

## Case Study: Contra Costa Resource Conservation District

**Watershed:** Suisun Bay Watershed

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Year	Grant Program	Project Title	Watershed	Award Amount
2003-2006	CALFED Watershed Program- Watershed Project Grant	Mt. Diablo Creek Watershed Coordinator Resource Management Planning Program	Suisun Bay	\$227,117
2004-2007	Department of Conservation- Watershed Coordination Grant	Watershed Coordination for Alhambra Creek (sub watershed of Suisun Bay)	Suisun Bay	\$188,730

This case study assesses two grants received by the Contra Costa Resource Conservation District for work in their watersheds. The grants focus on distinct sub-watersheds in the greater Suisun Bay Watershed. The findings of this research are based on stakeholder interviews and a review of documents produced for the grants.

### Suisun Bay Watershed

Within the greater Suisun Bay Watershed, the project grant and coordinator grant—funded through the CALFED and the Department of Conservation (DOC) Statewide Watershed Grant programs—focus on Mt. Diablo Creek, Alhambra Creek, and Kirker Creek. The Mt. Diablo Creek watershed is 64% unincorporated county land<sup>1</sup> with a smaller percentage of urban area, including the cities of Clayton and Concord. The Mt. Diablo Creek Watershed extends from the headwaters on the northwest side of Mt Diablo Mountain Peak to the mouth of Suisun Bay, approximately 18 miles following the creek, and draining about 37 square miles of land.

The DOC coordinator grant funded a coordinator working in both the Alhambra Creek and Kirker Creek Watersheds. The Alhambra Creek Watershed drains about 16.5 square miles of the north central region of Contra Costa County, discharging into the tidal wetland at Martinez Regional Shoreline. Alhambra Creek is the common name for the entire Creek that originates in and then drains into Arroyo del Hambre. Technically, Alhambra Creek is the upper two miles of the Creek. However, John Muir's mother-in-law, Mrs. John Strenzel, preferred "Alhambra" as the name of the entire creek, so the lower portion is commonly known as Alhambra Creek, as opposed to Arroyo del Hambre. Franklin Creek and Arroyo del Hambre are considered two tributaries of Alhambra. Alhambra Creek passes through Martinez, a city that was flooded by Creek in 1997, which led to much support and investment in the watershed.

Kirker Creek Watershed encompasses parts of the Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve and the Dow Wetlands Preserve where it connects with Suisun Bay through the cities of Pittsburg and Antioch. The Kirker Creek watershed covers approximately 16 square miles, its source originating in the northeastern slopes of the Mt Diablo foothills.

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<sup>1</sup> This percent will change with the annexation of the Concord Naval Weapons Station.

Throughout the greater Suisun Bay Watershed, there is rangeland, protected wetlands, state and regional parks, and urban areas (e.g., Concord, Martinez, Pittsburg, Antioch). Impact on the watershed includes, but is not limited to, trash and illegal dumping, which have impaired creeks throughout the watershed and negatively affected water quality. Water quality has been designated a Category 1 priority according to the California Integrated Water Quality System Project.<sup>2</sup> Other issues of concern noted by the CCRCDC are non-native invasive species, erosion and sedimentation problems.

## **Organization & Grants**

The Contra Costa Resource Conservation District (CCRCDC) received both a project grant (2003-2004) and a coordinator grant (2004-2007). CCRCDC is a non-regulatory, quasi-governmental agency that works in Contra Costa County with diverse partners, including: individuals, farmers, ranchers, public agencies, non-profit organizations and corporations. A portion of the technical support for the CCRCDC programs come from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service. CCRCDC's mission is to facilitate conservation and stewardship of natural resources in Contra Costa County.

Watershed groups in this portion of Contra Costa County (e.g., Alhambra Watershed Council, Friends of Alhambra Creek, Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek, Friends of Kirker Creek) currently operate or have previously operated autonomously with the support of RCD staff, as well as support from the County. The RCD provides paid watershed coordination, staff, and technical expertise throughout Contra Costa County.

