

**DATE:** January 19, 2017

**TO:** WCA Governing Board

**FROM:** Johnathan Perisho, Project Manager

**THROUGH:** Mark Stanley, Executive Officer

**SUBJECT:** Item 14: Consideration of a resolution to accept an acquisition and planning grant from the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy for the Rio Hondo Trailhead Acquisition Project.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Watershed Conservation Authority Governing Board accept an acquisition and planning grant from the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy for the Rio Hondo Trailhead Acquisition Project for an amount up to \$2,000,000.

**PROJECT'S DESCRIPTION:** The proposed project consists of acquiring up to 11 acres fee simple land or up to 22 acres of conservation easement for open space, wildlife habitat, and future trailhead development adjacent to the Rio Hondo tributary of the Los Angeles River. The project location is included as Exhibit A.

The property is currently under consideration for development—including potential development through the Montebello Hills Specific Plan. Conservation on portions of these properties is of high importance to the RMC and other local, state, and federal conservation agencies, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services in coordination with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife have been working with the landowner's representatives on the acquisition of a portion of this property.

Increasing the extent of conserved habitat in the Montebello Hills will reduce habitat fragmentation, supporting a significant California gnatcatcher population which is a federally threatened species, as well as suitable habitat for coastal cactus wren—a California species of special concern—and other associated species. Acquisition of the proposed project (Exhibit B) will conserve habitat for 18 known pairs of California gnatcatchers—habitat which is also immediately adjacent to an active restoration effort which has greatly increased the California gnatcatcher population in recent years. Although focused surveys have not been conducted, cactus wrens have been observed in suitable habitat within the project site. If Phase C is acquired, a large block of habitat will be conserved at the east end of the Montebello Hills, adjacent to open space contiguous with the Chino/Puente Hills.

**BACKGROUND:** Los Angeles and Orange counties are largely urbanized, and all remaining open space in these counties are highly vulnerable to urban development. The region is internationally recognized as an ecological hotspot for both this vulnerability and for the impressive richness and diversity of wildlife and plant species found here. These factors drive an imperative to conserve remaining available natural open space to support populations of native species and habitats as well as to ensure recovery of listed species.

Critical need has led to the creation of several large-scale, multiple species habitat conservation plans that have been implemented in the region, including the Shell/MWD HCP in the Chino/Puente Hills in northern

Orange County. The Shell/MWD HCP was completed in 1996 and helped to restore and conserve habitat in eastern Chino/Puente Hills for a core population of federally threatened coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*; gnatcatcher), and the cactus wren (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus cousei*; cactus wren), a California Species of Concern. The Shell/MWD HCP is a single-listed species HCP that focused on the conservation of gnatcatcher habitat within the plan area boundary.

The Chino/Puente Hills run through southern Los Angeles County and northern Orange County. These hills represent the largest remaining area of undeveloped open space in the vicinity. While the gnatcatcher and cactus wren are the more high-profile sensitive species, this area also provides essential breeding habitat and connectivity to surrounding areas for a wide variety of wildlife species (Exhibit C). Habitat conserved through the Shell/MWD HCP in Puente Hills allows these species to disperse back and forth from the hills to the multiple-species reserve system established in central and coastal Orange County to the south, the reserve system in western Riverside County to the east, and the San Jose Hills to the north in Los Angeles County. This corridor of habitat along the Chino/Puente Hills is also designated critical habitat for the gnatcatcher.

