

Summary

On behalf of its members¹, the Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency (RCHCA) is seeking a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and an agreement with the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) which would authorize incidental and management take, respectively, of the Stephens' kangaroo rat (SKR), a species protected under both the California and federal Endangered Species Acts (ESA). Toward this objective, the RCHCA has prepared a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) which describes the conservation, mitigation, and monitoring measures which will be implemented if the permit and agreement are approved by the USFWS and CDFG.

This summary briefly describes the:

- Reasons for which the RCHCA is seeking the permit and agreement;
- General terms and conditions proposed in the HCP regarding incidental take of SKR;
- Specific measures proposed in the HCP to minimize, mitigate, and monitor the impacts of incidental take on SKR, and;
- Institutional and funding arrangements for implementation of the plan.

A. Reasons for Seeking the Permit and Agreement

The RCHCA is seeking the permit and agreement in order to establish a regional mechanism through which otherwise lawful activities resulting in incidental take of SKR may meet ESA requirements without having to secure individual permits and agreements with USFWS and CDFG. Additionally, this HCP will help achieve specific conservation goals in RCHCA jurisdictions by preserving the biological diversity and natural open space which distinguish western Riverside County from other parts of southern California.

The incidental take authorizations provided by the USFWS permit and CDFG agreement are necessary for activities which affect SKR since the California and federal ESA prohibit actions which directly or indirectly harm a species listed as threatened or endangered. RCHCA member agencies include the County of Riverside and the Cities of Corona, Hemet, Lake Elsinore, Moreno Valley, Murrieta, Perris, Riverside, and Temecula.

This HCP is intended to replace a SKR Short-Term HCP which the RCHCA and its member agencies have been implementing since 1990. Under that plan the USFWS and CDFG authorized a limited amount of incidental take subject to conservation and mitigation actions designed to:

1. Provide for interim protection of Study Areas in order to allow for their evaluation as potential SKR reserves;
2. Ensure full mitigation for all SKR occupied habitat incidentally taken through acquisition of replacement habitat in Study Area locations approved by the USFWS;
3. Allow time for the RCHCA to conduct biological research necessary to document the species' characteristics and identify factors essential to its continued existence in the HCP area;
4. Design a regional reserve system adequate to ensure long-term SKR persistence in the plan area, and;
5. Establish reliable funding sources sufficient to implement all provisions of the HCP for which the RCHCA assumed financial responsibility.

The biological research and planning process for establishing the SKR reserves is now complete, and the RCHCA is seeking to:

1. Replace its existing authorizations for incidental take of SKR with a 30-year permit and agreement;
2. Replace the conservation, mitigation, and monitoring measures established under the Short-Term plan with those described in this HCP, and;
3. Implement a conservation program for the SKR which will also provide the basis for a subsequent ecosystem based plan covering all sensitive habitat types and species in RCHCA jurisdictions.

B. General Terms and Conditions Proposed by the RCHCA

The new permit and agreement would be valid for 30 years and would authorize incidental take of SKR on RCHCA member agency lands within the plan area mapped in the HCP ([Figure S-1](#)). The HCP area covers 533,954 acres within RCHCA member jurisdictions, including approximately 30,000 acres of occupied SKR habitat ([Table S-1](#)).

Salient terms and conditions proposed for this HCP by the RCHCA include the following:

1. The RCHCA will establish a regional system of seven core reserves for conservation of SKR and the ecosystem upon which it depends. The core reserves encompass 41,221 acres, including 12,460 acres of SKR occupied habitat. The

vast majority of land included in these reserves is presently in public ownership; some privately held properties remain in the Lake Mathews-Estelle Mountain, Lake Skinner-Domenigoni Valley, and San Jacinto-Lake Perris reserves;

2. The RCHCA will complete the core reserve system through:
 - a. execution of an agreement with Western Waste Industries, USFWS, CDFG, and the County of Riverside concerning mitigation for SKR impacts resulting from the proposed expansion of the El Sobrante Landfill in the Lake Mathews core reserve;
 - b. acquisition of fee simple interest or conservation easements on remaining privately held lands within core reserves, or;
 - c. acceptance of land dedications from, or negotiation of voluntary conservation agreements with, property owners in such areas;
3. In order to provide additional assurances of SKR persistence in the HCP area, the core reserves will be expanded through the use of federal lands managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Consistent with the provisions of an Assembled Land Exchange Agreement recently executed by BLM and the RCHCA, federal lands available for trade will be used to expand the amount of SKR occupied habitat conserved within core reserves to approximately 15,000 acres;
4. The RCHCA will ensure ongoing and appropriate management of conserved SKR habitat in the core reserves through:
 - a. Execution of agreements with responsible land management entities, including the BLM, State of California, University of California at Riverside, Riverside County Regional Park and Open Space District, and others;
 - b. Establishment of a Reserve Managers Coordinating Committee to provide a forum through which the RCHCA, individual reserve managers, USFWS, and CDFG may monitor regional changes in SKR population and habitat, confer regarding SKR habitat management techniques, and implement appropriate management programs, and;
 - c. Establishment of non-wasting endowments to provide ongoing funding for SKR monitoring, habitat management, and necessary biological research in the Lake Mathews-Estelle Mountain, Lake Skinner-Domenigoni Valley, Motte Rimrock, and Sycamore Canyon Park core reserves;
5. During the period prior to completion of the core reserves, incidental take of SKR occupied habitat will be subject to authorization by RCHCA member agencies. In the case of entities exempt from member agency permits, the RCHCA will authorize incidental take directly. Upon completion of the core reserves, specific authorization will not be required for incidental take occurring outside of core reserves;

