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Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Climate Change Program and Policy

I. Introduction

The environmental and land use choices we make today and in coming years will have a profound impact on future conditions in California. Decisions about whether open space should be preserved or developed, or how urban infill interacts with the natural environment, will affect not only our lives, but future generations of California residents. Land use-related climate change policies have the potential to be among the most cost-effective and efficient ways of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Recent reports such as *Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risks* (July 2014) and the *California Water Action Plan* (February 2014) identify various strategies that can reduce the State's short and long term risk. Natural resource protection is a critical component of the State's ability to adapt to climate change and growing population demands, as well as meet its short and long term greenhouse gas reduction goals as articulated in the Global Climate Change Solutions Act of 2006 (AB 32) and related legislation. It is therefore urgent that we act now to preserve open space, restore green spaces in urban areas, clean and recharge our water supply, and protect and restore key habitat and ecosystems.

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy's Climate Change Program ("Program") seeks to support project planning and implementation that addresses the risks and impacts of climate change on Southern California communities and natural resources. The Program will produce verifiable and quantifiable greenhouse gas reductions through the strategic acquisition of open space, parks and urban greening, and water use efficiency projects. The policies and criteria outlined below are designed to produce projects that will yield maximum greenhouse gas reduction benefits and associated co-benefits.

II. Key Facts and Findings

- a) The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Act of 1979 (Division 23 of the Public Resources Code) establishes the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) to acquire, restore, and improve lands of statewide and regional significance and making these lands accessible for public enjoyment.
- b) The Conservancy's geographic and programmatic jurisdiction includes the Santa Monica Mountains Zone, Rim of the Valley Trail Corridor, and Upper Los Angeles River Watershed.
- c) The Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 (AB 32) declares that global warming poses a serious threat to the environment of California and requires California to reduce its total greenhouse gas (GHG) emission levels to 1990 levels by 2020. New legislation, SB 32 (Pavley) proposes to extend greenhouse gas (GHG) emission limits to 2050, with a target of an 80% below 1990 levels.

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- d) AB32 and the Governor's Executive Orders S-3-05 (2005) and S-13-08 (2008) call upon agencies to consider global warming with respect to their proposed actions. SB 535 (de León, 2012) requires that 25% of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund is spent on projects that benefit disadvantaged communities, and at least 10% is spent on projects located in disadvantaged communities. Disadvantaged communities are determined using the CalEnviroScreen tool developed by CalEPA and other entities.
- e) Southern California is experiencing documented adverse changes as a result of global warming and drought. It is predicted that these changes will accelerate, including significant sea level rise and coastal erosion, salinity changes, higher air and water temperatures, altered precipitation patterns, more severe El Niño climate events, increased storm frequency and intensity, greater fire intensity and frequency, increased ocean acidification, loss of key habitat areas and biodiversity, and more.
- f) These changes pose a threat to California's natural resources, and more specifically, to habitats within the Conservancy's jurisdiction. Southern California's natural resources have already been significantly altered and reduced in size due to human activities, and will continue to be affected by changes in climate and development patterns.
- g) Large portions of Los Angeles and the Conservancy's zone are considered disadvantaged as designated by CalEnviroScreen Version 2.0. People who live in disadvantaged communities face health disparities due to poor air quality, exposure to harmful pollution, and lack of public amenities and services. The mandates of SB 535 require immediate investment in such areas to mitigate the disproportionate negative impacts felt in low-income and highly polluted areas.
- h) The Conservancy has been engaged in the protection of open space for thirty five years. Strategic conservation of open space surrounding urban cores reduces sprawl and vehicle miles traveled, and avoids additional greenhouse gas emissions associated with new development. Open space vegetation and soil also acts as a carbon sink. At the same time, open space "buffer zones" around urban areas encourages density and mixed use development in the urban core.
- i) Protection and restoration of key open space also mitigates the effects of climate change and development on fish and wildlife. Southern California is one of the most biologically diverse areas in the United States and contains a higher than average concentration of endangered species.¹ The Conservancy has been successful at preserving habitat and wildlife corridors through developed areas. Continuing these efforts is vital as development increases, and because many species will be forced to migrate due to changing climate conditions.
- j) Urban greening and water use efficiency programs are a cost-effective way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Water recycling and filtration techniques produce verifiable water and energy savings, while urban parks reduce the heat island effect and sequester carbon. Further, strategic development of parks and greenways along waterways and bike paths encourages non-motorized transit and promotes investment in disadvantaged or park-poor neighborhoods.

