



Member Jurisdictions

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Date: August 14, 2020
To: RCHCA Board of Directors
From: Rick Bishop, Executive Director
Subject: Activities Update

The following provides an “in between meetings” update on activities underway within the Agency for your information and use in the event needed.

RCA Potentially to Move to RCTC

A few weeks ago the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority (RCA) Chair, Vice-Chair, and Executive Director reached out to WRCOG staff, along with staff with the Riverside County Transportation Commission, and requested participation in discussions related to migrating RCA (the agency in charge of administering the Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP) for Western Riverside County) to one of the two agencies. In response, WRCOG prepared a proposal for consideration by RCA’s Executive Committee (a subset of its full board). In general, WRCOG viewed the migration of RCA under its administrative umbrella, similar to what was done for RCHCA, as being consistent with several Agency activities, including:

1. WRCOG’s experience managing other joint powers authorities, such as Western Community Energy and RCHCA, which manages the Stephens’ Kangaroo Rat Habitat Conservation Plan (SKRHCP)
2. The MSHCP contemplated that the two habitat conservation plans (MSHCP and SKR) would eventually come together.
3. Opportunities for a more comprehensive and consistent approach to the subregion’s habitat conservation, management, and monitoring efforts: Bringing the MSHCP to WRCOG provides opportunities to explore linkages among the two conservation plans (MSHCP and SKR) for the benefit of the region.
4. Moving RCA to WRCOG is consistent with the HCP approach in Eastern Riverside County; the Coachella Valley Association of Governments provides HCP management for the MSHCP in Eastern Riverside County.

We were informed last week that the RCA Executive Committee decided to pursue moving the Agency to RCTC.

El Sobrante Landfill Habitat Restoration

Many agencies have an obligation under its permits to complete various tasks according to its activities involving emissions or the disposal or use of certain materials and substances that impact the environment. Under contract to Waste Management, Inc., RCHCA planted over 200 trees and understory shrubs within drainages adjacent to the El Sobrante Landfill as required under its 404 and 1600 permits for mitigating impacts associated with expanding the El Sobrante Landfill. Ongoing activities included providing supplemental irrigation to individual plants using a gravity-fed drip irrigation system and weed management.

Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund

RCHCA applied for state funding to restore riparian habitat within the Lake Mathews Reserve under the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) and received an award of \$275,000 worth of services. The State's portion of the Cap-and-Trade Program auction proceeds are deposited in the GGRF and used to further the objectives of the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006. The funding, distributed through various organizations such as the California Conservation Corps, will provide labor and equipment to remove fire fuel loads by cutting and chipping non-native overstory trees within riparian habitat that act as ladder fuels during a catastrophic wildfire. After removal efforts are completed the funding will then provide for restoration of those areas by using supplemental drip irrigation to establish native understory vegetation and trees.

Good Neighbors Authority Program

RCHCA is under contract with several agencies to provide land management and monitoring services. Through the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) Program, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) informed RCHCA of its intent to exercise its option for year two under the existing Good Neighbors Contract by providing \$194,000 of funding to improve SKR habitat through management and monitoring actions within Western Riverside County. In partnership with Conservation Biology Institute (CBI) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS), we are working on a species Range-Wide Management & Monitoring Plan that includes a genetics study of SKR lead by Dr. Debra Shier from the San Diego Zoo Global, Zoological Society of San Diego, and public outreach and ongoing educational programs.

SKR Downlisting

There are three major category listings for animals and plants under the Endangered Species Act. SKR is listed at the highest and most protected level, Endangered. Delisting of an endangered species occurs when a species is considered "recovered" from the critical levels that lead to that species listing as endangered with population numbers and low level of threats to maintaining or increasing populations in the future. RCHCA is pursuing downlisting of SKR because it demonstrates successful conservation efforts have been completed in Western Riverside County and aligns the federal listing with the state listing for SKR. The USFWS completed work on the SKR Species Status Assessment. USFWS are in the process of evaluating downlisting for the species, and a decision should publish soon.

SKR Monitoring at Three Reserves

RCHCA updated and renewed existing agreements and logistics associated with its SKR monitoring program that will allow Federal and State permitted staff biologists to monitor Sycamore Canyon Wilderness Area, Lake Perris State Park, and Steele Peak Reserve. On August 17, 2020, RCHCA staff, utilizing specialized State and Federal permits, will begin monitoring the status and trends of SKR within the SKR Reserve system at Sycamore Canyon Wilderness Park located in the City of Riverside, and Lake Perris State Park located in the City of Perris. Each of these Reserves function as a regional recreational hub for outdoor enthusiasts, which makes monitoring SKR challenging.

Sycamore Canyon is primarily owned by the City of Riverside, with a small southern portion owned by the State. It features excellent SKR habitat in the southern and eastern portions of the park and, as the name implies, is bisected by a large canyon with a year-round stream with fish. The Lake Perris Recreation Area is owned and managed by California State Parks and several thousand acres within the flat valley are ideally suited for SKR occupation with grassland habitat and loamy soils. Unfortunately, the area has recently been invaded by stinknet, a highly invasive weed that is not conducive to SKR health. The Steele Peak Reserve is located in unincorporated Riverside County near the City of Perris. This Reserve has essential cultural and historical value. RCHCA owns and manages approximately 250 of the 1,723 acres and is currently looking to purchase additional parcels as part of the Public Access Plan, which will examine ways to combine the preservation effort with recreational public access benefits.

It is imperative to conduct the survey during the highest probability of detecting these rare animals, including accounting for the lunar cycle, low nighttime temperatures, and geographic features, among other variables. The monitoring process will begin with staff pre-baiting traps to get the animals adjusted and interested in the bait seed, then on the evening of monitoring, just prior to dusk, staff will bait the traps. A few hours later, RCHCA-permitted biologists will check the traps and measure captured SKR for weight, ear length, sex, age class, and reproductive status. After the data is collected for each individual, that animal is then marked on its belly to identify it in the event that individual is subsequently recaptured during the remainder of the survey. The 1st trap opening ends around 1:00 a.m. Around 2:00 a.m., the grids are then re-checked and subsequently closed for the night around 4:00 a.m. The trapping continues in this manner for three consecutive nights. By the third night, most caught animals are "recaptures," and therefore, we can deduce that there is a high probability of estimating population status and trends.

Data collected from these surveys will be used to influence adaptive management practices for the species. For more information please contact Brian Shomo at (951) 840-8070 or bshomo@wrcog.us.

Arundo Removal To Benefit Southwest Willow Flycatcher Habitat

The United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) signed off on year two of the Arundo removal and restoration project located on RCHCA property near Lake Street in northern Lake Elsinore. RCHCA previously applied for funding through the NRCS for removing *Arundo donax* (Giant Reed) within a major drainage within the Reserve. Arundo can grow to over 20 feet in height and is highly flammable when dormant during the fall and winter months, exacerbating wildfires and eliminating native vegetation used by the Southwest Willow Flycatcher, a Federally protected species. In year one, RCHCA removed the Arundo, and then in year two was required to control it for 12 months by spot treating with herbicide until no new growth was observed. Year three of the grant will consist of planting and maintenance of native trees in the areas formerly occupied by the Arundo.

Next RCHCA Board Meeting

The next RCHCA Board Meeting is scheduled for **Thursday, September 17, 2020, at 11:30 a.m.** via the Zoom platform. A complete agenda packet and meeting links will be sent prior to the meeting along with a request for your commitment to attend the meeting.