[Table S-2-Summary Characteristics of Acreage in the SKR Core Reserves](#)

6. Within core reserves, incidental take of SKR will be subject to approval by USFWS and CDFG. However, such approval will not be required for incidental take occurring as a result of activities necessary to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of the general public. This includes emergency response activities, clearance of flammable vegetation for fire prevention purposes, and activities necessary to operate and maintain public facilities;
7. Bona fide agricultural activities will not be required to perform SKR biological surveys. With the exception of the construction of agricultural structures requiring building permits, agricultural activities in the plan area will not be subject to SKR mitigation requirements established under this HCP;
8. Actions taken by public agencies to respond to emergency conditions or operate and maintain public facilities will not be subject to the submission of SKR biological surveys or approval by USFWS and CDFG. Consistent with the provisions of a Cooperative Agreement executed between the USFWS and RCHCA member agencies, this HCP provides that clearance of flammable vegetation by private property owners for fire prevention purposes will not require submission of SKR biological surveys or be subject to approval by USFWS and CDFG;
9. Individual land owners outside the HCP area may receive incidental take authorizations from the RCHCA if such owners acquire and dedicate to the RCHCA replacement SKR occupied habitat in an amount at least equal to that to be incidentally taken. All such replacement habitat will be subject to specific approval by USFWS and CDFG;
10. Recognizing the limitations of single species HCP's, following approval of the SKR plan the RCHCA intends to amend it into an ecosystem-based HCP designed to provide for conservation of all sensitive habitat types and species in RCHCA member jurisdictions. In concert with commitments received from the U.S. Department of Interior, the RCHCA will seek appropriate conservation credit from USFWS and CDFG for all natural resource values present on lands dedicated to habitat conservation pursuant to this plan, its predecessor Short-Term HCP, and other independent conservation actions which have occurred in the plan area.

Subject to the above terms and conditions, incidental take of SKR will be permitted anywhere in the HCP area.

C. Conservation, Mitigation, and Monitoring Measures

To meet the requirements specified in the California and federal ESA's for the incidental and management take authorizations it seeks, the RCHCA has prepared this HCP which identifies how the impacts of SKR incidental take will be minimized, mitigated, and monitored, and the degree to which the species' persistence in the plan area will be ensured.

1. Establishment, Completion, Expansion, and Management of the Core Reserves

The establishment, completion, expansion, and management of the core reserves defined in Chapter 5. SKR Conservation and Mitigation Measures will be the primary means of mitigating the impacts of incidental take to SKR in the plan area. These conservation and management activities also will be the primary means of assuring that SKR will persist within the plan area.

Through its implementation of the Short-Term SKR plan the RCHCA has ensured the conservation of the vast majority of land contained within the core reserves defined in this HCP. In order of decreasing size, the seven core reserves established by this HCP are:

- (a.) Lake Skinner-Domenigoni Valley (13,158 acres);
- (b.) Lake Mathews-Estelle Mountain (11,243 acres);
- (c.) San Jacinto-Lake Perris (10,932 acres);
- (d.) Sycamore Canyon-March Air Force Base (2,502 acres);
- (e.) Steele Peak (1,753 acres);
- (f.) Potrero ACEC (995 acres)
- (g.) Motte Rimrock (638 acres)

In the aggregate these core reserves encompass 41,221 acres, including 12,460 acres of SKR occupied habitat.

Lands within the Lake Skinner-Domenigoni Valley core reserve will be managed and administered pursuant to the terms of the Southwestern Riverside County Multi-Species HCP prepared by the Metropolitan Water District (MWD) and RCHCA, and approved by USFWS and CDFG. Lands within the Lake Mathews core reserve will be managed pursuant to the Lake Mathews Multi-Species HCP prepared by MWD and RCHCA and approved by USFWS and CDFG in December 1995.

To date, the RCHCA has expended more than \$24 million to acquire land for the SKR core reserves. That investment has been combined with interagency agreements to ensure the establishment of a regional reserve system for the SKR.

In order to complete the reserves designated herein, the RCHCA will acquire or otherwise assure the conservation of private properties remaining in the reserves.

The core reserves will be expanded through a program involving trade of federal lands managed by BLM. The land trade program will be conducted pursuant to the provisions of the RCHCA/BLM Assembled Land Exchange Agreement included in Appendix A.

This HCP establishes new agreements and coordinates existing arrangements among the agencies responsible for management of public lands in the proposed core reserves. The plan provides a framework and funding for:

- (a.) Coordinating the management of conserved SKR habitat; S-9
- (b.) Increasing the amount and quality of SKR habitat in the reserve system through additional land acquisitions and adaptive management activities including habitat enhancement and restoration, and;
- (c.) Monitoring the status of the SKR populations in the plan area.