Due to geographic focus and timing, the grants did not overlap. Informants for this research were most familiar with either the CCRCDC project grant in Mt. Diablo Creek or the coordinator grant in Alhambra and Kirker Creek, though participants of both grants were familiar with employees of the CCRCDC, including watershed coordinators hired through resources separate from the DOC grant program. The CCRCDC has a history of collaborating with other organizations like the Flood Control District, and has helped to promote and support watershed coordinators prior to and following the end of the DOC coordinator grant program.

### **Project grant (2003-2004)**

The project grant, "Mt. Diablo Creek Watershed Coordinated Resource Management Planning Program" was awarded \$227,117 in order to "develop a citizen-based watershed management plan using a local, consensus-based planning program." Mt. Diablo Creek watershed is the fourth largest watershed in Contra Costa County. The watershed is geographically diverse with ranchlands, urban areas, a state park, marshland, and a decommissioned Naval Weapons Station, which is also an EPA Superfund Site. Approximately 25% of the City of Concord is encompassed in the Naval Weapons Station.

There was no watershed management plan for Mt. Diablo Creek watershed prior to the project grant. One of the intentions of the watershed project grant was to raise public awareness and participation in shaping the future of the watershed through an assessment, which was then used

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<sup>2</sup> Category 1: Violation of effluent limitation for Group I pollutant (e.g., BOD, TSS, aluminum, nitrate).

to prepare a management plan. These efforts were partially motivated by the decision to decommission the Concord Naval Weapons Station. There was a recognition that a watershed inventory, assessment, and management plan needed to be developed in order to provide recommendations for the transition from private to public land ownership, as a sizable reach of Mt. Diablo Creek flows through the Naval Weapons Station.

The specific project goals included: 1) facilitate and coordinate governmental agencies, local organizations and interested individuals; 2) conduct a watershed assessment; 3) develop a watershed management plan; 4) lead educational and outreach efforts to improve natural resource stewardship; 5) build a strong network for long-term sustainability of activities in the local watershed; and 6) create a citizen-based water quality monitoring program.

### *Project grant process and outcomes*

The objectives of the project grant parallel many of the objectives of a typical Department of Conservation coordinator grant in terms of outreach, building awareness, and developing collaborative relationships among various stakeholders in the watershed. To meet the objectives of the grant, the CCRCDC dedicated funds to hire a watershed coordinator for the Mt. Diablo Creek watershed. The coordinator participated in the CALFED Bay-Delta Program “bootcamp”, acquiring consensus-based facilitation skills.

A public awareness campaign began prior to receiving the CALFED grant. The campaign was led by an individual devoted to local watershed efforts and resulted in the creation of Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek, a local watershed volunteer-based organization primarily composed of creekside landowners. This individual then wrote the CALFED project grant proposal on behalf of the CCRCDC. Once the grant was secured, the CCRCDC hired a watershed coordinator to continue efforts in raising public awareness through outreach to landowners, local, regional and state agency staff and elected officials, and nonprofit organization representatives.

The watershed coordinator was specifically tasked with outreach to bring stakeholders together to form a watershed planning group to collaboratively develop a watershed management plan following a coordinated resource management planning (CRMP) process.<sup>3</sup> The watershed coordinator sent out a letter to local landowners and attended various meetings to reach out to landowners along Mt. Diablo Creek to form the watershed planning group with the goal of promoting watershed health and educating stakeholders. During monthly meetings over a two-year period, the watershed coordinator brought speakers in to inform stakeholders on diverse watershed topics and challenges. The CCRCDC dedicated a portion of CALFED grant funds for third-party facilitation of the meetings. Several of those involved with Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek joined the watershed planning group, but the Friends group also continued to meet separately. Owing to public outreach and education efforts, frequent interactions between local landowners, the CCRCDC, and agency representatives developed and allowed for relationships between these stakeholders to strengthen. Building awareness and developing relationships

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<sup>3</sup> The Coordinated Resource Management & Planning (CRMP) process consists of three elements: 1) local control with decision making; 2) consensus decision making ensuring a community-supported processes; and 3) voluntary implementation with “buy-in” from all parties in the community rather than government directed.

among various stakeholders in the watershed were stated by informants as positive outcomes of the grant.

