

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 15, 2004

Ventura Hillside Acquisition Planning & Feasibility Studies-
Acquisition Planning Program

File No. 04-049
Project Manager: Kara Kemmler

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up \$200,000 to the Ventura Hillside Conservancy (VHC) to prepare acquisition planning and feasibility studies for the Ventura Hillside.

LOCATION: Ventura Hillside, vicinity of City of Ventura, California

PROGRAM CATEGORIES: Resource Enhancement, Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Regional Location Map

Exhibit 2: Project Location

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following Resolution pursuant to Sections 31241-31270 and Sections 31400-31404 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to the Ventura Hillside Conservancy to prepare acquisition planning and feasibility studies as part of an acquisition planning program for the Ventura Hillside project area as shown in Exhibit 1 of the accompanying staff recommendation, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of funds, the Ventura Hillside Conservancy shall submit for the review and approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, including timeline and budget and the names and qualifications of any contractors it intends to employ for the project.”

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 project is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31241-31270 regarding resource enhancement;
2. The project is consistent with Chapter 9 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31404 regarding public access;
3. The project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001;
4. The Ventura Hillside Conservancy is a non-profit organization existing under Section 501 (c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code and having purposes consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code; and
5. The project serves greater than local need.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The grant funds will be used by the Ventura Hillside Conservancy (VHC) for pre-acquisition planning and feasibility activities to support the Ventura Hillside Acquisition Planning Program. The planning will focus on five areas: data acquisition; biological and resource assessment; individual property assessments; an acquisition plan; and a preliminary stewardship plan.

The Ventura Hillside project area is on the northern boundary of the City of Ventura and is part of the larger Santa Ynez Mountains system. The area is contiguous to two major coastal river systems in Ventura County, including the lower reaches of the Ventura River watershed, and the western boundary of the Santa Clara River watershed. The Ventura Hillside project area is the “missing link” between the Coastal Conservancy’s activities in the upper Ventura River watershed to the north, and the Santa Clara River to the east.

The Ventura Hillside are the last remaining undeveloped, coastal view land of its size in coastal Ventura County. The project area has tremendous regional potential for passive recreation including hiking, biking, birdwatching, wildflower viewing and picnicking. Along the 60 mile coastal stretch between Carpinteria in Santa Barbara County to the west, and Malibu in Los Angeles County to the east, there are no publicly accessible hiking trails that lead into the coastal foothills.

Site Description:

The Ventura Hillside Acquisition Planning Program is focused on the Ventura component of a regional open space system extending from the Los Padres National Forest to the Pacific Ocean. The territory represents one of the last undeveloped, ocean-view properties between Carpinteria and Malibu with significant recreational potential.

The project area generally includes the undeveloped land encompassed by the City of San Buenaventura, its “Planning Area Boundary” and its “Area of Interest.” This territory generally includes the portion of the Ventura River watershed from the crest of Sulfur Mountain above

Cañada Larga to the Pacific Ocean, along both sides of the river. This area also includes the fore and back hills behind the City from Grant Park east to Aliso Canyon. Altogether the project area encompasses approximately 50,000 acres of non-urbanized land. The project area includes both land within Ventura's corporate limits and land within unincorporated Ventura County.

The hillside lands are significant to the coastal area in that they represent the upland resources that relate to the creeks and rivers that flow into the Pacific Ocean. The hillside lands are part of the Ventura River watershed and include drainages with riparian resources that connect to coastal wetlands. Part of the hillsides west of the Ventura River and north of Emma Wood State Beach are located entirely within the Coastal Zone.

Within the project area, the Ventura Hillsides Conservancy has further identified a Priority Acquisition Area. Lands within the Priority Acquisition Area are those hillside lands facing the greatest threat of potential development. The Priority Acquisition Area also defines the urban limit boundary, the bright line between residential land use in the City and open range and natural habitat to the north and west. The Priority Acquisition Area includes the hillside lands generally coterminous with that portion of the City of San Buenaventura's Planning Area, as defined in the City's 1989 Comprehensive Plan, lying north of the City's residential development from roughly Wells Road to the Ventura River. The Priority Acquisition Area represents approximately 18,600 acres.