Habitat management for the benefit of SKR will be implemented on core reserve lands in public ownership upon approval of this HCP by USFWS and CDFG. Ongoing management programs for SKR will be extended to encompass all lands acquired or otherwise conserved by the RCHCA within the context of this HCP. Management programs are expected to include habitat enhancement and restoration, access controls, fire management activities, grazing where appropriate, and managed recreational activities.

Over the 30-year term of the permit and agreement, RCHCA will establish non-wasting endowments for habitat management, monitoring, and biological research in the core reserves in the amount of \$3.9 million.

In order to coordinate habitat management and biological monitoring activities among the individual core reserves, the RCHCA will establish a Reserve Managers Coordinating Committee (RMCC). Members of the RMCC will include one representative each from those agencies responsible for land management in the core reserves, as well as representatives of the RCHCA, CDFG, USFWS, and the University of California Cooperative Extension. Managers of public lands within the core reserves include:

- CDFG (San Jacinto Wildlife Area and Lake Mathews Ecological Reserve);
- California Department of Parks and Recreation (Lake Perris State Recreation Area);
- MWD (lands within the Lake Skinner Domenigoni Valley, and Lake Mathews core reserves);

- The Nature Conservancy (March Air Force Base SKR Management Area);
- City of Riverside Park and Recreation Department (Sycamore Canyon Park);
- University of California at Riverside (Motte Rimrock Reserve);
- Riverside County Regional Park and Open Space District (County lands within the Lake Skinner reserve), and;
- BLM (manager of federal lands in the Lake Mathews, Lake Skinner, Motte Rimrock, Potrero ACEC, and Steele Peak reserves)

Additionally, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection will be asked to participate as a technical advisor on fire management issues.

The RCHCA will work with each of the core reserve managers to develop and implement SKR management plans. These plans will provide guidelines and set priorities for habitat management and biological monitoring activities. They will supplement, and not supplant, existing conservation plans and programs in core reserves with the intent of optimizing benefits to SKR within the funding constraints of the RCHCA's program.

2. RCHCA Funding Commitments

In addition to the \$30 million expended to date by the RCHCA to implement the Short-Term HCP and develop this conservation plan, the agency will provide an additional \$11.7 million toward land acquisition, core reserve management, and administration activities necessary to implement this HCP. The implementation budget for this HCP is presented in Chapter 5. SKR Conservation and Mitigation Measures.

3. Monitoring of Compliance and Plan Effectiveness

The RCHCA will maintain responsibility for monitoring compliance with the terms and conditions of the permit and agreement. Additionally, with the assistance of the RMCC, the RCHCA will evaluate the effectiveness of HCP conservation and mitigation measures, and submit annual reports concerning same to USFWS and CDFG.

Annual reports will be reviewed by USFWS and CDFG to assess the effectiveness of the HCP in ensuring SKR persistence in the plan area. If necessary, modifications to the HCP will be made to address problems identified in the annual reports.

D. Plan Implementation

All of the institutional arrangements necessary for plan implementation are presently in place or will be established through interagency and cooperative agreements. The RCHCA Joint Powers Agreement already vests sufficient authority in the agency to perform all tasks necessary to fulfill its commitments for HCP implementation.

Implementation of this HCP will be governed by legal agreements executed among the RCHCA, its member agencies, USFWS, CDFG, BLM, U.S. Department of Interior, and the State of California Resources Agency. The purpose of such agreements is to specify the terms and conditions under which the HCP will be implemented, and define the roles and responsibilities of all parties. The RCHCA and its member agencies will execute a combined Implementation Agreement/California Endangered Species Permit agreement with the aforementioned federal and State agencies.

1. Roles and Responsibilities

The RCHCA and its member agencies will be responsible for implementation of the HCP, with recipients of incidental take authorizations sharing responsibility for compliance with HCP terms and conditions.

The core reserve managers will be responsible for habitat and species management within core reserves, and their role in plan implementation will be an extension of that function. In their regulatory capacity USFWS and CDFG will maintain responsibility for approval of RCHCA core reserve expansion land acquisitions, approval of incidental take within core reserves as specified in this HCP, approval of RCHCA requests for amendments to this HCP, and provision of technical assistance in the development and evaluation of SKR management, monitoring, and biological research activities.

2. HCP Financing

Through the combination of revenue sources including RCHCA contributions, federal cash and in-kind financial assistance, in-kind assistance from the State of California, and other sources, the RCHCA will ensure that sufficient funding exists to implement all aspects of this HCP.

[Projected budget for implementation of this HCP](#)

As of January 1995 the RCHCA had expended approximately \$30 million to implement the SKR Short-Term HCP and develop this plan. Thus, the combined expenditures for SKR habitat conservation under both HCP's is projected to exceed \$45 million. Of this total, over \$41.7 million in local funding will be provided to conserve the SKR in RCHCA member jurisdictions. The RCHCA is not aware of any single species conservation program in the United States which equals this commitment of local financial resources.