

WESTERN RIVERSIDE COUNTY REGIONAL CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING MINUTES

Monday, July 1, 2024

1. CALL TO ORDER

The Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority Board of Directors Meeting was called to order by Chair Kevin Bash at 12:30 p.m., in the Board Room at the County of Riverside Administrative Center, 4080 Lemon Street, First Floor, Riverside, California, 92501.

2. ROLL CALL

Board of Directors/Alternates Present

Kevin Jeffries
Karen Spiegel
Yxstian Gutierrez
Colleen Wallace
Julio Martinez
Dale Welty
Carole Kendrick
Leslie Altamirano*
Natasha Johnson

Lesa Sobek
Ulises Cabrera
Ron Holliday
Kevin Bash
David Starr Rabb
Patricia Lock Dawson
Crystal Ruiz
Joseph Morabito

Board of Directors Absent

Chuck Washington
V. Manuel Perez
Jeff Cervantez
Tony Daddario
Jocelyn Yow
James Stewart

*Arrived after the meeting was called to order.

3. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Board Member Lock Dawson.

4. PUBLIC COMMENTS

There were no requests to speak from the public.

5. ADDITIONS / REVISIONS

There were no additions or revisions to the agenda.

6. CONSENT CALENDAR - All matters on the Consent Calendar will be approved in a single motion unless a Board Member(s) requests separate action on specific item(s).

M/S/C (Wallace/Morabito) to approve the following Consent Calendar items.

6A. APPROVAL OF MINUTES – JUNE 3, 2024

6B. WESTERN RIVERSIDE COUNTY MULTIPLE SPECIES HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN FEE COLLECTION REPORT FOR APRIL 2024

This item is for the Board of Directors to receive and file the Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP) Fee Collection report for April 2024.

6C. JOINT PROJECT REVIEW STATUS REPORT

This item is for the Board of Directors to receive and file the Joint Project Review (JPR) monthly status report as of May 31, 2024.

6D. MONTHLY INVESTMENT REPORT FOR APRIL 2024

This item is for the Board of Directors to receive and file the Monthly Investment Report for the month ended April 30, 2024.

7. STATE AND FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Tyler Madary, Legislative Affairs Manager, provided an update on state and federal legislative actions. On June 22nd, the Governor and the legislature reached an agreement on the Fiscal Year 2024/25 Budget, which was signed by the Governor on Saturday. The \$297.9 billion spending plan uses a combination of cuts, spending deferrals, tapping into reserves, as well as pauses on some tax credits to address the existing \$45 billion shortfall in the upcoming budget year, and the projected shortfall of over \$30 billion for the following budget. The final budget includes a claw back of \$219 million from the past three fiscal years for the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) programs. The budget also reduces the impact to the general funds by shifting \$171 million in WCB program funds from the general fund to the greenhouse gas reduction fund. These cuts and shifts in funding to WCB build upon cuts made to nature-based solutions and climate change in the FY 23/24 Budget, including funds for land acquisition which RCA relies on.

The Legislature and the Governor reached an agreement over the weekend for a proposed climate and natural resources bond measure to backfill cuts made to climate resiliency funding. The Legislature has until July 3rd to place bonds on the November ballot. The \$10 billion bond proposal has various purposes that would be eligible for funding and range from water and droughts, wildfire and forest management, and coastal resiliency. Most pertinent to the MSHCP, is that the proposed bond would direct \$870 million to the WCB for various 30x30 priorities, including land acquisition and habitat conservation. The agreement is now reflected in the recent amendments to SB 867 by Senator Ben Allen. RCA took a support position for this bond proposal and the companion proposal by Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia, last year. RCA and the California Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) Coalition have signed a support letter for the bond agreement today.

RCA's advocacy to increase Section 6 HCP land acquisition funding continues in partnership with the National Habitat Conservation Plan Coalition (NHCP). RCA staff and the NHCP continue to engage in follow-up meetings and advocacy after the trip in April to Washington, DC.

At the recommendation of Shannon Estenoz, the Department of Interior Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, RCA and NHCP coordinated a meeting with Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) program staff at the National Park Service to explore alternative uses for the state grant funds including for HCP's land acquisition. However, LWCF program staff contend that parks face a high need, and these funds cannot afford shifting to any other purposes including those that RCA are interested in. RCA along with NHCP will continue their efforts to members of Congress as a part of continued advocacy for increased HCP Land Acquisition funding.

