COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
October 21, 2010

**SANTA CLARA RIVER PARKWAY- ACQUISITIONS**

File No. 00-105-05
Project Manager: Peter S. Brand

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to $4,000,000 to The Nature Conservancy for the acquisition of properties in the lower river to further implement the Santa Clara River Parkway project.

**LOCATION:** Ventura County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

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***EXHIBITS***

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: River Parkway Status Map

Exhibit 3: Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan and Staff Recommendation, October 26, 2000

Exhibit 4: Staff Recommendation, June 25, 2001

Exhibit 5: Project Letters

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS**:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following Resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-270 of the Public Resources Code:

"The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed four million dollars ($4,000,000) for the acquisition of properties (Ventura County Assessor's Parcel Nos. 138-0-060-47; 138-0-060-065, -585, and-100; 138-0-060-365; 138-0-211-04) to The Nature Conservancy to implement the Santa Clara River Parkway project, as shown in Exhibits 1, 2 and 3 of the accompanying staff recommendation, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for each acquisition, the Conservancy's Executive Officer shall review and approve all title and acquisition documents including but not limited to the appraisal, agreement of purchase and sale, escrow instructions and documents of title pertaining to that acquisition.

2. The Nature Conservancy shall pay no more than fair market value for any property acquired pursuant to this authorization, as established by an appraisal approved by the Conservancy's Executive Officer.
3. All property interests acquired with these funds shall be permanently protected for public access, open space and habitat conservation in a manner acceptable to the Conservancy's Executive Officer and consistent with the Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan and Public Resources Code Section 31116(b)."

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 proposed project is consistent with and will help to carry out the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan (Exhibit 3) approved by the Conservancy on October 26, 2000, pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) and remains consistent with the October 26, 2000 authorization regarding enhancement of coastal resources and local coastal program policies.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines last updated by the Conservancy on June 4, 2009.
3. The Nature Conservancy is a private, nonprofit organization existing under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code, whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code."

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**PROJECT SUMMARY**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to $4,000,000 to The Nature Conservancy for the acquisition of specified properties along the Santa Clara River as more specifically identified on the attached Exhibit 1. These acquisitions will preserve over one mile of river and allow for the enhancement and restoration of approximately 250 acres of riparian habitat. Six and one-quarter million dollars in matching federal and state funds from Conservancy partners will leverage the Conservancy's contribution to fund the property acquisitions. These acquisitions implement the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan approved by the Conservancy on October 26, 2000 (the "Plan") to ultimately provide a continuous riparian corridor and public trail along thirty miles of the river.

The proposed river parkway acquisitions will help consolidate management of the lower six miles of river, much of which is now in public ownership. Once continuous river reaches are acquired, riparian restoration and levee removal will provide flood relief to adjoining farmers and reduce river flows that have periodically destroyed public facilities nearby. Removal of levees along these and nearby properties will lower flood elevations by several feet. Reconnecting the river to its floodplain in the lower river will also reverse the manmade process of incision and degradation of the streambed that is hampering the revival of endangered species dependent on the estuary. The southern steelhead, tidewater goby, and two federally endangered

species, the southwestern willow fly catcher and least Bell's vireo, will be the primary targets of future restoration in the lower river but numerous other listed and candidate species will benefit.

The goals of the Santa Clara River Parkway project are: (1) to restore natural hydrologic and geomorphic processes affecting the Parkway area, while providing enhanced flood protection for adjacent private land and public facilities including removing and/or setting back levees and other permanent flood control structures within the planning area; (2) to restore aquatic and riparian habitat within the Parkway area to provide improved conditions for native species such as the anadromous steelhead; and (3) to provide for public access and environmental education including the creation of a continuous public trail system along the length of the Parkway.

This project is the fifth in a series of acquisition authorizations for the Santa Clara River Parkway. The acquisitions will continue the implementation of the Coastal Conservancy's Plan. The Conservancy and its partners, The Nature Conservancy and the Friends of the Santa Clara River, already acquired approximately fourteen miles of river, nineteen properties totaling 3,000 acres, in implementation of the vision of a Santa Clara River Parkway (Exhibit 2).

