

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 22, 2022

**SANTA CLARA RIVER PARKWAY  
LONG TERM MANAGEMENT OF THE NATURE CONSERVANCY PROPERTIES**

Project No. 00-105-08  
Project Manager: Christopher Kroll

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Designate The Nature Conservancy as the long-term management entity for the Santa Clara River properties acquired with Coastal Conservancy funding since 2001 and approve the revised Enhancement Plan as an amendment to the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan adopted by the Conservancy on October 26, 2000.

**LOCATION:** Santa Clara River, Ventura County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [TNC SCR properties map](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [2000 Enhancement Plan](#)
  - Exhibit 4: [Properties acquired with SCC funding](#)
  - Exhibit 5: [2020-2030 Enhancement Plan](#)
  - Exhibit 6: [Hanson Site Access Plan](#)
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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 designates The Nature Conservancy as the long-term management entity for the Santa Clara River properties acquired with Coastal Conservancy funding since 2001 and accepts the revised Enhancement Plan as an amendment to the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan adopted by the Conservancy on October 26, 2000.

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 resource enhancement.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy designate The Nature Conservancy (TNC) as the long-term management entity for the Santa Clara River properties acquired with Coastal Conservancy funding since 2001 (Exhibit 2) and acceptance of the Amended Santa Clara River Parkway Enhancement Plan (2020-2030) (2020-2030 Enhancement Plan) as an amendment to the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan (Enhancement Plan) adopted by the Conservancy on October 26, 2000 (Exhibit 3). The proposed project consists of the designation of TNC as the long-term manager of the acquired properties and acceptance of the 2020-2030 Enhancement Plan as an amendment to the Enhancement Plan.

In June 2001, the Conservancy authorized funding to The Nature Conservancy for the acquisition of several properties on the Santa Clara River for the purpose of public access, open space, and habitat conservation (the “acquisition purposes”). The acquisitions were implementing the recommendations of the Enhancement Plan for a continuous river corridor for habitat preservation and to provide public trail linkages to and along the river and adjacent public lands. In 2001, it was envisioned that a joint powers authority (JPA) would be established for ultimate management of the lands acquired along the river. TNC agreed to purchase the properties and provide interim management of and for the properties pending transfer of the properties to a long-term management entity that would undertake the restoration and conversion of the properties to the uses envisioned by the Enhancement Plan. At the time of the original authorization of funding, TNC was unwilling to agree to being the long-term management entity. Since 2002, the Conservancy has approved funding to TNC for additional purchases and TNC has used funding from the Conservancy to acquire a total of 16 properties (2,372 acres) with approximately \$18 million in Conservancy funds (Exhibit 4).

Nine of the 16 properties had agricultural uses on them when TNC acquired them. To this date, TNC has continued to lease those properties for agricultural uses. However, TNC and Conservancy staff agreed that those leases will be terminated over time as the properties are restored. Currently, the lease revenue varies year to year but is generally between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000. TNC and Conservancy staff agreed that TNC would use the funds for costs related to management of the properties. These costs have included property taxes, agriculture contract management, security services, and TNC staff project administrative and legal costs.

The grant agreement required that the Conservancy would designate and approve a long-term manager for the properties. That never happened because the Santa Clara River JPA was never formed and no other public agency or nonprofit organization was identified to manage the properties. This meant that TNC continued to acquire and hold Santa Clara River properties with funding from the Conservancy on an interim management basis. TNC has managed all the properties it has acquired since 2001. Recently in discussions with Conservancy staff, TNC staff indicated that TNC had reevaluated its position and was now willing to become the long-term management entity. Designation of TNC as the long-term manager would finally address the outstanding requirement of the grant agreement for the acquisition of all the properties.

In light of TNC's interim management status, the recommendations of the Enhancement Plan for a continuous river corridor for habitat preservation and to provide public trail linkages to and along the river and adjacent public lands have not yet been fulfilled. At the request of Conservancy staff, TNC prepared the 2020-2030 Enhancement Plan to lay out a schedule for implementing restoration and public access improvements on the acquired properties to fulfill the acquisition purposes. The 2020-2030 Enhancement Plan (Exhibit 5) will be an amendment to the Conservancy-approved 2000 Enhancement Plan.

The 2020-2030 Enhancement Plan lays out a 10-year strategy for restoration implementation and public access development on all properties purchased in whole or in part with funding provided by the Conservancy. Below is an excerpt from the plan that summarizes TNC's goals:

Restoration planned for the Santa Clara River Parkway prioritizes the expansion of large contiguous blocks of native habitat to create greater resilience to ecological threats, such as invasive nonnative species and climate-driven impacts (e.g. fire and flooding). As such, active restoration areas will be expanded upon and completed, while restoration planning in new areas is undertaken. In certain locations, additional acquisitions are needed to facilitate the restoration of properties that are currently protected and managed, particularly where levee removal could negatively impact neighboring properties. In all cases, restoration and public access expansion will be contingent upon continued successful fundraising, planning, and permitting. All planning described in this Plan is based on TNC's familiarity with local circumstances specific to the properties and external regional factors. Scheduled restoration and public access activities will be reviewed and updated on an annual basis to reflect progress toward intended milestones and to adapt to new circumstances as they arise.

