

# **WESTERN RIVERSIDE COUNTY REGIONAL CONSERVATION AUTHORITY**

## **STAKEHOLDERS COMMITTEE MINUTES**

**Wednesday, October 19, 2022**

### **1. CALL TO ORDER**

The meeting of the Executive Committee was called to order by Deputy Executive Director Aaron Hake at 2:03 p.m., via Zoom Meeting ID: 883 5362 1867, in accordance with AB 361 due to state or local officials recommending measures to promote social distancing.

### **2. ROLL CALL**

#### **Members/Alternates Present**

Julie Beeman  
Teri Biancardi  
Brian Bush\*  
Bruce Colbert  
Matthew Liesemeyer  
Tuba Ebru Ozdil  
Allison Renck  
Edwin Sauls  
Dan Silver  
Michael Viramontes

#### **Members Absent**

Ileene Anderson  
Cara Lacey  
Pam Nelson  
Rick Neugebauer  
Nicole Padron

\*Arrived after the meeting was called to order.

### **3. PUBLIC COMMENTS**

There were no requests to speak from the public.

At this time, Committee Member Bush joined the meeting.

### **4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES – MARCH 31, 2022**

**M/S/C (Beeman/Liesemeyer) to approve the Minutes as submitted. There were no objections to this motion.**

### **5. FAIRVIEW FIRE UPDATE**

Tricia Campbell, Regional Conservation Deputy Director, provided a presentation on the Fairview Fire that occurred early in September and the aftermath of it on MSHCP Conservation Lands. The fire began in the area of the intersection of Fairview Road and Bautista Road on September 5<sup>th</sup> and was fully suppressed on September 19<sup>th</sup>. A grand total of 28,000 acres

burned, with almost 23,000 acres of it being MSHCP conservation lands, 6,300 acres were RCA lands.

Almost all of the fire occurred on unincorporated County jurisdiction, with only a small part at the eastern edge of the City of Hemet. During the active fire, MSHCP Park staff was present at the Cal Fire Incident Command Center every day including weekends and available 24/7 by phone. Staff attended morning Daily Briefings and Fire Suppression Repair meetings until activity at the Incident Command Center died down on September 18<sup>th</sup>.

Several times during the fire, MSHCP Park staff communicated with several staff at the Emergency Management Department (EMD). EMD's focus was on evacuation and clearance to have people return to their homes. Park staff made sure all gates and access points were open and known to Cal Fire. A dozer line was installed on RCA's Bautista Canyon property by Cal Fire during the fire.

Since 2019, the RCA and MSHCP Park Staff have identified lands adjacent to structures and access roads and has been in coordination with Cal Fire. The fire stopped at the weed abatement buffer RCA maintains between adjacent private properties. MSHCP Parks staff respond to every weed abatement notice sent from cities and the County and has established a good working relationship with Cal Fire.

In fact, in 2019, MSHCP Parks submitted a grant proposal to receive funds through the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, specifically with funding coming from the California Climate Investments Fire Prevention Grants Program. In 2020 they were awarded \$86,000 to purchase a tract loader tractor with a mower attachment specifically to be used for weed abatement.

The fact there is still some vegetational structure remaining means the fire was not so hot as to scorch the lands. Recovery is more possible when fires are not too hot. MSHCP Park Staff worked directly with the Fire Suppression Repair team to advise and monitor the repair work completed on RCA properties. This work in general included the smoothing out of dirt piles from dozer damage, re-spreading topsoil onto dozer lines, installing water bars on dozer damaged grades and hills to help control erosion, and the grading of damaged roads on the RCA Goodhart and Bautista Canyon properties. Parks staff has been and continues to be in communication and overseeing work performed by other entities such as Southern California Edison and Anza Electric as they repair damaged facilities.

Inspection and resecuring the RCA properties is occurring. Priority is being given to areas that may pose a safety risk for debris flows should rains come through. Gradually, RCA will inventory the damage and determine what restoration activities will be needed to support the recovery of the lands. RCA continues to be in communication with Cal Fire on assessing damage and any other needs or questions they have. The investigation of how the fire began is ongoing. To date, is it known that unusually high activity from both Southern California Edison and Frontier Communications facilities was occurring, however this is all part of the investigation and nothing conclusive is known yet.