The hillside lands represent continuous stretches of natural open space and contain various native habitat types including chaparral, coastal sage scrub, oak woodland, native perennial grasslands, riparian scrub, and ephemeral and intermittent watercourses. Several barrancas and drainages descend from the high peaks and cross the hillside property on their way to the ocean. Trees dot the land including coast live oak and scrub oak species, sycamores, and willow species. Native plants include lemonade berry, wild cucumber, purple sage, morning glory, lupine and other herbaceous flora types of wildflowers. The land is also refuge for wildlife such as raptors, songbirds, mammals, and other animals, and brings many wild species in direct contact with the urban area of Ventura.

The distribution of native habitat has been substantially altered as a result of human disturbance, primarily cattle grazing, agriculture and oil industry operations. In many locations, historic overgrazing of the hillsides is evidenced by destructive erosion and in some cases, slope failure. The City has, in recent years, experienced significant water quality problems in the Ventura Harbor from runoff originating in the overgrazed hillsides. Disturbances have also resulted in invasion by exotic plants and fragmentation of remaining habitat areas. Scenic resources such as ridgelines and viewsheds in the hillsides have been compromised by development and are further threatened by urban sprawl under current development proposals within City planning boundaries.

The acquisition of recommended parcels within the project area, combined with habitat restoration, erosion control, and long-term management and public education, will provide an effective means for open-space preservation, enhancement of biological functions, the improvement of water quality for direct-to-ocean tributary drainage courses such as the Arundell Barranca, Hall Canyon, and others. The acquisition of the recommended parcels will also enhance the social understanding of the relationship between the hillsides as watershed and the ocean below, thereby instigating a broader development of public appreciation for the inherent values nearby natural areas.

Project History:

The Ventura Hillside Conservancy (VHC) was formed in 2003 to provide a vehicle for preserving open space areas threatened by development in the vicinity of the City of San Buenaventura. Until the formation of VHC, this area lacked a local entity ready and able to acquire and manage open space land. This circumstance is likely the result of the area’s history, which saw historic agrarian and ranching uses as an economic activity and did not interpret the scenic land upon which the activity took place as a public resource. Consequently, the City developed a traditional urban parks department, but never embarked on regional park development. Meanwhile, the County had abandoned park development after the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978. Unlike eastern Ventura County, with its young suburban cities supported by distinct recreation and open space districts, western Ventura County did not develop an open space recreation infrastructure.

This project forms the basis of VHC’s planning activities to acquire and manage privately held property for public use and habitat preservation. The VHC is committed and motivated to acquire the hillside lands, but must first assess the property and its biological and resources values, and formulate a plan to acquire and manage the property. Through the urging of Ventura’s Mayor Brian Brennan, City Councilman Bill Fulton, and representatives of Assemblywoman Hannah Beth Jackson’s office, VHC representatives informed the Conservancy of their objectives, and Conservancy staff advised the organization to submit a pre-acquisition planning grant.

PROJECT FINANCING;

Coastal Conservancy	\$200,000
VHC-In Kind (Est.)	<u>\$50,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$250,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds are funds from Proposition 40, The California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Bond Act.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapters 6 and 9 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270 and Sections 31400-31404.

Pursuant to Section 31251, the Conservancy may award grants to protect coastal resources. The proposed project would provide for the long-term protection and stewardship of important coastal resources. Consistent with Section 31252, the project area has been identified in the City of Ventura Local Coastal Plan as requiring public action to resolve resource protection problems.

Consistent with Section 31251.2, the City of Ventura has requested that the Conservancy undertake the project. See Exhibit 3 (Letter from Brian Brennan, Mayor of City of Ventura)

This project is consistent with Chapter 9 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation regarding public access. Consistent with Section 31400, the Conservancy is being to approve funding to

analyze appropriate public access trails within the project area to connect to accessways to and along the coastline. Consistent with Section 31400.1, Conservancy staff has determined that the access improvements shall serve greater than local needs.

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

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective A**, the project will preserve natural communities and scenic and recreational resources, protecting significant coastal resource properties. The project will analyze the best opportunities for connecting existing public lands to provide larger contiguous blocks of habitat and wildlife corridors, "preserving scenic vistas and open space near urban areas."

