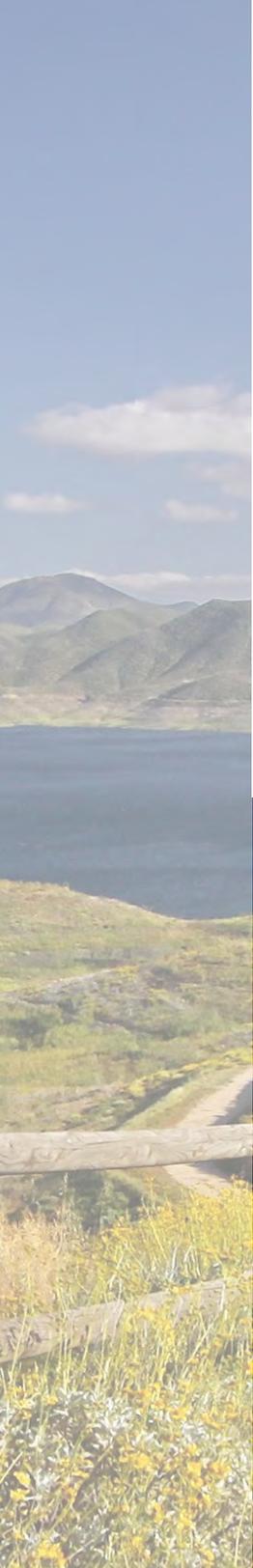


RCHCA

RIVERSIDE COUNTY HABITAT CONSERVATION AGENCY

2021 ANNUAL REPORT



WELCOME LETTER

The world experienced unprecedented challenges in 2020, but it also allowed all of us to take a step back and reevaluate our processes, check our resolve, and grow our resilience.

During this time, it became clear that the public's desire to engage with the outdoors and be immersed in nature for their own well-being grew stronger and provided meaningful connection and a place to destress.

The new year has brought a renewed sense of hope and appreciation for our natural world. Now, more than ever, conservation and protecting biodiversity is at the forefront of a sustainable future, and RCHCA's vision.

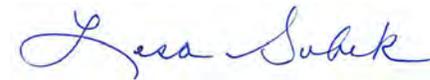
In Fiscal Year 2020/2021, RCHCA worked to focus on elements of our core mission: conservation, to effectively manage conserved and open space lands in Western Riverside County; collaboration and coordination to share

successful management strategies, reduce environmental impacts, and employ innovative techniques that will foster continuity in species management, ultimately helping to achieve the overall goal of range-wide species recovery; and education to spread awareness of preventable threats to endangered and threatened species and promote a healthy, sustainable future for all living creatures.

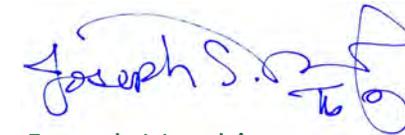
This past year, RCHCA is proud to have accomplished the milestone of completing the Range-wide Management and Monitoring Plan for Stephens' Kangaroo Rat. As we look ahead and begin implementation of this Plan, our goal of range-wide species recovery is within reach. Another milestone on the horizon is species reclassification to downlisting, from Endangered to Threatened.

Our vision for the agency cannot be achieved without the hard work, collaboration, and dedication of our employees and partner agencies which help to make that vision a reality.

This report intends to provide an insight into the projects undertaken by the RCHCA. Thank you for your interest and support of the agency this past year. We are optimistically looking forward and welcome your feedback.



Lesa Sobek
Chair, RCHCA Board of Directors
Mayor Pro-Tem, City of Menifee



Joseph Morabito
Vice-Chair, RCHCA Board of Directors
Councilmember, City of Wildomar

RCHCA MISSION STATEMENT

The Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency (RCHCA) is a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) comprised of the cities of Corona, Hemet, Lake Elsinore, Menifee, Moreno Valley, Murrieta, Perris, Riverside, Temecula, Wildomar, and the County of Riverside. Through an Agreement for Services, RCHCA activities are administered by the Western Riverside Council of Governments (WRCOG).

The RCHCA successfully manages conserved lands for the benefit of not only the SKR but also other threatened species covered under the Western Riverside Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan. The RCHCA's mission is supported by local conservation partners, academic experts and the wildlife agencies working towards species protection and regional conservation goals.

