

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 25, 2021

Upper San Gabriel River Watershed Urban Greening Project

Project No. 21-004-01

Project Manager: Emely Lopez

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$218,895 to the California Urban Forests Council to implement a multi-benefit urban greening project that will plant approximately 500 trees through educational community events that engage residents in communities across the Upper San Gabriel River Watershed.

LOCATION: Multiple locations within the Upper San Gabriel River Watershed, Los Angeles County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed two hundred eighteen thousand eight hundred ninety-five dollars (\$218,895) to the California Urban Forests Council ("the grantee") to plant approximately 500 trees through community events that engage residents in communities in the Upper San Gabriel River Watershed.

Prior to the commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgment of Conservancy funding and Proposition 1 as the source of that funding.

4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation 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 Resource Protection.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The California Urban Forests Council is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY: Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$218,895 grant to the California Urban Forests Council (CaUFC) to implement a multi-benefit urban greening project in the Upper San Gabriel Valley watershed area. The project consists of planting approximately 500 trees using resident volunteers who will receive environmental education in the process of the tree plantings, in communities across the Upper San Gabriel River Watershed.

The San Gabriel Valley (the valley) has experienced rapid urbanization over the decades, and the watershed is now home to approximately two million people. The valley's urban sprawl leaves the region exceptionally vulnerable to climate change effects. Climate change is projected to increase the frequency and intensity of extreme heat, drought, wildfire, and flooding events. This urbanized region has little opportunity for groundwater recharge because minimal green space and a high level of impervious surfaces leaves the area vulnerable to flooding during storms. The area's urban sprawl also magnifies the urban heat island effect during heat waves. Structures such as buildings, pavement, concrete, and other human-made infrastructure absorb and re-emit the sun's heat more than natural landscapes such as forests and water bodies. The valley's current tree canopy cover is 17.50%; this is below the Los Angeles County average of 19.77% canopy cover and far below the national average of 27.10% for urban areas. With little green space, the valley will warm to temperatures higher than 95 degrees on about 62 days per year by 2050, according to a UCLA study released in 2015. This means residents will experience two full months of dangerous heat.

Additionally, ambient toxicity, high levels of urban stormwater runoff, and a lack of groundwater recharge in this upper section of the San Gabriel watershed degrade water quality downstream in Alamitos Bay at the estuary. Pollutants from dense clusters of residential and commercial activities impair water quality in the middle and lower watershed.

The proposed project will help mitigate climate change effects in the region. The project is a multi-benefit urban greening project that will plant approximately 500 trees and engage residents in environmental education. Low-income neighborhoods will be priorities as this group of residents are most vulnerable to climate change effects. CaUFC will partner with ten cities and West Coast Arborists, Inc. (WCA), a local municipal tree care expert that hires from low-income communities. This project will work across the following ten cities to yield region-wide benefits: La Verne, San Dimas, Azusa, Glendora, El Monte, Baldwin Park, Pomona, Claremont, Covina, and West Covina.

Trees will be planted on public land, including green spaces adjacent to various streams, creeks, washes, lakes, neighborhood parks, and parkways where tree plantings will provide multiple benefits, such as groundwater recharge, pollutant filtration, and shade. There will be a mix of large and medium-size trees: native tree species, such as coast live oak, Engelmann oak, and Torrey pine, will be prioritized. Non-native trees that are appropriate for the planting conditions in the area, such as red ironbark, southern live oak, Australian willow, and Canary Island pine, will also be utilized. These trees were identified based on their ability to sequester carbon, reduce stormwater runoff, and have low water requirements. The partnered cities have tree inventories with thousands of vacant tree-planting sites. CaUFC will utilize GIS maps to determine appropriate vacant sites. They will overlay the vacant tree sites with the State's CalEnviroScreen 3.0 map, the AB 1550 low-income map, hydrologic features, and tree canopy cover, and select sites where tree plantings will provide the greatest benefits.

CaUFC will work with WCA to provide hands-on tree planting experience and engage residents in environmental education in the valley. CaUFC aims to hold community tree planting events in every city; however, tree planting events will adhere to the local COVID-19 ordinances. At the tree-planting events, CaUFC will relay the importance of trees, water resource management, and tree health benefits to the community, including cooling and water quality enhancement. CaUFC will work with local community groups to recruit volunteers for the events, providing local groups and the community a sense of ownership and stewardship of the project. Other tree plantings will be conducted with the San Gabriel Conservation Corps, providing job training for corps members.