Board Member Spiegel thanked staff for staying focused on RCA's area of interest and wanted to know if there were any other thoughts on possible additional claw backs. Tyler Madary noted that no further claw backs were anticipated, but whether the option of a potential bond measure will be placed before voters is an attempt by the Legislature and the Governor to backfill some of the cuts that were made.

Aaron Hake, Executive Director, added that the concern will be if the state has another budget deficit next year and so on, and if the deficit continues to grow each year. RCA will have to remain vigilant and walk in as many grants as possible now to get them through the process and better prepare RCA if there are further budget cuts in the future.

At this time, Board Member Altamirano joined the meeting.

Chair Bash hoped that the Board Members could get out and look at the RCA properties as much as possible. The RCA has been taken for granted, the reality is there was a time when they would pave over everything. This plan is not for us, but for our children and grandchildren, this is a legacy and the one of the most important things that someone can do.

This item is for the Board of Directors to receive and file an update on state and federal legislative affairs.

8. ACQUISITIONS STATUS REPORT

Hector Casillas, Right of Way Manager, provided a presentation on Right of Way Acquisition Overview and Status Report. A great deal has been accomplished since RCTC took over as managing agency of RCA in 2021. One of the Board's mandates, that has already been fulfilled, was to prioritize acquisitions by fully staffing a team of real estate professionals.

On the organization chart, the Right of Way Department falls under the Capital Projects and Project Delivery Division, led by the Project Delivery Director, Erik Galloway. The Right of Way Department is comprised of a Right of Way Manager and 6 analysts. There are 3 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) assigned to RCA and 3 for RCTC. The 3 analysts that work for RCA are Monica

Tlaxcala, Angela Ferreira, and Susan Park-Robinson. All Right of Way staff are members and participate in professional development opportunities with the International Right of Way Association. To meet the demands of the various projects that are managed, RCA relies on the help of consultants which are considered an extension of staff.

The Right of Way Department has acquired and added to the Additional Reserve Lands (ARL) a total of 6,636 acres, for a combined value of \$138 million. Staff have been able to successfully acquire properties by listening, negotiating, building relationships, and working closely with property owners or their representatives.

RCA utilizes three kinds of acquisitions which include willing seller, grant funded, and Habitat Acquisition Negotiation Strategy (HANS). Willing seller acquisitions include properties where the property owner has offered their property for sale to RCA or are listed on the open market. However, in February 2023, RCA placed a pause on any new willing seller acquisitions due to the new and expensive HANS acquisitions. Of note, willing seller acquisitions are not required to be purchased unlike HANS acquisitions.

Grant funded acquisitions are acquisitions of properties that were included within a grant application. RCA is currently managing the Non-Traditional Section 6 Grant Program and the Jurupa Mountains Conservation Grant. The process for grant properties differs from willing sellers or HANS acquisitions. Grant properties have strict deadlines and require coordination with other agencies. RCA efforts with grants has been successful as we have been able to secure some large grants at the state level.

HANS properties are split into two sub-categories, Development HANS and Non-Development HANS. For both, the entire property or a portion of the property deemed for conservation must be acquired by the RCA after the Joint Project Review (JPR) process is complete, as outlined in Section 6.1.1 of the MSHCP. If the findings deem any portion necessary for conservation, staff begins the 120-day negotiation period which often extends past the original term.

Under Development HANS, RCA and the property owner may enter the 120-day negotiation period to acquire the property. After a purchase price has been agreed upon, the close of escrow is determined by the purchase price and the availability of funding. Under the Non-Development HANS, a development is not proposed, and the property is acquired on a first-come first-served basis, as funding permits. If the market value offer is not agreed upon, staff has a conflict resolution process which has been utilized a handful of times since 2021. The details for the conflict resolution process have been included in the agenda item.

Since 2021 there has been a shift from willing sellers to HANS and grant acquisition properties. By the end of 2021, willing sellers made up more than 40% of the workload, but today represent less than 10%. HANS represented 25% in 2021, and today they are almost 45%. A similar increase in grant properties has also been noted. For full transparency to the Board and public, RCA staff reports each month an item that discloses the number of properties being processed through RCA, including location and their representative.

As of May 31, 2024, there are 416,977 acres of conserved lands, which leaves 83,023 acres of ARL to be acquired. Overall, staff is fulfilling the Board's directive from the managing agency transition.