RCHCA BOARD MEMBERS

Lesa Sobek (Chair)

Mayor Pro-Tem, City of Menifee

Tim Sheridan

Mayor Pro-Tem, City of Lake Elsinore

MaryAnn Edwards

Mayor, City of Temecula

Joseph Morabito (Vice-Chair)

Councilmember, City of Wildomar

David Marquez

Councilmember, City of Moreno Valley

Michael M. Vargas

Mayor, City of Perris

Tom Richins

Councilmember, City of Corona

Lisa DeForest

Councilmember, City of Murrieta

Jeff Hewitt

Supervisor, County of Riverside District 5

Russ Brown

Mayor, City of Hemet

Steve Hemmenway

Councilmember, City of Riverside

ABOUT THE

HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN

The importance of preserving biodiversity by preventing species extinction was legally recognized in 1973 when the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was signed into federal law. The purpose of the ESA is not only to protect species that have been listed as threatened or endangered, but also to conserve the ecosystem upon which those species depend.

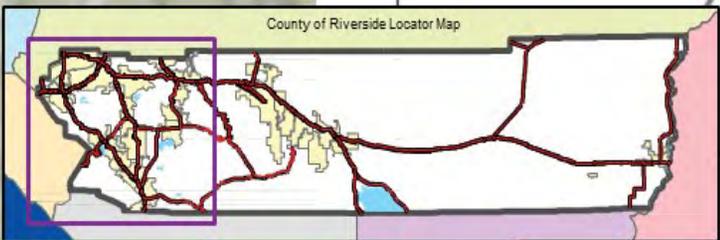
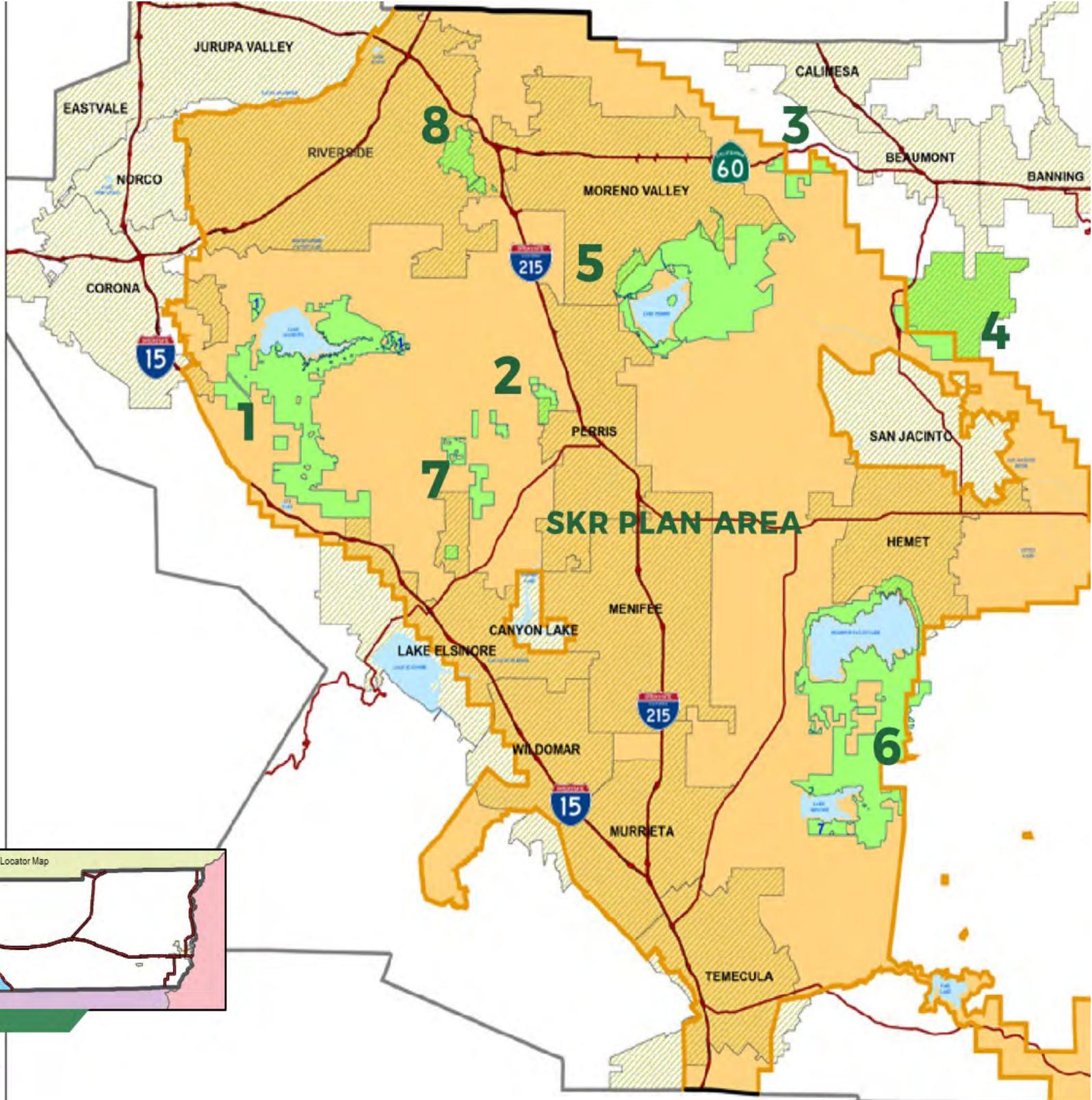
The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is one of the lead agencies tasked with the implementation of the ESA and are therefore responsible for regulating prohibited and allowable activities concerning endangered or threatened species. To mitigate the “taking,” which refers to any attempt or action involving the harassment, harm, pursuit, hunting, shooting, wounding, killing, trapping, capturing, or collecting of any listed species,

