

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 25, 2021

MATILIJA DAM ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION PROJECT: CAMINO CIELO BRIDGE DESIGN

Project No. 99-099-05

Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$734,730 to the County of Ventura to conduct planning and to prepare designs and environmental documentation for the replacement of the Camino Cielo Bridge over the Ventura River in unincorporated Ventura County.

LOCATION: Camino Cielo, Unincorporated Ventura County

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 seven hundred thirty-four thousand seven hundred and thirty dollars (\$734,730) to the County of Ventura ("the grantee") to conduct planning and to prepare designs and environmental documentation for the replacement of the Camino Cielo Bridge over the Ventura River 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 completing the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.

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 and regarding restoration of fish and wildlife habitat in coastal watersheds (Section 31220).
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$734,730 grant to the County of Ventura to conduct planning and to prepare designs and environmental documentation for the replacement of the Camino Cielo Bridge over the Ventura River in unincorporated Ventura County. The Camino Cielo Bridge Design Project (project) will develop up to 70 percent design plans, specifications and estimates and environmental documentation for construction of a new bridge to replace the existing low-flow river crossing constructed with multiple concrete box culverts.

The Camino Cielo Bridge, downstream of Matilija Dam, is a key component of the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project (MDERP). The release of sediment following the removal of Matilija Dam is expected to result in significant aggradation in the reaches directly below the dam. This aggradation will likely bury the current Camino Cielo crossing, making replacement a critical component of MDERP. Currently, the Camino Cielo road crossing, which consists of a set of concrete box culverts, requires repair and maintenance following each major storm event to restore access to adjacent properties. The new bridge project is requisite to manage increased sediment flows following the removal of Matilija Dam. The new bridge will be designed to resolve multiple issues. It will lessen current and future concerns with increased sediment transport (pre- and post-dam removal), enhance steelhead migration through the Camino Cielo reach, avoid the current need for instream repairs and maintenance after major storm events, and provide unimpeded access to existing residences south of the Ventura River.

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 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

Project 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 the project will build upon that previous investment, including the 2008 Conservancy funding of conceptual designs for the bridge replacement at Camino Cielo.

The tasks involved with the proposed project will include: surveying and base maps; public outreach; technical studies; utility coordination; design development for the 70 percent design; and preparation of CEQA documentation. Final design and permitting will be completed in a subsequent phase. MDERP partners have identified multiple potential sources for final design, permitting and subsequent implementation funding upon the completion of the current MDERP planning project and this proposed project.

Public outreach has been an important component of the MDERP planning and specifically the Camino Cielo Bridge Design. A public meeting was held which included residents of the Camino Cielo neighborhood and others who would be most directly affected by the location and design of the replacement bridge. This meeting informed the neighborhood and others of the preferred replacement of the bridge at its current location. Final site selection for the replacement bridge will depend on adjacent property owners, anticipated flood risks and other factors, and will be determined in part through the proposed project and finalized after further public outreach in the final design phase.

Site Description: The Camino Cielo Bridge is located at the intersection of Highway 33 and Camino Cielo in the Upper Ventura River Watershed. This 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 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.

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. Construction of the new Camino Cielo Bridge will allow terrestrial wildlife safer passage in the area by removing the threat posed by vehicles crossing the current low water crossing.

The primary species to benefit from the future replacement of the Camino Cielo Bridge 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*). The federally threatened California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*) uses the river for winter movement among perennially wet habitats; and the project will benefit other native fishes and amphibians, such as Arroyo chub (*Gila Orcutt*), Stickleback (*Gasterosteus* spp.), and Pacific tree frog (*Pseudacris regilla*).

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Ventura County is the owner and operator of the Camino Cielo crossing and will be the owner and operator of the replacement bridge. Watershed Protection has been engaged in the greater MDERP for over two decades and is currently engaged in the Santa Ana Bridge Replacement project, also a downstream component of MDERP and designed with funding from the Conservancy. The Conservancy has a long history of partnering with Watershed Protection.

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 October 2, 2014, 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 below.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section below.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:** The proposed project is consistent with the following state plans and policies promoting global climate change resilience and adaptation in watershed management:
 - a. The proposed project will implement the **California Water Action Plan** (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2016) by protecting and restoring important ecosystems (Action 4.) Fish passage remediation will restore access to additional critical steelhead habitat. There will be instream design improvements that further enhance instream habitat conditions for steelhead, as well as restore natural sediment transport.
 - b. The proposed project will implement the **California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report** (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2016) by protecting natural landscapes and specifically enhancing a migration corridor. The project will prioritize watershed protection and health in ecosystem management (subgoal 5) by enhancing instream habitat and access for steelhead as well as providing safe and reliable access for residents.
 - c. The proposed project will implement the **Safeguarding California Plan - 2018 Update** (CA Natural Resources Agency, January 2018) by enhancing habitat connectivity (Strategy B2), and by supporting ecosystem level projects to restore coastal habitats and natural physical and ecological processes (Strategy O2.5.)

- d. The proposed project is consistent with the **California Wildlife Action Plan** (CDFW, 2015) because it will Enhance and protect key spawning and rearing habitat for ... anadromous species; ... Promote restoration actions that focus on ecological processes and climate change resilience (e.g., removing barriers to migration, expanding riparian corridors); . . . [and] Remediate most downstream barriers to steelhead entering rivers and streams (Chapter 6 – Anadromous Fish.)
 - e. The proposed project is consistent with **the Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan** (NMFS 2012) and the **Steelhead Restoration and Management Plan** (CDFW 1996) because it will provide safe and reliable fish passage.
 - f. The proposed project is consistent with the **California Water Resilience Portfolio** (CA Natural Resources Agency, CalEPA, CDFA, 2020) by supporting a comprehensive culvert and fish passage improvement program (10.2), and by contributing to developing a process for removal of aging or obsolete dams (10.3.)
- 4. **Support of the public:** The proposed project enjoys broad support including support Senator Monique Limon, Assemblyman Steve Bennett, Resources Legacy Fund, Ventura Land Trust, Pew Charitable Trusts, California Trout, Surfrider Foundation/Matilija Coalition, Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, Patagonia and the Ventura River Watershed Council. See Exhibit 3 for project letters.
 - 5. **Location:** See the “Project Summary”.
 - 6. **Need:** The County of Ventura has been successful with funding applications for other components of design and implementation of the greater project. Conservancy funding of the proposed project is needed to leverage significant other state funding and local staff time.
 - 7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project is a component of the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project which will significantly expand habitat for the federally endangered southern California steelhead.
 - 8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project is approximately 16 river miles from the ocean and is not vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

- 9. **Urgency:** The Camino Cielo crossing currently creates maintenance issues after larger storm events. These impacts also may create temporal passage issues for steelhead. These issues will continue until corrected.
- 10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will plan for safe and reliable passage now and in the future for the federally endangered southern California steelhead upstream of the Camino Cielo crossing as well as a safe and reliable river crossing for local residents.
- 11. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section below.

12. **Readiness:** The Camino Cielo Design Project will follow an ongoing phase or preliminary design. Project approval will allow a seamless transition to the proposed phase.

13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See Project Summary.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$734,730
Project Total	\$734,730

The expected source of Conservancy funds for the proposed project is the 2018 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. (See 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 replace the Camino Cielo Bridge, 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 the purpose of 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 restoration 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 the 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 a monitoring and 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 will develop a plan enhance coastal watersheds and improve fish passage.

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;
- Protect, restore and enhance existing wetlands and waterbodies.

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, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.