

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
December 2, 2021

**MATILIJAM DAM ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION PROJECT: ROBLES DIVERSION DESIGN**

Project No. 99-099-06  
Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$379,350 to the County of Ventura to conduct planning and to develop design criteria, preliminary design plans and alternatives refinement for improvements to the Robles Diversion and Fish Passage Facility in unincorporated Ventura County.

**LOCATION:** West of Meiners Oaks in unincorporated Ventura County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Maps](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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**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 three hundred and seventy-nine thousand three hundred and fifty dollars (\$379,350) to the County of Ventura (“the grantee”) to develop design criteria, preliminary design plans and alternatives refinement for improvements to the Robles Diversion and Fish Passage Facility in unincorporated 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 in carrying out 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 protection and restoration of fish and wildlife habitat in coastal watersheds.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

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## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize \$379,350 to the County of Ventura to develop design criteria, preliminary design plans, and alternatives refinement for structural and operational improvements to the Robles Diversion and Fish Passage Facility (Robles Diversion) on the Ventura River, in unincorporated Ventura County. Alternatives refinement will be based on the preliminary alternatives developed by AECOM in an ongoing project as well as ongoing Independent Technical Review performed by Northwest Hydraulic Consultants (begun September 2021.)

The redesign of the Robles Diversion is a key component of the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project (MDERP) and a pre-requisite to removal of Matilija Dam. The Robles Diversion consists of infrastructure that diverts water from the Ventura River to the Casitas Reservoir during appropriate flows and includes a fish passage facility that enables fish in the river to bypass the diversion to remain in the river. The diversion infrastructure includes a dam that directs water to the diversion headworks and into a canal to Casitas Reservoir. Casitas Municipal Water District (Casitas) operates and manages the Robles Diversion as a component of the Bureau of Reclamation's Ventura River Project. The accumulation of sediment and debris behind the Robles Diversion dam results in costly maintenance, frequent blockage of fish passage, and diversion system outages during storms. Structural and operational improvements are needed for the restored sediment regime from the eventual upstream removal of Matilija Dam to be transported through Robles Diversion. These improvements are also needed to enhance fish passage, water supply reliability (residential and agriculture) and flood protection both upstream and downstream of the Robles Diversion.

The removal of Matilija Dam has been identified as a critical action for the recovery of the federally listed endangered southern California steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) in the National Marine Fisheries Services (NMFS) Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan. Since 1999, the Ventura County Public Works Agency's Watershed Protection District (Watershed Protection) has engaged in a multi-stakeholder effort to remove the sediment-filled Matilija Dam from the Ventura River watershed. The MDERP is a watershed-scale endeavor with a number of downstream components that will provide multiple benefits to endangered species by restoring natural ecosystem function to the Ventura River, its tributaries, and the estuary. It will help to address beach erosion concerns through natural sediment replenishment. The

MDERP will also address current flood risks and other liabilities posed by the obsolete dam and inadequate downstream infrastructure.

The Conservancy has been a primary project partner in MDERP for over two decades and this project will build upon that previous investment, including the 2001 Conservancy funding of implementation of the existing fish passage facility at Robles.

The tasks involved with the proposed project will include:

- Continued Refinement of Design and Sediment Transfer Criteria.
- Development of draft and final Design Criteria Memoranda with key findings and recommendations for project development.
- Model sediment transfer for the no-action and action alternatives.
- Development of draft and final Alternatives Analysis Reports with findings and recommendations for the Preferred Alternative to be carried forward into feasibility.
- Stakeholder workshop to build consensus around the Alternatives Analysis Report, and
- Project management associated with these tasks.

Public outreach has been an important component of MDERP planning. The project proponents conduct twice-yearly public meetings to update stakeholders on project progress, which will include updates on this project. Because Robles is critical infrastructure to Casitas and is subject to a biological opinion on the southern California steelhead, the project will include extensive coordination with Casitas and NMFS.

**Site Description:**

The Robles Diversion is located on the Ventura River approximately 14 miles upstream of the Pacific Ocean, and 2.3 miles downstream of Matilija Dam (located on Matilija Creek, the River's largest tributary) (Exhibit 1). The Robles Diversion consists of a forebay, diversion canal headworks, timber cutoff wall, downstream overflow channel, debris fence, and a spillway and spillway channel. The Fish Passage Facility consists of a fish entrance structure, fish ladder, auxiliary water pipeline, fish screens, brushes, a fish guidance device, and both high- and low-flow fish exits. Casitas operates and maintains the facility pursuant to a 2003 NMFS Biological Opinion for the federally endangered Southern Steelhead trout.

The Ventura River Watershed lies in the northeastern part of Ventura County, approximately 80 miles from Los Angeles. The Ventura River watershed is a remarkable watershed for several reasons. Unlike most watersheds in southern California, residents rely 100 percent on local water supplies and the land in the watershed is largely undeveloped. The northern half of the watershed lies within the Los Padres National Forest. Rainfall in the Matilija Wilderness, the river's headwaters, is the highest in Ventura County, with average annual rainfall over twice that at the coast. The steep terrain of the Ventura River watershed, coupled with intense downpours that can occur in its upper portions, result in flash flood conditions where floodwaters rise and fall in a matter of hours. Major or moderate floods with substantial sediment loads have occurred once every five years on average since 1933. The 2017 Thomas

Fire burned more than 95 percent of the upper watershed, and only magnified the sediment challenges confronting critical downstream infrastructure.

At least 65 special-status wildlife species, 54 special-status plant species, and six sensitive natural communities have been documented in the middle reaches of the Ventura River watershed. In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has designated Critical Habitat for six wildlife species.

