

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 16, 2019

ARROYO SEQUIT HEADWATERS ACQUISITION

Project No. 19-009-01
Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$800,000 to the Trust for Public Land for the acquisition of 136 acres of undeveloped land at the headwaters of the north fork of Arroyo Sequit creek in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area in Los Angeles County.

LOCATION: Santa Monica Mountains, Unincorporated, Los Angeles County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Location and Site Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31220 and 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed eight hundred thousand dollars (\$800,000) to the Trust for Public Land for the acquisition of 136 acres of undeveloped land in unincorporated Los Angeles County (consisting of Los Angeles County Assessor Parcel Nos. 4472-005-003, 4472-005-004, 4472-005-010, 4472-006-001, 4472-006-006, 4472-006-012 and 4472-012-006) to protect open space, wildlife habitat, water quality and water supply, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer):
 - a. All relevant acquisition documents for the acquisition including, without limitation, the appraisal, purchase and sale agreement, deed, escrow instructions, environmental or hazardous materials assessment, and title report;
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- b. A baseline conditions report;
 - c. A monitoring and reporting plan; and
 - d. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
 3. The property acquired under this authorization shall be managed and operated for the protection of open space, wildlife habitat, water quality and water supply. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
 4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property or in a nearby publicly-viewable area, the design and location of which are to be approved by the 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:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Trust for Public Land is a nonprofit organization organized 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.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends disbursement of up to \$800,000 to the Trust for Public Land (TPL) for the acquisition of 136 acres of undeveloped land at the headwaters of the north fork of Arroyo Sequit creek in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA) in Los Angeles County (See Exhibit 1). The purpose of the acquisition is to protect open space, wildlife habitat, and water quality and supply, as described more fully below. The proposed acquisition, comprised of seven lots in western Los Angeles County, includes 0.6 miles of the headwaters of Arroyo Sequit Creek and tributaries, a small, unimpeded watershed that provides habitat for the Southern California Coast Steelhead Distinct Population Segment (DPS), a federally endangered species (Exhibit 1). Arroyo Sequit Creek is one of only three creeks that host the federally listed DPS in the Santa Monica Mountains.

For the proposed project, TPL will acquire fee title to seven parcels (Los Angeles County Assessor Parcel Nos. 4472-005-003, 4472-005-004, 4472-005-010, 4472-006-001, 4472-006-006, 4472-006-012 and 4472-012-006) totaling 136 acres (the “property”). The acquisition will

protect coastal sage scrub and riparian woodland and ensure connectivity of habitat between the National Park Service's (NPS) Circle X Ranch and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority's (MRCA) Little Sycamore Canyon Preserve. This in turn will protect instream water quality and supply for the Southern California Coast Steelhead DPS and other threatened and endangered species known to occur or to have suitable habitat present in the Arroyo Sequit Creek watershed. Following the acquisition, TPL will transfer fee title of the parcels to MRCA for management consistent with acquisition purposes. Long-term management of the property will consider resource-protection-compatible public access.

The property is located within the SMMNRA, bordered by MRCA and NPS public lands. The SMMNRA is the world's largest urban national park, and yet more than 70,000 acres of private lands permeate this landscape with a development rate of approximately 1,300 acres per year.¹ The checkerboard of public and private land within the SMMNRA challenges effective and cohesive habitat, resource and recreational facility management. The property falls within the Santa Monica-Sierra Madre landscape linkage – one of 15 major landscape linkages within southern California and one of the few remaining coastal connections in the South Coast Ecoregion. The viability of the Santa Monica – Sierra Madre connection depends upon seamless linkage of perpetually protected landscapes that provide enough movement area for wildlife survival.² Loss of connection between already conserved lands within the within the SMMNRA could cause irreparable setbacks to wildlife populations in the region, particularly for large mammals such as mountain lion, deer, and bobcat that require large expanses of habitat to maintain genetic diversity.

Site Description: The project site is an undeveloped 136-acre property in the Santa Monica Mountains just hundreds of feet from the Ventura County line. The seven parcels are zoned R-C-40, which permits one dwelling unit per 40 acres, and has a potential connection to Mulholland Highway at the southern end of the property. The property is comprised of predominantly coastal sage scrub and riparian woodland and contains roughly 0.6 linear miles of the headwater stream of the north fork of Arroyo Sequit Creek. The Arroyo Sequit Watershed starts at Sandstone Peak, the tallest peak in the Santa Monica Mountains at 3,111 feet, and enters the ocean at Leo Carrillo State Park. Arroyo Sequit Creek features a steep gradient throughout the majority of its course with a deep V-shaped canyon profile. The headwaters are comprised of a north fork and a south fork that merge about two river miles upstream from Leo Carrillo State Park. The property is located roughly two miles from the northern boundary of the Leo Carrillo State Park. The upstream reaches of the Arroyo Sequit are characterized by large pools of year-round water shaded by large sycamores.

