

Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Competitive Proposition 1 Grant Program  
Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority  
Chesebro Meadows Habitat Acquisition Project

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## **Project Description**

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) is proposing the fee simple acquisition of 71.26 acres within Chesebro Canyon and part of the regionally significant Malibu Creek Watershed (APNS 2052-009-270 and 2055-010-270). Located just north of the 101 freeway adjacent to Chesebro Road, Chesebro Meadows is one of the last significant properties along the Liberty Canyon wildlife corridor. The subject property is part of multiple conservation planning documents and is integral in preserving water dependent habitats for fish and wildlife within the Santa Monica-Sierra Madre Linkage. The South Coast Wildlands Missing Linkages project has classified this linkage as one of 15 landscape linkages within the ecoregion as irreplaceable and imminently threatened. Preservation of Chesebro Meadows is critical for the functionality of the Liberty Canyon wildlife corridor. The long term survival of species depends on their ability to move between the Santa Monica Mountains and Los Padres and Angeles National Forests to maintain genetic diversity.

APN 2055-010-270 contains part of the natural drainage course of Chesebro Canyon Creek, featuring a rich mosaic of red and arroyo willow canopy and mugwort understory. APN 2052-009-270 is a large topographically diverse parcel characterized by a large virtually flat meadow and surrounded by rolling hilly land. This parcel also features a crucial section of the Rim of the Valley Trail that provides access over the 101 freeway. During exceptionally wet years the alluvial valley floor of APN 2052-009-270 inundates and forms a vernal pool – a rare feature in the Santa Monica Mountains. Both properties provide critical habitat for species and preserve water dependent habitats for flora and fauna within the Santa Monica Mountains-Sierra Madre Linkage Design. Conservation of these parcels ensures vital protection of the upper Malibu Creek watershed and preserves habitat linkages for wildlife and flora in the face of climate change along this key inter-mountain wildlife corridor.

## **Implements California Water Action Plan Objectives**

The acquisition of these two parcels in Chesebro Canyon implements a key California Water Action Plan Objective, restoration of important species and habitat. The upper Santa Monica Mountains encompass an area of great biological richness. Those values, however, are increasingly threatened by the conversion of habitat to human land uses that are incompatible with ecosystem conservation, as well as by invasive species and altered fire regimes. This acquisition project sits along the main entrance into 16,000 acres of Simi Hills

core parkland habitat and is a vital piece in restoring habitat connectivity between the Santa Monica Mountains and the Angeles National Forest via the Simi Hills.

Within a 5 mile radius there is a total of thirty-eight (38) special-status species. All of which are dependent on diverse vegetation and land cover types that occur on the Chesebro Meadows property. Of the 38 special-status species, 20 are special status wildlife, 13 are special-status flora, and 5 are special-status habitat communities. The property is also unique as it supports one of the last examples of a valley oak savannah of any significant size in Los Angeles County. Valley oak savannah is a scarce but visually and ecologically significant plant community. Just over two percent of the Santa Monica Mountains consists of valley oak savannah. Public acquisition ensures that this valley oak savannah continues to support abundant populations of raptors, woodpeckers, western gray squirrels, quail and other savannah species.

The property ridgelines around the valley floor support coastal sage scrub and other kinds of chaparral. The savannah and ridgetop chaparral combine to support the connectivity that wildlife and plant populations need to sustain themselves. The property and the surrounding area has been named in a number of studies as very important to the continued genetic exchange and population replenishment of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties and other parts of Southern California. Acquisition will further help maintain watershed integrity, watershed storage capacity, and habitat connectivity essential to sustaining the flow of organisms and processes across aquatic and terrestrial systems.

## **Site Description**

Located along the main entrance into 16,000 acres of Simi Hills core parkland habitat the subject property lies within Chesebro Canyon and is part of the regionally significant Malibu Creek Watershed which provides habitat for numerous species, including, steelhead trout, the southwestern pond turtle, Arroyo toad, Pacific tree frog, American goldfinches, song sparrows, coyotes, and mountain lions.