Board Member Spiegel wanted to know if the purpose of pausing the willing seller process was because the cost of HANS properties was increasing. Hector Casillas confirmed that was correct.

Board Member Spiegel also wanted to know what would happen when the cost of the HANS properties become more than RCA can handle and if RCA was required to purchase the properties.

Hector Casillas noted that staff starts with estimates whenever a project is created. If staff thought there would be a funding issue they would immediately be in communication with Finance. At this time, the RCA has not yet run into that scenario, but are approaching the limit. RCA is required to purchase the Development HANS properties.

Board Member Spiegel thought the escrow closing guidelines for Development HANS was dated as it only accounts for purchase prices ranging from \$100,000 to \$400,000. Hector Casillas agreed that it was very rare to get Development HANS properties that were that low in value, as most properties are in the \$300,000 and above range. Though staff may see a property less than that about once a year.

Aaron Hake, Executive Director, noted that the MSHCP was written in the early 2000's, so thinking on the property values back then, the range was appropriate. The document the RCA is dealing with has those values fixed, which is a symptom of some of the challenges.

Board Member Johnson wanted to know with the 40% increase in the HANS process if it would be fair to say that those with an understanding of the process are weaponizing it against the RCA. Hector Casillas believes that would be a fair assessment.

Board Member Johnson also wanted to know if based on the information that was gathered for the Board, did it show that there were multiple HANS properties that were represented by one group or representative. Hector Casillas noted that there was an attachment with the agenda item that showed the pending properties, and their representatives are listed, there is a company, The Sauls Group, who represent many of the acquisitions.

Aaron Hake noted that at the last Board meeting it was requested that this item be brought forward to provide an update on the progress of acquiring habitat for the MSHCP. This was a priority of the Board in the managing agency transition. RCA is continuing to do a lot with what is available, and staff will continue to do that. The grant properties chosen are backed with strategic thinking and what RCA thinks will compete the best. On page 28 of the agenda packet, you can see that the RCA Right of Way team is very busy and there are a lot of properties in the queue at any given time.

Board Member Ruiz wanted to know if the increasing price of land would affect willing sellers, and if they could get more from a private sale versus RCA. Hector Casillas stated it would depend on zoning of the property, what the potential uses of the land are, and what the city and county is doing in their general plan. The appraisal process for a willing seller and HANS property are the same for RCA.

Aaron Hake noted that Board Member Ruiz had a great point in that willing seller property owners will hold on selling to RCA and come back at a later date. Instead of using the willing seller process, they'll instead use the HANS process to force RCA's hand. There have been several properties that RCA had previously negotiated on or did appraisals on as a willing seller several years ago, but now that the land value has increased, they will come in under the HANS process.

Board Member Jeffries stated that while he agrees that this process has been weaponized, RCA did take away the ability for owners to use their property. RCA created this nightmare by virtue of taking away private property rights. Now RCA is upset that these owners have figured out how to manipulate the game and come back to RCA to attempt to get the maximum amount of money for what was taken away. RCA is the victim of its' own success, yet the process is being manipulated and this same process requires RCA to buy disturbed land that has no endangered species on it, because the plan says so.

Aaron Hake stated that the next agenda item for discussion will cover where the RCA is in the assessment of the MSHCP, and changes that will require the wildlife agencies to weigh in.

This item is for the Board of Directors to receive and file the acquisition overview and status report as of May 31, 2024.

9. STRATEGIC IMPROVEMENT ASSESSMENT AND ACTION PLAN UPDATE

Aaron Gabbe, Regional Conservation Director, provided an update on the Strategic Improvement Assessment and Action Plan. The Western Riverside MSHCP is an ambitious plan, vital to supporting smart regional growth in Western Riverside County while protecting threatened and endangered species and their habitats for future generations of Western Riverside County residents.

The plan was developed more than 20 years ago, so while the MSHCP remains as important today as it did when it was adopted, some of the assumptions used to develop the plan are no longer accurate. It was always anticipated that the MSHCP would need to be refined as conditions changed. Examples of outdated assumptions that affect implementation of the MSHCP include:

- The pace of development and corresponding revenue through development fees has not happened at the level assumed by the MSHCP;
- Land acquisition costs are considerably higher than anticipated in certain regions of the plan area;

- The extent of land donated or exchanged for incentives through the development review process has not happened at the level assumed by the MSCHP;
- Some areas described for conservation have been developed since original baseline assessments of the plan area were made; and
- The pace of State and federal funding for habitat acquisition has been less than what was expected to complete the state and federal commitments in the MSHCP.

