

RES12 Restructure Funding and Governance for Certain Land Conservancies

Summary

Five of the eight separate conservancies for which the Resources Agency is responsible do not represent land assets of statewide interest that benefit all Californians. State funding and governance for these conservancies should be restructured to provide more direct control and accountability to local agencies.

Background

Within the Resources Agency, there are eight separate conservancies that acquire lands for habitat protection and provide public access to open spaces. The conservancies, and other departments and programs, lack a comprehensive and cohesive statewide land conservation plan. Without such a statewide plan, individual organizations have developed their own land conservation strategies that frequently do not work coherently to achieve statewide objectives. [1] Although some acquisitions are pursued with a statewide perspective, others are simply purchases made as opportunities arise. [2]

The Department of Fish and Game (DFG) and the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) have statewide responsibility for managing lands for habitat protection and recreation, respectively. [3]

The chart below compares information obtained from the Department of Finance on the conservancies. [4]

Conservancies at a Glance

Year Begun	Jurisdiction	2002–03 Budget	Acquisitions Objectives	Land Holdings (Acres)	Board
State Coastal Conservancy					
1976	Coastal zone (1,100 miles of coast)	\$6.3 million support \$179.4 million property acquisition and improvement	Promote coastal management plan—generally public access, scenic views, natural habitat and agricultural land	700 physical properties 3,700 easements; 20,000 acres	7 members All state appointments
California Tahoe Conservancy					
1984	Lake Tahoe Basin (about 148,000)	\$4.0 million support	Provide access to shore;	64,000 acres	7 members 4 state 3 local

	acres)	\$20.7 million property acquisition and improvement	environmental sensitive lands, especially those draining to the lake and/or subject to erosion		
San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy					
1999	San Gabriel River and Lower Los Angeles River watersheds (about 569,000 acres)	\$790,000 support \$18 million property acquisition and improvement	Provide open space, recreational, educational uses, watershed improvement, wildlife and habitat restoration and protection	None	13 members 7 state 6 local and regional
Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy					
1979	Santa Monica and Santa Susanna Mountains, and Placerita Canyon (551,000 acres)	\$655,000 support \$13.2 million property acquisition and improvement	Provide for parks, trails, open space, and wildlife habitat that are easily accessible to the general public	About 55,000 acres are held by joint powers authority associated with the conservancy	9 members 5 state 3 local 1 federal
Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy					
1996	Coachella Valley (about 1.25 million acres)	\$274,000 support \$8 million property acquisition and improvements	Promote habitat priorities listed in Natural Communities Conservation Plans, currently being developed for Coachella Valley region	3,835 acres; 1,138 easements	21 members 9 state 9 local 3 federal

San Diego River Conservancy					
2003	San Diego River from Julian to the Pacific Ocean (about 52 miles)	\$265,000 support (proposed)	Acquire and manage public lands	None	9 members 2 state 7 local
Baldwin Hills Conservancy					
2001	Baldwin Hills area in Los Angeles County (about 1,200 acres)	\$262,000 support \$15 million property acquisition and improvement	Provide recreational open space and wildlife uses	384 acres	9 members 8 state 1 local
San Joaquin River Conservancy					
1995	San Joaquin River parkway in Fresno and Madera Counties (about 5,900 acres)	\$253,000 support \$2.5 million property acquisition and improvement	Affords public recreational opportunities and supports wildlife habitat	1,762 acres	15 members 9 state 6 local

The State Coastal Conservancy covers the largest jurisdiction of these conservancies including the entire coast and some significant inland areas, especially around the San Francisco Bay. The other conservancies are each responsible for considerably smaller regions. The Baldwin Hills Conservancy, the smallest, covers 1,200 acres, yet it too has a predominantly state-level governance structure.

The Tahoe Conservancy, the State Coastal Conservancy and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy concentrate on the protection of land and habitat resources that are of statewide interest. The San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, San Joaquin River Conservancy, Baldwin Hills Conservancy, San Diego River Conservancy, and Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy focus on land acquisitions that are of regional or local interest.

One conservancy, the State Coastal Conservancy, primarily provides grant funding to local governments and private non-profits that acquire and manage lands. Other conservancies primarily acquire and manage lands themselves, and some do both. Conservancies also provide grants to each other, to DFG or to DPR.