**Site Description:**

The natural vegetation remaining on the specified project sites consists of a variety of habitat communities including Southern Willow Riparian Scrub, Coastal Sage Scrub and Cottonwood-Willow Riparian Forest. Those portions of the sites currently in agriculture will be restored to their former historical ecology.

The Santa Clara River is the largest river in southern California and one of the last major rivers in the region that exists in a relatively natural state. The Santa Clara originates in the northern slope of the San Gabriel Mountains in Los Angeles County, traverses Ventura County and flows into the Pacific Ocean halfway between the Cities of San Buenaventura and Oxnard. Its total length is approximately 100 miles with its watershed covering approximately 1,200 square miles.

The headwaters of the Santa Clara and all of its major tributaries originate on National Forest lands. The estuary at the river mouth is protected as a natural preserve within McGrath State Beach. The portion of the river in Los Angeles County is designated as a "significant ecological area" by Los Angeles County. While this designation does not convey protective status, it does recognize the biological importance of the upper Santa Clara River. The majority of the main river corridor is privately owned and not protected.

From a biological perspective, the river is unmatched in southern California. Extensive patches of high quality riparian habitat are present along the entire length of the river. These patches serve as "stepping stones" for migratory birds traveling between riparian areas and wetlands on the south coast.

The river is also home to many species in decline throughout the southern California region. The federal listed endangered Least Bell's Vireo and Unarmored Threespine Stickleback are two such species. Projections in the draft recovery plan for the vireo indicate that approximately 4,500 acres of riparian habitat on the Santa Clara River could support 625 territorial male vireos, more than any other southern California river, making the Santa Clara the site for a new population stronghold. The count of vireo pairs on one recently restored Santa Clara River Parkway site went from two pairs to 71 pairs.

Likewise, two reaches of the river in Los Angeles County are designated as essential habitat for the stickleback. Without these areas, the sticklebacks, vireos, and the other endangered or candidate species (*e.g.*, Least Tern, Tidewater Goby, *etc.*) will face localized extinction and possible extirpation from the region. The Santa Clara River has also been designated as critical habitat for the survival of southern steelhead.

Elevations in the Santa Clara River watershed range from 8,831 feet above sea level on Mount San Piños to sea level at McGrath State Beach. Drier eastern portions of the watershed get eight inches of rain per year; the headwaters of Sespe Creek get 34 inches per year. Streamflows into the Santa Clara River are highly variable. Average discharge measured at Montalvo (on the mainstem three miles upstream of the estuary) ranges from no flow for many days during the summer to winter flood flows over 100,000 cubic feet per second (cfs). Major floods are common on the Santa Clara (most recently in 1969, 1978, 1980, 1983,1995, and 2005), and because the river carries high sediment loads and has a broad migrating channel, flood damage has been extensive. The most damaging flood occurred in January 1969, when a peak flood of 160,000 cfs jumped the north bank of the river and destroyed the East Side Treatment Plant, Ventura Boat Harbor, and several upstream bridges.

The Santa Clara River is naturally a very dynamic, flashy system. 75% of the time, the flows are less than 150 cubic feet per second (cfs). However, the largest peak flows, approximately once every ten years, are 1,000 times that. The hydrograph for one day in 1992 shows flows increasing and decreasing 100,000 cfs during one day (from about 2,000 cfs to 104,000 cfs and back down to 4,000 cfs). Over a 72 year period (1928 to 2000) 25% of the total sediment discharge of the SCR occurred in just four days. The Santa Clara River is also dominant regionally. Over time, 65% of the sediment discharge in the Santa Barbara littoral cell comes from the Santa Clara River. The Conservancy's scientific consultants remark on the exceptional nature of the Santa Clara River which "will not generally behave like a classic alluvial river…will not exhibit equilibrium tendencies." Episodic high flows increase the chance of a "rapid onset of hazardous conditions during a large flood event."

