

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 2, 2017

**SANTA CLARA RIVER PARKWAY
A.C. GROWERS ACQUISITION**

Project No. 00-105-07
Project Manager: Christopher Kroll

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Augmentation of the Conservancy's October 21, 2010 authorization to include the acquisition of 50.17 acres of property commonly known as "A.C. Growers" to implement the Santa Clara River Parkway project in Ventura County.

LOCATION: Santa Clara River, City of Santa Paula, Ventura County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Staff Recommendation, October 21, 2010](#)

Exhibit 3: [Site Photo](#)

Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-270 of the Public Resources Code:

"The State Coastal Conservancy hereby augments its October 21, 2010 authorization, attached as Exhibit 2 to the accompanying staff recommendation, to include as a priority property the 50.17-acre property commonly known as the "A.C. Growers" property (Ventura County Parcel Nos. 046-0-230-270 and 046-0-230-300) to implement the Santa Clara River Parkway project, as shown in Exhibit 2 to the accompanying staff recommendation, subject to the conditions in the October 21, 2010 authorization and the following additional conditions:

1. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) shall permanently dedicate the property for flood protection, wildlife habitat, wetland restoration, open space protection, public access and limited agricultural uses through an irrevocable offer to dedicate the property or other instrument approved by the Conservancy's Executive Officer.
2. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property or in a nearby public staging area, the design and location of which is to be 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 the proposed authorization remains consistent with the findings made by the Conservancy in its October 21, 2010 authorization; with the current Conservancy’s 2013 Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives; with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines; with the Coastal Act; and with the Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31251-270 (resource enhancement).”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy augment its October 21, 2010 authorization to include the acquisition of the 50.17-acre property commonly known as “A.C. Growers Property” (“property”) on the Santa Clara River, to implement the Santa Clara River Parkway project (Parkway project). (See Exhibit 2).

The proposed inclusion of the property will protect a 0.85-mile stretch of the Santa Clara River, located immediately adjacent to the Friends of Santa Clara River Hedrick Ranch Nature Area and TNC’s Taylor and Best properties. The property contains approximately 25 acres of agricultural land and the remaining approximately 25 acres is located in the river channel itself. Riparian scrub and riparian forest plant communities on the property likely provide habitat for many species of birds and other species. Protection and restoration of riparian habitat such as exists on the property is essential to the recovery of the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Least Bell’s Vireo, and other riparian-dependent migratory song bird species that have suffered population declines due to widespread habitat loss.

On October 21, 2010, the Conservancy approved a grant of \$4,000,000 to TNC “for the acquisition of properties in the lower river to further implement the Santa Clara River Parkway project.” (See Exhibit 2). TNC has been focusing on acquiring priority properties (Tier 1) in the lower Santa Clara River. Since 2010, TNC has acquired three properties under this October 21, 2010 authorization. However, two of the priority properties listed in the October 21, 2010 authorization were not available for purchase.

TNC now requests that the Conservancy include the purchase of the A.C. Growers property because it has significant riparian habitat and is located adjacent to important properties already purchased for conservation purposes. Staff agrees with TNC’s assessment of the merits of acquisition of the A.C. Growers Property as essential to implement the Santa Clara River Parkway objectives as more particularly described in the October 21, 2010 authorization. (See Exhibit 2).

TNC owns numerous properties along the Santa Clara River and manages those properties with revenue from farming leases on portions of the properties outside the river channel. Similarly, the farmed portion of the A.C. Growers Property will continue to be farmed and managed by TNC in this way for the foreseeable future.

TNC is an international non-governmental organization with offices throughout the United States and operating in over 35 countries around the world. TNC has been working to protect the Santa Clara River and its tributaries since 1999 and in 2000 established its L.A.-Ventura Project specifically to focus on: 1) protection and restoration of the Santa Clara River; 2) restoration of the wetlands at Ormond Beach; and 3) securing of wildlife corridors in the region. The Conservancy has worked with TNC along the Santa Clara River for many years, providing funding for several acquisitions by TNC. TNC, the Conservancy, and other partners are working to identify a long-term management strategy for the Parkway project. Until then, TNC will continue to manage its river properties.