The proposed project is the conservation of a portion of the Montebello Hills project site located within the City of Montebello. The Montebello Hills support a core population of gnatcatchers on approximately 484 acres at the far western extent of designated critical habitat and remaining natural open space contiguous with the Chino/Puente Hills. The current population of 213 pairs of gnatcatchers is by far the largest population within the northern range of this species (Exhibit D). Because available habitat is extremely limited compared to other gnatcatcher populations (i.e., approximately 1.4 acres of habitat per pair), a multitude of juveniles disperse from the Montebello Hills each year. Dispersing juveniles provide genetic interchange with significant gnatcatcher populations conserved through the Shell/MWD HCP in the Chino/Puente Hills. Juveniles also disperse to the north, along the San Gabriel River channel to relatively isolated populations supported in designated critical habitat at the extreme northwestern end of the range in the San Gabriel and Santa Susana Mountains (Figure 3). Given the paucity of open space remaining in Los Angeles and northern Orange counties, conserving the Montebello Hills gnatcatcher population will help to ensure stability of the populations within the northern range of the species over the long term. Maintaining this large source population of dispersing juveniles will also allow gnatcatchers to track regional changes in vegetation and climatic conditions associated with global climate change.

Staff is recommending accepting funds for the Rio Hondo Trailhead Acquisition Project as this project meets the WCA's vision of *Connecting Communities Through Nature* by preserving open space and habitat in order to provide for low-impact recreation and educational uses, wildlife habitat restoration and protection, and watershed improvements within the WCA territory.

**FISCAL INFORMATION:** The grant from the RMC is for \$1,000,000 to match partner contributions of up to 86 percent (\$6,000,000) of anticipated funding. Should the RMC receive additional funds for the program of projects, an additional \$1,000,000 in acquisition funds may be granted for the project.

The \$6,000,000 in matching funds that have been secured to date include a grant already held by the WCA through Los Angeles County using Proposition A funding (\$3,000,000), as well as partner funds through the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service through an Endangered Species Act Section 6 Grant (\$2,000,000) and the Wildlife Conservation Board (\$1,000,000). The estimated cost per acre is approximately \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 per acre. Therefore, we anticipate purchasing 11 acres in fee title or about 22 acres that would be encumbered by a conservation easement with this initial acquisition effort.