The Contra Costa RCD hired a consultant, the Natural Heritage Institute, to conduct a watershed inventory, completed in 2006, which informed the watershed assessment and watershed management plan. The watershed coordinator, with the help of experts<sup>4</sup>, developed the watershed assessment and the watershed planning group developed the watershed management plan through the CRMP process. The coordinator convened monthly meetings typically covering one or two planning topics. Sub-committees were formed for each major topic of the management plan to hold additional meetings outside of the monthly meetings to further develop these topics. Subcommittee members brought their recommendations back to the full group for discussion and consensus-based decisions on inclusion or exclusion in the management plan.

One of the primary focuses in the watershed at the time was how the Mt. Diablo Creek area should be managed in light of decommissioning the inland portion of the Concord Naval Weapons Station. Included in the Mt. Diablo Creek watershed plan was a recommendation for the area to become a regional park in order to best protect and restore the creek. Several stakeholders, including Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek, were invited to participate in discussions about decommissioning the Concord Naval Base in order to bring watershed planning issues into the process. While the watershed inventory, assessment, and management plan were completed and considered “well done” and “not a failure at all,” according to several stakeholders, there was not progress in terms of on-the-ground project implementation. However, the inventory, assessment, and management plan likely played a critical role in the Mt. Diablo Creek area being incorporated into a regional park. According to one informant, in terms of long-term impacts, “the CALFED watershed planning process likely contributed to raising awareness of the creek that led to this success.”

A challenge noted by informants was that “it just takes time to develop strong roots and build trust.” Several local property owners did not develop trust in the efforts of the watershed planning group and remained fearful of the intentions of the group, such as the possibility of voluntary-based policies transitioning to mandatory requirements. This contributed to the watershed planning group at times struggling to achieve consensus. Following the CALFED grant guidelines, the watershed coordinator adhered to the consensus-based approach. The result was the group could only agree on a few recommendations that were tied to public land. Fearing regulations and other restrictions, private landowners generally rejected creek buffer zones and similar actions they viewed would apply to their lands and force them to act or restrict the use of their land. An additional challenge was disbanding Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek watershed group. One of their focuses was water quality monitoring, which was through a program financially supported by the County, but when the CALFED funding was over and the lead of the water-monitoring group moved on, water quality monitoring ceased and the watershed group dissolved.

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<sup>4</sup> Technical advisors and reviewers included representatives from the Friends of Mt Diablo Creek, the Contra Costa RCD, UC Cooperative Extension, Contra Costa Fish and Wildlife Committee, City of Clayton Clean Water Program, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, Concord Historical Society, Natural Heritage Institute, Contra Costa Volunteer Monitoring Program, Mt Diablo State Park, U.S. Department of the Navy, and San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board.

While the efforts of Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek watershed group faded, the watershed planning group led by the watershed coordinator finalized their watershed management plan, and the City of Concord initiated a multi-year community planning process they would receive from the case closure. An outcome of the Concord planning process was the adoption of the Reuse Plan in 2010, which was further refined and integrated into Concord's General Plan in 2012. The plan designated over 2,500 acres for a regional park and land was given to the East Bay Regional Park District, which has continued work through a community planning processes to design and implement the park. The current park plan is known as the Concord Hills Land Use Plan. From inception of the watershed management plan with the recommendation of the decommissioned weapons station site to transition to a public park, through implementation, a guiding principle from the Mt Diablo Creek watershed management plan remains, "[to] facilitate restoration of Mt. Diablo Creek, wetlands, and other sensitive habitats with City, project developers, and regional stakeholders." Overlap in the membership of the watershed coordinator stakeholder group and participants of the City of Concord and East Bay Regional Park District planning efforts have brought these watershed management plan recommendations to implementation.