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective B**, the project will preserve and restore habitat corridors between core habitat areas from coastal habitats to inland areas.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective C**, the project will preserve and restore native vegetation through the development of a program of invasive plant removal as part of the stewardship plan.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective A**, the project will preserve and restore a coastal watershed improving water quality, habitat and other coastal resources with a coastal watershed and the "coastal ocean."

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes: See the Consistency with Conservancy's enabling legislation above.
2. Consistency with purposes of the funding source: See Project Financing above.
3. Support of the Public: The citizens of San Buenaventura and the surrounding region have demonstrated strong support for preservation of the hillside lands through their memberships and contributions to the Ventura Hillside Conservancy. In its first year of existence, VHC recruited over 750 dues-paying members, and entertained and educated over 300 people at its free educational outreach events. More than 50 local businesses have contributed to VHC either monetarily or through in-kind donations and VHC has received grant funds from Patagonia, Inc. (corporate and the local retail store) and Mid-State Bank & Trust (local branch).

VHC also enjoys the strong support of local elected officials and conservation groups, as evidenced by the attached letters of support from: Assemblymember Hannah Beth Jackson; Ventura County District 1 Supervisor Steve Bennett, City of San Buenaventura Mayor Brian Brennan; the local chapter of the California Native Plant Society; and the Nature Conservancy.

4. Location: The project area includes the portion of the Ventura River watershed from the crest of Sulfur Mountain above Cañada Larga to the Pacific Ocean, along both sides of the river. This includes the Taylor Ranch property north of the Ventura River and some lowland areas along the Santa Clara River, both of which are in the coastal zone of the City of San Buenaventura.

The Priority Acquisition Area, which consists of the hillside lands north of the city of San Buenaventura, is not directly in the coastal zone, but is linked to coastal resources due to its watershed function. This region includes several barrancas and drainages which descend from the high peaks and cross the hillside property on their way to the ocean. Canada Larga, Manuel Canyon, School Canyon and Canada Las Encinas drain to the Ventura River, which has the potential to serve as important steelhead trout habitat. Sudden Barranca, Long Canyon, and Harmon Canyon drain into the Santa Clara River, the longest, free-flowing river in Southern California. Arundell Barranca, San Jon Barranca, Barlow Barranca, and Hall Canyon drain directly to the Pacific Ocean. The San Jon feeds a minor coastal estuary, while the Arundell empties into Ventura Harbor. Maintaining the health of the upland resources will improve the water quality at these coastal wetland areas and at the beaches.

5. Need: This pre-acquisition planning grant provides a unique opportunity for VHC to prepare to acquire and manage open space land. This grant will allow VHC to complete the priority-setting and data gathering activities, so that its initial acquisitions focus on the key parcels within its Priority Acquisition Area. With the high local interest in access to the hillside lands for public recreation, VHC will be under intense pressure to immediately open acquired lands to public access.

Without this grant, and the stewardship planning activities it enables, VHC will be forced to delay public access or proceed with public access before sensitive biological receptors can be fully protected through a preserve management plan.

Greater Than Local Interest: The project area is situated on the northern edge of the Los Angeles megalopolis and constitutes a buffer zone to the Los Padres National Forest. The hillside lands are part of the greater Santa Ynez Mountains foothills system, and are contiguous to two major river systems. Included in the project area are the lower reaches of the Ventura River watershed, the western boundary of the Santa Clara River watershed and the hillside lands in between that drain directly to the Pacific Ocean. With major funding assistance from the Coastal Conservancy, the Ventura River is currently the object of a multi-agency dam removal project along the Matilija Creek. This project, if successful, represents a major coastal habitat enhancement project for the southern Steelhead trout. The hillside lands constitute additional critical watershed area for the Ventura River. Therefore, the project will enhance a regional restoration project of major import.

The project area is the missing link between Conservancy activities in the upper Ventura River watershed to the north (most notably the Conservancy contributions to the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy's acquisition of the River Ranch and Confluence properties) and Santa Clara River to the east (specifically the Valley View Ranch, now managed by Friends of the Santa Clara River following the Conservancy's acquisition of the property.)