The property consists of two parcels. The small 5,360-square-foot parcel on the west side of Chesebro Road is a natural drainage channel part of Chesebro Canyon Creek (about 140 linear feet). This parcel contains a rich mosaic of red and arroyo willow canopy and mugwort understory. The large parcel on the easterly side of Chesebro Road consists of a virtually level 21.9 acre meadow with the remaining 49.36 acres mostly rolling to hilly land. The property is adjacent to the Ventura 101 freeway, Chesebro Canyon Park, and 14 residences in the City of Agoura Hills. Overall, the site is in excellent ecological condition and does not need extensive restoration. The portion of Chesebro Canyon Creek found on APN 2055-010-270 is healthy but it does have the potential for a small scale (up to 0.07 acres) riparian restoration project.

Topographically, Chesebro Meadows is an eastward extension of the alluvial valley floor surmounted by the ridgelines of local hills on the north, east and southern borders of the site. During exceptionally wet years Chesebro Canyon Creek jumps Chesebro Road. This rare and unique hydrological event results in sheet flow filling the alluvial valley floor of APN 2052-009-270. This event inundates the alluvial valley floor and forms a vernal pool capable of supporting multiple species including the federally listed arroyo toad. Vernal pools are a rare feature in the Santa Monica Mountains.

Site soils are of the Linne association (NRCS Web soil survey), which belong to the Order Mollisols and are defined as rich fertile/organic soils that are typical of grassland ecosystems worldwide. More generally, the soils encountered in the northwestern valley portion of the property are alluvial (Heschel West School Final EIR, 2006), which are soils derived from the deposition of silt, clay, sand, and rock by streams along riverbeds, floodplains, and alluvial fans, including those deposits that result from flood events.

The property contains core habitat that supports wildlife movement as well as a rich complex of valley oak savannah, coastal sage scrub, chaparral, and southern willow scrub. The large parcel also contains a small seep capable of supporting cattail marsh. Additionally a combination of aspect, geology, and soils found on the large parcel provide the ideal habitat for round-leaved filaree (*California macrophylla*), considered a rare, threatened, or endangered in California and elsewhere by the California Native Plant Society. Only one other known population remains extant in the region (Reagan Library). Other populations within the region have been lost to development (California Lutheran University expansion). It is worthwhile to protect the property from future private development pressures to ensure that sufficient habitat is provided for the round-leaved filaree and other important species.

## **Public Use**

The project consists of a portion of the Rim of the Valley Trail, which is the main component of the Rim of the Valley Trail Corridor Master Plan of the SMMC (codified by the State Legislature in 1987). The Rim of the Valley Corridor is a planning area circling the north, east, and west edges of the San Fernando and La Crescenta Valleys, and was created to facilitate the development of an interlocking, connected system of public parks, trails, and wildlife habitat preserves within the mountain areas. The Rim of the Valley Trail unifies this system and provides a significant statewide recreational resource as it protects biological and water resources along the corridor. The Rim of the Valley Trail is consistent with conservation planning efforts in that it provides a contiguous wildlife corridor between the Santa Monica Mountains, Simi Hills, and Santa Susana Mountains.

The Rim of the Valley Trail is also recognized and incorporated in the Santa Monica Mountains North Area Plan and the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area

Interagency Trail Management Plan. The subject property must be protected to ensure that the property's recreational benefits and the regional wildlife dependence can be sustained indefinitely for all people and wildlife.

APN 2052-009-270 provides a high quality public access point off Chesebro Road to regionally significant trails and local trails. The portion of the Rim of the Valley Trail on APN 2052-009-270 is a critical Rim of the Valley Trail link. This section of the Rim of the Valley Trail provides the only trail crossing over the 101 freeway. This public access point also connects it to an expansive National Park Service trail network north of Chesebro Meadows.

