

RCHCA

RIVERSIDE COUNTY HABITAT CONSERVATION AGENCY

2022 ANNUAL REPORT



RCHCA
RIVERSIDE COUNTY HABITAT CONSERVATION AGENCY



WELCOME LETTER

Friends and supporters of RCHCA,

It is my pleasure to share the 2021-2022 Annual Report, which highlights our accomplishments, current financial status, and challenges during the past year.

By far, the most significant takeaway is that after 30 years of hard work and collaboration, the Stephens' kangaroo rat (SKR) was downlisted by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which is one of the necessary steps towards our goal of full recovery for the species and commemorates our mission and passion for species management. This is truly a monumental achievement for the agency and the entire region.

The success story of downlisting SKR represents the embodiment and reason why the Endangered Species Act was created; conservation and land management that leads to species recovery.

This could not have been accomplished

without our member agencies, our employees' and our conservation partnerships' hard work, collaboration, and dedication, which helped to make this achievement a reality.

Our work at RCHCA is far from done, and to achieve our goal of full recovery for SKR, the agency will continue to implement the SKR Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan, collecting data year after year that we will use to assess population status and trends and guide land management decisions.

We will continue to employ innovative land management techniques that utilize current research in managing invasive species and other threats. Lastly, we will continue to prioritize conservation education to enhance awareness of threatened and endangered species and the importance of protecting species and their habitats.

As you read through this report, I hope you enjoy learning more about the projects undertaken by our agency, which is dedicated to conservation, the effective and fiscally responsible management of conserved and open space lands in Western Riverside County, collaboration, and coordination to share successful management and monitoring strategies and ultimately, helping to achieve the overall goal of rangewide species recovery. Thank you for continuing to support the Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency.



Joseph Morabito
Chair, RCHCA Board of Directors
Mayor Pro-Tem, City of Wildomar



Lisa DeForest
Vice-Chair, RCHCA Board of Directors
Councilmember, City of Murrieta

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

Joseph Morabito (Chair)
Mayor Pro-Tem, City of Wildomar

Lisa DeForest (Vice-Chair)
Councilmember, City of Murrieta

Tom Richins
Councilmember, City of Corona

Russ Brown
Mayor, City of Hemet

Steve Manos
Councilmember, City of Lake Elsinore

Ulises Cabrera
Councilmember, City of Moreno Valley

Steve Hemenway
Councilmember, City of Riverside

Jessica Alexander
Councilmember, City of Temecula

Michael Vargas
Mayor, City of Perris

Jeff Hewitt
*Supervisor,
County of Riverside, District 5*

Lesia Sobek
Councilmember, City of Menifee

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.