## Exhibit A

# Territory Map: Rio Hondo Trailhead Acquisition

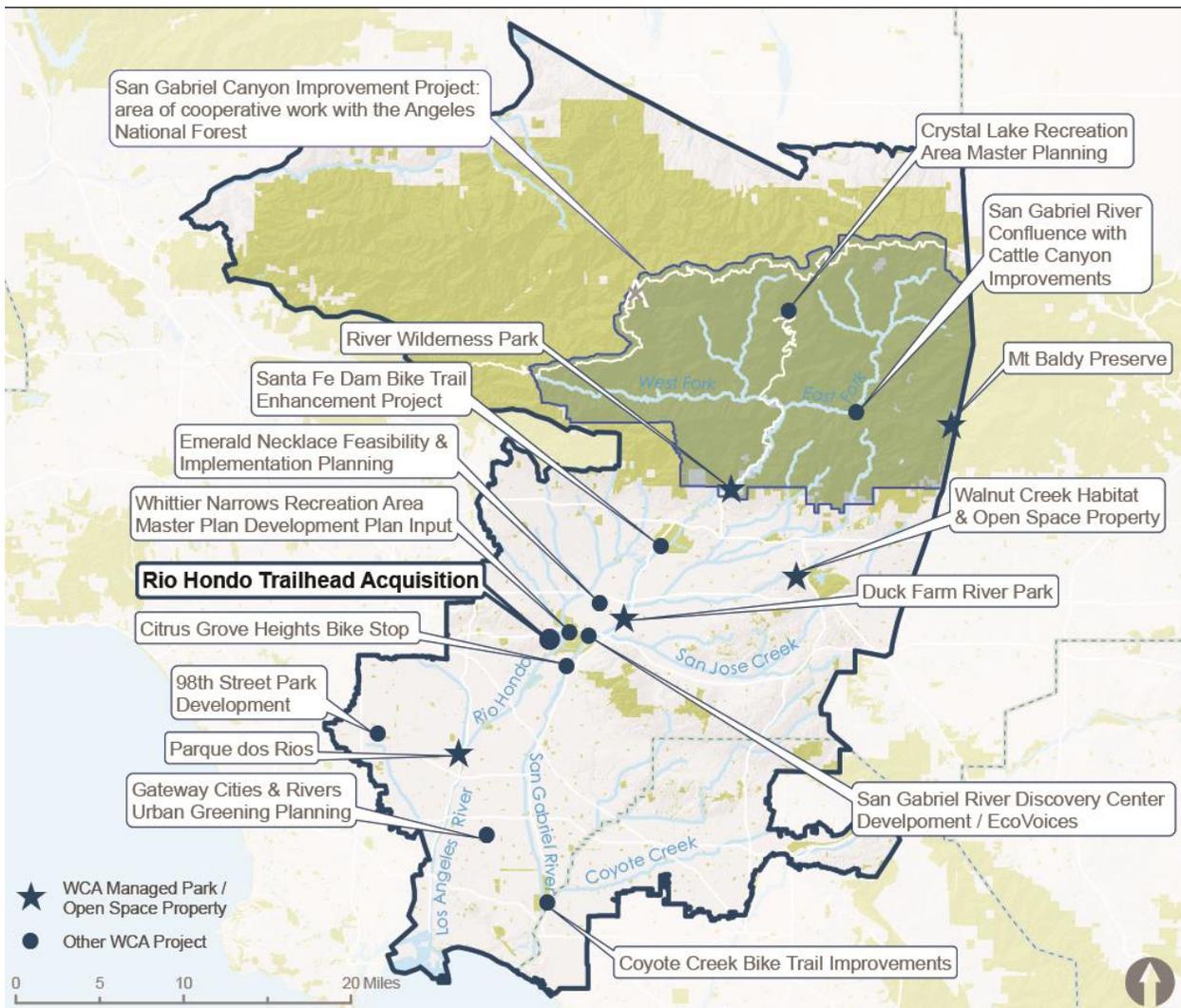


Exhibit B

Montebello Hills Acquisition Property