Section 10 of the ESA regulates a range of activities that affect endangered or threatened plants and animals.

A Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) is a required part ESA and is a planning document that ensures the anticipated “take” of a listed species will be minimized or mitigated when development occurs. It conserves the habitat upon which listed species depend upon, thereby contributing to the recovery of the species.

Under the Stephens’ Kangaroo Rat Habitat Conservation Plan (SKR HCP), there were eight permanent SKR core reserves established that today total 51,280 acres. Within the Core Reserves, there are 15,000 acres of occupied SKR habitat. There has been no suitable habitat or SKR occupied habitat which has been acquired and no occupied SKR Habitat that has been disturbed within the Core Reserves during Fiscal Year 2020-2021.





SKR CONSERVED LANDS

These Eight Core Reserves designated for SKR conservation are jointly owned and form the nucleus of multi-species habitat conservation efforts in Riverside County.

- 1 LAKE MATHEWS / ESTELLE MOUNTAIN RESERVE
- 2 MOTTE RIMROCK
- 3 POTRERO ACEC
- 4 POTRERO RESERVE
- 5 SAN JACINTO / LAKE PERRIS
- 6 SOUTHWESTERN RIVERSIDE COUNTY
MULTI-SPECIES RESERVE
- 7 STEELE PEAK
- 8 SYCAMORE CANYON



ACCOMPLISHMENTS

FISCAL YEAR 2020/2021

RCHCA celebrated its 25th Anniversary of the SKR HCP in 2021, commemorating over two decades of species recovery, preserving biological diversity through adaptive land management, and community involvement through educational outreach.

In Fiscal Year 2020/2021, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Agency published the Proposed Rule Recommending the Reclassification of SKR, Downlisting the species from Endangered to Threatened with a Section 4(d) Rule under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This action is based on the Agency's thorough review of the best scientific data available, which indicated that SKR no longer meets the definition of endangered under the ESA because major threats to the species have been significantly reduced, and the species is on its way to being recovered. The final rule is set to publish in early 2022. This will be a significant milestone for our region, and it honors our agency and partners who have worked tirelessly toward this objective since the beginning.

For the RCHCA, the past 25th years represents a place in history for SKR. Specifically, RCHCA has:

- Established eight dedicated ecosystem-based reserves in Western Riverside County.
- Completed management plans for all Reserves and established endowments for management as required by the HCP
- Funded the SKR Translocation Plan, which developed an efficient and reliable translocation strategy for all species of kangaroo rats.
- Developed an SKR Habitat Suitability Model that includes population genetics and improves habitat connectivity.
- Developed a Range-wide Management and Monitoring Plan for SKR, that will coordinate recovery efforts across SKR's entire geographical range.



Photo by Moose Peterson

Stephens' Kangaroo Rat Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan

March 2021



Prepared by
Conservation Biology Institute for Bureau of Land Management and Riverside
County Habitat Conservation Agency

CBI is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization that works collaboratively to conserve biological diversity in its natural state through applied research, education, planning, and community service.