These outdated assumptions are, among other issues, affecting MSHCP implementation. For example, the development HANS process and corresponding conservation strategy provides little flexibility to the RCA to make acquisition decisions based on habitat quality or cost. This is because the spatial consideration configuration and the size of the reserve system is just as important to the ecological functions as the current habitat quality on the ground. Assembling the reserve system is like putting together a 10,000-piece puzzle of parcels with each new piece dependent on the other pieces, limiting flexibility. The HANS process determines which properties the RCA must acquire, which can vary greatly in price, and when the RCA must acquire them, generally within 4 years. However, fee revenue is not related to specific HANS acquisitions, so there may be a mismatch between fee revenue and the cost of HANS properties that the RCA must acquire. This could force the RCA to expend its limited resources in a manner and pace that may not result in the most effective way to achieve the goals and objectives of the MSHCP, particularly those related to reserve assembly.

On January 8, 2024, the RCA Board of Directors authorized an agreement with ICF Jones & Stokes (ICF) to prepare the Strategic Improvement Assessment and Action Plan (SIAAP). This presentation provides a brief update on consultant work through June 2024, by the ICF Team. The primary objective of the study is to identify and recommend pathways that the RCA and the other permittees may take to improve MSHCP implementation flexibility while maintaining financial stewardship and permit compliance. The study is focusing on the HANS process and related aspects of MSHCP implementation, though ultimately solutions may result in other changes to the MSHCP implementation process, as many aspects of the MSHCP are interrelated.

The consultant is evaluating all the elements of the development HANS process to identify factors that limit the RCA's flexibility in the land acquisition process. It should be clear that the SIAAP is simply a study and does not change the MSHCP. The SIAAP does not "re-open" the MSHCP or the permits issued by the wildlife agencies. The study will suggest recommended alternatives to address identified problems that staff will present to the Board, with the understanding that the Board will provide direction to RCA staff on how to proceed based on the results of the study and recommendations by RCA staff. Ultimately, RCA do not know that the study will find, so we do not know what changes the SIAAP study may recommend.

There are three phases to the consultant team's approach. Each phase will consider three overarching goals of the SIAAP: 1) improved implementation flexibility; 2) financial stewardship for the RCA; and 3) long term MSHCP permit compliance. The consultant team is in the first phase, the Assessment Phase. The purpose of the Assessment Phase is to organize information to identify and highlight sources of the HANS process-related issues. The outcomes will be clear

descriptions of how and why each issue is causing challenges; and comparisons with how similar issues have been addressed in other plans to provide ideas for the Improvements Phase.

The purpose of the Improvements Phase is to work collaboratively through a series of workshops with the RCA and wildlife agencies to create a common and detailed understanding of the primary issues causing the greatest HANS process-related challenges for the RCA and collaboratively develop and vet ideas to address each issue. The outcomes will be a prioritized set of strategic improvement options to address each issue. The prioritized set of strategic improvement options will provide the basis for development of the Action Plan.

Finally, the Action Plan Phase is to distill the information gathered in the Assessment Phase and the prioritization and depiction of ideas developed in the Improvements Phase to generate a clear set of alternative potential improvements and solutions to the HANS-related challenges. The outcome will be a complete SIAAP document with recommendations presented as a set of discrete actions that the RCA can implement to achieve strategic improvements. RCA does not expect that the recommended improvements will be easy, but the SIAAP will make it clear why the recommended changes are necessary. Potential adjustments represent the important next steps to ensure the long-term viability of the MSHCP, and the benefits of permit streamlining, and regulatory assurances needed for enduring economic health and the environmental security of the region.

Primary activities that the consultant has undertaken include:

- Interviews with RCA Board Chair Kevin Bash and former Board Chair Natasha Johnson, Executive Directors of the RCA past and current, RCA staff, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and California Department of Fish and Wildlife to better understand the intricacies of the MSHCP, implementation challenges, and to identify and vet potential solutions and recommendations.
- Reviewed the MSHCP and extensive documentation and supporting materials to better understand implementation challenges and identify alternative solutions, including the Implementing Agreement, 2020 Nexus Study, RCTC/RCA Right of Way and land acquisition policies and procedures, and past appraisals among others.
- The consultant team has also been gathering and analyzing data on revenue and land acquisition costs, zoning in Western Riverside County and the cities to identify trends in costs and to compare findings with the cost estimates and assumptions from the original 2004 MSHCP and the 2020 Nexus Study.
- Identify and describing the breadth and scope of development HANS-related implementation challenges that may affect the RCA and Permittee's ability to achieve the goals, requirements, and functions as intended by the MSHCP.

