barbara County Conservation Blueprint, as discussed in the attached staff recommendation, subject to the condition that no funds shall be disbursed until the Executive Officer of the Conservancy has approved in writing a detailed work program, schedule, budget, and the names of any contractors the grantee 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 the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with Section 31111 of the Public Resources Code regarding preparation of plans and feasibility studies.
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3. The Land Trust for Santa Barbara County is a nonprofit organization existing under 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:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to seventy-five thousand dollars (\$75,000) to the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County to prepare a county-wide conservation plan for Santa Barbara County. The Santa Barbara County Conservation Blueprint (Blueprint) will identify and prioritize existing land conservation values and opportunities for additional natural resource conservation for all of Santa Barbara County. Conservancy funds would assist with the development, publication and presentation of the Blueprint to the public (Exhibit 1). Santa Barbara County combines a highly varied geography including urban and agricultural areas, diverse natural resources including mountain and coastal flood plain areas, large areas of open space held in both public and private ownership, and high biodiversity and large numbers of endemic species.

While a substantial amount of the county’s coastline and inland areas are still undeveloped, development pressure is increasing, threatening lands with high conservation value in coastal, watershed and agricultural areas. Existing threats to open lands in the county include residential and commercial development, mansionization, leap frog development, expansion of oil and natural gas extraction, habitat fragmentation from fencing, and agricultural conversion or intensification. Other pressures include increased transportation needs created by thousands of daily commuters from neighboring communities and counties. Uncertainties and vulnerabilities associated with predicted changes in climate such as shifts in temperature and precipitation patterns, sea level rise, flooding, fires, and droughts also threaten existing conservation assets in the County.

An expanded regional conservation vision and strategy that addresses the increasing number and pace of current and emerging threats, balances among multiple conservation goals, and considers the whole county is needed to ensure wise investment of limited conservation dollars. Several strategic conservation plans focusing on specific area or topics have already been completed. Notable examples include the Conception Coast Project’s *Regional Conservation Guide* (2005), several plans to conserve the Gaviota Coast and Point Sal, and more focused studies on barriers to steelhead trout habitat in watersheds, and protecting agricultural lands from conversion or intensification. The project will building on these efforts to create a county-wide, strategic conservation plan. Key objectives of the Blueprint include preserving and enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem interactions, preserving agricultural and range lands, providing open space for recreation and non-motorized transportation, increasing habitat connectivity opportunities that will benefit plant and animal communities, protecting carbon stocks by preventing land conversion, and promoting resiliency to climate change in both coastal and inland areas, which are connected by numerous large and small watersheds. When completed, the Blueprint will comprise a collective vision that will enable the Land Trust and other organizations involved in conservation in the County to target high priority areas for conservation and to explore potential conservation options with willing landowners.

The Blueprint will be developed in three main steps. First, the Land Trust will convene a steering committee representing key stakeholders (Exhibit 4) comprised of persons involved in land conservation and planning in the County. The steering committee will refine project goals, and collect existing resource data to compile into an atlas. Secondly, the Land Trust will present the resource maps to a broad group of stakeholders to gather input on opportunities, constraints, and priorities. Using this information, the Land Trust will develop a geospatial model to identify high priority conservation areas. This information will be compiled into the Conservation Blueprint, comprised of maps, a report, supporting documentation, and a web-based decision support tool. This tool will allow a variety of entities to access the synthesized conservation information to assist in implementing their individual missions. Expected users of the Blueprint include land trusts, native American tribes, public and private funders, federal, state and local land managers, regional and local planning agencies, technical service providers, academia and research institutions, environmental, food, and farming advocacy groups. End users will be able to create systematic and consistent reports for a site. Another benefit of the framework is that it can be easily performed at different geographic extents, making it especially amenable for using data from existing efforts, and providing outputs useful for those efforts.

As a key project partner, through its Landscapes, Ecosystems, Agriculture and Food (LEAF) Initiative, the Santa Barbara Foundation will participate in the outreach effort and will develop a funding program for follow-on and related efforts based on the information developed through the project. Use of the decision support tool by potential grantees will be incorporated into the Foundation's grant making process as criteria for project evaluation.

The essential elements of the Blueprint will have lasting value for conservation in our County, beyond the project's 20-25 year planning horizon. The Blueprint will be based on GIS analyses and can be updated as high priority lands are conserved, as scientific understanding and methodologies evolve, and as major environmental processes, such as climate change, play out on the landscape.

