

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

December 2, 2004

**SAN DIEGO NCCP PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION:  
MONTE VISTA RANCH**

File No. 03-137

Project Manager: Marc Beyeler

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$9,700,000 to complete the acquisition of Monte Vista Ranch property in the San Diego River watershed, in order to implement the San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Plan (MSCP), as part of the state's Natural Communities Conservation Planning (NCCP) Program.

**LOCATION:** Southwestern San Diego County; San Diego River watershed (Exhibit 1)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Location Map

Exhibit 2: Site Photos

Exhibit 3: Wildlife Conservation Board Letter

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following Resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed nine million seven hundred thousand dollars (\$9,700,000) to the Nature Conservancy for acquisition of the Monte Vista Ranch property described the accompanying staff recommendation to implement the Multiple Species Conservation Program, as part of California's Natural Communities Conservation Planning (NCCP) program, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any funds, the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“Executive Officer”) shall review and approve all relevant acquisition documents, including but not limited to an appraisal, agreement of purchase and sale and documents of title.
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2. Conservancy funds may be used to fund acquisition of the first portion of a phased acquisition if the Executive Officer determines that the acquisition of the first phase alone will accomplish significant protections under the MSCP; that the Nature Conservancy has adequately secured opportunities to acquire the remaining property interests; and that all other funds necessary to carry out the first phase acquisition have been secured.
3. The Nature Conservancy shall pay no more than fair market value for the property as established in an appraisal approved by the California Department of General Services.
4. The Nature Conservancy shall dedicate the property for wildlife habitat preservation, restoration and management, wildlife-oriented education and research, and compatible public uses, consistent with wildlife habitat preservation, in a manner acceptable to the Executive Officer and consistent with Public Resources Code Section 3116(b).
5. Conservancy and Wildlife Conservation Board/Department of Fish and Game funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property, the design and location of which has been reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer.
6. All funds disbursed for this acquisition shall be paid from the Wildlife Conservation Board's NCCP grant to the Conservancy."

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 acquisition is consistent with its authority under Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270 regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The Nature Conservancy is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and 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 \$9,700,000 to complete acquisition of Monte Vista Ranch property within the San Diego River watershed to implement the state's NCCP Program, through the implementation of the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) within San Diego County. Monte Vista Ranch is in the foothills of the San Diego River watershed, several miles south of the town of Ramona (Exhibit 1). Monte Vista Ranch has been recommended for acquisition by the staff of the Wildlife Conservation Board, the Department of Fish and Game and the NCCP Managers (Exhibit 3).

Monte Vista Ranch is one of the largest single parcels available for purchase within the rural lands of the San Diego River watershed and the largest parcel available for purchase within the Core Biological Area of the MSCP. The proposed acquisition of the Monte Vista Ranch would protect approximately 4,400 acres (Exhibit 2). Due to its mosaic of high quality riparian, coastal

sage scrub, grassland and woodland habitat, the ranch is within the core biological area of the MSCP, and would be a critical addition to the MSCP. Among the important habitats located on the ranchlands are Southern Coast Live Oak Riparian Forest, Southern Mixed Chaparral, Diegan Coastal Sage Scrub, Coastal Sage/Chaparral Scrub, and Southern Cottonwood-Willow Riparian Forest.

The ranchlands contain high quality willow habitat, as well as good quality riparian habitat with willows, dense groves of coast live oak, stretches of Mule Fat Scrub, and many large Sycamores. The Ranch is bisected by San Vicente Creek, a drainage to the San Diego River. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) would acquire 4058 acres in fee and a conservation easement over the remaining 390 acres, which includes an existing ranch compound that the seller will retain. This authorization would provide for use of WCB funds to purchase all or a portion of the fee area in a phased transaction. The property will be transferred to the County of San Diego for management after it has been acquired by TNC.

The City of San Diego's MSCP is one of the most important regional plans which make up the State of California's NCCP Program. Since 1998 the Conservancy has been an active partner in implementing the NCCP program in the coastal areas of San Diego and Orange counties, including the MSCP. The NCCP program is a cooperative effort to protect habitats and species. The program, began in 1991 under the state's Natural Communities Conservation Planning Act, is intended to conserve natural communities at the ecosystem scale while accommodating compatible land uses.

In June 2003, the Coastal Conservancy and the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) entered into an Interagency Agreement (IAA) in a cooperative effort to facilitate the acquisition of real properties as part of the state's NCCP Program, whereby the WCB granted approximately \$36 million to the Coastal Conservancy, to be used in the acquisition of properties located within an NCCP as approved by DFG.

All property acquired pursuant to the IAA and this authorization will be acquired, held, used, and managed for the purposes of wildlife habitat preservation, restoration and management, wildlife-oriented education and research, and compatible public uses, consistent with wildlife habitat preservation, in order to enhance the natural and scenic character of coastal watersheds and their resources.

**Site Description:** The Multiple Species Conservation Planning area of southwestern San Diego County includes the most ecologically significant watersheds in San Diego County, including the San Diego River watershed. The City of San Diego is the lead agency in establishing the 172,000-acre MSCP preserve in southwestern San Diego County.

