COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 23, 2021

Santa Clara River Invasive Vegetation Removal

Project No. 21-054-01
Project Manager: Carol Martinez

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to $216,636 to the Regents of the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) to conduct invasive plant removal to enhance native riparian habitat on the Santa Clara River in Ventura County.

LOCATION: Saticoy, Ventura County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: Project Photos

Exhibit 3: 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 sixteen thousand six hundred thirty-six dollars ($216,636) to the Regents of the University of California, Santa Barbara ("the grantee") to conduct invasive plant removal to enhance five acres of native riparian habitat on the Santa Clara River, at the Lloyd-Butler property, in Ventura County.

Prior to 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 to complete the project.

3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding and Proposition 1 as the source of that funding.
4. Evidence that all necessary permits and approvals have been obtained.
5. Prior to commencing the project, the grantee shall enter into and record an agreement pursuant to Public Resources Code 31116(d) sufficient to protect the public interest in the improvements funded by this 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 Resources Protection.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to $216,636 to the Regents of the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) to conduct invasive plant removal to enhance five acres of native riparian habitat on the Santa Clara River, at the Lloyd-Butler property in Saticoy, an unincorporated community in Ventura County (Exhibit 1). The goal of the project is to remove invasive giant reed (*Arundo)*, thereby restoring riparian and wetland habitats and natural river functions in the project area and supporting the restoration of the entire Santa Clara River.

The Santa Clara River (SCR) (Exhibit 1) represents one of the most hydrologically intact river systems in southern California and provides habitat to approximately two dozen riparian-dependent and aquatic Species of Special Concern. The 2012 Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan identifies the SCR watershed as a Core 1 or highest priority watershed for recovery of the steelhead population. The project area offers opportunity for enhancing riparian habitat for riparian and aquatic species impacted by invasive non-native species. This project will focus on removal of *Arundo* (Exhibit 2), which poses both a fire and flood hazard in the SCR floodplain, as well as degradation of wildlife habitat. The lack of canopy shading associated with *Arundo* overgrowth reduces survival rates of cold-water aquatic species such as the federally listed Southern California steelhead and Pacific lamprey that migrate throughout the SCR. Furthermore, *Arundo* transpires large amounts of water, thereby reducing streamflow,

and is associated with increased channel erosion and sedimentation. Its removal will remediate these concerns in the area of the project.

The acquisition and restoration of riverine and riparian habitat on the Santa Clara River have been a high priority for the Conservancy for decades. The five acres being restored is part of a larger area identified on the Southern California Wetland Recovery Project's Work Plan as a 17-mile segment of the river known as the "Santa Paula-to-Sespe Conservation Area". The proposed project would restore and enhance the native riparian floodplain vegetation on the Lloyd-Butler property, a 1,200-acre private property within the Santa Paula to Sespe Conservation Area. The project will remove non-native invasive vegetation on five acres of this large property, focused on the riparian zone. Many private properties remain on the Santa Clara River, making restoration opportunities hard to find. The landowner of the Lloyd-Butler property is willing and excited to assist in the proposed restoration project.

Removal of invasive *Arundo* on the property will conserve ground- and surface-water resources and allow recovery of native vegetation that will enhance aquatic habitat for southern steelhead trout and other aquatic vertebrates. The Southern California steelhead will benefit from the project because the project area serves as a holding zone for steelhead returning to the Pacific Ocean. The project site is immediately downstream of the Freeman Diversion, a 20-foot-tall dam that poses a partial barrier for migrating fish and causes steelhead to remain resident in the project area for extended periods. The native vegetation on the project site also supports nesting for endangered Least Bell's vireo, which would be jeopardized by further encroachment and dominance of *Arundo*. The restoration will benefit wildlife, including federally listed species such as Southwestern willow flycatcher and Western yellow-billed cuckoo and other sensitive species such as Least bittern, Yellow rail, Northern harrier, Tricolored blackbird, and the Western pond turtle. Finally, *Arundo* reduction and eventual eradication will strongly reduce the threat of wildfires for the watershed. *Arundo* is a major factor in increased ignition, spread and severity of wildfires in California's riparian areas, including the Santa Clara River.