The next steps in the SIAAP process include

- Completion of the Assessment Phase and summarization of the findings in a memo;
- An RCA Stakeholder Meeting, on July 24th, to update the stakeholders on the SIAAP and elicit feedback from the stakeholders on the HANS and land acquisition process, and related MSHCP implementation challenges;

- An RCA staff Workshop led by the consultant team to establish and gain common understanding of the HANS-related issues and underlying mechanisms causing the issues and to begin identifying potential solutions; and
- Begin Improvements Phase to identify and categorize potential types of changes that could be made to improve the HANS-related implementation processes.

RCA staff will also be providing updates to the Board and the Executive Committee throughout the work period ending in March 2025, with the next update due to the Board in September.

Board Member Holliday recalled a property that RCA purchased last year that was bordered on the east by a housing track and on the west by I-15, that had no quality habitat whatsoever, and wanted to know how that fit in the 10,000-piece puzzle. There was nothing surrounding it that connected it to anything. Aaron Gabbe noted that this property was part of the puzzle when the plan was created in 2004 using baseline information of the landscape that was even a little old then. It fit in at that time, but as described it would not fit in quite as well now.

Board Member Holliday also wanted to know if the consultant would be speaking to each of the Board Members. Aaron Gabbe stated that it was anticipated that the consultant would speak to the Board Chair and Past Chair but are happy to have them speak with other Board Members if needed.

Aaron Hake, Executive Director, added that if there are Board Members interested in speaking with the consultants, staff is happy to arrange that.

Board Member Holliday expressed interest and thought some of his colleagues would be interested as well. Last year it was proposed that if a property like the one was mentioned earlier happened to come up, the RCA could have a rule change that a criteria refinement could be used to remove a piece that does not fit in favor of one that does. With four years to purchase the property, that should give RCA enough time to make that happen and if the owner wanted to develop, they could.

Aaron Gabbe stated that the recommendation made last year has been included and RCA does evaluate that option as the plan permits.

Board Member Jeffries did not need to speak with the consultant but thought the consultant should speak to Juan Perez from the County of Riverside, who was around when the plan was formulated, and the bulk of the acquisitions are occurring in unincorporated Riverside County.

Chair Bash asked Board Member Jefferies to elaborate on his previous comments where RCA is forcing people to sell.

Board Member Jeffries stated that when you own private property, and a government entity takes away your ability to use or develop it, it is a taking. The question is when you buy private property after the government has already implemented a taking, what level of compensation are you entitled to when you knowingly bought property you cannot develop. That is a second

issue that the consultants should evaluate, are you really entitled to full compensation when you knowingly bought a piece of property that had already been diminished in value.

Chair Bash wondered about cases where there is biodegraded property, because RCA's hands are tied by state and federal agencies, RCA is not able to say no.

Board Member Jefferies agreed and stated that at the end of the day, you have an injured private property owner who lost the use of their private property, that they are still required to pay taxes on and in some cases must insure. There are also certain mandates that must be met, in other states that do not have these mandates, it is every landowner for themselves, and they must fight the wildlife agencies on their own. As a collective body in this county, it was determined that was not the best way to go and this coherent effort was formed. Even still, at the end of the day, RCA owes those property owners for the loss of their land. Holding them up for multiple years does not exactly seem fair, but RCA is also being taken advantage of by someone who knows how to manipulate the plan.

Board Member Spiegel shared the whole issue is where the manipulation is happening, and it is really frustrating that RCA has nothing to do with it. It is a hope that when this plan is revisited, safeguards are put in place to protect against the bad things that are currently happening. RCA should have learned this lesson and not let it happen again.

Board Member Johnson encouraged any of the Board Members who wanted to speak to the consultants to do so, it was about a 30-minute interview. If you are familiar with the plan you can dive in and have your concerns heard as the consultants have done their homework. Board Members also need to remember, while the desire is to fix the plan, there also needs to be state and federal approval to do so. There are permits in place that if changed, RCA could lose what they currently have. It is not a matter of just fixing the HANS or any other process that is no longer serving the RCA or has been manipulated. It is about getting our partners to understand where the issues are so RCA can find a plan that works.