After the tree planting events, CaUFC will conduct post-planting tree care and monitoring for one year to ensure tree establishment. There will be a total of 15 visits to each tree site to provide restaking, mulching, supplemental watering, and a structural prune as needed. After the first year, partner cities will maintain the newly planted trees as part of their long-term maintenance routine.

CaUFC will report the total benefits of the trees over their lifetime using iTree planting software. Reporting will quantify carbon sequestration, stormwater reduction, particulate matter 2.5 reduction, and several other benefits from the trees planted over their lifetime. The trees planted from this project will benefit the parks, streets, wildlife corridors, watershed, and public facilities of this region. Most importantly, the project will yield multiple benefits that address climate change: stormwater runoff mitigation, heat island effect reduction, carbon sequestration, public health benefits, conservation of pervious surfaces, and air filtration.

Site Description: The Upper San Gabriel River Watershed Area is in the Mideast portion of Los Angeles County. It is bounded by the San Gabriel Mountains to the north, San Bernardino and Orange Counties to the east, the Los Angeles River Watershed to the west, and the Pacific Ocean to the south. The San Gabriel River itself has a central channel length of approximately 58 miles and drains to the Pacific Ocean between Long Beach and Seal Beach. The river flows through residential, commercial, and industrial areas. The main tributaries of the river are Walnut Creek Wash, San Jose Creek, and Coyote Creek.

Most of the San Gabriel River's streams are locked in artificial channels, and most of the original wetlands have been lost to urban development. Less than 2,500 acres of wetlands remain in the San Gabriel River watershed, with the most significant decline in the coastal floodplain zone. Most remaining wetland habitats are either immediately adjacent to the river or within the Whittier Narrows and other flood control basins, providing habitat to birds and small mammals. The river is a popular recreation area, with parks and trails in the many flood basins along its course. Although most parks have been fully developed because of their urban locations, many routes and larger parks still maintain healthy native habitats.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The CaUFC is the first urban forest council in the nation, founded in 1968. It is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that leads community tree planting events and environmental education programs with local governments and community-based organizations. CaUFC provides essential expertise and assistance by working with local partners and their regional councils. Through CaUFC's California Initiative to Reduce and Limit Carbon Emissions (CIRCLE), it has planted over 9,000 urban trees, working with over 40 municipalities, and collaborating with over 30 community groups. A portion of each of the CIRCLE projects have been located in the San Gabriel and Inland Empire region where community members continuously show up to events and advocate for urban greening projects. They have successfully executed numerous projects to help grow green communities across California. CaUFC has experience managing federal and state grants, including working with the U.S. Forest Service and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

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 below.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section below.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**
 - a) The proposed project will help implement the following action of the California Water Action Plan (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2014):

Action #2 Increase Regional Self-Reliance: The project will increase local water supply via groundwater recharge.

- b) The proposed project will implement California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2015) by furthering the following goals:

Build a Resilient and Sustainable Water System: The project will reduce stormwater runoff and enhance groundwater recharge.

Invest in education for the future, including skill-building and workforce training: The project will help implement this action by partnering with the San Gabriel Conservation Corps. The Plan cites this action as part of the strategy to fulfill the Plan's goal to "Support Compact and Infill Development for Healthy and Equitable Communities."

- c) The proposed project will implement the California Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan (CA Natural Resources Agency, 2018 Update) by advancing the following strategies:

L-4.4. Promote workforce training and development programs that...accelerate the creation of green jobs in fields such as planting and maintenance of urban forestry and parks.

F-5.8. Support the creation of jobs, training programs, and workforce development in urban forest management, tree planting, and green infrastructure development to provide sustained economic benefit and ensure long-term capacity for maintenance.

F-5.9. Fund urban tree planting and green infrastructure projects where they yield multiple benefits such as energy reduction, storm water capture, or job creation.

4. **Support of the public:** The proposed project has support from local governments, schools, and local organizations, including the City of San Dimas, the City of Glendora, the City of Claremont, the City of Azusa, the City of West Covina, Rebuilding Together, Charter Oak High School, West Covina High School, Inland Urban Forest Council, Sustainable Claremont, and Glendora Youth Football Club.
5. **Location:** See the "Project Summary."
6. **Need:** Conservancy funding is needed for this urban greening project to address the valley's climate change effects. The outcome of seeking alternative funding sources would be uncertain, and it could lead to project delays for a community that is extremely vulnerable to climate change.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The water quality and quantity benefits of the project will enhance the health and habitat values of the San Gabriel River Watershed, thereby

benefiting special status and migratory species that depend on the river downstream of the project site. Additionally, as climate change continues to intensify, there is an expected increase in wildfires that create hazardous air pollution affecting the region. These trees will help clean the air in the area after wildfires for both humans and wildlife.