However, development, agriculture and channelization have also altered the hydrology of the system and made flooding more damaging to farms and cities. Irrigated acreage rose from 31,700 acres in 1919 to 107,700 acres in 1949, eliminating habitat and lowering base flows and the groundwater table. The human population has increased tenfold since the 1940's. Since 1938, the average width of the active channel has been reduced from 1,580 ft to 830 feet. The estuary extent has decreased 75%. The confinement of the river in a narrower channel has been dramatic but most of that floodplain can be regained with a consequent rise in groundwater and rebirth of riparian forests, dense, multi-storied stands of broadleaf trees that once extended from a few to several miles wide. The 2005 flood of 136,000 cfs inundated just over 7,000 acres whereas the 1938 flood of 120,000 cfs inundated over 12,000 acres. This represents a 40% loss in the extent of the riparian corridor, with a greater loss in the lower river of 70%.

**Project History:** In 2000, after discussions with river landowners and with the support of the adjoining cities, state and local politicians and environmental groups, the Conservancy proposed the establishment of the Santa Clara River Parkway, which would result in the acquisition and restoration of a 30 mile-long corridor from the mouth of the Santa Clara River to the Sespe Creek confluence. The Santa Clara River Parkway was

established with two complimentary purposes: the acquisition and public management of the river corridor to allow for habitat restoration, public enjoyment and environmental education; and the restoration of the natural processes of the river to prevent continued flooding and damage to habitat, farmland and public facilities. In 2001, initial funding of $9.2 million was appropriated by the legislature to the Coastal Conservancy for this project.

At that time, The Nature Conservancy was analyzing the potential to protect the most threatened natural communities of the region. Its scientists having determined the biological significance of the river corridor, The Nature Conservancy began collaboration with the Conservancy to help implement the Santa Clara River Parkway project which will help to achieve also The Nature Conservancy's goals for the ecoregion.

The Coastal Conservancy approved the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan and authorized the first acquisition in October 2000. Land acquisition began in March 2001, with the purchase of the Camp property, 225 acres (approximately one and a half miles of the river) including 150 acres of orchard that ultimately, after levee removal, will be converted back to riparian habitat. Since then fifteen other properties have been acquired with Conservancy grant funds within the boundaries of the Parkway. Additionally, in 1999, the Friends of the Santa Clara River acquired the Valley View Ranch, 213 acres, with a grant from the Conservancy. It is now considered part of the Santa Clara River Parkway. The proposed acquisitions will contribute to this assemblage of parcels within the Parkway.

The Nature Conservancy will hold and manage the properties. The Nature Conservancy has also acquired three properties upstream through dedication. Ultimately, a comprehensive levee removal (or setback) program will be implemented restoring habitat on these properties.

The Conservancy authorized on September 15, 2004 an amount of $550,000 and an additional amount of $57,290 provided by the Santa Clara River Trustee Council for consultant services in the preparation of a restoration feasibility study for the Santa Clara River Parkway. The feasibility study augments existing studies by providing a comprehensive understanding of both physical and biological processes (including human induced change) within the Parkway. The study documents baseline conditions and develops a set of general and site specific restoration strategies, and an assessment of restoration feasibility given existing constraints and implementation and an estimate of management costs. Various levee and berm removal and habitat restoration options are examined to identify the biological and flood reduction benefits that could result from reconnecting the river to the floodplain.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

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| Coastal Conservancy (current authorization) | $4,000,000 |
| Santa Clara River Trustee Council | $3,000,000 |
| U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service | $1,000,000 |
| Wildlife Conservation Board | $2,250,000 |

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| TOTAL | $10,250,000 |

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for this authorization is Proposition 1E. Proposition 1E is the Disaster Preparedness and Flood Prevention Bond Act of 2006. A portion of the Bond funds are made available, without specifying the agency recipients, for the acquisition of interests in property located in a floodplain that cannot reasonably be made safe from future flooding and to enhance flood protection of adjoining lands while preserving or enhancing the wildlife value of the property.

The Santa Clara River Trustee Council, established as a result of an oil spill settlement, will contribute $3,000,000. The Wildlife Conservation Board has approved in concept a grant of $2,250,000 for this project. The Fish and Wildlife Service awarded a Section 6 Endangered Species grant.