The plan identifies land protection, restoration, and public access priorities for the 2020-to-2030-time frame. The plan groups the properties into "conservation nodes" which is an approach to land preservation and restoration which focuses on acquiring large contiguous blocks of habitat to avoid habitat loss and associated losses in biodiversity. TNC has identified five conservation nodes along the lower Santa Clara River and each node corresponds with important habitat with high ecological value. Several of the nodes historically supported large areas of riparian forest. TNC staff conducted a nodes analysis, which resulted in the framework in the plan for sequencing of restoration, acquisition and public access planning as well as "land use priorities" for each node.

Although the original vision for the Santa Clara River properties was a new long-term management entity, TNC has been filling the manager role since they acquired their first property on the river in 2001. TNC has been implementing restoration already at a few of the properties with Conservancy approval and has developed an award-winning public access plan for the Hanson property which is currently under construction (Exhibit 6). Conservancy staff will continue to work with TNC to develop habitat restoration and public access along the river and will continue to help implement the vision of the plan. TNC will submit a report to the Conservancy in 2030 laying out the projects completed in implementing the 10-year vision of the plan.

**Site Description:** The Santa Clara River is one of the least altered major coastal 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, including southern steelhead, in addition to being a very significant agricultural area and a source of water for the surrounding communities. Major tributaries include Castaic Creek and San Francisquito Creek in Los Angeles County, and Sespe, Piru, and Santa Paula Creeks in Ventura County.

TNC has acquired 28 properties along the Santa Clara River, including 16 with funding from the Conservancy (Exhibit 2).

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** TNC is an international non-governmental organization with offices throughout the United States and operating in over 35 countries around the world. TNC has been working to protect the Santa Clara River and its tributaries since 1999 and in 2000 established its L.A.-Ventura Project specifically to focus on: 1) protection and restoration of the Santa Clara River; 2) restoration of the wetlands at Ormond Beach; and 3) securing of wildlife corridors in the region.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, 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.

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

Wildfires are increasing in the area, in part due to climate change. Implementation of the amended enhancement plan will result in significant habitat improvements, including removal of stands of *Arundo donax*. *Arundo donax* is an invasive plant that displaces native riparian habitat. In addition, unlike riparian habitat, *Arundo* is fire prone and has worsened the impact of recent wildfires on river habitat. Removal of nonnative invasive species such as *Arundo* will benefit the resilience of the river ecosystem by reducing the threat of wildfire in the river corridor.

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

Implementation of the amended enhancement plan will provide much needed benefits for the Santa Clara River watershed including: 1) restoration of degraded habitat areas on the TNC properties which will benefit listed species such as steelhead trout and least bill's vireo by addressing degraded water quality and riparian habitat loss to invasive non-native vegetation, chiefly *Arundo donax*; and 2) provision of public access to the river for the disadvantaged communities which currently have little to no access to the river that flows through these communities. In surveys with community groups, residents of these communities have indicated a strong interest in securing public access to the river.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$0</b>
Others	\$0
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$0</b>

**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 undertake coastal watershed restoration projects to improve and protect coastal and marine water quality and habitats, including through coastal watershed protection and restoration. Such projects must achieve one or more of the objectives identified in Section 31220(b).

Consistent with Section 31220(a), the properties that are the subject of the 2020-2030 Enhancement Plan are in the Santa Clara River Watershed, a coastal watershed, and the proposed project would address degraded habitat issues that will enhance water quality and benefit endangered southern steelhead populations which travel upstream from the coastal zone to spawn. Past and current land uses on these properties such as mining and agriculture in addition to the spread of invasive *Arundo donax* have seriously reduced the value of the habitats of these properties, including water quality. Implementation of the amended enhancement plan will address these issues.

Consistent with Section 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 Section 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. The project includes a plan for public access that is compatible with resource protection and restoration objectives.

As Section 31220(c) requires, the proposed project is consistent with the 2014 Integrated Regional Water Management Plan of the Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County. The project furthers the following goals of the Plan:

- Goal 4. Protect and restore habitat and ecosystems in watersheds. The proposed project will plan for the restoration of habitat consistent with Goal 4.
- Goal 5. Provide water-related recreational, public access, stewardship, engagement and educational opportunities. The proposed project will plan for public access and educational opportunities consistent with Goal 5.

Monitoring requirements will be integrated into later portions of the project.

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

Consistent with **Goal 15, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan to communicate a vision and priorities for conservation and public access in coastal watersheds, the 2020-2030 Enhancement Plan sets out a vision and specific priorities for restoration and public access improvements at the TNC Santa Clara River properties, acquired with Conservancy funding.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project involves a plan for only feasibility and planning studies, and it may include basic data collection, resource evaluation, and research for possible future action which has not yet been approved, authorized, adopted, or funded by the Conservancy or another agency.

Planning carried out as part of this project will consider environmental factors as required by Section 15262. Therefore, the proposed project is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to California Code of Regulations Title 14, Section 15262.

In addition, the project is categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Section 15306. Section 15306 provides that basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to environmental resources are categorically exempt from the provisions of CEQA.

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