The Arroyo Sequit watershed supports a high priority core recovery population of the Southern California Coast Steelhead DPS. The property offers vital habitat for all the focal species evaluated in the 2006 Linkage Design prepared for this corridor by the South Coast Missing Linkages project, which include mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), American badger (*Taxidea*

¹ National Parks Conservation Association, Southern California's Mediterranean Biome Parks: A Resource Assessment, April 2008.

²Penrod, K., C. Cabañero, P. Beier, C. Luke, W. Spencer, E. Rubin, R. Sauvajot, S. Riley, and D. Kamradt. 2006. South Coast Missing Linkages Project: A Linkage Design for the Santa Monica-Sierra Madre Connection. Produced by South Coast Wildlands, Idyllwild, CA. www.scwildlands.org.

taxus), mountain lion (*Puma concolor*), and Southern steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss mykiss*). In the winter of 2018/19, the entire project site burned in the 96,949 acre Woolsey Fire.

Grantee Qualifications: TPL has a long history of working with the Conservancy and local partners on land conservation in the Santa Monica Mountains and continues to have the staff capacity and resources to complete the proposed acquisition successfully. TPL staff has developed partnerships to fund acquisitions in the SMMNRA and to assure long term management of the properties. Additionally, they have raised the significant state and local funding needed to complete the acquisition.

MRCA is a joint powers agency formed in 1985 to manage open space and parkland, watershed lands, trails and wildlife habitat in Los Angeles and Ventura counties. It currently manages and provides ranger services for almost 69,000 acres of land both within and outside the SMMNRA. The addition of this property is not anticipated to significantly impact existing operations. MRCA owns and manages the adjacent Little Sycamore Canyon Preserve.

Project History: The project was selected for funding through a competitive grant round for Proposition 1 in October 2017. In the subsequent months, TPL staff has worked with the landowner and with Conservancy staff to be ready to complete the acquisition.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$800,000
County of Los Angeles Proposition A	\$800,000
Trust for Public Land	\$7,500
Project Total	\$1,607,500

The expected source of Conservancy funds for the proposed project is the 2007 fiscal year appropriation to the Conservancy from the Habitat Conservation Fund (“HCF”) established by the California Wildlife Protection Act of 1990 (Proposition 117), Fish and Game Code §2780 *et seq.* Pursuant to Fish and Wildlife Code § 2786(d) & (f), HCF funds may be used for acquisition, restoration or enhancement of wetlands and riparian habitats. The proposed project will acquire land that contains the headwaters of Arroyo Sequit Creek and the riparian habitat surrounding the headwaters. Thus, the proposed project is an appropriate use of HCF funds.

Matching funds from the County of Los Angeles consist of Proposition A supervisorial District 3 discretionary funds.

The grantee will provide in kind contribution including staff resources to execute due diligence prior to the acquisition. The value of this in kind service is estimated to be \$7,000.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to with Chapter 5.5, Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection, of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. (Section 31220). Section 31220(b) authorizes the Conservancy to undertake a project or award grants for coastal

watershed projects that meet one or more criteria of that section. Consistent with Section 31220(b)(2), the proposed project will protect fish and wildlife habitat within coastal watersheds, including endangered species habitat in Arroyo Sequit Creek by protecting land containing the headwaters of the anadromous fish-bearing creek from development.

Consistent with Section 31220(c), staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board on project selection and confirmed that the acquisition project is consistent with local watershed management plans and water quality control plans adopted by the State Water Resources Control Board and Regional Water Quality Control Boards (see the “Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan” section below).

Consistent with Section 31117, which is applicable because of the property’s location within the Santa Monica Mountains Zone, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy has been informed of the proposed acquisition and has provided a letter of support.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#)
GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective A** of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project protects 136 acres of significant coastal and watershed resources.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective C** of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project preserves fish and wildlife corridors from coastal to inland habitat areas.

**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:** By acquiring the subject property, the project serves to promote and implement several state plans including:
 - *California Water Action Plan* (2014). California Natural Resources Agency, the California Environmental Protection Agency, and the California Department of Food and Agriculture developed this Water Action Plan to meet three broad objectives: more reliable water supplies, the restoration of species and habitat, and a more resilient, sustainably managed water resources system. By protecting a 0.6 mile stretch of the headwaters of Arroyo Sequit Creek, this project will advance the

following goal: Goal #4, which identifies restoration of coastal watersheds as a priority action in order to protect and restore important ecosystems, including habitat of the Southern California Coast Steelhead.