The Land Trust for Santa Barbara County (LTSBC) is a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1985 and dedicated to preserving and enhancing Santa Barbara County's natural resources, open spaces and agricultural heritage for present and future generations. Since its inception, the Land Trust has worked to protect, restore and manage open space, wildlife habitat and agricultural land in Santa Barbara County in a number of ways. The LTSBC works with willing landowners to acquire land and conservation easements provide incentives for resource stewardship, and create conservation plans; ; promotes the preservation, stewardship and restoration of wildlife habitat and watershed resources on the land it protects; and educates through programs and events at Land Trust preserves. To date, the LTSBC has helped to preserve nearly 25,000 acres of natural resource and agricultural land, including the Arroyo Hondo Preserve, Sedgwick Reserve, Carpinteria Bluffs, Coronado Butterfly Preserve, Point Sal, Carpinteria Salt Marsh and several ranches on the Gaviota Coast. As part of that effort, the LTSBC has assisted landowners in placing conservation easements on 35 properties totaling more than 16,000 acres. This year, the Land Trust celebrates 30 years of land conservation in Santa Barbara County.

Site Description: The Conservation Blueprint will encompass the entire spectrum of Santa Barbara County's varied landscapes, including inland and coastal habitats connected by numerous large and small watersheds, agriculturally rich farmlands and rangelands, and open space and recreational resources (Exhibit 2). Santa Barbara County is renowned world-wide for

the scenic beauty of its seascapes and mountains. The coastal shelves, nestled between ocean and mountains, and the scenic inland valleys are unique and biologically diverse. As stated in the Santa Barbara County General Plan Open Space Element, “the large expanses of cultivated farmlands and grazing lands on the valley floors and gently rolling hillsides provide a green or golden pastoral setting, depending on the season, that delights the eye of resident and traveler.” Spanning an area of 2,735 square miles along the central coast of California, Santa Barbara County is divided into North and South by the east-west trending Santa Ynez Mountains. The southern part of the county includes the cities of Santa Barbara, Goleta, and Carpinteria and is significantly more developed than the northern County. In addition, Avocado, citrus and other high value agriculture can be found along the coastal terraces below the Santa Ynez Mountains. Numerous creeks in the southern part of the county drain from steep mountains directly to the Pacific Ocean. Four of the islands comprising Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary occur offshore, which along with dozens of miles of accessible shoreline, and easily accessible coastal bluff and mountain trail systems, and an average of 300 days of sunshine per year, and create highly scenic, natural and recreation-friendly coastal communities along the County’s south coast.

West of Goleta, the 40-mile stretch of the Gaviota Coast is one of the most remarkable biological transitions zones in the world. This stretch of south facing coastline is a place where many northern California species reach their southernmost extent and many southern California species reach their northernmost extent. Known as a biodiversity "hot spot", the Gaviota Coast provides an essential safe harbor for a very high density of imperiled and endemic species. The Gaviota Coast remains largely undeveloped with a mix of open space, grazing lands, and more developed agriculture such as citrus and avocado orchards.

The North County is dominated by agricultural lands, but is also home to the cities of Santa Maria, Guadalupe, Cuyama, Lompoc, Buellton, Solvang, as well as the 138-acre Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indian reservation. In addition, to grazing, key agriculture in the north county includes broccoli, wine grapes, lettuce, cauliflower, and strawberries. In contrast to south county, the northern part of the county is dominated by two major river systems, the Santa Maria and Santa Ynez Rivers. At nearly 900 square miles, the Santa Ynez River watershed is one of the largest in the central coast of California. The 75-mile long river flows from east to west through the Santa Ynez Valley, emptying into the Pacific Ocean at Vandenberg Air Force Base. The Santa Maria River begins at the confluence of the Sisquoc and Cuyama Rivers, flowing 24.4 miles to the Pacific Ocean west of the City of Santa Maria. The entire river defines the border between Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties.