The primary species to benefit from the project as well as the broader MDERP include the federally endangered southern California steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss irideus*) and federally designated species of special concern, Pacific lamprey (*Entosphenus tridentatus*).

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** Ventura County's Watershed Protection has been the principal project proponent of the greater MDERP for over two decades and is currently engaged in the Santa Ana Bridge Replacement project and the Camino Cielo Bridge Replacement Design, both downstream components of MDERP and designed with funding from the Conservancy. The Conservancy has a long history of partnering with Watershed Protection. Casitas, the operator of the Robles Diversion, has submitted a letter of support for the project.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

##### **Selection Criteria**

**1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Strategic Plan" section below.

**2. Project is a good investment of state resources.**

The proposed project, when implemented in the future, would enhance an existing water diversion and fish passage facility and would provide important benefits to Californians as well as the resources of California. Enhancement of the diversion structure would provide Casitas with a reliable method of diverting excess flows of the Ventura River to Casitas Reservoir. Casitas provides water to the majority of the watershed's residents and acts as a backup provider to other water districts and agencies. These water districts supply water to valuable coastal agricultural lands. Enhancements to the fish passage facility will provide more reliable fish passage past the facility for the endangered southern California steelhead as well as the Pacific lamprey.

The project budget is based upon cost estimates developed during the ongoing MDERP design project funded by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (the Department) and the project goals have been developed in consultation with the Department and NMFS as well as Casitas.

The proposed project is generally consistent with several state plans, and specifically with the

**Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan** (NMFS, 2012) and the **Steelhead Restoration and Management Plan** (CDFW, 1996). The Ventura River watershed is a priority watershed for recovery in both plans. The 2012 NMFS Recovery Plan includes the following priority recovery action that is furthered by this project:

*Physically modify Casitas, Matilija, and Robles Diversion dams to allow steelhead natural rates of migration to upstream spawning and rearing habitats, and passage of smolts and kelts downstream to the estuary and ocean.*

Matilija Dam is also recognized as a statewide anadromous fish passage priority in the California **Updated List of Anadromous Fish Passage Statewide Priority Barriers** (CDFW, 2012).

**3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.**

The proposed project involves the planned enhancement of existing facilities and not the development of a new facility. Conservancy staff has notified regional tribes in accordance with the Conservancy’s Tribal Consultation Policy. The greater MDERP will include a more extensive tribal engagement effort that is currently being developed.

**4. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.**

The proposed project is being developed specifically to ensure that infrastructure is resilient to climate change impacts and to allow the natural systems of the Ventura River to adapt to a changing planet. Changes in precipitation and sediment flow regimes are already present in the watershed and design alternatives will be considered over a range of modeled climate impacts.

**5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impacts.**

As stated above in the “Project is a good investment of state resources” section, the proposed project, when implemented in the future, would provide both a more reliable water supply system for watershed residents and more reliable fish passage through the mainstem Ventura River. The project is considering the impacts of global climate change in its design.

**6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.**

The MDERP is a multiple-decade project that has involved community engagement throughout its development and has included significant project refinement as a result of community input. The proposed project has been developed out of that process and enjoys broad support.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$379,350</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$379,350</b>

The expected source of Conservancy funds for the proposed project is the 2020/21 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. HCF funds may be used for the enhancement of aquatic habitat for spawning and rearing of anadromous salmonids and trout resources and the enhancement of riparian habitat (Fish and Game Code § 2786(e)(f)).

The proposed project will plan and design for a future aquatic and riparian habitat enhancement project. This future project, which will enhance the Robles Diversion and Fish Passage Facility, is expected to enhance aquatic habitat under a range of conditions and will provide reliable habitat connectivity for steelhead. Thus, the proposed project is an appropriate use of HCF funds.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 3 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation (Public Resource Code Section 31111), and Chapter 5.5, integrated coastal and marine resources protection (Public Resources Code Section 31220).

Section 31111 permits the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies and non-profit organizations for funding and undertaking plans and feasibility studies. Consistent with this section, the proposed project is a grant to the County of Ventura to plan and design a habitat and water delivery project in Ventura County.

Section 31220 directs 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. Pursuant to Sections 31220(b)(2)(3) and (6), the Conservancy is authorized to undertake a project or award a grant for a project that protects or restores fish and wildlife habitat within coastal and marine waters and coastal watersheds, that reduces threats to coastal and marine fish and wildlife, and that restores coastal wetlands, riparian areas, floodplains, and other sensitive watershed lands, that drain to sensitive coastal or marine areas. By preparing the pre-implementation plans, designs, and environmental documentation necessary to implement a riparian habitat restoration project, the proposed project will restore fish habitat, reduce threats to coastal and marine fish and wildlife and restore coastal riparian areas. Staff consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board, which confirmed that the project is consistent with Chapter 3 (commencing with Section 30915) (Clean Beaches Program) of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code (Watershed, Clean Beaches, and Water Quality Act).

Consistent with Section 31220(c) the proposed project includes preparation of an evaluation component and is consistent 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 6, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project develops a plan that enhances a coastal watershed and floodplain.

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

The facilities associated with the proposed project will further several objectives of section 5.2.3 of the Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, "Ecosystem Protection and Restoration Strategies," including the following:

- Protect and enhance native ecosystem diversity;
- Protect existing habitats from degradation.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project is statutorily and categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 Cal. Code Regs. Sections 15262 and 15306, respectively. Section 15262 provides that feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded are exempt from the requirement to prepare an environmental document although environmental factors must be considered. Section 15306 provides a categorical exemption for basic data collection and resource evaluation activities that do not result in serious disturbance to an environmental resource. The proposed project qualifies for these exemptions because it consists of planning, environmental evaluation, and information collection for a subsequent project, which has not yet been approved or funded.

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