

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 15, 2017

**CRYSTAL COVE STATE PARK
NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN**

Project No. 17-009-01

Project Manager: Mary Small

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to one hundred thousand dollars to the Irvine Ranch Conservancy to develop a natural resource management plan for coastal sage scrub habitat enhancement at Crystal Cove State Park in coastal Orange County.

LOCATION: Crystal Cove State Park, Orange County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)

Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)

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 the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the Irvine Ranch Conservancy (“IRC”) to develop an integrated resource management plan to enhance coastal sage scrub habitat in Crystal Cove State Park and surrounding protected lands of coastal Orange County. This authorization is subject to the condition that, prior to the disbursement of funds, the IRC shall submit for the review and approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work plan (including a schedule and detailed budget) and the names and qualifications of any contractors employed to complete 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:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding coastal resource enhancement projects.

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2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
 3. The IRC is a nonprofit organization qualified under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, with purposes consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends a grant of \$100,000 to the Irvine Ranch Conservancy (IRC) to develop a natural resource management plan (Plan) to manage and enhance coastal sage scrub (CSS) habitat at Crystal Cove State Park. The Plan will also address resource management of adjacent protected lands in coastal Orange County to provide greater habitat connectivity, improved water quality and lower overall management costs. The Plan will identify management objectives, responsibilities and tasks to ensure consistent management and restoration of CSS to enhance gnatcatcher populations and to better manage CSS habitat at Crystal Cove State Park and across adjacent protected lands. The Plan will be integrated into the management of Crystal Cove State Park under the umbrella of the park General Plan and the Department of Parks and Recreation's Natural Resources Program. This Plan will also serve as the park's Resource and Recreation Management Plan as required under the Orange County Central and Coastal Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP) protecting the California gnatcatcher and more than two dozen other listed and covered species.

The Plan will focus on Crystal Cove State Park's approximately 2,400 acres of backcountry and 400 acres of coastal terrace. Crystal Cove State Park contains a relatively dense, core breeding population of the federally-threatened California gnatcatcher and other target species of the NCCP/HCP. More than 20 pairs of gnatcatchers are found on the coastal bluffs alone. The Plan will include management of adjacent habitat parcels owned by the City of Irvine and County of Orange for conservation purposes to ensure consistent management and restoration of CSS and gnatcatcher populations across the landscape. The Plan will identify resource management priority actions for Crystal Cove State Park for management of existing habitat and enhancement of degraded areas.

As part of the Plan development, IRC will complete the following activities:

- Review of Existing Conditions: Collect, organize and evaluate existing resource data and other relevant information including, but not limited to, information on historic and current habitats, and park uses. Focused wildlife surveys and detailed botanical surveys – including sensitive plant surveys and high-priority invasive species -- will be recorded and mapped.
- Resource Goals and Objectives: Develop goals and objectives for management of Crystal Cove State Park's approximately 3,000 acres of terrestrial natural resource lands. The plan will address management of sensitive plants and wildlife, invasive species, wildfire, and identify significant restoration opportunities to guide future management.
- Develop Public Participation Plan: Develop a public participation plan that identifies goals, overall strategy and specific outreach components and tools to provide public input

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on plan alternatives. State Parks will organize and facilitate public and stakeholder meetings and workshops, supported by IRC.

- **Recreational Use Impact Assessment:** Conduct field-based assessments of existing authorized and unauthorized trails, and other recreation facilities and activities in the project area.
- **Final Plan Publication:** Develop a final, implementable natural resource management and enhancement plan for the park that is acceptable to State Parks and ready for environmental review and approval by State Parks. The Plan will provide specific management objectives and actions needed to achieve these goals.

The non-profit Irvine Ranch Conservancy is a local land stewardship non-profit established for the purposes of assisting public landowners with stewardship of their resources. The IRC has an extensive record of successful land management and large-scale habitat restoration projects in Southern California. The IRC currently manages 30,000 acres of habitat parcels and urban wildland in partnership with the City of Irvine and the County of Orange under long-term management agreements extending to 2025.