Preferred Citation:

Spencer, W.D., D. DiFietro, H. Romsos, D. Shier, and R. Chock. 2021. Stephens' Kangaroo Rat Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan. Unpublished report prepared by the Conservation Biology Institute for Bureau of Land Management and Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency. March 2021.

The Stephens' Kangaroo Rat Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan will provide proven strategies to assist in SKR recovery efforts and standardize methodologies allowing for more precise management and consistent reporting.

FIRST PUBLIC ACCESS PLAN: THE STEELE PEAK INAUGURAL TRAIL

RCHCA manages over 50,000 acres of land conserved for the Endangered Stephens' Kangaroo Rat (SKR). These lands reflect multiple ownerships, some of which are not currently open to the public, and they have different objectives as it relates to public access. In 2021, RCHCA completed the Steele Peak Public Access Plan at the Steele Peak Reserve, the first project under the Agency's newly developed Public Access Plan for RCHCA-owned and conserved lands in Western Riverside County. This Plan will introduce controlled, limited public access that will serve to dissuade illegal and harmful access to RCHCA lands, thus improving SKR habitat while expanding community access to the outdoors.

The Steele Peak Reserve is located adjacent to the City of Perris in unincorporated Riverside County. The Steele Peak Inaugural Trail will greatly benefit the surrounding community and offer the experience to appreciate the natural environment that is being protected in this area while providing recreational opportunities. In 2020, RCHCA was awarded a 600K grant from the California Natural Resources Agency that provides sufficient resources to develop the Steele Peak Inaugural Trail. The trail is scheduled to open to the public in winter 2022.





Reptiles



Nocturnal Animals



PRESENTS

WILD CRITTERS



Birds



Habitat Restoration & Management

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Education is an important part of habitat conservation and the RCHCA is committed to providing citizens with opportunities that enhance awareness of threatened and endangered species in Western Riverside County. RCHCA has a robust educational outreach program where hundreds of students from local school districts visit SKR-conserved lands each year to participate in NGSS based programs, like the "Celebrating Endangered Species" Event, where they learn about endangered species and the importance of conserving natural resources. Due to the pandemic, RCHCA's educational program looked a bit different in 2020, when it worked with Eco Hero and The Energy Coalition to organize an interactive, live streamed virtual event. The Agency also released videos on wildlife and reserve management during Conservation Appreciation Month in May 2021. The RCHCA plans to resume holding outdoor events in 2022.

14 Years of educational services, reaching 10,000 students throughout Western Riverside County.

RIVERSIDE
COMMUNITIES
PARTNERSHIP
PROJECT



In 2021, RCHCA formed their non-profit, the Riverside Communities Partnership Project (RCPP). In collaboration with AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), the RCPP provides a wide range of service-learning opportunities for community service volunteers throughout Western Riverside County with various partner agencies. Some of the activities volunteers work on include:

- Promoting environmental sustainability through fire mitigation / suppression, conservation restoration and wildlife habitat management
- Supporting building affordable housing units
- Assisting community recovery and emergency services management after natural or other disasters



RESERVE MANAGERS COORDINATING COMMITTEE (RMCC)