Exhibit C

Chino/Puente Conservation Area Overview

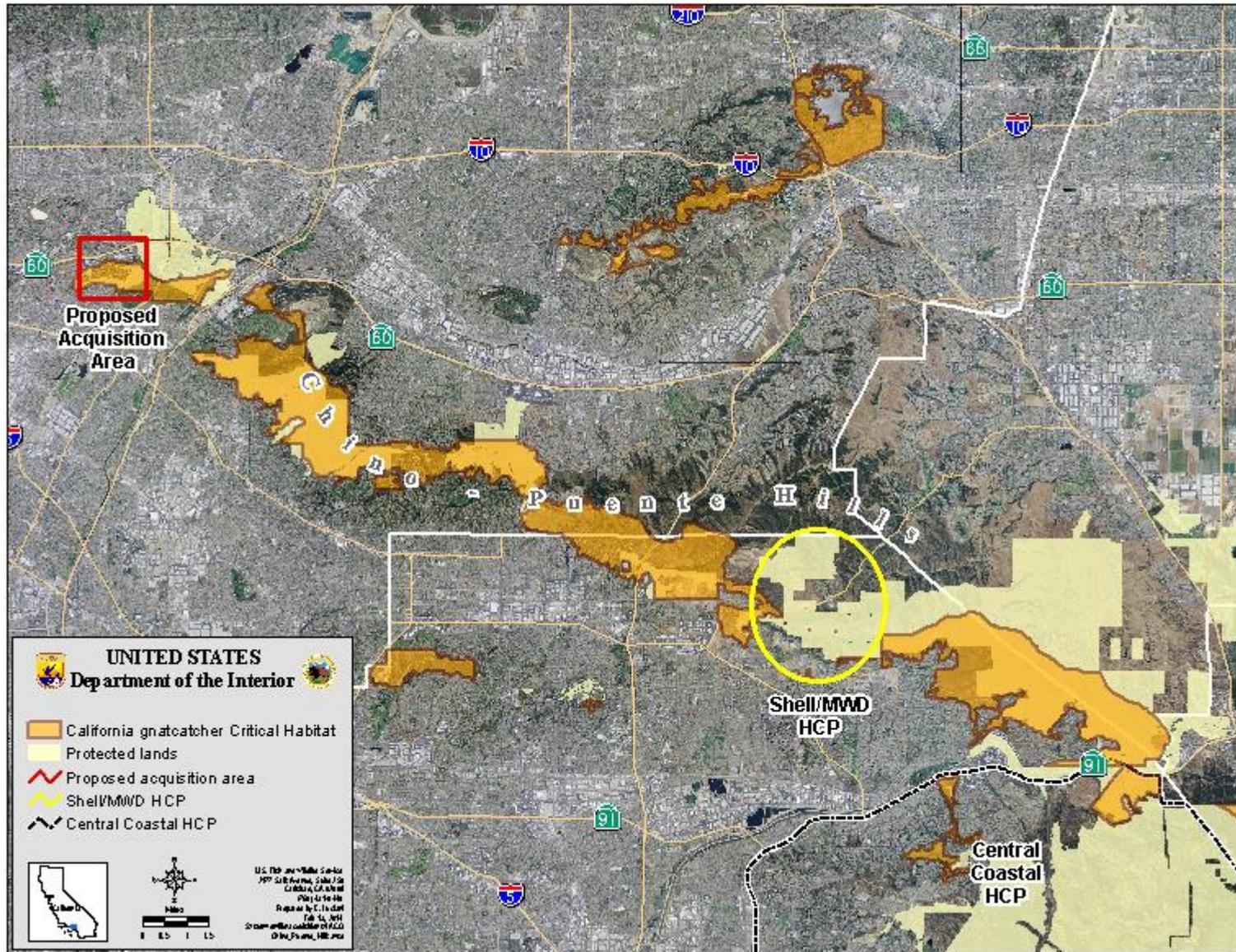
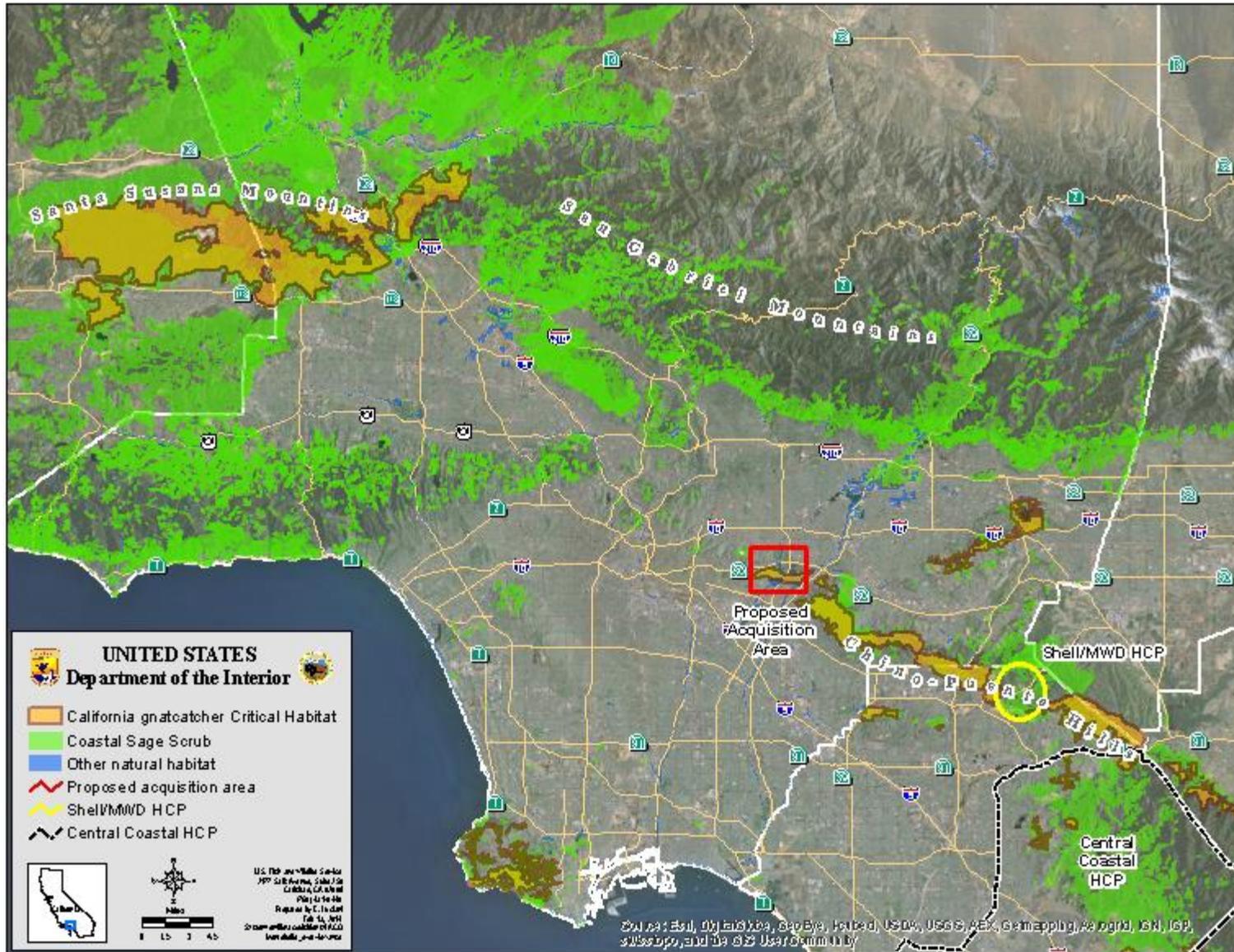