Site Description: The plan will focus on Crystal Cove State Park's 2,400 acres of backcountry and 400 acres of coastal terrace which is composed of globally-rare coastal sage scrub habitat. The Park contains both intact as well as degraded habitat areas in need of enhancement and restoration. The Park contains a relatively dense, core breeding population of the federally-threatened California gnatcatcher. Crystal Cove State Park is adjacent to other protected coastal lands that are part of the Orange County Central and Coastal Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP). Adjacent habitat parcels owned by the City of Irvine and County of Orange, including Laguna Coast Wilderness Park, will be considered in the plan to ensure consistent management and restoration of CSS and gnatcatcher populations throughout the landscape. IRC currently manages the City of Irvine's adjacent land under contract, which will provide the opportunity for additional coordination during implementation.

Project History: This project emerged from the California State Park Transformation Process. In July 2013, the Secretary of Natural Resources appointed the Parks Forward Commission to assess the challenges faced by California's State Parks and to help identify improvements for the future of the State Parks. The Commission released its final recommendations in the report titled "[A New Vision for California State Parks](#)". Guided by this report in January 2015 the Brown Administration assembled the State Parks Transformation Team to develop a two-year tactical Transformation Action Plan and initiated a number of projects to initiate change at State Parks. These include enhancing partnerships, expanding park access, and garnering stable and diversified funding, and protecting and enhancing natural and cultural resources. The Crystal Cove project titled *Collaborative Venture for State Park Stewardship at Crystal Cove State Park* was developed by staff and a statewide advisory workgroup and adopted in spring 2016 by the Transformation Team and the Department. The project seeks to align management activities at Crystal Cove SP with regional conservation priorities, and, through improved collaboration across boundaries, significantly scale up habitat restoration and stewardship for sensitive species. Lessons learned from this collaboration will be applied to other landscape-scale conservation

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efforts elsewhere in the system. The project furthers the goals of the State Parks Transformation by actively working with multiple public landowners and nonprofit partners to improve stewardship of natural resources at the park, and demonstrate a scalable approach to achieve landscape-scale conservation goals.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
California State Parks (committed)	\$50,000
Marisla Foundation (committed)	<u>\$50,000</u>
Project Total	\$200,000

There are two expected sources of the Conservancy funds for this project; \$50,000 would come from the Conservancy’s Violation Remediation Account (VRA) and \$50,000 would come from an interagency agreement between California State Parks and the Conservancy. Funds in the VRA originate from administrative orders, settlements and judicial actions arising from Coastal Act violations and are available for carrying out the provisions of the Coastal Act. (Pub. Res. Code, § 30823). The origin of these VRA funds would be from a settlement for impacts to gnatcatcher habitat in Orange County. The California State Parks funding is a one-time allocation to the project from its statewide natural resource management funds. The allocation contemplates the Conservancy granting these funds for this project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The Conservancy is authorized under Section 31111 of the Public Resources Code (PRC) to fund plans and feasibility studies to implement Division 21 of the PRC. Section 31251 of Division 21 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that have suffered loss of natural and scenic values due to improper location of improvements or natural or human-induced events. The plan funded with this grant will facilitate enhancement of coastal sage scrub habitat that has been degraded by natural and human-induced events, including an influx of invasive vegetation, indiscriminate social trails and nearby development. The plan will identify corrective measures to enhance the natural and scenic character of the area. The proposed project is consistent with of the certified Newport Coast Local Coastal Program, Second amendment (December 3, 1996) (“LCP”), which calls for conservation of Crystal Cove State Park and for public acquisition and protection of the surrounding open space lands (see Part II, Chapter 8, Section F “Conservation Planning Areas,” of the LCP).

The proposed project is consistent with Section 31253, which authorizes the Conservancy to fund the total cost of a coastal resource enhancement project. In determining the amount of Conservancy funding for this project, the Conservancy has considered and applied the factors identified in Section 31253 as described further in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” section of this report.

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

Consistent with Goal 5, Objective A of the Conservancy's 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will complete a plan for enhancement of coastal sage scrub habitat.