In addition to the Rim of the Valley Trail, APN 2052-009-270 also provides access to a local trail that connects to the adjacent MRCA Liberty Canyon property (APN 2052-009-900). Because the property borders MRCA property and a local trail is already established between the two properties, the MRCA has the potential to design and upgrade public recreational opportunities within the surrounding area such as hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, and bird watching. The potential trail connection between the local trail and the future Liberty Canyon wildlife crossing will expand trail access over the 101 freeway and Simi Hills.

### **Disadvantaged Communities**

Just 2 miles north of the 101 freeway and 10 miles east of the project area are the park poor communities of Canoga Park, Winnetka, and Reseda. The property provides among the closest and easiest access points to recreation for these communities since it is immediately off the 101 freeway, a primary route used by all residents in immediate and more distant regions. Additionally, the project is located within 1 mile of public transportation. The nearest bus stop is 0.6 miles southwest on Roadside Drive. It's proximity to public transportation allows the property to be accessible to a wide range users from varying economic levels.

The MRCA has experience and success developing public outreach programs to Economically Distressed Areas. This acquisition will further the MRCA's land base and allow it to develop community engagement and reach out to the surrounding park poor communities. Protecting this high quality access point into the Simi Hills creates an easy and encouraging access point to these nearby, lower-income and under-represented communities.

## **Relationship to Existing or Planned Conservation Planning Efforts - Regional and State Conservation Planning Framework**

The property is wholly located within the Santa Monica Mountains Zone as defined by Section 33001 of the Public Resources Code. Section 33001 of the Public Resources Code states:

The Legislature hereby finds and declares that the Santa Monica Mountains Zone, as defined in Section 33105, is a unique and valuable economic, environmental, agricultural, scientific, educational, and recreational resource that should be held in trust for present and future generations; that, as the last large undeveloped area contiguous to the shoreline within the greater Los Angeles metropolitan region, comprised of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, it provides essential relief from the urban environment; that it exists as a single ecosystem in which changes that affect one part may also affect all other parts; and that the preservation and protection of this resource is in the public interest.

Acquisition of the property furthers the goals of the Santa Monica Mountains Comprehensive Plan and CDFW species conservation efforts: CDFW Strategic Plan Theme III – manage wildlife from a broad habitat perspective, and protect drainage courses.

Chesebro Canyon is part of the upper Malibu Creek watershed. This coastal watershed is one of the most ecologically diverse watersheds in Los Angeles County capable of supporting multiple listed species including southern California steelhead. Malibu Creek is listed in the Southern California Coast Steelhead Recovery Plan. Preservation of this upstream property provides multi-benefits to the downstream integrity of the Malibu Creek watershed and improves the total watershed storage capacity. The property is also central to the Los Angeles County-designated Santa Monica Mountains Significant Ecological Area (SEA).

The Project is ranked as a “High” priority within the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy’s current Acquisition Workprogram project. The property also is part of the Rim of the Valley Trail Corridor Master Plan of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area is considered the finest example of a Mediterranean biome within the mainland National Park system, of which only five such biomes exist in the world. This project promotes the conservation goals of many plans that influence connectivity conservation within this unique and treasured biome.

## **Public and Institutional Support**

Accomplishing ambitious conservation goals in the Santa Monica Mountains in the face of immediate and pervasive development threats requires the cooperation, support and commitment of many stakeholders and partners. An important nucleus for this collaborative effort is the Linkage Implementation Alliance focused on the planning and protection of the wildlife corridor known as the Santa Monica-Sierra Madre Linkage. This linkage is one of 15 landscape linkages within the ecoregion identified by the South Coast Missing Linkages Project as irreplaceable and imminently threatened.

The Linkage Implementation Alliance is a very active inter-agency working group that meets quarterly; active participants include CDFW, Caltrans, California State Parks, Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, National Park Service, Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, The Nature Conservancy and South Coast Wildlands. However, other active participants in the Alliance include Ventura County Planning Department, Los Angeles County Planning Department, Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains, Mountains Restoration Trust, and the Biological Resources Division of US Geological Survey.