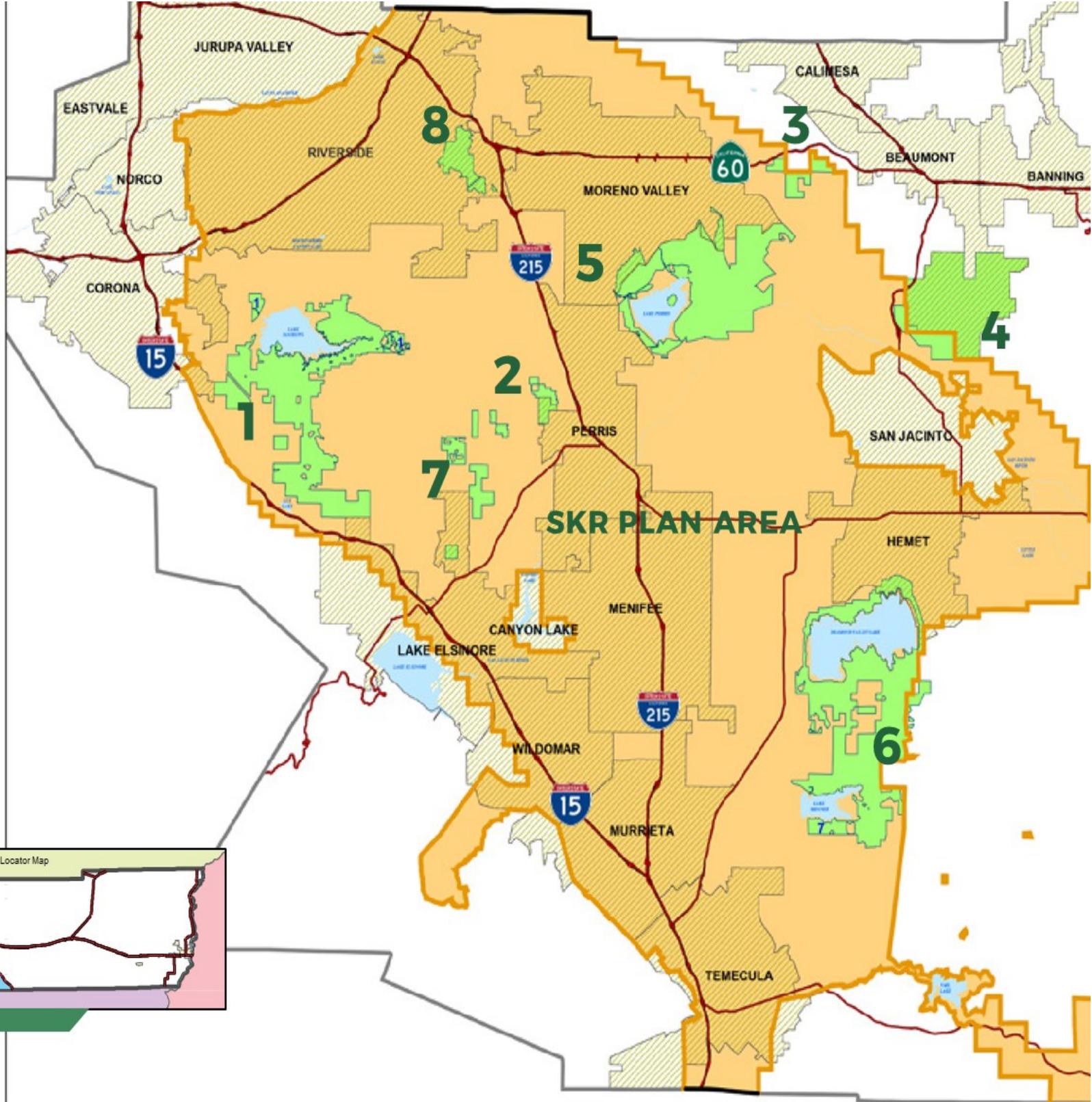
The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is one of the lead agencies tasked with the implementation of the ESA and are therefore responsible for regulating prohibited and allowable activities concerning endangered or threatened species. To mitigate the “taking,” which refers to any attempt 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 2021-2022.





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 2021/2022

The RCHCA is proud to report that on February 22, 2022, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service downlisted the Stephens' Kangaroo Rat from Endangered to Threatened with a Section 4(d) Rule under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

This downlisting marks thirty years of intentional and strategic conservation management for the species and is a monumental milestone for the agency, its partners and the region.

Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency: 30 Years of History

1988

Named after famed American zoologist Frank Stephens, in October 1988, the Stephens' kangaroo rat (SKR) was listed as an endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).



1991

The Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency (RCHCA) was formed as a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) for the purpose of planning for, acquiring, and managing habitat for SKR.



1996

The SKR Habitat Conservation Plan (SKR HCP) was adopted to conserve 15,000 acres of SKR occupied land. RCHCA applied for and received a 30-year "incidental take" permit under the Endangered Species Act.



2008

In order to locate 15,000 acres of SKR occupied habitat, RCHCA needed to conserve over 46,000 acres of land to protect the endangered SKR. In 2008, RCHCA received concurrence from the USFWS along with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) that the acquisition was completed.



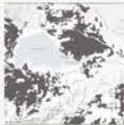
2015

RCHCA contracted with WRCOG. Over the following years, RCHCA generated funding assurances for land management and worked to mitigate the future effects of habitat fragmentation by development projects, ensuring regional residential and commercial development could continue unabated by the SKR.



2019

RCHCA completed the most comprehensive SKR Habitat Sustainability Model to streamline management and monitoring, moving forward towards full recovery of the species.



2021

The SKR Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan was completed, the first of its kind for the species, and a monumental significance towards futureproofing the preservation of this keystone species to the Southern California ecosystem.