The grant achieved both short-term and long-term objectives with the aid of a watershed coordinator working with stakeholders throughout the watershed to produce a watershed management plan. One of the main goals of the watershed plan, transforming the decommissioned Naval Weapons Station into a regional park, was achieved through ongoing references to the recommendation of the management assessment and watershed plan during local and regional planning processes that continued for ten years following the completion of the watershed plan (2007).

#### **Coordinator grant (2004-2007)**

Through the course of active watershed improvement work, the CCRCDD received one three-year watershed coordinator grant through the DOC Watershed Program. Each watershed group in Contra Costa County operated autonomously prior to the grant. Those groups that remain today, following the conclusion of the grant, remain autonomous, but receive support from the RCD in terms of staff and watershed coordination, as well as support from the County. Interviewees reported that the RCD recognizes the benefits a watershed coordinator can bring to a watershed, especially in coordinating volunteers to complete on-the-ground projects. The Department of Conservation grant awarded \$188,730 to CCRCDD. The goal of the grant was to restore habitat and increase stewardship capacity through community-based watershed programs. To meet this goal, four specific objectives of the coordinator grant included: 1) facilitate community involvement in current and planned restoration and stewardship activities in both Kirker and Alhambra Watersheds; 2) promote and facilitate participation, coordination and collaboration among organizations, agencies, landowners, residents, and other stakeholders in the Kirker and Alhambra Creek Watersheds; 3) act as a resource and point of contact for community groups concerned with creek and watershed health; 4) seek sources of funding for continued watershed coordination.

### *Coordinator grant process and outcomes*

To accomplish restoration goals, the watershed coordinator brought together approximately 20 organizations to work collaboratively in the Alhambra and Kirker Creek watersheds. Typical watershed coordination tasks executed for the meetings included coordinating the groups, taking notes, and conducting administrative duties. One of the major responsibilities of the watershed coordinator was to facilitate implementation of projects once the group identified priority projects. The watershed coordinator wrote grants and conducted outreach to move the projects toward implementation. The coordinator managed and oversaw the funded projects. If a project did not have funding, the coordinator focused on more general watershed activities, such as facilitating volunteers to conduct watershed restoration and clean-up activities.

The coordinator formed partnerships with teachers and students at local schools for bioassessment training in the Kirker Creek Watershed. The director of the school was able to secure a grant to re-engineer and revegetate the creek. Students participated in environmental stewardship activities in the watershed. In terms of building awareness, the coordinator wrote, edited, and distributed a regional newsletter, created an outreach brochure for the Alhambra Creek Watershed Council, and maintained a website to provide water conservation information to communities in the watershed. Regarding on-the-ground restoration, the watershed coordinator coordinated the Strentzel Meadow efforts with the County and the local community. Volunteers from the community participated in restoration efforts removing weeds and replanting native species on a monthly basis. The coordinator also arranged for five work days of native planting and seed collection, numerous creek clean-ups, and worked with the County to conduct GPS surveys of Kirker Creek. Over the three-year grant period, the watershed coordinator secured an additional \$207,419 in grant awards and donations to implement the various projects.

In terms of outcomes from the 2004-2007 coordinator grant, key informants discussed how watershed coordinators “bring legitimacy to volunteer organizations.” Interviewees mentioned that the watershed coordinator provides a sense of authority and direction and motivation to carry out watershed projects. Another informant mentioned how the existence of a paid watershed coordinator position is unique, as not all watersheds have this resource, and is a testament to stakeholder involvement and advocacy for paid staff. This same informant wondered if this is a chicken and egg situation, which came first: Are the community members engaged and pushing for a paid watershed coordinator, or did the CCRC providing a watershed coordinator throughout the years help inspire and organize the group and catalyze watershed activities?

### **Key Findings**

#### **Trust**

Both watershed groups, the Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek and the watershed planning group, struggled at times to gain trust from private landowners. For the Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek, the lack of trust and limited financial resources contributed to the dissolution of their efforts. The Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek watershed group also relied heavily on a single individual to sustain the group. Once this individual left, the group did not continue water quality monitoring for Mt

Diablo Creek watershed. There was no structure in place that led to Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek or other groups to continue this work.