¹ Dobson, A. P., J. P. Rodriguez, W. M. Roberts, and D. S. Wilcove. 1997. Geographical distribution of endangered species in the United States. *Science* 275: 550-553.

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- k) Implementation of conservation and land use strategies requires collaboration across multiple levels of government, as well as engagement with non-profit and community groups.

III. Climate Change Policy Statements

In consideration of the above Key Facts and Findings, the Conservancy adopts the following policies:

- a. Climate Considerations in Project Selection. The Executive Director and his designees are directed to consider climate change in evaluating projects, in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while continuing to support the mission and purposes of the Conservancy. The Conservancy will adopt guidelines for project selection that will yield a diverse array of projects that further the mandates of AB 32, SB 535, and related legislation.
- b. Quantifiable Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reductions. The Conservancy supports projects that will produce measurable, verifiable greenhouse gas emissions reductions using appropriate and established methodologies and metrics. Where possible, the Conservancy will support the development of such practices and designs through funding and collaboration with other entities.
- c. Multi-level Collaboration. The Conservancy will collaborate with other agencies and governmental entities to develop, support, and implement climate change strategies and projects that minimize or offset impacts to natural resources. The Conservancy will partner with non-profits and NGOs to deliver projects in communities where they are most needed.
- d. Focus on Disadvantaged Communities. The Conservancy has long been committed to delivering projects in low-income and otherwise disadvantaged communities. The need for increased investment in these communities has never been greater, and the Conservancy will devote significant resources to project development and implementation in disadvantaged and park-poor neighborhoods.
- e. Education and Interpretation. To the extent practicable, the Conservancy will provide current information and guidance to grantees and communities on climate change and environmental stewardship information and best management practices.
- f. Conservancy Impacts. Conservancy staff will, where feasible, work toward reducing work-related greenhouse gas emissions. Staff will continue to measure, verify and report its overall GHG emissions and will explore opportunities to offset emissions from Conservancy operations.

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IV. Project Criteria

The following general outline for project criteria is submitted to the Conservancy board for consideration. Staff will develop more particular scoring criteria as the program evolves.

Broadly, the program will support projects that:

- Acquire, preserve, or restore natural areas or ecological reserves at risk due to development patterns in order to improve the long-term health of the region and avoid emissions associated with development;
- Develop parks and greenways in urban areas to mitigate climate change effects and promote public health and recreation;
- Acquire and maintain wildlife corridors and linkages to provide connections between areas of undeveloped lands, particularly significant public lands and key habitat ecosystems;
- Develop or maintain multi-use trails that connect communities, provide access to public resources and help reduce vehicle miles traveled;
- Protect, enhance, or restore water resources including wetlands and urban riparian areas;
- Implement water saving technologies and techniques to yield quantifiable water and energy savings. Such techniques may include the use of drought-efficient landscaping, stormwater filtration, impervious surfaces, green roofs and other forms of water capture and storage.
- Provide climate-related mitigation or improvements within disadvantaged communities;
- Preserve, restore, or enhance habitats that sequester carbon;
- Recognize that wildland fires may be a major contributor to atmospheric carbon dioxide, and implement fire safety mitigation projects where appropriate.
- Demonstrate a reduction in baseline greenhouse gas emissions through other innovative techniques or project designs, such as diverting organic material from landfills;
- Leverage partnerships and resources with local communities, including government entities and non-profits;
- Include non-climate related co-benefits, such as job creation, youth employment and job training, recreation, and public health benefits;
- Engage local communities through outreach, education, and interpretation, particularly as it relates to long-term stewardship and climate change awareness.