The hillside lands are the last remaining undeveloped, coastal view land of its size in Ventura County. The property has tremendous regional potential for passive recreation including hiking, biking, birdwatching, wildflower viewing, and picnicking. Along the 60-mile coastal stretch between Carpinteria and Malibu, there are no publicly accessible hiking trails that lead into the coastal foothills. Trails through the hillside lands would afford uninterrupted views of the Pacific Ocean and the Channel Islands, which would be a draw for residents throughout Ventura County – a population which currently numbers 802,400. Additionally, the project would enhance Ventura’s growing reputation as an ecotourism destination, adding an upland counterpart to its role as a gateway to Channel Islands National Park and as a major surfing, sailing, and ocean sport activity center. Proximity-wise, the hillside lands would provide the nearest trails for the 284,000 residents of the cities of San Buenaventura and Oxnard.

Additional Criteria

6. Urgency: The hillside properties are currently owned by several corporations and leased to a variety of cattle grazing, oil extraction, and orchard agriculture operations. In recent years, development proposals for the hillsides have included housing projects, commercial buildings, and golf courses. In 2002, several hillside landowners crafted a ballot initiative that would have locked in a development agreement paving the way for the construction of 1,390 houses and 40,000 square-feet of commercial development spread throughout a 3,800-acre property. The project was defeated by voters by a margin of 70 percent despite a \$1.5 million campaign by the landowners and endorsement by some local politicians. In March 2004, property owners who own another 2,000-acre hillside property commenced focus group discussions and telephone surveys to gauge public opinion regarding a possible 600-home development in the hills. These first steps indicate that additional political battles may be in the offing. The hillside lands will continue to be vulnerable to such development plans until the properties are permanently preserved through acquisition.
7. Leverage: See Project Financing above.
8. Conflict resolution: The proposed project is intended to resolve dispute over development within the project area by providing a plan for property acquisition and stewardship. The project is supported by the City Council of the City of Ventura and by the member of the County Board of Supervisors.
9. Readiness: The Board of Trustees of the Ventura Hillsides Conservancy is committed to the objectives of this project, and will be actively involved in monitoring the progress and insuring that milestones are met. VHC’s Conservation Planning Committee will provide advisory support to the project manager in the area of biological assessment. Volunteers with experience in GIS have been recruited to provide input on the mapping process.
10. Realization of prior Conservancy goals: “See Project History above.”
11. Cooperation: Ventura Hillsides Conservancy will actively solicit input from the public regarding future uses and management of the hillside lands through a series of public workshops. VHC has successfully engaged the public during past outreach events, and will broadly publicize the public workshops to its 750 members and the community-at-large. Officials from the City of San Buenaventura and the County of Ventura are expected to participate by providing data and facilitating a community dialogue. Specific expertise will

also be sought from local nonprofit organizations. The California Native Plant Society (CNPS) will be consulted in the development of the vegetation mapping. VHC plans to use CNPS protocols and methods, following the CNPS Manual of California Vegetation classification to the Series level, with Plant Associations identified where possible. The Ventura Audubon Society will provide data collected annually on bird species observed at various study sites within the Interest Area.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the policy goals of the certified Local Coastal Program of the City of Ventura, including: maintaining sensitive habitat, coastal resource management, and protection of rivers and harbors. Specifically, Objective 12 seeks to protect sensitive wetland, riparian and oak woodland wildlife habitat areas. Policy 12.1 calls for efforts to implement the Sensitive Habitat Overlay, including “the Ventura River mouth area in the Ventura River/Taylor Ranch area” within the project area. Additionally, Objective 13 calls for the conservation and protection of rivers within the project area. Policy 13.1 states that “To complement existing City boundary protection policies for hillsides and beaches, it is the City’s intent to encourage preservation of the Ventura and Santa Clara Rivers in their present semi-natural state, and possible restoration to natural conditions.”

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA: The project involves only the preparation of planning and feasibility studies which is statutorily exempt from the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262. Upon Conservancy approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.

EXHIBITS