RCA has a meeting set with the EMD in October to ensure we know how best to coordinate with them on safety needs during fire or other forms of disaster. RCA is also researching grant opportunities through Cal Fire as well as fire recovery/restoration grant opportunities through the state Wildlife Conservation Board and other entities.

Committee Member Silver expressed his deep concerns over the long-term effects of the fire. It is a myth that fire is “good” for shrub lands in California, it is only true if the fires only occur once every 100 years. If another fire was to come to this same area in 10 or 15 years, there would be no restoration and the land would convert to non-native annual grasses and weeds. The crux of the matter is ignition control, if RCA can buy land in these areas that can help with ignition control because then there aren’t people out there. In that respect, the MSHCP can be seen as a fire prevention mechanism.

A wind driven fire spreads by embers driven by the wind, and fire breaks or fuel breaks would have no effect on these fires. What the defensible space lines do is provide space for fire fighting vehicles to access structures. The fuel breaks are really for access purposes, but weed abatement will not stop a fire from spreading because of the ember factor.

Ms. Campbell noted that any weed abatement that has been performed was based on requirements and weed abatement notices. This is strictly withing 100-feet of structures or access roads. There are circumstances where RCA communicates with County Fire and Cal Fire if there are sensitive resources in a particular area. In those instances some accommodations are made. RCA does not make fuel breaks on MSHCP land. Part of the MSHCP documentation is to annually get all the fire information in the plan area and overlay it onto the MSHCP reserve lands, resulting in a re-occurring fire analysis.

Committee Member Liesemeyer wanted to know if there was a notion that RCA could be doing better in creating fire breaks, possibly helping to ensure preservation and prevention. Ms. Campbell stated that under RCA’s state permits, RCA cannot create floor breaks on properties, as there is not take coverage for that. Part of the process is making sure that there is safety and understanding that bridge between where development occurs adjacent to RCA lands. That makes it important for RCA to be in communication with Cal Fire and EMD to make sure that fires can be stopped as soon as possible.

Ms. Campbell also noted that there are a couple of projects that Cal Fire has wanted to do, not on RCA lands but for fire fuel breaks. There has been some discussion on having some of those fuel breaks between a development and open space lands. RCA has been coordinating with Cal Fire on things they want to accomplish, and it has really been helpful to look at paths for the intended fuel break without encroaching on lands that in or proposed to go into conservation.

Aaron Hake, Deputy Executive Director, stated in summary, RCA is always looking for ways to improve within the bounds of what is allowed by the permit.

Committee Member Renck thanked staff for the presentation and expressed concern that as many of the RCA properties are abutted to dirt roads and opening the gates, gave citizens

another escape route to utilize. That was helpful as there was one way that was totally blocked by the fire. While nothing can stop a wind driven fire, any type of weed abatement RCA can do in a community, even along the dirt roads, creates some type of defensible space for Cal Fire. Where there were the fires up north, they were able to put in some defensible areas to preserve the sequoia trees. Perhaps that is something that RCA could do in the future for some of the more sensitive areas.

Committee Member Ozdil suggested that for weed abatement management talking with local tribes could be helpful for both entities. There are a lot of resources in this region and the local tribes would like the opportunity to talk with RCA and Cal Fire about weed abatement. In Northern California, some tribes work with the fire departments for tribal controlled fires.

Committee Member Silver asked if it would be possible to talk to Ms. Campbell offline about roadside ignition control. There is program in San Diego County to try to make roadsides more resistant to fire. Secondly, the aspect of surveillance. San Diego also has an expansive network of cameras for early detection of fires. Lastly, in Orange County they also have citizens that patrol the roads on red flag days.

Committee Member Sauls thought that some the ideas presented lead to more community involvement and support for the MSHCP. The red flag patrols are highly participated in some areas. Thinking strategically, it seems that there are benefits to conservation and fire and there are funding sources that could be available for RCA. Ms. Campbell stated that because of this fire, RCA has been looking into funding opportunities where RCA might be able to have a fire ecology approach, looking at the natural aspects and how to best complete fire abatement for the ecology of the area, within permit limits. San Diego County was able to bring in more lands to offset the lands they were able to complete fuel abatement on.