The proposed project would: 1) eradicate five acres of *Arundo*, and other noxious non-native plant patches scattered throughout the riparian woodland in the Lloyd-Butler property by utilizing the "cut and daub" hand-cutting method, which consists of initial cutting with loppers or other hand-equipment, followed by immediate direct treatment to cut stems with approved herbicide using backpack sprayers; and 2) conduct effective monitoring at the project area which includes field monitoring operations, map production, data collection, and other tasks for integrating all field data. Monitoring will be carried out by UCSB staff biologists or contractors, where staff will be split into separate crews such as a vegetation monitoring crew, wildlife monitoring crew, and a groundwater monitoring crew, as well as a data manager analyst and a monitoring coordinator. The monitoring plan involves a pre-treatment baseline survey, post-implementation surveys of plant and wildlife re-habitation, surveying soil conditions, monthly groundwater well observations, and trend analysis for adaptive management. Long-term maintenance of the restored project area will be accomplished by the landowner and UCSB staff conducting periodic sweeps to remove newly recruited *Arundo* and other critical invasive

plants, particularly following storm events that may re-distribute *Arundo* into the restored project area.

The project area is fully within a documented disadvantaged community (Exhibit 1) that extends from Santa Paula to the unincorporated community of Saticoy, adjacent to where *Arundo* removal work will take place. The town is at risk from *Arundo*-fueled wildfires, which have occurred numerous times in recent years in the lower portion of the SCR. In November 2019, the Maria Fire burned into the SCR riparian zones, less than one mile from the project site. Removing invasive, fire prone *Arundo* will contribute to fire prevention strategies and highly benefit the nearby disadvantaged community.

Although not included in this project, part of the restored floodplain area will be used for future projects to conduct experimental studies on native plants' resistance to drying and warming temperatures owing to climate change.

Site Description: The project is located on the Lloyd-Butler Ranch owned by long-time agricultural producers, the Lloyd-Butler Family. The Lloyd-Butler Ranch encompasses approximately 1,200 acres, 197 of which occur within the SCR floodplain extending above the Freeman Diversion. The proposed project removal activities will take place in a 5-acre segment within the Lloyd-Butler ranch property, specifically Zone 3 Parcel C (Exhibit 1). The site is surrounded by high-value agricultural production areas, much of which is farmed by the Lloyd-Butler partnership that holds the project property.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The University of California, Santa Barbara is a California public institution founded in 1944. UCSB is one of 62 research-intensive institutions in the US elected to membership in the prestigious Association of American Universities. UCSB operates an annual budget of approximately $230-300 million. The UCSB team of scientists that will manage the project has been involved in the restoration and protection of the Santa Clara River for decades and provides scientific and project management expertise in the identification and removal of non-native, invasive plants and restoration with native vegetation.

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:** The proposed project is consistent with several state plans and policies, as follows:

The proposed project will implement the ***Safeguarding California Plan*** - *2018 Update* (CA Natural Resources Agency, January 2018*)* by furthering the following recommendation: Prioritize restoration or enhancement of areas with highly or moderately vulnerable ecosystems and with appropriate species and genetic stock to increase the likelihood of population persistence into the future (Next Step B-3.2).

The proposed project will implement the ***Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan*** (National Marine Fisheries Service, 2016) by restoring habitat, removing barriers to fish passage, and removing invasive species in a high-priority recovery watershed.

California Wildlife Action Plan. 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 restore and conserve riparian communities.

California Water Action Plan. Goal #4, "Protect and Restore Important Ecosystems," identifies restoration of coastal watersheds as a priority action.

4. **Support of the public:** Because the project area has been, and will remain, under private ownership it has not received substantial attention from the community and is further restricted from public use by the Freeman Diversion facility. However, the project has received support from the following agencies and organizations: NOAA National Marine Fisheries Administration, US Fish & Wildlife Service— Ventura Office, California Department of Fish & Wildlife.
5. **Location:** See the "Project Summary".
6. **Need:** Without Conservancy participation and funding, project objectives cannot be implemented, and *Arundo* will continue to displace native vegetation if not treated.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Santa Clara River is one of the least altered river systems in all of California and is one of the only river systems in southern California that remains in its natural state without significant channelization. The river flows over 100 miles from the San Gabriel Mountains in Los Angeles County to the Pacific Ocean at the City of Ventura. The watershed provides habitat for numerous threatened and endangered species in addition to being a very significant agricultural area and a source of water for the surrounding communities.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project site is located approximately 9 miles from the coast and therefore is not vulnerable to sea-level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Innovation**: Light Detection and Ranging technology is being applied to the SCR floodplain to document both topographic and vegetation change, particularly their changes in response to high flows associated with periodic El Niño/Southern Oscillation conditions. Furthermore, the project will use satellite-based imagery of Normalized Difference

Vegetation Index to measure canopy productivity as a modeling tool to predict habitat suitability for Endangered, riparian-dependent wildlife species.