The Linkage Implementation Alliance has been a crucial player in orchestrating and promoting landscape connectivity between the Los Padres and Angeles National Forests and the Santa Monica Mountains through conservation easements, landowner education, purchasing land from willing sellers, raising conservation awareness, working with city and county planning departments, and other appropriate tools. This project has the full support of the Linkage Implementation Alliance.

Additional support for this project includes the National Wildlife Federation. The National Wildlife Federation is one of the oldest and largest wildlife conservation groups in the country, with 6 million supporters nationwide. They are particularly concerned about the plight of larger mammals, like mountain lions in Los Angeles County, which need expansive contiguous wildlife habitat corridors to survive. Their dedication to preserving Chesebro Meadows is highlighted by the #SaveLACougars campaign and advocating for the preservation of open space and fundraising for the Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing. Saving this property from encroaching development is a vital step in protecting wildlife permeability along the best possible wildlife linkage across the 101 freeway.

## **Project Outcomes – Diversity and Significance of the Benefits**

The MRCA acquisition of these parcels will benefit the flora and fauna within and around the parcels. The subject properties are part of multiple conservation planning documents and preserve water dependent habitats for fish and wildlife within the Santa Monica Mountains-

Sierra Madre Linkage, Rim of the Valley Trail Corridor Master Plan, Los Angeles SEA, and Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Workprogram. These documents are the blueprints to preserving and guaranteeing a functional wildlife corridor between the Santa Monica Mountains and the Simi Hills. The Liberty Canyon wildlife corridor serves as the only documented crossing to ensure genetic viability between the Santa Monica Mountains and Los Padres and Angeles National Forests. Preservation of Chesebro Meadows is critical for the functionality of the Liberty Canyon wildlife corridor. Additionally, this acquisition project safeguards the habitat viability of a quarter of a billion dollars worth of open space investments surrounding Chesebro Meadows. The public acquisition of Chesebro Meadows protects the biodiversity of the area and ensures that there is no artificial impediment to the natural capacity of the watershed to accommodate changes due to drought, flood, or climate change.

### **Project Deliverables**

The project only involves the fee simple acquisition of 71.26 acres in Chesebro Canyon. The property is currently unimproved and largely in its natural condition, however it is under contract for sale by the City of Agoura Hills to a private developer who has indicated plans for a residential subdivision. This transaction however is pending a lawsuit. MRCA staff anticipates that the lawsuit will be dismissed as part of a complete purchase to a conservation agency. Presently the litigation timetable is unclear between the City of Agoura Hills and the plaintiffs. Nonetheless, MRCA intends to be in a position to make a strong formal offer for the purchase.

After the MRCA presents its formal offer for purchase staff should be able to close escrow on the property within a couple of months. The project is expected to be complete by May 2016 contingent on securing Wildlife Conservation Board funds.

### **Monitoring and Assessment**

Qualitative assessments will be gathered in the field after acquisition to assess the health and vigor of habitat to establish a baseline. The MRCA will continue to conduct annual site visits after the acquisition and shall monitor the property for a total of 5 years. Annual site visits will monitor for invasive species, trash and debris, and off-road vehicle use. Site visit reports will be provided to the SMMC upon request.

Additionally, sworn MRCA rangers will regularly patrol the area as part of normal agency operations. Regular parkland maintenance and ranger inputs will provide adequate long-term protection from unnatural disturbances and some natural disturbances such as wildfire. MRCA park rules and regulations will apply to the project sites upon acquisition.

Following an event that causes damage to all or part of the project parcels, field data will be used, in part, to drive management considerations for repair of the damaged areas. The following maintenance and remediation activities will be implemented if needed:

- Identifying and controlling invasive plant species
- Regulating human access that may interfere with the ecological integrity of the project parcels.
- Removing trash and debris.