Mr. Hake added that all of the Stakeholders Committee input was helpful. The involvement and interest in this topic are mirrored with the Board of Directors, who asked this topic to be placed on this agenda. The suggestions mentioned here will be discussed among staff with any necessary actions going back to the Board.

**This item is for the Committee to receive an update on RCA-owned lands damaged by the Fairview Fire.**

## **6. RCA ACTIONS AND PROGRESS HIGHLIGHTS IN 2022**

David Knudsen, External Affairs Director, provided a presentation on RCA actions and progress highlights in 2022. The goal of the MSHCP through the RCA and state and federal partners is to successfully incorporate 153,000 acres into conservation, completing the overall 500,000-acre reserve, a main goal of the MSHCP. The status of each entity towards the conservation goal through 2021 has RCA with 44% of the 97,000 acres, state with 45% of the 28,000 acres, federal with 33% of the 28,000 acres. Through 2021, the total RCA assembled 64,123 acres, equaling about 42% of the overall 153,000-acre goal. RCA is leveraging all its' resources to assemble the remaining 86,695 acres for the local goal.

As of August 31, 2022, approximately 1,278 acres have been added to the reserve total, with a total investment of about \$5.6 million. It is anticipated that escrow will close on an additional 700 acres before the end of the calendar year. In looking at the entire 500,000-acres goal, RCA is at about 82% of its assembly. Working towards completing the reserve goal, RCA is looking at budget enhancements for law enforcement on RCA-owned land to protect against illegal growers and any other illegal activity.

Looking at ongoing funding opportunities, land acquisition is resourced by funds contributed at the local, state, and federal levels of government. As anticipated by the MSHCP, by far the majority of the funds are derived locally through the Local Development Mitigation Fee (LDMF) and the Transportation Uniform Mitigation Fee (TUMF). RCA also seeks funding from state budgets and through grant programs, like the one received for the Jurupa Mountains provided by Assembly Member Sabrina Cervantes. RCA also seeks out federal grant funds through the Section 6 process, and RCA has been very successful over the years in receiving these funds. Announced just today, RCA will be receiving approximately \$6.7 million in Section 6 grant funding, which includes the federal funding as well as the state match.

Since 2004, RCA has spent more than \$437 million on land acquisitions, the state has spent just over \$105 million, and the federal investment has been about \$68 million. RCA is actively engaged with Senator Diane Feinstein and Representative Ken Calvert of their legislative bills to establish a National Wildlife Refuge in Western Riverside County. The RCA Board of Directors has formally supported both the Calvert bill HR 972 and Feinstein bill S 4669. RCA staff believes the formation of the wildlife refuge will allow for a greater funding opportunity for land acquisition in the MSHCP and more land acquisition adds to the reserve acreage under the federal contribution.

RCA also supports grants efforts to the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) including for the Burrowing Owl and the Mountain Lion. In 2022, RCA was awarded a State Local Assistance Grant (LAG) to study the Quino-Checkerspot Butterfly habitat. The RCA also supports LAG awarded organizations doing work within the MSHCP, like the San Diego Natural History Museum and the University of California, Davis.

LDMF fee-credits for off-site conservation was discussed by the Stakeholders Committee at the March meeting. Following the Stakeholders Committee meeting, the discussion the committee had was shared with the Executive Committee in April. RCA staff summarized that the Stakeholders Committee's did not reach an overall consensus of off-site conservation fee credits, though there was a lot of discussion on the topic. Therefore, RCA staff did not recommend changing RCA's current fee policy, the Executive Committee agreed and moved the item to the full Board of Directors. On May 2, 2022, the RCA Board of Directors affirmed the Executive Committee's action. The Board is interested to hear if the Stakeholders Committee has any new information concerning this issue.

RCA is absolutely engaged in the policy discussions taking place at the state and federal levels of government. Over the year, RCA supported legislation, budget items, and participated in

policy workshops at the state and federal level both directly and via state and federal coalitions RCA belongs to. In the policy area, this includes participating in California's 30x30 strategy development, expanding the Jurupa Mountain state grant acquisition boundary, supporting increases in local assistance grant funding for conservation projects, supporting SB 856 by Senator Dodd which creates a framework for property owners to protect their land from the impacts of wild pigs, and advancing Section 6 reforms so that funds can be used faster and more efficiently.