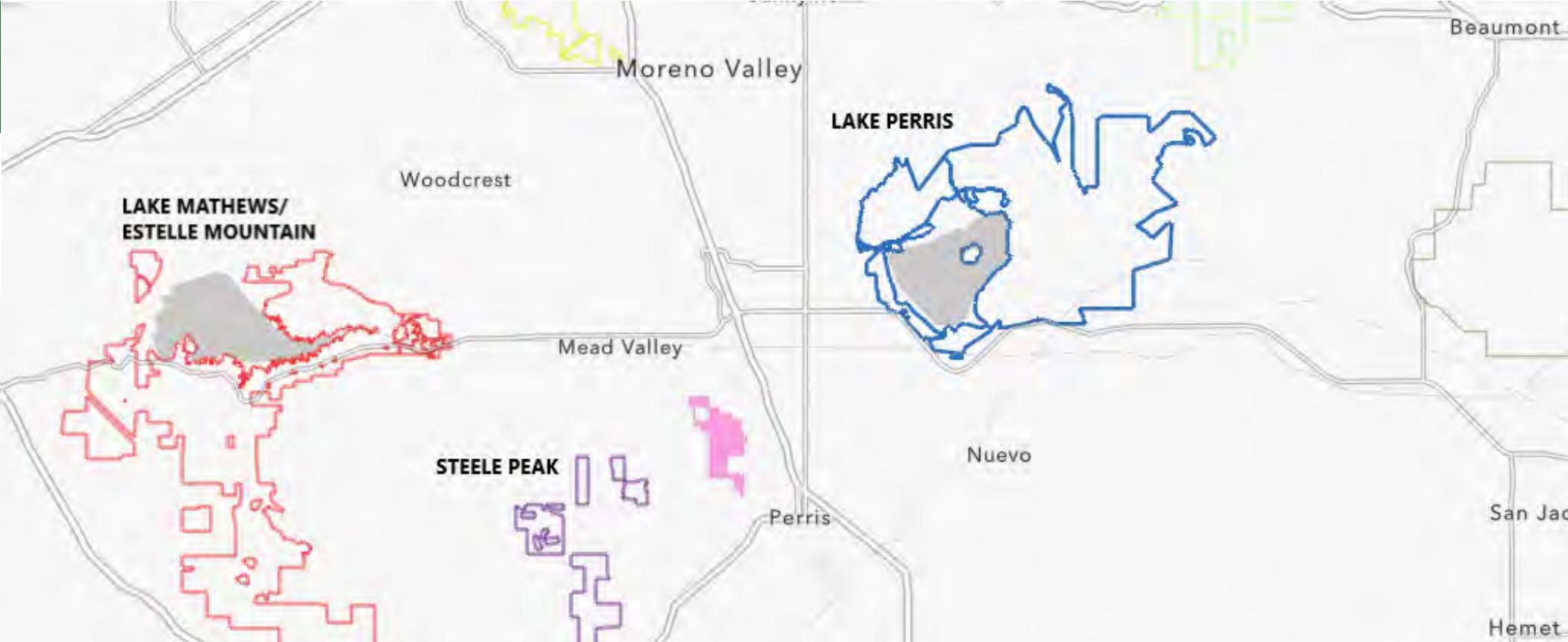
The RMCC is a group whose primary mission is to promote coordination of SKR management throughout the core reserve system and address regional management issues of importance to species persistence in the HCP area. RMCC members are made up representatives from entities that have responsibilities for management of lands within SKR core reserves. Representatives from the following agencies make up the RMCC :



RESERVE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Reserve management activities are dependent on environmental factors such as precipitation, and the conserved area's habitat and land management plans that specify the management activity allowed.

RESERVE	MOWING	PRESCRIBED BURNS	HERBICIDE	MECHANICAL	TOTAL ACRES
LAKE PERRIS	600				600
SOUTHWEST MULTI-SPECIES RESERVE	480	98			578
LAKE MATHEWS/ ESTELLE MOUNTAIN	550	170	88	223	745
STEELE PEAK	10			76	86
TOTAL ACRES	1640	268	88	299	2,295



During the current reporting period, the RMCC met three times. Notable items that were presented and discussed during the RMCC meetings included the following:

- Novel methods and herbicides to combat new weeds threatening SKR habitat
- Analysis of current regional threats to SKR and SKR habitat
- Grant opportunities for funding management activities
- SKR monitoring protocols and procedures
- Coordination with public utility agencies to allow for emergency repairs and maintenance of utilities while protecting sensitive habitats within reserves
- SKR recovery efforts





RESERVE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES





INVASIVE SPECIES MANAGEMENT

RCHCA employs innovative invasive plant management strategies to prevent, eradicate, and contain invasive plant species on its reserve lands to encourage the health of beneficial native plants and wildlife. These efforts support species recovery for Stephens' Kangaroo Rat and many other species.

RCHCA developed an Invasive Species Management Calendar to assist regional Reserve Managers and Public Works Departments in a cooperative approach to combat invasive plants that may reduce the fire fuel loads and infrastructure operation and maintenance costs, while simultaneously enhancing habitats to reduce the regulatory burden on future development projects. This calendar is a tool to coordinate management actions for treating invasive species throughout the region and displays the plant's life cycle and recommended management treatment for the current month of the year. The calendar is available on the RCHCA website.