2022

A result of collaboration among conservation agencies over three decades, in February 2022, the USFWS downlisted SKR from Endangered to Threatened – a status that signifies species recovery through excellent land management practices as outlined in regional HCPs. As such, the RCHCA SKR HCP identifies the practice of successful land management that reduces threats to aid in the recovery of vulnerable species.



This action is based on the Service's thorough review of the best scientific data available, which indicated that SKR no longer meets the definition of endangered under the ESA because significant threats to the species have been significantly reduced, and the species is on its way to being fully recovered.

The downlisting of the species could not have been achieved without the cooperation of many agencies working together to achieve a common goal of recovering the species. This is a considerable step towards delisting the species from the Endangered Species Act, a goal RCHCA will continue to work towards by implementing the SKR Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan.

COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS

The data required to recover SKR fully must be collected consistently throughout the range of the species to determine the population's long-term health. Using funding from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), during the last two years, the RCHCA coordinated a project team consisting of the Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), 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 over 30 partners and stakeholders to develop Southern California's first Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan (Plan) for the Stephens' Kangaroo Rat (SKR), which was completed in April 2021. 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.

In FY 2021/2022, RCHCA began to work on the implementation phase of the Plan. Through a contract with the Santa Ana Watershed Authority (SAWA), RCHCA was able to train additional biologists to expand the territory and the number of grids able to be monitored. After two years of collecting data, a baseline will be used to determine future population density and trends.



Conservation
Biology Institute



San Diego Zoo
Wildlife Alliance



EDUCATION AND OUTREACH



Education is an integral part of habitat conservation that helps people of all ages understand and appreciate our area's natural resources. 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. The RCHCA will be resuming its outdoor educational events in the next fiscal year, which had been postponed since the start of the pandemic.



RCHCA also partners with the California Conservation Corps (CCC) and Boy Scouts of America (BSA) to offer hands-on training and learning opportunities in land management, habitat restoration, and wildlife biology. This past fiscal year, RCHCA hosted Eagle Scouts, who worked on restoring burrowing owl boxes and CCC members who helped to remove invasive Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*) at the Lake Mathews / Estelle Mountain Reserve.

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 :



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

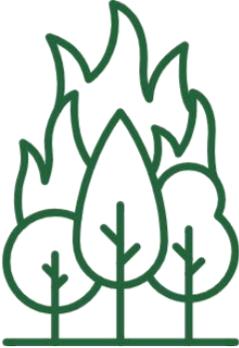
- Assisting the RCHCA with narrowing down range wide survey sites.
- Reviewing new practices and rules associated with the downlisting of the Stephens' kangaroo rat.
- Sharing information about new invasive species in the area and common invasive species control practices.
- Coordinating and reviewing Stephens' kangaroo rat habitat management techniques.

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

RESERVE MANAGER'S TOOLBOX

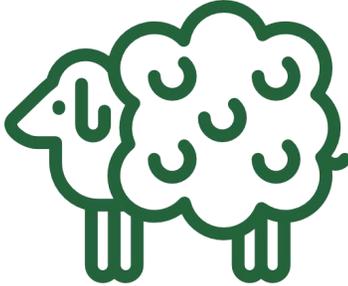
530

ACRES
Burned



2000

ACRES
Grazed
using sheep



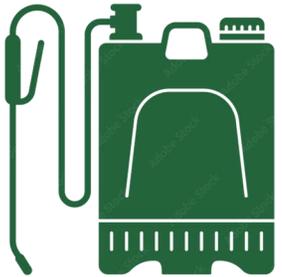
800

ACRES
Mowed



415

ACRES
Treated using
herbicide



Prescribed burns are used to control grass, invasive weeds and maintain the ratio of at least 50% grassland to bare dirt.

Herbicide is used to treat invasive weed populations , such as stinknet, mustard and tamarisk.

Once land management techniques are implemented, treated areas are restored by typically broadcast seeding with native SKR preferred seeds.