In addition to RCA's proactive policy engagement, RCA engaged in several discussions on legislation including opposing unless amended AB 2344 by Assemblymember Laura Freidman. While the bill does promote wildlife connectivity across the state, it unfortunately creates a review and remediation process that are somewhat duplicative of the Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) like the MSHCP.

With support from the Board, RCA staff has worked on 73 different advocacy actions to engage in the policy and budget process to support RCA's mission and the goals of the MSHCP. Arguably, the RCA is the most active and engaged HCP across the state. RCA staff will be headed to Washington, D.C. at the end of the month to meet with Martha Williams, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, congressional committee staff, and budget office staff to promote the value of HCPs and RCA's work in Western Riverside County.

Increasing public awareness and knowledge about the MSHCP and the work that RCA is doing was a major goal of the Board of Directors when RCTC became the managing agency of RCA. RCA's social media growth has been vast since RCTC became the managing agency, with a 586% growth in Facebook followers, 236% growth in Twitter, and 156% growth in followers on Instagram. Between all three social media platforms, the quarterly average of engagement reach has grown substantially. RCA publishes a monthly newsletter, *The Vista*, since January 2021 the subscriber list has grown by 127% to 1,447 subscribers. More than 71 *Vista* articles have been published through the RCA blog. The RCA website also continues to grow with the average number of sessions breaking the 10,000-record set in the last quarter. The number of unique visitors was over 7,000. RCA is also working on a special project targeting students so they can learn more about the MSHCP, protected species, and enjoying open space.

RCA is engaged in supporting member agencies. The Board of Directors has approved an updated fee manual and RCA continues the consistent and open communication with outreach to the cities and the county. RCA recently initiated permittee training and fee training will be rolling out in early 2023.

The RCA has been very busy over the last two years since RCTC became the managing agency. The work that has been accomplished is exciting, but RCA will not stand still.

**This item is for the Stakeholders Committee to receive a verbal presentation highlighting Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority actions and progress in 2022.**

## 7. STAKEHOLDERS COMMITTEE SURVEY RESULTS

David Knudsen, External Affairs Director, provided a presentation on the 2022 Stakeholders Committee survey. As part of the ongoing commitment to working with stakeholders, Chair Johnson asked for input from the Stakeholders Committee on possible items for RCA to consider in 2023. Last week, a survey was sent to the Stakeholders Committee.

Question 1: My top desire for RCA in the coming year. The top selection was to acquire more land to fulfill RCA's obligations under the MSHCP.

Question 2: If budgetary resources are available, what enhancements to current RCA activities do you recommend that the RCA Board of Directors prioritize (Choose up to 3). The top selection was increased advocacy (lobbying) for state and federal funding legislation in support of the MSHCP. The second top response was to acquire more habitat to protect MSHCP-covered species.

Question 3: My top concern about the MSHCP is. The top response was RCA has acquired less than half of the habitat acreage necessary to fulfill the local obligation under the MSHCP.

Question 4: What are the best ways for you to learn more about the MSHCP. The top response was "Species of the Month" and "Getting to Know the MSHCP" presentation at Committee meetings. The second most chosen response was one-on-one briefings with RCA staff.

Question 5: Would your organization be willing to support the RCA through state and federal legislative advocacy efforts. Of the 8 that responded, all stated they would.

Question 6: One word I would use to describe RCA and the MSHCP. The responses included conservation, focused, overpowering, hope, habitat, uncertain, busy, needs to consolidate effort too much government, unsound, and antiquated.

Committee Member Sauls thought it looked like the focus was on the desire to finish the completion of the 153,000 acres and to support lobbying and other financing sources for that. The Stakeholders Committee has a variety of skills that may be helpful in achieving those goals. Since all who responded said they would be willing to support the RCA through state and federal legislative advocacy efforts, a good, focused discussion on those subjects with the committee members brainstorming in assisting RCA would be fruitful and productive.