10. **Readiness**: The grantee and project partners are ready to begin work as soon as funding is secured.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals**: See Project Summary.
12. **Cooperation**: The private landowners of the project area are long-time agricultural producers in this region and are enthusiastic about contributing to the enhancement of riparian ecosystems for biodiversity conservation. The landowner will join with UCSB staff field crews to conduct periodic sweeps to remove newly recruited *Arundo* and other critical invasive plants, particularly following storm events that may re-distribute *Arundo* into the restored project area.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The proposed project would be unlikely to result in significant impacts from greenhouse gas emissions because the removal activity will mainly use hand-cutting methods and tools.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	**$216,636**
Project Total	**$216,636**

The source of Conservancy funds for this project is the fiscal year 19/20 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 (Proposition 1, Water Code § 79700 et seq.). Funds appropriated to the Conservancy derive from Chapter 6 (commencing with § 79730) and may be used "for multi-benefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects for the watersheds of the state." (Water Code § 79731.). This project addresses several of the specific purposes of Chapter 6, listed in Section 79732, of which the following pertain to this project: implement watershed adaptation projects in order to reduce the impacts of climate change on communities and ecosystems (subsection (a)(2)), protect and restore rural and urban watershed health to improve watershed storage capacity, forest health, protection of life and property, storm water resource management, and greenhouse gas reduction (subsection (a)(9)), protect and restore coastal watersheds (subsection (a)(10)); and protect or restore natural system functions that contribute to water supply, water quality, or flood management (subsection (a)(11)).

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

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resource Code Section 31220, regarding Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection. Section 31220(a) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for projects that improve and protect coastal and marine water quality and habitats, including through coastal watershed protection and restoration.

Consistent with Section 31220(a), the property that is the subject of the proposed project is located on the Santa Clara River Watershed, a coastal watershed, and the proposed project will address degraded water quality and aquatic habitat issues that will enhance water quality and benefit endangered southern steelhead populations which travel upstream from the coastal zone to spawn.

Consistent with §31220(a), staff has consulted with State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) in the development of the project to ensure consistency with the Clean Beaches Program, Chapter 3 (commencing with §30915) of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code.

Consistent with Section 31220(b), the project is specifically intended to restore fish and wildlife habitat within a coastal watershed and restore riparian areas, floodplains, and other sensitive watershed lands.

As Section 31220(c) requires, the proposed project is consistent with local and state watershed plans, as discussed below under "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan."

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

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will implement a project to enhance a coastal watershed, including floodplain habitat.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will implement a project to ensure sufficient instream flow for fish and other aquatic species habitat and provide in stream habitat and favorable water temperatures.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective 16A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project is in a disadvantaged community.

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

The proposed project aligns with the Santa Clara River Enhancement and Management Plan by meeting the primary goal for Conservation, Preservation and Enhancement of Species Habitat: To manage the resources of the river for the net benefit of native wildlife and plant species through the preservation, enhancement, and restoration of native plant communities, and aquatic and wetland habitats; protection, maintenance, and improvement of water quality parameters of the aquatic habitats; and management of water supplies to enhance prolonged

seasonal flow regimes for support of anadromous and other native fish and aquatic wildlife species. The proposed project does so by restoring habitat for multiple aquatic species.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 Cal. Code Regs. Section 15333, "Small Habitat Restoration Projects." Section 15333 exempts projects that do not exceed five acres in size that assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife. The proposed project qualifies for this exemption because it restores exactly five acres in part of the floodplain of the Santa Clara River.

Staff also evaluated whether the project involves unusual circumstances that would make the categorical exemption inapplicable under Section 15300.2(c) in the 14 Cal. Code Regs. due to the use of herbicide in proximity to the river. The project proposes the standard cut-stem approach that has been applied in many sites in the Santa Clara River watershed which involves the use of Glysophate or Imazapyr application directly onto the cut stems so that the compound is actively absorbed into the stem and roots. Done properly, there is no drip nor drift away from the cut stem itself. An approved non-ionic organic surfactant (wetting agent) is added ahead of time so that no mixing occurs in the field. Glyphosate treatments are best done in the fall when plants are translocating nutrients into their rhizomes, while imazapyr can be effective at other times of the year, creating some flexibility regarding time of treatment.

For these reasons, staff have concluded that the project will not have a significant effect on the environment due to unusual circumstances and use of the categorical exemption is appropriate.

Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.