

DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION BOARD

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State of California
The Resources Agency
Department of Fish and Game
WILDLIFE CONSERVATION BOARD

Minutes
September 30, 2003

The Wildlife Conservation Board met on Wednesday, September 30, 2003, in Room 4203 of the State Capitol in Sacramento, California. The meeting was called to order at 10:00 A.M. by Chairman Michael Flores. Mr. Flores introduced the Board Members and then turned over the meeting to Mr. Al Wright, Executive Director of the Board.

1. Roll Call

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION BOARD MEMBERS

Michael Flores, Chairperson
President, Fish and Game Commission
Fred Klass, Program Budget Manager
Vice, Steve Peace, Member
Director, Department of Finance
Robert C. Hight, Member
Director, Department of Fish and Game

JOINT LEGISLATIVE INTERIM ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Assembly Member Patty Berg
Kristin Stauffacher,
Vice, Senator Michael J. Machado
Jeff Arthur,
Vice, Assembly Member Hannah-Beth Jackson
Debra Gravert,
Vice, Assembly Member Fran Pavley

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Al Wright

It was moved by Mr. Robert Hight that the Board approve the acquisition of Area A, B Residential and Ballona Wetlands Parcel as proposed; allocate \$140,000,000.00 from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Fund of 2002 (Prop. 50), Section 79572(b) to cover acquisition and project expenses; authorize acceptance of any and all interests in Area C, the freshwater marsh, and the expanded wetland parcel, as appropriate; authorize transfer of the property to the appropriate managing entity as identified at the end of the restoration planning process; authorize staff to enter into appropriate agreements as necessary to accomplish this project; and authorize staff and the Department of Fish and Game to proceed substantially as planned.

Motion carried.

Mr. Wright expressed appreciation to the many people who worked on this project.

3. Ahmanson Ranch, Ventura County \$135,000,000.00

Mr. Wright reported that this was a proposal to consider the allocation of a grant to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC) to assist in the cooperatively funded acquisition of 2,958.76± acres of land for the protection of wildlife habitat and corridors to promote the recovery of rare and sensitive species. Other partners in this project include the State Coastal Conservancy (SCC) and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), a Joint Powers Authority. The property is located on the southern facing slopes of the Simi Hills, at the easternmost edge of Ventura County, just north of Calabasas. Mr. Dave Means described the project and its location.

The SMMC is seeking to acquire the property to expand protection of critical habitat within the Simi Hills and maintain habitat corridors with other adjoining mountain ranges and ecosystems. This includes the protection and restoration of sensitive and declining plant communities, protection of the Malibu Creek watershed (a coastal stream) and to provide accessible open space parkland opportunities for the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area.

The Simi Hills run 16± miles east to west, bounded by the 23 Freeway and Thousand Oaks on the west, the San Fernando Valley on the east, the 101 Freeway to the south and the 118 Freeway to the north. The hills are situated in the middle of a series of mountain ranges running east to west in southern California, containing Mediterranean type ecosystems. To the north are the Santa Susana and Big Mountains. These two ranges essentially merge together to form one range of mountains that extends east to west, 20± miles between Moorpark on the west and Santa Clarita on the east. North of this range are larger national forest areas, including the Los Padres National Forest and the Angeles National Forest, located within the San Gabriel Mountains. Running parallel and south of

the Simi Hills are the Santa Monica Mountains, coastal mountains that extend east to west, 40± miles between the Oxnard plain on the east and Hollywood on the west, with southerly slopes extending down to the Pacific Ocean coastline.

The location of the Simi Hills provides critical habitat linkage that allows migration of species back and forth between the coastal ranges, up into the larger national forest areas to the north and east. In 1989 the National Park Service commissioned a study that concluded the existing sub-populations of many of the larger mammals in these coastal ranges were too small to be self-sustaining. The linkages provided by the Simi Hills allow for the migration and replenishment of mammals between the different ranges. Without these linkages, the species, especially in the Santa Monica Range, could become isolated and suffer detrimental effects in terms of health and numbers. Adding to this potential impact is the fact that most of the areas separating the Simi Hills from the other two ranges are already developed and separated by major roads and freeway improvements.