Committee Member Silver attested to the fact that RCA has been working hard on state and federal funding, RCA has been seen in action in few coalitions he sits on. The key to the federal dollars is getting the Feinstein/Calvert bill passed this year. RCA has found a lot of success this year in getting state dollars using the 30x30 and climate program. The Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) has more money than they have ever had, on their November agenda, there are three items for over \$20 million that are not for single properties but for restoration projects. WCB is now seemingly open to innovative proposals. A one-on-one meeting with the head of the WCB to see what RCA can do to bring forth an ambitious, charismatic proposal.

There is a substantial chunk of WCB money about \$60 million that has been loosely earmarked for several things, and in particular, tribal partnerships. This could be a synergistic approach to be able to bring forth a tribal partnership in RCA's efforts.

Committee Member Bush shared that there are a lot of investment companies, called Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), that are using private equity funds to invest in projects via partnerships for long-term sustainability. This route could be a potential funding source for RCA.

Aaron Hake, Deputy Executive Director, wanted to know from the committee, with the survey showing a willingness to advocate, if the organizations represented would have the leeway or ability to advocate on RCA's behalf.

Committee Member Renck stated that she represents a community and a non-profit organization. The community, if approached in the correct way, because a lot of the habitat land is in that rural area, there could be some driven support. The community members are very conservation-minded, and they do like the habitat land in the area. Going at the Stakeholders Committee in broader terms, perhaps it is not just the individual organization that can back the RCA, but also going to the public for a writing campaign.

Committee Member Sauls noted that the organizations he represents or participates in would be able to advocate on behalf of the RCA. There is a history with the Building Industry Association and some non-profits like the Land Conservancy. They would be willing to pay their own expenses to go to Sacramento to advocate.

Committee Member Ozdil stated that this would need to be brought to the tribe and the tribal council. Once the information was presented, the tribe would make a recommendation for consideration.

Mr. Hake reiterated that this request is timely because of the amount of money that is being putting into the system at this moment. Everyone across the state can smell the money and are going for it in this unprecedented situation. The state is creating the process for distribution in real time which makes for confusion, but also opportunities.

Committee Member Sauls wanted to know with the results of the questionnaire how would RCA be moving ahead and if they would pursue additional Stakeholders meetings or creating different sub-groups. Mr. Hake noted that following this discussion, RCA staff will package up this information for the Board of Directors as they consider their plans for the next year. The Board will decide the next steps to take. Another consideration is that this committee is required to meet twice a year, at the call of the Chair of the Board of Directors.

Committee Member Sauls thought that sounded like a positive going forward, but it sounds like that puts the Stakeholders not getting together until next year, putting them behind as far as going after state funding. There should be something more immediate the Stakeholders can



do. Mr. Hake added as reported in the previous item, advocacy efforts at RCA are ongoing and constant so there would be no lag in any level of effort. The issue of what the obligation of the Stakeholders Committee would be, now that interest has been gaged, you could possibly see an email from RCA asking for support or additional advocacy.

**This item is for the Stakeholders Committee to receive a verbal presentation summarizing the Stakeholders Committee members survey results.**

## **8. COMMITTEE MEMBER / EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORTS**

Aaron Hake, Deputy Executive Director, introduced Aaron Gabbe, Regional Conservation Director, who started at RCTC today. Mr. Gabbe will be leading the Regional Conservation Team with Tricia Campbell, working on the implementation and monitoring of the MSHCP.

Mr. Gabbe stated he appreciated hearing everyone's feedback and comments, it was inspiring, and it is a great way to kick-off his tenure at RCA.

RCA Board Chair Natasha Johnson commented that this meeting was very helpful for her, and she appreciated hearing what the Stakeholders' priorities were. This information is for the Board as they get ready to set the priorities for the next year. The feedback is invaluable. She also thanked the Stakeholders' Committee for their time and feedback.

Tomorrow, Congressman Ken Calvert has invited RCA to a roundtable discussion with Congressman Bruce Westerman (AR), a ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee. This presents an advocacy opportunity for RCA to highlight some of the things that RCA is doing well, including finding a balance between conservation and development of infrastructure.

## **9. ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business for consideration by the Executive Committee, Deputy Executive Director Hake adjourned the meeting at 3:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Lisa Mobley  
Administrative Services Manager/  
Clerk of the Board