

**WATERSHED PLANNING IN COASTAL SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA:
WHO IS DOING WHAT AND WHERE, AND WHICH ARE THE CRITICAL GAPS THAT
WATERSHED COORDINATORS
HIRED UNDER A PROPOSITION 13 GRANT CAN ADDRESS?¹**

I. REGIONAL OVERVIEW

1. PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE

The State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) awarded Environment Now a Proposition 13 grant, in part, (a) to determine who is doing what and where with regard to watershed planning in each of the five coastal counties of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP) area;² (b) to identify critical planning gaps; and (c) to undertake activities to fill in a select subset of those gaps. The grant allowed for the hiring of watershed coordinators in each of the five counties to perform this work. The watershed coordinators administered a questionnaire,³ surveying key stakeholders in each watershed by phone or in person, to elicit the required information. The coordinators summarized the results of this research in a “Gaps Report” and appended to each a list of stakeholders by watershed.⁴

Each county Gaps Report constitutes a subsequent chapter in this document: Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego. Each chapter is introduced by a map indicating planning activities and an executive summary describing overall findings, gaps and priorities for watershed coordinator action. These findings are supported by a county-wide overview, along with watershed-by-watershed analyses that describe the setting, the watershed organizations, planning activities, gaps, and watershed management priorities. Together, these reports offer a snapshot of the region’s watershed planning environment—where planning is well underway, where efforts are just beginning, and where nothing has yet commenced.

Under the auspices of the WRP, a leading environmental organization and a county supervisor in each of the five counties have joined to co-chair a county-wide WRP Task Force. The task forces engage in the following activities:

- Promote cross-watershed information exchange;
- Develop wetland restoration projects;
- Build a county-wide consensus about priorities for WRP funds;
- Encourage greater commitment to wetlands and watershed protection by local government and the general public; and
- Gather data at the local level for the WRP’s regional planning activities.

¹ The contract between the SWRCB and Environment Now requires the following disclosure in any document prepared pursuant to the contract:

Funding for this project has been provided in full or part through a contract with the State Water Resources Control board (SWRCB) pursuant to the Costa-Machado Water Act of 2000 (Proposition 13) and any amendments thereto for the implementation of California’s Nonpoint Source Pollution Control Program. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the SWRCB, nor does mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation for use.

² The WRP’s geographic scope starts at Point Conception in Santa Barbara County and stretches south to the border with Mexico, including inland areas of the five Southern California coastal counties California that drain to the Pacific.

³ See <ftp://selc@sanelijo.org>; logon dgselc; Database 1 (Deliverable 4.1 under the SWRCB-Environment Now contract).

⁴ Deliverables 4.4 and 4.5 under the SWRCB-Environment Now contract.

The task forces constitute the grassroots base of the WRP—a broad, community based effort supported by seventeen state and federal agencies working in concert with a distinguished Science Panel and Public Advisory Committee.⁵ The watershed coordinators hired under the Proposition 13 grant work for the county environmental organization that co-chairs the task force. They help to staff the operations of the task forces whose members represent different watersheds and interest sectors throughout each county. The gaps identified in each county Gaps Report inform not only the work of the individual watershed coordinators, but also of each task force, and their members as well as the WRP partners.

2. SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

2.1 Setting

The geographic scope of the WRP embraces only one-sixth of Santa Barbara County—a single hydrologic unit comprising 50 to 60 short, steep watersheds, ranging from 2,000 to 13,000 acres. The headwaters typically flow from the Los Padres National Forest to the middle and lower stream reaches which are surrounded by agricultural or urban development. Half of Santa Barbara County's population of 400,000 lives in the area. Water diversions, flood control structures, irrigation with imported water, runoff from impervious surface, stream crossings and barriers have altered the hydrological regimes of many streams. This has resulted in a loss of native species and influx of aggressive exotics, erosion of stream banks and scouring of stream beds, as well as thermal and chemical pollution of the water.

2.2 Watershed Assessment and Planning

Watershed planning in this area is still in its infancy, but has been impelled by three forces. First and foremost is the area's concern for clean water. The importance of beaches to the tourism and recreation industry led the City of Santa Barbara to augment its bed tax as a means to fund water quality improvement activities. While the City has not pursued comprehensive watershed planning, it has conducted an assessment targeting problem areas that will guide expenditure of funds. The County manages Project Clean Water, a coalition of agencies and community organizations working to address stream pollution.

Second is the keen interest in recovery of the southern steelhead trout, a federally listed endangered species. Many of the area's streams were or continue to be prime steelhead habitat; the National Marine Fisheries Service has designated all perennial, intermittent, and ephemeral rivers and creeks in the County as habitat critical to the steelhead's recovery. The Conception Coast Project has just released a sophisticated GIS assessment of steelhead recovery opportunities in the County.

The third major force has been the WRP task force which, when it got underway several years ago, prompted the County Water Agency to begin thinking about watershed planning as the way to integrate concerns about water quality, steelhead recovery, and habitat restoration. Working closely with the task force, the county secured a \$250,000 grant from US EPA to conduct a hydrogeomorphic assessment, which allows for a general characterization of south coast streams and comparison across stream reaches. While that study was underway, the task force developed a matrix that identified four streams where the task force could concentrate its energies. The Community Environmental Council, the task force co-chair, obtained WRP funds to pursue opportunities on these streams, spurring activity on Carpinteria Creek and San Jose Creek, the only two watershed planning efforts in the County.