For more information on RMCC activities, including meeting minutes and maps of areas managed, please visit www.rchca.us

76

ACRES
Restored



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>	\$1,425,570
<i>Interest Earned on Endowments</i>	\$36,631
	\$654,340

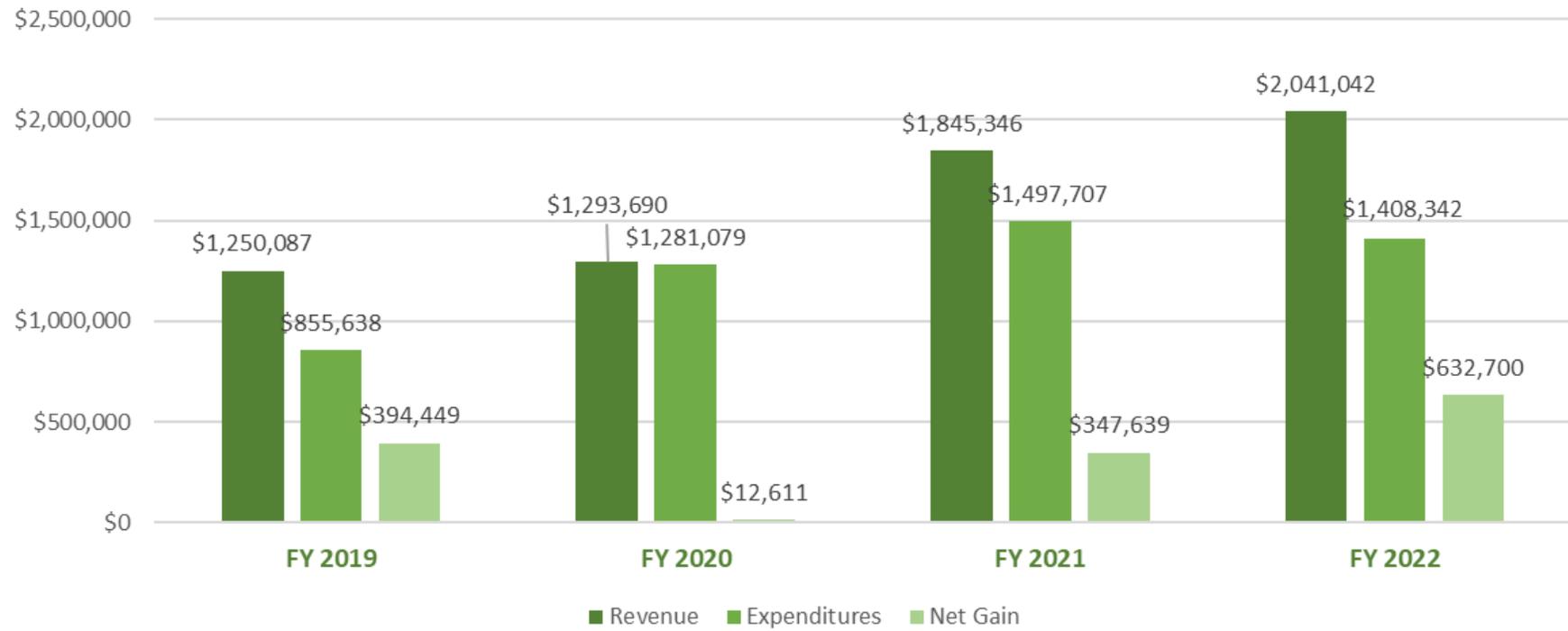
TOTAL REVENUES \$2,041,042

OPERATING EXPENSES

<i>General Operations</i>	\$1,142,788
<i>Lake Mathews Reserve Endowment</i>	\$264,553