As part of this acquisition the SMMC will also obtain rights to an open space easement encumbering Crummer Canyon that abuts the southeast corner of Ahmanson Ranch and extends approximately one mile south to the 101 Freeway. Crummer Canyon is one of the only two existing protected habitat corridors remaining between the Simi Hills and the Santa Monica Mountains. Eventually a habitat underpass (tunnel) will need to be constructed under the 101 Freeway in order to link up with the Las Virgenes View park open space, located on the south side of the freeway. From here the open space connects with the Malibu Creek State Park and the Malibu Creek watershed, a protected wildlife corridor that extends out to the Pacific Ocean.

Other public held open space within the Simi Hills includes the Santa Susana Pass Historical Park; the 625 acre Sage Ranch; the 2,566 acre Las Virgenes Canyon open space abutting the eastern boundary of the Ahmanson Ranch; the 300 acre Liberty Canyon North Open Space, that also provides the only other protected corridor link between the Simi Hills and the Santa Monica Mountains; the 1,792 acre Cheeseboro Canyon located west of the Las Virgenes Canyon; and the 2,308 acre Palo Comado Canyon National Park. Located in the western portions of the Simi Hills are a combination of county and MRCA open space areas managed by the Conejo Open Space Conservation Agency, encompassing approximately 15,000 acres.

In addition to protecting critical linkages, Ahmanson Ranch will also expand core habitat areas within the Simi Hills. By abutting and linking with the Las Virgenes Canyon open space, the majority of the Las Virgenes Creek watershed, a major tributary of Malibu Creek, will be protected.

The topography of Ahmanson Ranch ranges from the relatively flat Laskey Mesa, to gentle slopes and rolling hills, to the rugged rock lands at the northern boundary

of the property. East Las Virgenes Creek flows east to west through the center of the property connecting to the main fork of the Las Virgenes Creek that makes up the western border of the property.

For most of its history the property has been used as ranch. As a result, there is still an abundance of native habitat and wildlife found on the property. Habitat types include valley oak savannah, coastal sage scrub, chaparral, riparian woodland, California walnut woodland, southern willow riparian vegetation and native bunch grasses and grasslands. Wildlife includes a high level of both common and rare species. Listed species of note include the red-legged frog, San Fernando spineflower and the southwestern willow flycatcher. The population of red-legged frogs found on the property is thought to be one of the last remaining viable populations of the federally listed red-legged frog in Southern California; the extremely rare San Fernando Valley spineflower, discovered in 1999 by consultants on the ranch was thought to be extinct at one time and was last observed in the area in 1929; and the southwestern willow flycatcher observed on the property, is both a State and federally listed bird.

The Ahmanson Ranch is also part of the historical range of the California condor and the southern steelhead. It is hoped that preservation of the property will lead to reestablishment of these species on site. Other sensitive species and wildlife found on the property include the loggerhead shrike, two-striped garter snake, American Badger, southern California rufous-crowned sparrow and the yellow warbler. Fifteen species of raptors have been observed on the ranch, nine of which are considered sensitive by the State. Bats use the property for foraging, including the three sensitive listed species. Large mammals include the mountain lion, mule deer, bobcat, coyote, long-tailed weasel, raccoon and ringtail cat. The ranch also supports a full compliment of reptile, rodent and bird species.

Approval of the Ahmanson Ranch development was conditioned on the transfer to MRCA of approximately 7,316 acres of land offsite and 2,633 acres of what was once the western portion of the ranch for parkland, for a total of 9,949 acres which has been completed.

The property has been appraised and the value has been approved by the Department of General Services (DGS) at \$170,000,000.00. The purchase price as negotiated is \$150,000,000.00. The WCB will fund \$135,000,000.00 toward the purchase price, with the remaining \$15,000,000.00 funded by the SCC and the SMMC. The transaction and transfer of the property will involve two purchase agreements. The first is a purchase agreement between the MRCA and the current owners. Immediately after this transaction has been completed, the MRCA will transfer and sell the property to the SMMC. Because the transaction between the SMMC and MRCA requires the Public Works Board (PWB) approval, disbursement of WCB funds will be conditioned on approval by the PWB, scheduled to occur subsequent to WCB approval.

For management purposes, title to the property will be transferred to SMMC. Management objectives include: 1) protection of core habitat and wildlife corridors; 2) protections and restoration of sensitive and declining plant communities; 3) protection of listed and sensitive species; 4) nature education and interpretation uses, including the possible conversion of a residence on the property to a nature interpretation center; 5) protection of coastal stream watershed; and 6) public use for low impact recreation, including hiking, biking and nature-related studies.