Chair Bash thought the state and federal agencies were probably in opposition to RCA. The idea that we need to be good ancestor is an important one.

Aaron Hake stated that this has been a healthy discussion, and it really helps RCA staff as we advance through this next phase of the assessment. Arrangements will be made for those Board Members that want to engage with the consultant, and the consultant will also be connecting with Juan Perez. RCA staff takes all these comments seriously and we all can agree that something needs to be done. We have inherited a great plan, while we have talked a lot about its' flaws, back in 2004 when it was signed, it was a visionary ambitious plan and something that had never been done before on this scale. This plan was done to provide regulatory certainty, and consistency to development and transportation here. Any plan this complex is not going to be implemented the way everyone assumed it would be at the beginning, especially when the plan is a massive compromise between interests that in some cases will never agree. In order to fix the plan those entities will again need to compromise.

This item is for the Board of Directors to receive and file the Strategic Improvement Assessment and Action Plan Update through June 2024.

At this time, Board Member Jeffries left the meeting.

10. PRESENTATION – HABITAT SPOTLIGHT

Tricia Campbell, Regional Conservation Deputy Director, provided a presentation on the Reserve of the Month, B Canyon Reserve and how it supports MSHCP covered species.

The 701-acre B Canyon Reserve was a recent critical acquisition in conserving in perpetuity an essential wildlife passage at a regional scale. Habitat types on the reserve include coastal sage scrub, chaparral, grassland, and riparian scrub, woodland, and forest among others. B Canyon is utilized by many MSHCP-covered species including bobcat, mountain lion, coastal California gnatcatcher, Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow, and others. The cost of the B Canyon Reserve totaled \$24 million, with a contribution of roughly \$15 million by the Wildlife Conservation Board, roughly \$2.5 million by the California Natural Resources Agency, and roughly \$6.5 million by RCA through the Local Development Mitigation Fees.

Like so many lands needed for the MSHCP reserve, B Canyon is located at what we call the wildlands interface, meaning it abuts urban development and high-traffic areas such as the City of Corona to the east and State Route 91, directly to the north. The Reserve is regularly used by the public for hiking and biking on existing trails that are accessed via a Santa Ana River Trail parking lot and an SR-91 underpass, but unfortunately, is also frequented by unauthorized vehicles and dumping of trash. This is an example of the challenges of managing reserve lands at the urban/wildlands interface. It is important to provide public access for wildlife-compatible recreation while also patrolling for and cleaning up nefarious activities.

The acquisition of the B Canyon reserve conserved the final remaining piece of land connecting the 14,000 acres of Chino Hills State Park to the north and 68,000 acres of protected land in the Santa Ana Mountains to the south and providing permanent protection of lands adjacent to both sides of the existing SR-91 wildlife culvert.

The segment of SR-91 in the vicinity of B Canyon is identified by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife as a Priority Barrier to wildlife movement and presents a high risk of mortality not just to dispersing wildlife including mountain lions as well as a risk of injury to motorists due to the potential for vehicle collisions. Caltrans District 8 is proposing to improve the existing undercrossing of SR-91 at B Canyon by straightening the culvert structure to provide better line of sight, facilitating usage by mountain lion and other species like bobcat and coyote. Just like most people, animals do not want to enter a dark tunnel without seeing an outlet at the other end.

This improvement to the undercrossing will reduce mountain lion and other wildlife mortality and risk to motorists by reducing the probability of collisions on the SR-91. The undercrossing improvement will also increase the survival of the mountain lion population in the region by

supporting increased movement of lions between the Chino Hills State Park and the Santa Ana Mountains. This helps maintain genetic diversity, which helps the region's mountain lion population avoid the negative effects of inbreeding and better enables the population to respond to new diseases and a changing climate.

Caltrans received a State Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) grant for the planning and design of the improved SR-91 undercrossing and is currently seeking grant approval through the WCB for construction. Caltrans actions are complimentary to the WCB's funding contribution to the RCA acquisition of the B Canyon Reserve. This is a great example of partnership between the RCA, Caltrans as an MSHCP Permittee, and WCB as a funding partner, all working together to secure and improve the MSHCP reserve system and transportation infrastructure.