Collectively, the governing boards of these conservancies total 90 members. The

size of the respective boards ranges from 7 to 21 members each.

The creation of multiple conservancies has increased state funding for land acquisition and management in the areas in which conservancies are located. However, the programs have the following limitations and inefficiencies:

- No master plan exists at the Resources Agency level to give conservancies comprehensive, strategic guidelines for land acquisition and resource protection. Consequently, the state approach to habitat and recreational land acquisition is a patchwork;
- Creating state conservancies having broad authority within their respective jurisdictions has impaired strategic planning at the state level, diffused accountability and limited state-level oversight. The perspective of each conservancy is limited, and the membership of the conservancy boards is not generally reflective of the state-level policy-makers who are held accountable for the expenditure of state funds; and
- Conservancy funding has tended to be used primarily on purchases as opportunities have arisen, instead of supporting broader statewide resource management priorities set by the Resources Agency, DPR and DFG. [5]

Recommendations

A. The Governor should work with the Legislature to devolve five conservancies of regional or local interest (San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, San Joaquin River Conservancy, Baldwin Hills Conservancy, San Diego River Conservancy, and Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy) into local joint powers authorities.

- The proposed legislation should remove state-level majority participation on the governing boards of those five conservancies, and eliminate state Environmental License Plate Fund and bond funds for staff support.
- The five conservancies of regional or local interest should be encouraged to apply and compete for state bond funds for land acquisition and other projects in the same manner that all other local and nonprofit entities are eligible for state resource bond funds.

Removing state majority representation on the governing boards and reducing state funding for the five conservancies that represent local and regional interests would empower these local jurisdictions to address local land conservation issues.

State-level funding and majority participation on the three conservancies of statewide interest (Tahoe Conservancy, State Coastal Conservancy, and Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy) should be retained.

The remaining conservancies would continue as joint powers authorities that compete for state bond funding. State law provides for the joint exercise of powers by public agencies and this is an appropriate governing model for some of the state's conservancies. [6]

- B. The Resources Agency, or its successor, in conjunction with the conservancies and the Departments of Parks and Recreation and Fish and Game, or their successors, should develop a statewide master plan, including strategic guidelines, for land acquisition and resource protection for habitat and recreational purposes.**

Fiscal Impact

Estimated savings assume that legislation becomes effective January 1, 2005. These savings would accrue primarily to the Environmental License Plate Fund, with minor savings from bond funds, which might be freed up for other environmental projects. It is anticipated that the five state conservancies that would be devolved to local joint powers entities would receive state support for only the first half of Fiscal Year 2004–2005, and the state would realize savings of about \$1.0 million for the last half of the fiscal year. Beginning in FY 2005–2006 the state would incur savings of about \$2.1 million annually.

It is anticipated that the costs of developing a statewide master plan would be minor and be absorbed by the Resources Agency.

Environmental License Plate Fund and Bond
(dollars in thousands)

Fiscal Year	Savings	Costs	Net Savings (Costs)	Change in PYs
2004-05	\$1,041	\$0	\$1,041	(7.8)
2005-06	\$2,082	\$0	\$2,082	(15.6)
2006-07	\$2,082	\$0	\$2,082	(15.6)
2007-08	\$2,082	\$0	\$2,082	(15.6)
2008-09	\$2,082	\$0	\$2,082	(15.6)

Note: The dollars and PYs for each year in the above chart reflect the total change for that year from 2003–04 expenditures, revenues and PYs.

Endnotes

- [1] California Legislative Analyst's Office, "California's Land Conservation Efforts: The Role of State Conservancies" (Sacramento, California, January 5, 2001), p. 8.
- [2] Memorandum from Department of Finance to California Performance Review, Sacramento, California (March 10, 2004).
- [3] California Governor's Budget for Fiscal Year 2004-05; Public Resources Code Sections 825 et seq., and Sections 500 et seq.
- [4] Memorandum from Department of Finance to California Performance Review, Sacramento, California (March 10, 2004).
- [5] Memorandum from Department of Finance to California Performance Review, Sacramento, California (March 10, 2004).
- [6] Government Code Section 6500 et seq.