Within Santa Barbara County's borders are two significant federal land holdings. The 99,000-acre Vandenberg Air Force Base, the third largest air force base in the country, has 35 miles of coastline, 166 miles of streams, 5,000 acres of wetlands, 9,000 acres of dune habitat and 4,150 acres of coast live oak. In addition, roughly 608,520 acres of the Los Padres National Forest are located in Santa Barbara County (about 44% of the county). Located in the north County, the 5,368-acre Burton Mesa Ecological Reserve, managed by the State Department of Fish and Wildlife, contains one of the last significant stands of maritime chaparral in the state. The Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Complex located in northwestern corner of the County and Southwestern San Luis Obispo County, is comprised of 19 miles of isolated and rugged coastline teeming with biodiversity, and boasting the tallest dunes in the state.

Project History: The Land Trust has adopted a series of internal land conservation strategic plans for Santa Barbara County over the years, as has The Nature Conservancy. In the early 2000s, the Conception Coast Project developed a substantial Regional Conservation Guide for an area that included Santa Barbara County. However, these projects were not designed to have lasting utility and were not structured to directly engage and solicit input from the wider community.

Conservancy staff became involved in the current project after convening a series of meetings with local environmentalists to explore opportunities to update the RCG to document wildlife movement and mortality and inform our understanding of habitat connectivity and threats. The group also considered how climate change might affect the County's various landscapes and ecosystems. The Conservancy has funded many individual land and easement acquisitions and habitat conservation projects in the County, including many Land Trust projects. In 2004, the Conservancy funded preparation of a Conservation Area Prioritization Plan for the Gaviota Coast to help identify conservation priorities in that area.

Conservation planning has evolved over time, as spatial data technology capability has expanded. This project was designed using as a model the Bay Area's Conservation Lands Network Project, <http://www.bayarealands.org/> which was funded, in part, by the Coastal Conservancy.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$75,000
Santa Barbara Foundation	\$210,000
Holly and Walter Thomson Fund	\$25,000
JS Bower Foundation	\$25,000
Hutton Parker Foundation	\$10,000
Other private donors (pending)	\$25,000
Project Total	\$420,000

The expected source for the Conservancy funds for this project is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (Proposition 12, Public Resources Code Section 5096.352). Proposition 12 funds may be used for projects that are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code including projects that involve the preservation, restoration, or enhancement of real property in coastal areas and watersheds or the development of public use facilities. (Public Resources Code Section 5096.352). Proposition 12 directs that a portion of funds appropriated to the Conservancy be used specifically for Central Coast projects, including Santa Barbara County. (Public Resources Code Section 5096.352(c)(3)).

Substantial in-kind services have been provided to date through the LTSBC and the Santa Barbara Foundation in order to conceive, articulate and initiate this project, as well as obtain the substantial funding referenced above for the project. This in-kind donation is estimated at

approximately \$50,000. It is anticipated that significant additional in-kind services will be contributed to the Blueprint in the future by the LTSBC, the Santa Barbara Foundation, National Center Ecological Analysis and Synthesis, and/or other partner organizations. In addition, through the outreach project, local scientists and experts, as well as governmental agency staff, will be asked to provide input to the plan process on an “in-kind” basis.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is undertaken pursuant to section 31111 (Chapter 3 of Division 21). Section 31111 of the Public Resources Code provides that the Conservancy “may fund and undertake plans and feasibility studies, and may award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations” for the purposes of Division 21. The proposed project would provide a plan for future conservation activities within all of Santa Barbara County’s watersheds, which connect to coastal habitats, agriculturally rich farmlands and rangelands, open space and recreational resources. The plan will thus assist the Conservancy in implementing a variety of conservation and resource protection projects under Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective C**, the proposed project would develop a plan that would facilitate preservation of coastal watersheds and floodplains.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective A**, the proposed project would develop a plan for fostering the long term viability of coastal working lands, including projects to assist farmers and ranchers to reduce impacts of their operations on wildlife habitat and water quality.

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 October 2, 2014, 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. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:** The proposed project is consistent with the following state plans and policies promoting planning for land conservation and global climate change resilience and adaptation:
 - a. The project implements *California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft): Goal #1: “Preserve