The terms and conditions of the proposed grant require the PWB approval, as mentioned above, and provide that staff review and approve all documents pertaining to the Grantee's acquisition, including any appraisals, preliminary title reports, entitlements on the property, property and tax assessments, agreements for purchase or sale, escrow instructions and the instruments of conveyance prior to disbursement of funds.

The proposed acquisition is exempt from California Environmental Quality Act requirements under Section 15313, Class 13 as the acquisition of land for wildlife conservation purposes and under Section 15325, Class 25 as the transfer of ownership in land to preserve open space, habitat or historical resources. Subject to approval by the Board, the appropriate Notice of Exemption will be filed with the State Clearinghouse.

Mr. Wright reported that the Board received several letters of support from Senator Sheila Kuehl; Assembly member Fran Pavley; Assembly member Hannah-Beth Jackson; Zev Yaroslavsky, Los Angeles County Third District Supervisor; Frances Alet, President, Malibu Canyon Community Association; David Brown, Conservation Chair, Santa Monica Mountains Sierra Club; Phillip Rundell, UCLA Professor; Eugene Jones, Cal State Fullerton; Richard Ambros, UCLA; Jim Edmonson, Southern California Steelhead Coalition and approximately thirty letters from citizens, one of those letters contained 20 signatures.

Mr. Means reported that Ms. Linda Parks, Ventura County Second District Supervisor, was in the audience, also staff from the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, including Executive Director Joe Edmiston, Deputy Director Rorie Skei and Staff Counsel Laurie Collins should there be any questions.

Supervisor Parks addressed the Board and, as a member of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy as well as the Ventura County Transportation Commission and the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, expressed appreciation for this acquisition. She stated that from the point of view of the SMMC, she felt this acquisition was a great deal. As a member of the Ventura County Transportation Commission, she stated that this acquisition is less expensive than having to put extra lanes on the 101 Freeway and it will save the commuters of that region. She pointed out that the acquisition of the Ahmanson Ranch is supported by the major and minor environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, Save Open Space, Rally to Save Ahmanson Ranch, Heal the Bay and others, the legislators who

represent the area, the cities of Thousand Oaks, Agoura Hills, Westlake Village, Malibu, Los Angeles, Calabasas, as well as the County of Los Angeles. She commented that we are very fortunate to save a large expanse of open space in the middle of a major metropolitan area and that the voters intended for Prop 50 funds to be spent in this type of acquisition. She also pointed out that the Board members might look back on this vote with pride and that this is one of the most important votes they could make. She again expressed appreciation for the Board's support.

Mr. Joe Edmiston, Executive Director of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, expressed appreciation to the Board and Executive Director Wright for their work on this project, and stated that final approval for this acquisition lies with the Public Works Board at its regularly scheduled meeting. He stated that the appraisal and agreements have been reviewed by numerous people. Mr. Edmiston commented that it is appropriate that we deal with Prop 50, because the proposition requires the funds to be used in close proximity to urban areas of high resource value. He stated there is no other property, with the exception of Ballona Wetlands, in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, which better meets the criteria and there are no other willing sellers of as significant a property in Los Angeles and Ventura counties. Therefore, all the criteria are combined in this one property. He stated that the last acquisition approved by the Public Works Board for the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy was an area in Glendale for \$70,000 per acre and stated that the Ahmanson Ranch area is a much higher value community, the market is red hot and that we're considering about \$50,000 per acre for this acquisition.

Mr. Flores requested clarification regarding public access to the project area. Mr. Edmiston explained that there are two roads that access the property, there is a trailhead at the end of Los Virgenes that serves the current open space that was dedicated that will also serve as the principal trailhead into the property and all they have to do is cut off the no trespassing sign that Ahmanson has on it and the property is open. Mr. Edmiston stated there will have to be a management plan because of the sensitive and endangered species on site, with public input and a ranger will move onto the property to guide the public and make sure there is public access but also public access that also protects the sensitive resources. Mr. Edmiston stated they are ready to open it to the public because the SMMC already manages the adjacent property.

Mr. Metropulos, representing Sierra Club California, stated the Sierra Club supports the recommendation of staff to approve the purchase of Ahmanson Ranch, which will complete protection of a unique block of core habitat but it will also be an important step in completing a habitat linkage that will connect wildlife populations and protected lands in the Santa Monica Mountains to the south, to wild lands in the Santa Susanna and the San Gabriel Mountains to the north, in addition to a critical part of the upper watershed of Malibu Creek which is one of the largest protected coastal streams south of Big Sur. He stated that Lower Malibu Creek is

within Malibu Creek and supports the southernmost run of the endangered southern steelhead and Malibu Laguna at its mouth is the last remaining lagoon in Los Angeles. Protection of Ahmanson Ranch will provide watershed protection to these unique wetland and riparian resources downstream.