⁵ The Resources Agency chairs the agency partnership; the State Coastal Conservancy administers and coordinates the overall effort; the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project chairs the Science Panel; and Environment Now chairs the Public Advisory Committee and oversees the community outreach work of the WRP.

Of the 50 to 60 South Coast watersheds, none has a completed watershed plan and only two have planning efforts underway. First is Carpinteria Creek where a \$100,000 Department of Fish and Game grant will fund the Cachuma Resource Conservation District (RCD), on behalf of the Carpinteria Creek Watershed Coalition, to conduct a watershed assessment and management plan. Outreach activities and steelhead barrier removal projects are also funded for Carpinteria Creek. CEC's watershed coordinator helped to obtain grants for all of these activities. Second is San Jose Creek where the County will dedicate \$100,00 from its general fund for San Jose Creek to serve as a demonstration project for watershed planning. Supervisor Susan Rose, the task force co-chair was instrumental in launching this effort. Plans for both creeks should be completed over the next year and a half or two.

A third planning effort has been funded with a \$100,000 from the Coastal Impact Assessment Program, but may not come to fruition because of resistance by large, local land owners. The Gaviota Coast, a 30-mile stretch at the northern most part of the WRP region located between Point Conception and Goleta, was the focus of a recently published resource inventory by the County. California's Department of Parks and Recreation, which oversees Gaviota State Park, would like to follow up with a watershed assessment and management plan for Gaviota Creek that would, among other issues, address sediment input into the Creek. Differences in resource management perspectives have led to a campaign to split north from south Santa Barbara County. Although State Parks has solicited the assistance of the WRP task force, the Community Environmental Council, and the Cachuma RCD, it is not clear that planning can go forward in the current, highly politicized climate.

The Land Trust for Santa Barbara County has applied to the Department of Fish and Game for funds to support a fourth planning effort—a watershed assessment and restoration plan for Arroyo Hondo, one of just a few Southern California streams known to support a viable steelhead population. The WRP contributed to the Land Trust's purchase of the 782-acre Arroyo Hondo Ranch. The Land Trust and Forest Service, which supports the planning effort, are the two main landowners in the watershed.

2.3 Planning Gaps

The Santa Barbara County area has but rudimentary experience with watershed planning; only a tiny fraction of the South Coast hydrologic unit is the focus of planning activity. Just two or three of 50 to 60 watersheds are subject to an active watershed planning effort.

2.4 Planning Priorities

Given the yawning gaps, the completed assessments—especially the task force matrix and the steelhead assessment—help target areas of greatest ecological potential. Within these areas, the collective knowledge of the task force coupled with insights gleaned from stakeholder interviews, help to target areas with the greatest likelihood for community support.

Arroyo Burro, the middle reach of Mission Creek, and Rincon Creek offer the most promise for planning activity. In each case, restoration projects and activities have created a greater sensitivity to the need for more integrated planning. Rincon Creek straddles Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties and is a priority for both county task forces and watershed coordinators. Gaviota Creek is a remote possibility given community resistance yet funds available for planning. Refugio Creek is also a long shot, subject to the same political forces as Gaviota Creek. Nonetheless, the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County received WRP funds to work with landowners to develop an arrundo removal plan for the watershed; they could expand this to a series of individual farm conservation plans.

In addition to these creek specific planning priorities, the County Water Agency envisions building on the South Coast HGM assessment to map conditions, define institutional roles and

responsibilities, and develop a menu of restoration options from Rincon Creek to the western edge of Goleta. The County's San Jose Creek demonstration plan could serve as a template for developing South Coast watershed plans. Moreover, several watersheds or stream reaches of similar types might be grouped for greater efficiencies.

The County is actively engaged in watershed education activities and the Community Environmental Council runs a watershed education center. Nonetheless, there is much to be done to build community and political support for comprehensive watershed planning and stream restoration. Education and community outreach must accompany all activities of the watershed coordinator and task force members to continue to build a constituency for watershed planning and protection.

2.5 Organizational Capacity

Over the past two to three years the area has secured a fair bit of funding, conducted some first-rate assessments, and set the stage for action. However, while the County Water Agency has a keen interest in watershed issues, the county agencies—particularly those with flood control and GIS responsibilities—have not begun to coordinate their activities with those of the Water Agency. Watershed planning does not yet have a home, dedicated staff, or resources within County government. The City of Santa Barbara passed the bed tax and conducted assessments of City Creeks, but has not really begun to address watershed issues that transcend city boundaries by coordinating with other jurisdictions. The Cachuma RCD brings a great deal of credibility and technical expertise, but not much in the way of funds. The Conception Coast Project, with some links to UCSB, is a tremendous technical resource for applying GIS analysis in a watershed and area-wide context. The Land Trust for Santa Barbara County capably devises and implements projects and plans. The Community Environmental Council has strong outreach capabilities and can form effective coalitions at the project or stream level. The watershed coordinator must continue to promote watershed planning across these organizations by disseminating practical information, putting forward initiatives, and setting the stage for action.

3 VENTURA COUNTY

4 LOS ANGELES COUNTY

5 ORANGE COUNTY

6 SAN DIEGO COUNTY

7 CONCLUSION