The Southern California/Central Coast population of mountain lion is a Candidate for listing as Threatened or Endangered by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife through the California Endangered Species Act as of 2022. It is already a MSHCP covered species. This is important because if mountain lion were not already covered by the Plan, any proposed development would need to address this species as if it were already listed, meaning a lot of red tape and slower permitting process. Mountain lions have been documented using B Canyon as a movement corridor by the University of California, Davis radio-collar tracking study and U.S. Geological Survey wildlife camera study, highlighting again, RCA's collaboration with partner agencies.

Wildlife crossings are important because studies have found severe inbreeding and high mortality rates due to vehicles among the mountain lion population in the Santa Ana Mountains. One of the inbreeding signs is a deformed tail. Although some movement across roadways is occurring, current roadway widths and configurations have fragmented their habitat. Based on current genetic analysis, the Santa Ana Mountain population of mountain lion will likely disappear in 50 years if we do not construct safe wildlife crossings. The Caltrans SR-91/B Canyon wildlife crossing improvement project will do just this. This is an example of a long-term commitment of people and agencies to the health the region's open space system.

Mountain lions require large home ranges, which can range from 30 to 120 square miles in size, to accommodate their high caloric needs. They prefer to eat deer but will also eat smaller prey such as rabbits, coyotes, and squirrels. Along with the jaguar, they are one of only two big cat species living in North America, with females weighing 70 to 90 pounds, and males weighing 130 to 160 pounds. Mountain lions produce litters of 2 to 4 offspring, with generally 1 or 2 per litter surviving to adulthood. They have a lifespan of up to 12 years in the wild, with captive mountain lions living to 25 years or older.

The coastal California gnatcatcher is listed as Threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act and is an MSHCP covered species that uses B Canyon for foraging, breeding, and dispersal. Unlike mountain lions, who have large territories and dispersal routes, gnatcatchers require close or contiguous habitat to move within because they are not strong fliers. B Canyon has an elevational variation of nearly 2,000 feet, offering gnatcatchers climate resiliency by allowing

the species to adapt with the changing climate by moving to higher and lower elevations over time.

California gnatcatcher is a small blue-gray songbird which measures only 4.5 inches in length and weighs about 0.2 ounces. To put it in perspective, the local Anna's hummingbird is 4 inches in length and weighs about the same on a good day. Their call is like the mew of a kitten. This species is a year-round resident of coastal sage scrub. The species builds cup nests in shrubs approximately three feet above the ground in breeding territories maintained by the nesting pairs. Males typically select the nest site and do most of the nest building and feeding of young, while females spend more time incubating eggs and brooding the nestlings, meaning keeping the young warm or not too hot. The female typically lays 3 to 4 eggs.

The young are like other songbirds, not very attractive in the early stages. Nesting pairs will fiercely defend their nests from would-be nest predators up to four times their size, such as California scrub-jays and greater roadrunners. As their name would suggest, California gnatcatchers primarily feed on invertebrates like insects and spiders.

For many of us at the RCA, the placement of B Canyon into conservation is a career highlight and we are grateful for each RCA Board Member, for making this happen.

Chair Bash shared audio of the California gnatcatcher's call.

11. BOARD OF DIRECTORS / EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORT

Aaron Hake, Executive Director, shared that Caltrans will be doing construction on the B Canyon crossing sometime later this year which will have closures to the SR-91, when staff is aware they will be sure to update the Board. The RCA is dark in August so the Board will meet again in September. In the meantime, staff will set up interview with the consultant on the SIAAP.

After this meeting, staff will be sending out copies of the B Canyon presentation along with a memo summarizing what occurred at the Board Meeting for Board Members to have for their report out at City Council Meetings.

Chair Bash wanted to know if there was an official opening date for the Hamner Bridge in Norco.

Aaron Hake stated the Mayor Berwin Hanna Hamner Bridge is scheduled to for a ribbon cutting ceremony on August 26th.

Another happening this fall is a celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the MSHCP. Announcements will be going out soon to Board Members and other dignitaries. The event will be to commemorate the achievements, but also to look forward. This event will be in October.

12. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business for consideration by the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority Board of Directors, Chair Bash adjourned the meeting at 1:38 p.m. The next meeting of the Board of Directors is scheduled to be held on **Monday, September 9, 2024.**

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lisa Mobley".

Lisa Mobley
Administrative Services Director/
Clerk of the Board