**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:**
 - *California@50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (2013 Draft)
Preserve and Steward the State's Lands and Natural Resources; Increase ecosystem services and biodiversity. The proposed project will accomplish this goal by restoring and enhancing coastal habitat to protect biodiversity.
 - *Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan* (July 2014)
Ocean and Coastal Ecosystems and Resources: Improve management practices for coastal and ocean ecosystems and resources, and increase capacity to withstand and recover from climate impacts. Landscape scale ecological management of coastal resources will improve the management of these resources and increase resilience to climate change impacts.
 - *California Water Action Plan*
Protect and restore important ecosystems (restore coastal watersheds and strategic coastal estuaries): Coastal sage scrub habitat is a critical habitat in coastal watersheds, supporting threatened and endangered species.
 - *California State Parks Transformation Action Plan*
**Strategic Goal 2: Maintain High Quality Operations and Public Service
Objective 2. Partnerships with Outside Organizations**
 - Enhance and expand the ability of the Department, and the full array of its partners, to engage collaboratively in high-quality management, restoration, stewardship, and public benefit opportunities of the California State Park System.

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This project will allow State Parks to manage the natural resources of Crystal Cove State Park in coordination with other public landowners and contiguous natural resource lands.

- **Orange County NCCP/HCP**

Objectives: Provision for long-term protection of CSS habitat and target species on a subregional basis with a focus on source populations of target specifics and maintaining and enhancing connectivity between habitat areas.

This project will develop a management plan to enhance and manage coastal sage scrub habitat on a sub-regional landscape scale, encompassing Crystal Cove State Park and other public landowners and contiguous natural resource lands.

4. **Support of the public:** Resource management of the public lands of coastal Orange County has strong support from the public. The IRC manages more than 400 regular volunteers and hosts over 2,000 public programs annually to engage the public in land stewardship activities. The proposed Natural Resources Management Plan will include a public participation component to ensure stakeholder support.
5. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the Orange County NCCP/HCP Coastal Subregion, as shown on Exhibit 1. Crystal Cove State Park is enrolled as part of the Reserve established in the NCCP/HCP.
6. **Need:** Conservancy funding from the VRA is needed to complete the plan. In addition, State Parks has asked the Conservancy to participate in this project because the Conservancy has experience facilitating collaborative public-private resource management.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The project will benefit state- and federally-listed threatened and endangered species.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project will occur on coastal terraces and upland habitat that is not vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed Natural Resources Management Plan will address wildlife resources, botanical resources, invasive species and recreational use of public lands owned and managed by multiple entities.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Innovation:** As discussed above, this project came out of the California State Parks Transformation Process. Using nonprofit partners to enhance cooperative resource management of State Park’s resources is specifically identified as a priority in the transformation of State Parks, while lessons learned from this collaborative project will be applied to other landscape-scale efforts elsewhere in the State Park System
12. **Readiness:** If approved, the grantee is ready to initiate the planning process. It is anticipated that the Plan will be completed within a year to 15 months, and State Parks will move forward with implementation upon its completion.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy has long participated in the protection of the Laguna Coast Wilderness. Proposition 12 provided funding to the

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Conservancy for the Laguna Coast Wilderness, these funds were used to acquire habitat parcels and fund nature centers. This project will build on those investments through the development of an integrated natural resources management plan.

14. **Cooperation:** This project will center on the cooperative effort of the non-profit Irvine Ranch Conservancy and California State Parks, but includes many other partners including UC Irvine, the Natural Communities Coalition, the Crystal Cove Alliance, the County of Orange and the City of Irvine. The purpose of the project is to develop a plan leading to cooperative long term stewardship of public resources and to address issues that cross ownership boundaries such as recreation, invasive species, fire management, and other management challenges.
15. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** A 2011 study by Point Blue Conservation Science found that coastal sage scrub habitat is projected to suffer severe impacts from Climate Change including drought and increased fire intensity. Managing resources at the landscape scale can increase the resilience of these habitats to multiple climate related stressors.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 8, Section F of the Newport Coast Local Coastal Program, Second amendment (December 3, 1996) "Conservation Planning Areas".

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project to develop a habitat enhancement plan is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations, § 15262, which exempts feasibility and planning studies that have not yet been approved or funded if environmental factors are considered. The project involves studies for a possible future approval of the plan that no public agency, including the Conservancy, yet has approved, adopted or funded and is intended to consider the unique environmental resources within the project area. The project is also categorically exempt from CEQA under 14 California Code of Regulations § 15306, which exempts basic data collection and resource evaluation activities that do not result in serious disturbance to an environmental resource

After Conservancy approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.