TOTAL EXPENSES \$1,408,342

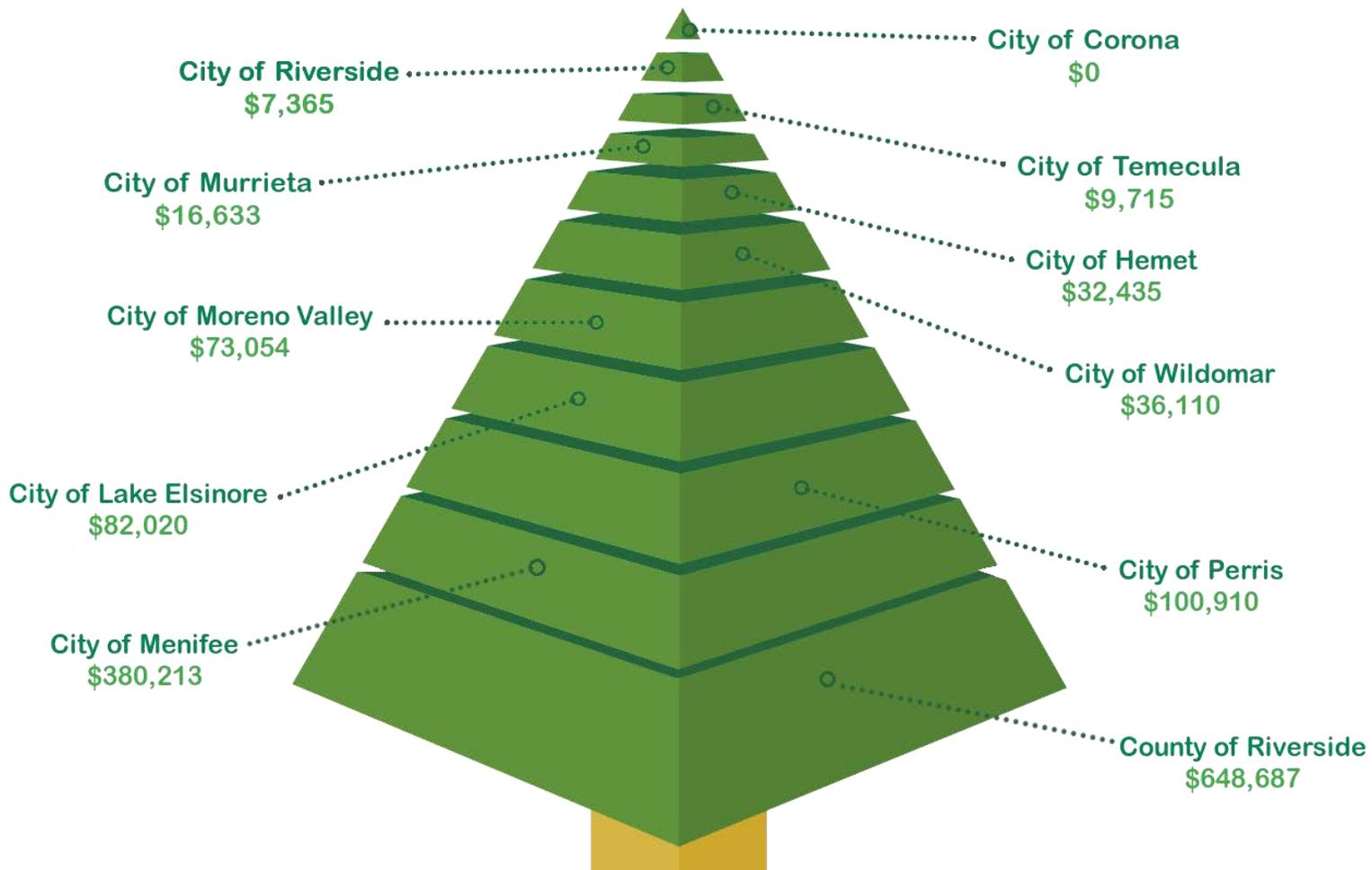
Revenue vs. Expenses Annually



A view of Lake Mathews during annual wildflower 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.



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.

Reserve	Endowment Principal	Fund Balance as of June 30, 2022	Interest Earnings	Dollars Expended in FY 2021/2022
Lake Mathews Wasting Endowment (RCHCA)	\$6,500,000	\$3,957,564	\$11,854	\$280,201
Lake Skinner (SWMSR)	\$500,000	\$533,948	\$1,389	\$0
Lake Skinner (RCHCA)	\$500,000	\$715,259	\$1,860	\$0
Motte Rimrock	\$601,200	\$733,924	\$1,909	\$240
Sycamore Canyon	\$1,000,000	\$1,069,380	\$2,781	\$0



RIVERSIDE COUNTY HABITAT CONSERVATION AGENCY

3390 UNIVERSITY AVE, STE 200
RIVERSIDE, CA 92501
(951) 405-6700
www.rchca.us
@rchcainfo