Site Description: The A.C. Growers property is located in the City of Santa Paula, approximately 18 miles east of the mouth of the Santa Clara River. (See Exhibit 1) The property contains riparian scrub and riparian forest plant communities that provide habitat for birds and other species. Least-Bell's Vireo, a state- and federally-listed endangered species, has been seen on adjoining properties already owned by TNC. Approximately 25 acres of the property are located within the riverbed and this area contains critical habitat for the southern steelhead trout. This property is located also within a wildlife corridor along the river that allows bobcats, mountain lions, and other large mammals to move throughout the watershed.

With the addition of site specific information provided above, the proposed inclusion of the A.C. Growers Property as a priority acquisition to the Conservancy's October 21, 2010 authorization remains consistent with the "Site Description" section of the October 21, 2010 authorization. See Exhibit 2.

Project History:

With the addition of the project history below, representing the history from October 2010 thru February 2017, the proposed addition of the A.G. Growers Property as a priority acquisition to the October 21, 2010 authorization remains consistent with the "Project History" section of the October 21, 2010 authorization. See Exhibit 2.

After the Conservancy's October 21, 2010 authorization, TNC acquired three properties with Conservancy funding: the "Totlcom 1" property (101 acres); the "Totlcom 2" property (22 acres); and the "Caron" property (86 acres) to implement the Santa Clara River Parkway Project.

Additionally, in June 2015, the Conservancy approved a grant to TNC for restoration of the "Hanson" property, that is the subject of the largest restoration project to date on the Santa Clara River. And, in September 2016, the Conservancy approved a grant to California Trout to restore access to a fish ladder on Santa Paula Creek, a major tributary of the Santa Clara River.

PROJECT FINANCING

Staff is not requesting any additional funding. Therefore, this section remains consistent with the Conservancy's October 21, 2010 authorization. See Exhibit 2.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project remains consistent with the Conservancy’s October 21, 2010 authorization with respect to this section, with additional information provided below. See Exhibit 2

Section 31251.2 states that the Conservancy may award a grant to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside of the coastal zone in order to enhance the natural or scenic character of coastal resources within the coastal zone. This section also provides that the Conservancy may only undertake a project affecting an area partly inside and partly outside the coastal zone if requested by a local public agency or agencies with jurisdiction over the entire project area. The Santa Clara River is a coastal river that is partly outside of the coastal zone and the A.C. Growers Property is located in a section of the river that is outside the coastal zone. Ventura County is the local public agency with jurisdiction over the property area. Inclusion of the A.C. Growers Property is consistent with Section 31251.2 because the County has recognized the Conservancy’s role in the Santa Clara River Parkway Project in its 2014 Integrated Regional Water Management Plan for Ventura County. That Plan states that “(t)he project is being implemented and funded by the State Coastal Conservancy and protects and restores floodplain areas...”

Section 31252 requires that all areas proposed for enhancement are identified in a certified local coastal plan/program or other local plans as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems. Although the A.C. Growers property is located outside the coastal zone, the proposed project is consistent with this section because it will beneficially affect the habitat value of the Santa Clara River’s downstream coastal resources that are under the jurisdiction of the City of San Buenaventura. The City’s Local Coastal Program Policy 13.1 encourages “preservation of the Ventura and Santa Clara Rivers in their present semi-natural state, and possible restoration to natural conditions.” Acquisition of the A.C. Growers Property for resource preservation will help to preserve the Santa Clara River.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S), AS REVISED JUNE 25, 2015:

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective A** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will protect a significant watershed resource property along the Santa Clara River.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective D** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will preserve and allow for enhancement of an important portion of the Santa Clara River Watershed and its floodplain.

The Strategic Plan specifically identifies major efforts that should occur between 2013 and 2018 for all four Conservancy regions. For the South Coast area, completion of property acquisitions for the Santa Clara River Parkway is identified as a priority. The proposed project is consistent with this South Coast priority.