The San Diego River watershed is an important part of the region's MSCP. The portion of the river watershed that contains the subject property to be acquired as part of this staff recommendation is within the Core Biological Areas and Corridors of the MSCP. Monte Vista Ranch is the largest parcel available for purchase within the Core Biological Area of the MSCP. Among the important habitats located on the ranchlands are Southern Coast Live Oak Riparian Forest, Southern Mixed Chaparral, Diegan Coastal Sage Scrub, Coastal Sage/Chaparral Scrub, and Southern Cottonwood-Willow Riparian Forest.

**Project History:** Since 1998 the Conservancy has been assisting local, regional, state, and federal agencies in the implementation of the MSCP, as part of the state's NCCP program. Between

1998 and 2000, the Conservancy received \$10 million to implement the MSCP. Using these and other funds granted to it, including River Parkway monies, the Conservancy has approved the expenditure of funds for property acquisition within the San Diego River watershed. Since 2000 the Conservancy has been a partner and funder in establishing a River Parkway in the San Diego River watershed.

Currently, the Coastal Conservancy is a project partner, and/or project funder, in several important coastal resource protection projects in the San Diego River watershed, including the eradication of non-native invasive plant species, the restoration and enhancement of coastal wetlands, riparian habitat restoration, and the provision of public access and recreational facilities. The acquisition of the Monte Vista Ranch as part of the implementation of the San Diego MSCP would contribute to the realization of several long-standing habitat and coastal resource protection goals of the Coastal Conservancy.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

WCB/NCCP-Monte Vista Ranch:	\$9,700,000
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No Conservancy funds are being requested as part of the proposed authorization. The Monte Vista Ranch acquisition will utilize funds granted to the Conservancy by the WCB for NCCP implementation projects. Acquisition of coastal draining watershed land in the San Diego River watershed to protect coastal natural resources and implement the state’s NCCP is consistent with the purposes and requirements of this grant. The total acquisition costs are estimated to be \$17.4 million dollars. Other funds for property acquisition are proposed to come from a variety of sources including funds from the Nature Conservancy, the County of San Diego, and from grant sources including Props 12 and 50. TNC is currently finalizing a purchase agreement allowing for a phased acquisition, where the first phase would be acquired using the proposed WCB/NCCP funds.

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

Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) provides for the Conservancy’s participation in a program of coastal resource enhancement. The proposed authorization would facilitate the preservation of significant coastal natural resources. Pursuant to section 31251, the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the assembly of parcels of land within coastal resource enhancement areas to improve resource management and for other corrective measures that will enhance the natural and scenic character of the areas. The Monte Vista Ranch has been identified in the Department of Fish and Game’s Conceptual Area Protection Plan for the Iron Mountain area, and the County of San Diego’s MSCP as high priority for acquisition. Consistent with section 31251.2, the Conservancy may award grants to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside the coastal zone. Protecting coastal resources along the San Diego River and its tributary San Vicente Creek is essential to ensuring the sustainability of the riparian ecosystems of the San Diego River. Loss of upstream habitat to urban development in the watershed will adversely affect water quality and aquatic ecosystem health within coastal area of the larger watershed. Minimizing the loss of natural resources within the core biological area of the MSCP will help protect the health and

function of important coastal natural resources, including important coastal sage scrub and riparian forest habitats.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:**

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A**, the proposed project will increase Coastal Resource Conservation by the acquisition of coastal-draining watershed lands that will protect, restore, and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas. Objective A directs staff to preserve, restore, and enhance important coastal habitats including coastal stream corridors, coastal sage scrub, and oak woodlands. The proposed project contains significant natural resources.

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective B**, the proposed project will increase Coastal Resource Conservation by the acquisition of coastal-draining watershed lands that will protect, restore, and enhance habitat corridors both between core habitat areas along the coast and from coastal habitats to inland habitat areas. The proposed project provides essential habitat lands linking habitat corridors within the larger MSCP area.

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objective A**, proposed project will improve water quality, habitat, and related coastal habitats within priority coastal watersheds, developing projects that preserve and restore coastal watersheds and create river parkways.

**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" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the Public:** The proposed project has widespread community and agency support. The NCCP program has multiple agency involvement, including federal, state, regional, and local.
4. **Location:** Located in the upper portion of a priority coastal watershed, acquisition of this property for purposes of open space and natural resource protection is essential to contribute to the restoration and enhancement of significant coastal resources, including riparian and watershed resources.
5. **Greater-Than-Local Interest:** The location of the property within a priority watershed is significant both locally and statewide. Significant public land holdings are either adjacent to, or near the proposed acquisition.

**Additional Criteria**

6. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will address coastal resource protection, habitat quality and species protection, water quality, and watershed resource protection. The proposed acquisition will eliminate further urban development in the area, preserving essential coastal habitats and minimizing additional polluted runoff.
7. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above. The proposed funding in this authorization will be matched by a nearly equal amount of additional funding to complete acquisition of the entire Ranch holdings.
8. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the “Project History” section above.
9. **Cooperation:** The proposed project involves the cooperation of state, local, regional, and federal agencies, as well as interested stakeholders and members of the general public. The acquisition is supported by the many cooperating agencies involved in implementing the NCCP/MSCP. The NCCP Managers Group supported the acquisition at its meeting of June 2004.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The project is categorically exempt from the provisions of California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Sections 15325 and 15313, which apply to transfers of ownership of interests in land to preserve open space or plant and animal habitat and to preserve public access. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.