Ms. Marsha Hanscom, Executive Director of the Wetlands Action Network, addressed the Board and expressed appreciation for those involved in this project. She stated that the headwaters for the Los Angeles River is located on this property, which created the estuary Ballona Creek and Ballona Wetlands. She wanted to honor those activists who have worked hard in promoting this proposal. She also thanked the Governor for recognizing the importance of the linkages in this area.

Ms. Victoria Rhome, representing the Natural Resources Defense Council, addressed the Board and stated they are very concerned about environmental degradation that could occur in this area if Ahmanson Ranch were to be developed and therefore, were in strong support of the proposal.

Mr. Flores requested clarification from Mr. Edmiston regarding plans for environmental education, particularly for children, on the property. Mr. Edmiston explained that Mr. Howard Ahmanson had a beautiful vacation home on this property and that will be turned into an education center. Mr. Edmiston reported that there are plans in the works for a permanent endowment to make sure there is money for children all over Southern California, particularly from the heavily impacted urban core, to visit this property. He stated they have an existing program called The Recreational Transit Program, that brings children from the inner city to all of the parks within the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and that will include this property.

Ms. Debra Gravert, representing Assembly member Fran Pavley, read a statement from the Assembly member strongly supporting this project. (See Attachment G)

Mr. John Tommy Rosas stated that the Native American group feels they should have been consulted regarding this project. He stated he is familiar with this land and that the land is shared by the Chumash and their people and that many of the Native American sites on the property are theirs. He stated they have concerns because there was no consultation and they were not involved with the process. At this time he also addressed that Board in support of agenda item 5 regarding Grizzly Creek.

Mr. Jeff Arthur, representing Assembly member Hannah-Beth Jackson, whose district includes parts of Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, read a statement from the Assembly member strongly supporting this acquisition. (See Attachment H)

Staff recommended that the Board approve this project as proposed; allocate \$135,000,000.00 from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Fund of 2002 [\$580,000.00 from Section 79572(a) and \$134,420,000.00 from Section 79572(b)] to fund the grant amount; authorize staff to enter into appropriate agreements as necessary to accomplish this project; and authorize staff and the Department of Fish and Game to proceed substantially as planned.

It was moved by Mr. Fred Klass that the Board approve this project as proposed; allocate \$135,000,000.00 from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Fund of 2002 [\$580,000.00 from Section 79572(a) and \$134,420,000.00 from Section 79572(b)] to fund the grant amount; authorize staff to enter into appropriate agreements as necessary to accomplish this project; and authorize staff and the Department of Fish and Game to proceed substantially as planned.

Motion carried.

4. Salton Sea Habitat Planning and Restoration Project, \$20,000,135.00
Imperial and Riverside Counties

Mr. Wright reported that this proposal was to consider a cooperative project with the Department of Water Resources (DWR) to develop feasibility studies and restoration options for the restoration of the Salton Sea. The sea is located in the southeast corner of California in Riverside and Imperial Counties. Mr. Scott Clemons described the project and its location.

The Salton Sea was created by accident nearly 100 years ago when water diversion dikes inadequately built along the Colorado River collapsed during a flood. For about a year and a half the Colorado River, flooding the channel now occupied by the New River, emptied into the ancient Salton Basin before finally being brought under control and redirected into Imperial Valley irrigation canals or down to the Gulf of Mexico. This accidental flood created what is now California's largest lake, based on surface area.

The Salton Sea is a desert lake with no outlet, with agricultural runoff from diversions from the Colorado River as its primary source of inflow. This runoff has been sufficient to maintain the sea's water level over the years. The sea's salinity has been increasing since its creation, due to concentration of salts through evaporation. Although its present salinity is about 25 percent saltier than ocean water, the sea supports a highly productive fishery and more than 400 species of resident and migratory birds. The endangered desert pupfish is the only native fish species in the sea. Introduced fish species, dominantly tilapia, Gulf croaker, orangemouth corvina and sargo, sustain an important sport fishery and provide the food base for millions of birds. The sea supports many species, including the endangered brown pelican, and significant populations of eared grebes and