Conservation
Biology Institute



San Diego Zoo
Wildlife Alliance



COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS

Several agencies work to protect SKR under their prospective management plans. The Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) contracted with the RCHCA to assemble a team of experts consisting of the Conservation Biology Institute (CBI), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance (SD Zoo), United States Geological Survey (USGS), Department of Defense (DoD) and other invested partners to develop Southern California's first Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan (Plan) for the Stephens' Kangaroo Rat (SKR). This Plan is the first of its kind for the SKR. Intended to unify the various organizational efforts to protect SKR, the Plan combines data from the geographic range that will confidently show indicators of SKR recovery, namely population dynamics, and reduce threats to SKR populations.

The Plan was completed in April, 2021, and RCHCA is working with CBI on the implementation phase, which will involve coordinating species management and monitoring of SKR throughout its geographical range, including Northern San Diego County, through a working group of over 30 agencies involved with SKR recovery. It builds upon the range-wide habitat suitability model developed in 2019 by CBI using Sentinel-2 satellite imagery. These updatable landscape-scale habitat maps are a foundation for preserve monitoring and management and play a key role in planning coordinated conservation of the species.

This project would not be possible without the funding support of the BLM, which provides national leadership to promote restoration, enhancement, and protection of fish and wildlife.

FISCAL

FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

As a JPA, the Joint Powers Agreement requires that full books and accounts be maintained for the RCHCA in accordance with practices consistent with those utilized by the Controller of the State of California. RCHCA contracts with a certified public accountant to make an annual audit of the accounts and records of the Agency.

Our auditor's opinion states the financial statements present fairly, in all material respects, the retrospective financial position of the governmental activities and the major fund of the Agency. There are no findings to report in relation to the audit and the Agency received an "unmodified opinion," which is the highest level of assurance.

OPERATING REVENUES

<i>SKR Mitigation Fee Collections</i>	<i>\$1,178,110</i>
<i>Interest Earned on Endowments</i>	<i>\$12,895</i>
<i>Contractual Services Revenue</i>	<i>\$654,340</i>

TOTAL REVENUES **\$1,845,346**

OPERATING EXPENSES

<i>General Operations</i>	<i>\$1,036,115</i>
<i>Lake Mathews Reserve Endowment</i>	<i>\$461,592</i>

TOTAL EXPENSES **\$1,497,707**



A view of Lake Mathews during annual poppy bloom.

SKR MITIGATION FEE COLLECTIONS

A mitigation fee is assessed on development projects in the SKR Fee Area. This fee is beneficial to the RCHCA because it allows for a streamlined permitting process for developers while providing funds to support habitat and species management.

SKR MITIGATION FEES COLLECTED DURING FY 2020/2021

<i>CITY OF CORONA</i>	<i>\$0</i>
<i>CITY OF HEMET</i>	<i>\$0</i>
<i>CITY OF LAKE ELSINORE</i>	<i>\$62,985</i>
<i>CITY OF MENIFEE</i>	<i>\$116,820</i>
<i>CITY OF MORENO VALLEY</i>	<i>\$47,516</i>
<i>CITY OF MURRIETA</i>	<i>\$50,154</i>
<i>CITY OF PERRIS</i>	<i>\$63,170</i>
<i>CITY OF RIVERSIDE</i>	<i>\$75,185</i>
<i>CITY OF TEMECULA</i>	<i>\$21,105</i>
<i>CITY OF WILDOMAR</i>	<i>\$1,870</i>
<i>COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE</i>	<i>\$739,305</i>

STATUS OF RESERVE ENDOWMENTS

In 1990, the RCHCA began assembly of a Reserve System to protect SKR. There are eight reserves encompassing approximately 50,000 acres. Endowments were established to provide funding to support land management. The principal amount of the endowment remains intact while the interest income is available for use on Reserves that have an existing management plan to support of SKR recovery efforts.

CORE RESERVE	ENDOWMENT PRINCIPAL	FUND BALANCE (As of June 30, 2021)	INTEREST EARNINGS (As of June 30, 2021)	DOLLARS EXPENDED IN FY 2020/2021
Lake Mathews (RCHCA)	\$6,500,000	\$4,546,495	\$1,066	\$171,817
Lake Skinner (SWMSR)	\$500,000	\$432,560	\$822	\$178,915
Lake Skinner (RCHCA)	\$500,000	\$713,399	\$1,101	\$0
Motte Rimrock	\$601,200	\$732,255	\$1,131	\$0
Sycamore Canyon	\$1,000,000	\$1,066,599	\$1,647	\$0



RIVERSIDE COUNTY HABITAT CONSERVATION AGENCY

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Diamond Valley Lake Cover Photo Courtesy of University of California, Riverside.