In the case of any natural disturbances (i.e. fire, storms, wind) the properties will be assessed for habitat enhancement and/or restoration opportunities. If a habitat enhancement and/or a restoration project is to occur on the properties, all necessary regulatory permits (Clean Water Act Sections 401 and 404 and California Fish and Game Code Section 1600) will be obtained prior to project implementation.

Additional inventory or monitoring activities that are expected to continue on the property are the ongoing bobcat, gray fox, and mountain lion radio collar monitoring being performed by National Park Service staff. The vast majority of the land will be preserved in its existing natural state with no restoration activities proposed. The site is in overall excellent ecological condition and does not need extensive restoration. Chesebro Canyon Creek is healthy but it does have the potential for a small scale (up to 0.07 acres) riparian restoration project.

### **Youth Employment Plan and California Conservation Corps**

The project objective is the fee simple acquisition of 71.26 acres in the upper Malibu Creek Watershed (APNs 2052-009-270 and 2055-010-270) containing a portion of Chesebro Canyon Creek to preserve water dependent habitats for the flora and fauna within and around the parcels.. Nevertheless, the MRCA makes every effort to employ both youth and at-risk youth where applicable.

Division 26.7 of the Water Code, Chapter 6, Section 79734 specifies the involvement of the California Conservation Corps (CCC) and the certified community conservation corps (as represented by the California Association of Local Conservation Corps-CALCC). The CCC has determined that it is not feasible to use their services on restoration and ecosystem protection projects that *solely* involve either planning or acquisition. Therefore, consultation with the CCC was not engaged as this project solely involves the acquisition of APNs 2052-009-270 and 2055-010-270.



## **Climate Change Considerations**

Strategically conserving and restoring functional connections between remaining habitat areas is an effective, and cost-effective, countermeasure to the adverse effects of habitat loss and fragmentation, and it is an essential mitigation measure for climate change. The subject 71.26 acres would add to the amount of protected core habitat area available for species to adapt to changing climate conditions.

The property is under threat of development and without public funding development shall disrupt landscape connections for species movements – compromising surrounding conservation investments. If our existing public conservation investments become islands with no connecting landscape to allow movement of species, they will not be able to continue to support animals and plants that currently reside within them or accommodate range shifts due to climate change.

The property is topographically diverse and supports a multitude of habitat communities that are important for supporting biodiversity and for allowing movement of species that must shift their ranges in response to climate change. This project offers SMMC an opportunity to collaborate on an essential climate change mitigation adaption strategy – connectivity conservation.

This strategic public acquisition ensures the property will be preserved for species to adapt to climate change and helps limit the conversion of open space. Therefore limiting sprawl and reducing greenhouse gas emissions associated with development and vehicle miles travelled.

## **Carbon Sequestration**

In order to calculate the carbon sequestration for the project, MRCA utilized the ecoSmart Landscape tool jointly developed by UC Davis, the US Forest Service, and Cal Fire. This model uses tree species, size, and location information with species specific allometric equations to calculate biomass and carbon storage. Tree growth curves are used to forecast future carbon storage rates. The Carbon model is the only model approved by the Climate Action Reserve and California Air Resources Board for quantifying and reporting reductions with their Urban Forest Project Protocol. The tool requires the location, species, and DBH of all trees as inputs and provides the expected growth rate and thus carbon sequestration. MRCA utilized the plant species list provided in the Agoura Equestrian Estates Project Final Environmental Impact Report and the ecoSmart Landscape tool to determine the carbon sequestration potential of preserving Chesebro Meadows.