Exhibit D

Overview of Connectivity within Northern Orange and Los Angeles Counties



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**RESOLUTION 2017-04**

**RESOLUTION OF THE WATERSHED CONSERVATION AUTHORITY TO ACCEPT AN ACQUISITION AND PLANNING GRANT FROM THE RIVERS AND MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY FOR THE RIO HONDO TRAILHEAD ACQUISITION PROJECT.**

**WHEREAS**, The Watershed Conservation Authority (WCA) has been established as a joint powers agency between the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC) and the Los Angeles County Flood Control District; and

**WHEREAS**, the Watershed Conservation Authority has further been established to focus on projects which will provide open space, habitat restoration, and watershed improvement projects in both the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers watershed; and

**WHEREAS**, this action will accept an acquisition and planning grant from the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy for the Rio Hondo Trailhead Acquisition Project; and

**WHEREAS**, the proposed action is exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act; **NOW**

*Therefore be it resolved that the WCA hereby:*

1. **FINDS** that this action is consistent with the purposes and objectives of the WCA.
2. **FINDS** that the actions contemplated by this resolution are exempt from the environmental impact report requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).
3. **ADOPTS** the staff report dated January 19, 2017.
4. **ACCEPT** an acquisition and planning grant from the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy for an amount up to \$2,000,000 for the Rio Hondo Trailhead Acquisition Project.

~ End of Resolution ~

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Motion: \_\_\_\_\_ Second: \_\_\_\_\_

Ayes: \_\_\_\_\_ Nays: \_\_\_\_\_ Abstentions: \_\_\_\_\_

Resolution 2017-04

Passed and Adopted by the Board of the  
**WATERSHED CONSERVATION AUTHORITY**  
On January 19, 2017

\_\_\_\_\_  
Governing Board Chair

ATTEST: \_\_\_\_\_  
David Edsall  
Deputy Attorney General