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

On October 26, 2000, the Conservancy adopted the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan pursuant to its authority under Division 21 of the Public Resources Code; in particular Chapter 6 (Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270), and authorized funding for the initial acquisition of property necessary to establish a continuous river corridor along the Santa Clara River (see Exhibit 1). The proposed authorization would continue that effort consistent with the Plan and with goals, objectives and authorities of Chapter 6 and as such, this authorization remains consistent with the Conservancy's October 26, 2000 authorization.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective G**, the project will acquire approximately one and one half miles of riverfront property that may ultimately be used to develop a river parkway trail to connect inland populations to the coast.

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective A**, the project will acquire approximately 250 acres of significant coastal resource properties for conservation of natural communities and scenic and recreational resources. As shown on Exhibit 2, these acquisitions are connected to other protected lands and are strategically important to complete the Santa Clara River Parkway.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective C**, the project will preserve wildlife corridors along the Santa Clara River.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective B** the proposed project will preserve property to help implement a river parkway.

**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 June 4, 2009, 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 above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by the Friends of the Santa Clara River, Audubon California, Heal The Bay, and the Ventura Hillsides Conservancy.
4. **Location:** The project advances the objectives of planning for and restoring the natural resources of a coastal watershed. The project area is inside and outside the coastal zone but will have direct beneficial impacts on the river's coastal resources.
5. **Need:** The Santa Clara River Parkway project is a project conceived, organized, and lead by the Conservancy since 1999.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Santa Clara River Parkway will help with the recovery of numerous federal and state listed species.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The acquired properties may be affected by sea level rise and are expected to readily absorb any increased flooding. The Conservancy's hydrology consultants are modeling sea level rise at the Santa Clara River estuary, including two dimensional flood hydrographs, to have a better understanding of the flooding as the river's floodwaters meet higher sea levels under expected scenarios.

**Additional Criteria:**

8. **Urgency:** There are 28 species of special concern on the Santa Clara River. Much of the habitat along the river has either been converted to other uses or is degraded due to flooding and pollution. Agricultural lands along the river, among the most productive in the nation, are endangered by severe flooding that is increasing due to development. Newhall Land and Farming recently received development approvals for approximately 6,000 acres of its 12,000-acre holdings in Los Angeles County. Newhall owns 15,000 acres in Ventura County downstream from its current development and is considering future development of these lands along the Santa Clara River**.**
9. **Resolution of more than one issue**: The project will help resolve several issues including flood management, habitat loss, sedimentation, erosion, water quality impairments, water supply and recreation.
10. **Leverage**: See the "Project Financing" section above.

11. **Conflict Resolution**: The Santa Clara River, like many other rivers in California, has been the scene of historic conflicts over endangered species, sand and gravel mining, channelization and confinement of the river through levee development, and many other land use issues such as development. In particular, acquisition and restoration of the floodplain ensures preservation of fish and other species while at the same time relieving flooding.

12. **Innovation**: The Santa Clara River Parkway provides an acquisition and public land management solution for a threatened river that previously relied on the traditional welter of overlapping regulations and costly, contradictory public works expenditures that resulted in increasing flood damage to public infrastructure and habitat damage on private property. By providing a more self- sustaining natural system, the Santa Clara River Parkway will reduce public and private expenditures in the future. Acquisition will also allow for a continuous recreation trail the length of the river.

13. **Readiness**: The Nature Conservancy has negotiated option agreements and letters of intent that will expedite acquisition of these properties. The Conservancy and The Nature Conservancy in partnership already acquired many properties on the river.

14. **Realization of Conservancy Goals**: See "Project History" section above.

17. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise**: The Santa Clara River Parkway project is designed to allow the river access to its former floodplain so that the extreme precipitation and flooding events typical of the river are accommodated naturally and to provide a continuous corridor for migration of species up or downstream or to different elevations as necessitated by changing conditions. By expanding the active floodplain and restoring riparian functions, the project will reduce anthropogenic stresses to all species and provide refugia essential to the survival and recovery of steelhead.

## CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project remains consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act and the Local Coastal Programs, as determined in the Conservancy's October 26, 2000 approval of the Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan.

## COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Acquisition of the properties pursuant to the Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan is categorically exempt under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because the transfer of ownership or interest in land is for the purpose of preserving open space (14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15325) and for wildlife conservation purposes (14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15313). Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.