Based on the Greenhouse Gas Emissions analysis completed for the public acquisition of Chesebro Meadows, over a 40 year time frame the project will result in a carbon reduction of 681 MT CO<sub>2</sub>. Based on the fact that we would expect many of the trees preserved as part of the project would live longer than 40 years and continue to sequester carbon emissions, the total carbon sequestration gain calculated as part of this project present a conservative estimate of the total carbon sequestration potential for this project. This calculation does not account for any future restoration work of the property. The site is in overall excellent ecological condition and does not need extensive restoration. However, the site has great acorn planting potential. Additionally, Chesebro Canyon Creek has the potential for a small scale (up to 0.07 acres) riparian restoration project.

Any future work e.g. additional tree plantings, would only further the carbon sequestration potential of the property. Details on the total carbon sequestration potential for the project are summarized in the table below.

**Carbon Sequestration over 40 years:**

Species	Number of Trees	Lbs. CO <sub>2</sub> Sequestered Per Tree	Total Lbs. CO <sub>2</sub> Sequestered
Quercus Spp.	39	34,310	1,338,090
California Walnut	2	7,793	15,586
Red Willow	14	6,642	109,102
Total			681 MT CO <sub>2</sub>

**Applicant Background and Experience**

The MRCA is a local public agency that was established in 1985 by a joint exercise of powers agreement between the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC), the Conejo Recreation and Park District, and the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District pursuant to the Joint Exercise of Powers Act (Section 6500 et seq. of the Government Code). The MRCA was created in order to acquire, develop, and conserve park and open space lands with a special emphasis on recreation and conservation projects, the protection and conservation of watersheds, and the development of river parkways. The MRCA presently manages approximately 72,000 acres of parks and open space throughout the Santa Monica Mountains, San Gabriel Mountains, Santa Susana Mountains and Antelope Valley, which provide significant statewide recreational and natural habitat benefits to the public as well as wildlife. The addition of Chesebro Meadows is not anticipated to significantly impact existing operations. MRCA maintenance staff and sworn rangers are within the project’s vicinity every day of the year.

MRCA staff has extensive experience with all phases of grant administration and has worked closely with the multiple grantors, including SMMC, on project agreements and invoicing for a great diversity of grant funded projects. For example, recently within the Santa Monica Mountains the MRCA successfully applied and was granted funds from SMMC to acquire 78 acres (APN 4465-004-053 and 4465-005-006) through Proposition 40 grant funds for the Escondido-Ramirez Canyon Connector Acquisition Project. Funding for the Escondido-Ramirez Canyon Connector Acquisition Project was also leveraged by Los Angeles County Proposition A funding and the Coastal Habitat Impact Mitigation Fund from the MRCA.

Additionally, the MRCA has extensive experience in acquiring and managing public lands within the Rim of the Valley Corridor. The MRCA has successfully acquired numerous parcels of land that make up the 4,800-acre Rocky Peak Park and 2,300-acre Michael D. Antonovich Regional Park at Joughin Ranch through grant awards.

### **Budget Justification**

The MRCA seeks to make the fee simple acquisition of APNs 2059-009-270 and 2055-010-270 to ensure permanent protection of these water dependent habitats for wildlife and flora. The total cost of the project is \$6,220,000. The MRCA is requesting \$2,550,000 to cover a portion of the total fee simple acquisition price. The MRCA is also requesting an additional \$20,000 to cover closing costs including escrow and staff time. In total, the MRCA is requesting to apply for a grant up to \$2,570,000 from the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy’s Proposition 1 allotment. The remainder of the acquisition price will be covered by separate funding amounts. Details of the estimated project cost are shown in the following table:

<b>Estimated Project Costs:</b>	
<u>Fee Simple Acquisition Cost</u>	
Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Proposition 1 Grant Funds	\$2,550,000
Wildlife Conservation Board Grant Funds	\$2,550,000
Los Angeles County Proposition A Specified Excess Funds	\$1,100,000
Total Fee Acquisition Cost	\$6,200,000
 <u>Closing Cost*</u>	
Escrow, staff time	\$20,000
 <b>Total Project Cost:</b>	 <b>\$6,220,000</b>

\*Funded through SMMC Proposition 1 Grant Funds