**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:** Including the A.C. Growers Property as a priority property in the Conservancy's October 21, 2010 authorization will implement the following state plans:
 - *California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft). The "Preserve and Steward State Lands and Natural Resources" section calls for working to increase biodiversity and helping natural systems recover from disruption. Action #3 calls for building resilience in natural systems and specifically calls out the need for well-maintained watersheds and floodplains. The proposed project will permit the acquisition and protection of riparian habitat and floodplain land essential for the protection of the Santa Clara River watershed.
 - *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. The proposed project will allow the protection of a significant property in the Santa Clara River watershed.
 - *California Wildlife Action Plan* (California State Department of Fish and Game, 2005). The proposed project will further the following statewide recommended actions: d) the state should increase efforts to restore coastal watersheds; and g) federal, state, and local agencies and nongovernmental conservation organizations, working with private landowners and public land managers, should expand efforts to conserve riparian communities. This project will enable the protection of sensitive riparian habitat important to the long-term health of the Santa Clara River watershed.
4. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by Congresswoman Julia Brownley, Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson, and Assemblymember Monique Limon (see Exhibit 4).
5. **Location:** The A.C. Growers Property is located 18 miles from the coast. Even though the proposed project site is located outside the coastal zone, the river channel on the property is critical habitat for coastal resources including the migrating southern steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*).
6. **Need:** The A.C. Growers Property owner is a willing seller now. The addition of the property to the priority list in the Conservancy's October 21, 2010 authorization will allow TNC to take advantage of this acquisition opportunity and purchase the property.

7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The property is located in the Santa Clara River Parkway, a regional greenway extending 30 miles from the Pacific Ocean to Sespe Creek. Acquisition of the A.C. Growers Property will benefit federal- and state-listed species such as Least-Bell's Vireo and southern steelhead trout, resources that provide greater-than-local interest.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The property is located 18 miles from the coast and therefore is not vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Readiness:** TNC has negotiated an option agreement and commissioned an appraisal of fair market value of the property. TNC is ready to complete the property acquisition as soon as the property is listed as a priority property in the October 21, 2010 authorization.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" section, above.
11. **Cooperation:** The proposed project will continue a long-established partnership between the Conservancy and TNC to establish and restore the Santa Clara River Parkway.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE COASTAL ACT:

The proposed project is consistent with the following specific Coastal Act policies:

Public Resources Code Section 30231 states that the "biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries and lakes appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms...shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored..."

Inclusion of the A.C. Growers property as a priority property in the Conservancy's October 21, 2010 authorization is the first step towards protection of the property, much of which is within the Santa Clara River channel. Protection of the native habitat and possible future restoration on this property will help restore the biological productivity of the Santa Clara River, a coastal stream.

Public Resources Code Section 30240 states that "environmentally sensitive habitat areas shall be protected against any significant disruption of habitat values, and only uses dependent on those resources shall be allowed within those areas." The environmentally sensitive habitat areas on this property will be protected and restored after the property is acquired.

Additionally, the proposed project is consistent with the certified Local Coastal Programs of the cities of San Buenaventura and Oxnard and the County of Ventura that identify the Santa Clara River as an environmentally sensitive resource that should be protected and restored. The inclusion of this key property on the priority list for acquisition will enable the protection and restoration of a portion of the Santa Clara River.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed inclusion of the A.C. Growers property in the priority acquisition list of the Conservancy's October 21, 2010 is categorically exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regs. § 15325. The acquisition of the A.C. Growers Property is a transfer of ownership of interests in land in order to preserve

open space and existing natural conditions, including habitat. The exemption explicitly includes acquisitions to allow continued agricultural use, to allow restoration of natural conditions, to prevent encroachment of development into flood plains, and to preserve open space or lands for park purposes (Section 15325, subsections (b), (c), (d) and (f)). The purpose of the proposed project is for acquisition of the A.C. Growers Property to preserve and restore the property's natural conditions, including plant and animal habitats; to allow the continued agricultural use on some of the property for a substantial period of time; and to protect the open space and flood plain portions of the property from development.

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