- and Steward the State's Lands and Natural Resources" by increasing ecosystem services and biodiversity and preserving agricultural lands and working landscapes to support the state's agriculture and forestry industries in the most sustainable manner; Goal #2: Build Sustainable Regions that Support Healthy, Livable Communities by developing natural resource protection plans that reflect long-term environmental goals; and Goal #3: "Build Climate Resilience into All Policies" by building resiliency and considering future climate conditions into ongoing planning efforts.
- b. This proposed project also aligns with the goals listed in the *CA Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan* (CA Natural Resources Agency, July 2014) in terms of improving management practices for coastal and ocean ecosystems and resources by including climate adaptation strategies.
 - c. *CA Wildlife Action Plan* (California State Department of Fish and Game, 2005). The project will further the following statewide recommended actions: d) State and federal agencies should work with cities and counties to secure sensitive habitats and key habitat linkages; g) Federal, state, and local agencies and nongovernmental conservation organizations, working with private landowners and public land managers, should expand efforts to restore and conserve riparian communities. In addition, recommended actions for the marine region include: d) the state should increase efforts to restore coastal watersheds.
 - d. *California Water Action Plan* (California Natural Resources Agency, 2014). Goal #4, "Protect and Restore Important Ecosystems", identifies protection of coastal watersheds as a priority action.
4. **Support of the public:** The project has the support of Congresswoman Lois Capps, Santa Barbara County Action Network, Environmental Defense Center, Los Padres Forest Watch, and the Gaviota Coast Conservancy. These individuals and groups recognize the value of having a comprehensive, current plan describing the natural resources, conservation values and opportunities in the County. See Project Letters, Exhibit 3.
 5. **Location:** Santa Barbara County. As a countywide plan, the project occurs both inside and outside the coastal zone. The project would benefit coastal or ocean resources because most of the County's inland watersheds, where biodiversity and resource values are often most concentrated, drain to the coast. The report will document the existence of those resources and prioritize them for conservation purposes.
 6. **Need:** Without the Conservancy's financial support, the Land Trust would not be able to provide the scope of services and work products for the project in a timely manner, including the extensive scientific, technical and community input planned.
 7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project is regional in scope and addresses land conservation needs and opportunities for all of Santa Barbara County. Key resources that will be addressed in the Blueprint include state and federally listed species and habitats, highly productive agricultural lands, and watersheds.
 8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project is not subject in any way to sea level rise, and the Blueprint developed under this authorization will consider vulnerability to future sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** As funding for land acquisitions becomes scarce, and development pressure increases with a strengthening economic climate and an increasing unstable global climate, strategic conservation of priority lands has become a pressing priority.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Readiness:** The Land Trust has already initiated preparatory work for the project is ready to commence with the project immediately if funds are approved.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
13. **Cooperation:** The project involves an extensive process to include scientific and technical experts, public agencies, nonprofit groups, landowners, and the public to share information, establish goals, and identify priorities.
14. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** While the proposed project does not entail physical improvements that could be vulnerable to climate change impacts, the project will incorporate information regarding climate change vulnerabilities for use in setting conservation priorities.
15. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The proposed project will have little impact on County greenhouse gas emissions. Development of the Blueprint could lead to an increase the acreage of conserved lands in the County which might otherwise have been developed, avoiding future greenhouse gas emissions. Developed land results in increased greenhouse gas emissions from cars and buildings, while natural lands and carefully managed farm and rangelands can sequester carbon and become carbon sinks instead of sources.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The “Coastal Land Use Plan” adopted by the County of Santa Barbara in 1982 is the certified Local Coastal Program (LCP) for the County of Santa Barbara, the project area. The project is consistent with LCP which focus on the protection of coastal resources and the regulation of development in the coastal zone. These resource protection policies govern land resources, which include environmentally sensitive habitat areas and prime agricultural lands, recreational resources, the marine environment (i.e., streams, wetlands, and coastal waters), scenic resources such as views to and along the ocean, and air quality. They require new development to be concentrated within existing developed areas to avoid costly urban sprawl and to protect coastal resources, i.e., prime agricultural lands, scenic quality of rural lands, habitat areas, etc. Section 3.9.1 of the County’s LCP calls for preservation, protection and restoration of environmentally sensitive habitats. LCP Section 3.9.4 specifically identifies the various environmentally sensitive habitat areas occurring in the County. The proposed project is consistent with the policies of the LCP because it would facilitate protection of the environmentally sensitive habitat areas and prime agricultural land and enhancement of recreational resources.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed Blueprint project is statutorily exempt pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations, Section 15262 which states that a project involving only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded does not require the preparation of an environmental document under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), but does require the consideration of environmental factors. The proposed project consists of synthesizing diverse data about the County resources and conservation values, and producing a report and web based decision support tool identifying conservation priorities. Thus, the project will consider environmental factors in its development. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.