- *California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft). Key Action #3 of the "Preserve and Steward State Lands and Natural Resources" calls for building resilience in natural systems and specifically calls out the need for well-maintained watersheds and floodplains. This project will advance two of the Goals for California's Future: 2) preserve and steward the state's lands and natural resources, and 3) build sustainable regions that support healthy, livable communities.
 - *CA Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan* (CA Natural Resources Agency, July 2014). The plan identifies "Actions Needed to Safeguard Biodiversity and Habitats" including #1: Improve habitat connectivity and protect climate refugia. This acquisition will preserve a portion of a significant regional wildlife corridor in the Santa Monica – Sierra Madre landscape linkage. The property offers vital habitat for all the focal species evaluated in the 2006 Linkage Design prepared for this corridor by the South Coast Missing Linkages project, which include mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), American badger (*Taxidea taxus*), mountain lion (*Puma concolor*), and Southern California Coast steelhead trout (*Onorochynchus mykiss mykiss*). This role of linkages will become increasingly important as species migrate due to climate change.
4. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, the National Park Service, California State Parks, the Bay Foundation, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Heal the Bay. See Exhibit 3 for project letters.
 5. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the Santa Monica Mountains, in Los Angeles County. The project is within both the coastal zone and the Santa Monica Mountains Zone.
 6. **Need:** The property owner has indicated a desire to complete the acquisition before August 2019. Conservancy funds are critical to the timely acquisition of the property.
 7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project is located in the Arroyo Sequit watershed, which supports a high priority core recovery population of the Southern California Coast Steelhead DPS. Furthermore, the proposed project is located within the SMMNRA, a local, regional, national and international tourism destination.
 8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** While in the Coastal Zone, the project site is above 1000' of elevation and is not vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria Urgency:

9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
10. **Readiness:** The grantee is prepared to enter into escrow in early summer, 2019.

11. **Cooperation:** The proposed project is a cooperative effort of the Conservancy, TPL and MRCA to ensure conservation of critical headwaters habitat in the Arroyo Sequit watershed.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The project is located within the Santa Monica Mountains area in the coastal zone. The project is consistent with conservation and open space policies of the Los Angeles County Santa Monica Mountains Local Coastal Program (LCP), as described below.

The proposed project is consistent with Water Quality Goal CO-1, which seeks to maintain and restore biological productivity and coastal water quality appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine and freshwater organisms and to protect human health. The project is consistent specifically with policies CO-3 seeking to reduce runoff and erosion associated with development; CO-7 seeking to protect water quality by limiting maximum potential buildout in sensitive watersheds; and CO-21 requiring natural vegetation buffer areas that protect riparian habitats to be maintained.

The proposed project is also consistent with Biological Resource Goal CO-2, which provides for the protection of Sensitive Environmental Resource Areas (SERAs), and specifically with the following policies: CO-41 restricting new non-resource-dependent development in the most SERAs to protect from disruption of habitat values, and CO-45 seeking to preserve, protect, and enhance habitat linkages through limitations in the type and intensity of development and preservation of riparian corridors.

The Project is consistent with open space policies CO-121 seeking to pursue a variety of methods to preserve open space, including fee-simple acquisition. It is also consistent with CO-123 which prioritizes acquisitions of lands that contain unique ecological features; protect undeveloped streams, watersheds, woodlands, and grasslands; prevent vegetation clearance or grading of steep areas; help reduce development-induced runoff; and protect existing and approved recreation areas. In addition, the Project is consistent with scenic resource policies CO-124 seeking to protect and, where feasible, enhance the scenic, and visual qualities of the Santa Monica Mountains contain scenic resources, and CO-125 seeking to protect public views within Scenic Areas and throughout the Coastal Zone.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the following objectives on the Greater Los Angeles County Integrated Water Management Plan (2014):

Objective: Enhance Habitat – Preserve or protect 2,000 acres of terrestrial aquatic habitat.

Objective: Enhance Open Space and Recreation – Create 38,000 acres of open space.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed acquisition is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under California Code of Regulations (CCR) Title 14, Section 15325 in that the acquisition constitutes a transfer of ownership to preserve open space and habitat. The proposed project also is exempt under Section 15313, which exempts the acquisition of lands for fish and wildlife conservation purposes.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.