8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project site is not vulnerable to sea-level rise.

Additional Criteria

- 9. **Urgency:** Every year, climate change intensifies, causing intense heat waves and sporadic wildfires in Southern California. Increasing tree canopy cover will not only help cool down the temperature, but it will help clean the hazardous air pollution from wildfires.
- 10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project is a multi-benefit urban greening project that will address several issues associated with climate change, including improving water quality and supply, attenuating urban heat island effects, and improving quality of life for residents in the Upper San Gabriel River Watershed.
- 11. **Readiness:** The project is ready to proceed. The partnership with WCA is established, and the cities have already approved tree planting in existing public land.
- 12. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea-level rise:** Tree planting from this project will sequester atmospheric carbon, contributing to mitigating climate change. Additionally, the trees planted will help mitigate climate change effects by reducing the urban heat island effect and capturing stormwater runoff during intense storm events.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$218,895
Project Total	\$218,895

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project is the fiscal year 2016-17 appropriation to the Conservancy pursuant to the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 (Proposition 1, Water Code Section 79700 et seq.). Funds appropriated to the Conservancy derive from Chapter 6 (commencing with Section 79730). They may be used "for multi-benefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects for the watersheds of the state." (Water Code Section 79731.) Section 79732 identifies specific purposes of Chapter 6, which include protecting and restoring urban watershed health to improve watershed storage capacity and stormwater resource management. (Water Code Section 79732(a)(9).) The proposed project will contribute to improved water quality and urban watershed health, as discussed in the project description.

The proposed project was selected through a competitive grant process under the Conservancy's Proposition 1 Grant Program Guidelines adopted in June 2015 ("Prop 1 Guidelines"). (See Section 79706(a)). The proposed project meets each of the Prop 1 Guidelines' evaluation criteria described in further detail in this Project Financing section, the "Project Summary" and "Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines" sections of this staff recommendation.

City partners will provide in-kind staff time and resources to help identify tree sites, assist with event coordination, and provide tree maintenance post project. WCA will provide in-kind project management services to coordinate project activities and provide their GIS tree inventory system to track trees. Lastly, volunteers will provide in-kind services to plant tree. All these in-kind services from the cities, WCA, and volunteers amount to approximately \$70,000.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5, integrated coastal and marine resources protection (Public Resources Code Sections 31220). Section 31220 permits the Conservancy to provide grants for coastal watershed and coastal and marine habitat water quality, sediment management, and living marine resources protection and restoration projects. As required by Section 31220, staff consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board, which confirmed that the project is consistent with the Clean Beaches Initiative. Pursuant to Sections 31220(b)(1) and (7), the Conservancy is authorized to undertake a project or award a grant for a project that reduces contamination of waters within the coastal zone or marine waters, and that reduces the impact of population and economic pressures on coastal and marine resources. The proposed project will plant trees to capture and infiltrate stormwater runoff, thereby enhancing water quality and reducing stormwater volume entering the San Gabriel River. The proposed project will help improve the water quality of coastal waters downstream, alleviate local flooding, increase stormwater infiltration, and reduce the dense population's impacts in Los Angeles County.

Also, consistent with Section 31220(c), the proposed project includes a monitoring and evaluation component. It is compatible with regional, local, or State watershed management and water quality plans or programs, as described in the "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan" section below.

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

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will host multiple tree planting events and distribute educational materials that outline the importance of protecting green spaces connected to coastal and water resources. There will also be opportunities for elected officials and public agency partners to speak on the importance of addressing climate change effects as a community.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective D** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will enhance a coastal watershed.

Consistent with **Goal 8, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will increase tree canopy cover that absorbs heat during intense heat waves, thereby increasing resilience to climate change effects in the Upper San Gabriel River Valley.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will prioritize tree plantings in disadvantaged communities.

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

The proposed project will help implement the Upper San Gabriel River Enhanced Watershed Management Program Group's 2016 Enhanced Watershed Management Program (EWMP) approved by the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board. EWMP aims to infiltrate stormwater runoff, improve water quality, enhance flood control, and implement green street plans through multiple cities within the watershed. The EWMP also incorporates public education opportunities, improves local aesthetics, and meets the State priority of addressing the California drought cycle. This proposed project is in alignment with EWMP goals as described in the project's description.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15301. Section 15301 exempts repair, maintenance, and minor alteration of existing public structures, facilities, and topographical features involving no expansion of use. This exemption applies because the project consists of planting trees on public lands, including green spaces adjacent to various streams, creeks, washes, lakes, neighborhood parks, and parkways, which is a minor alteration of these public lands with no expansion of use.

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