### **Coordinated Resource Management Planning**

Paralleling the efforts of Friends of Mt. Diablo Creek watershed group, the CCRCDD hired a watershed coordinator for Mt. Diablo Creek Watershed who led a diverse stakeholder group, the watershed planning group. The watershed coordinator laid the foundation for a two-year stakeholder-inclusive watershed planning process that resulted in a watershed management plan. The process utilized the CRMP process that relied heavily on the ability of a facilitator to bring a diverse group of stakeholders through a consensus-based process. This process limited the scope of the overall efforts of the group in achieving land-use recommendations on private land owing to the dissent of one particular landowner. Over the two-year period, the third-party facilitator and watershed coordinator utilized their facilitation skills, as well as methods ascertained from the CALFED watershed coordinator training program. Several group recommendations that lacked landowner support on private land were included in the management plan for public land.

### **Diverse, Inclusive Process**

With a diverse set of stakeholders and an inclusive process, which included agency representatives from multiple departments of the City of Concord, including the mayor, the East Bay Regional Park District, and Mt Diablo State Park, one of the principle goals developed by the stakeholder group and reflected in the watershed management plan was carried through to the City of Concord planning efforts and subsequent East Bay Regional Park District planning efforts. One of the principle interviewees attributes this to the inclusive, extensive watershed management planning process that built a strong local understanding of the watershed and helped develop the political will to do watershed restoration efforts on a grander scale. Another contributing factor to seeing the watershed group's recommendations be incorporated into larger scale planning efforts is likely attributed to the process of bringing planners, decision-makers, and a variety of stakeholders to the table in the watershed planning process, who were also involved in the planning efforts of the City of Concord and the East Bay Regional Park District. These individuals were not only familiar with the watershed group's efforts, but actively attended and contributed to the watershed meetings.

### **The Sundry Roles of a Coordinator**

In regard to the watershed coordination grant, while not from one of the local communities, the watershed coordinator did provide "a bit of a voice for the communities." The watershed coordinator arranged for experts to teach and build understanding of the technical aspects of watershed management to interested community members in an effort to encourage participation of non-experts in the planning and decision-making processes of watershed management. For the Alhambra watershed management planning process, the coordinator arranged for technical experts to arrive prior to meetings to help explain complex details being considered and ensure understanding of the issues at hand. This approach was used to ensure community members had access to experts to explain technical details so informed discussion and decisions would be made. This may have helped to promote and maintain community involvement, which in turn

can promote accountability and transparency among stakeholders, agencies, and organizations working in the watershed. Not only did the watershed coordinator help to organize people, but also the coordinator acted as the “glue” in keeping the group together and as a “catalyst” to move watershed initiatives forward. Without the coordinator, the group lost momentum and had turnover. “Without a focused dedicated staff person to produce documents, organize meetings, it is very hard to do.” A volunteer from Alhambra Creek mentioned:

“When we are doing it without a coordinator, we are on life support. It is hard to move forward. To organize plans for when you apply for money, you need to have something [to submit]. Without some kind of core staff function to keep that on track, it is hard to do.”

The coordinator grant received by the CCRCD continued to raise awareness of the benefits and the utility of having a watershed coordinator. This demonstration of the effectiveness of having a watershed coordinator precipitated more support by other organizations including the Contra Costa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, resulting in long-term funding and support of a coordination program. A sustained source of funding for a coordinator is what many organizations working in the watershed are seeking. CCRCD was able to demonstrate the value of maintaining a watershed coordinator and connect with an agency, the Flood Control District, to fund this position. However, gaining financial support required more than a demonstration of the utility of a coordinator in the watershed. The coordinator program in Contra Costa County has had a “champion” throughout the years, someone who is well connected and dedicated to the effort. This individual facilitated fiscal support during periods not funded by the DOC Statewide Watershed Coordinator Program recognizing the vital role of a watershed coordinator.

## **Appendix A. Methods**

Two researchers spent two days visiting stakeholders and touring watershed project sites in and around Martinez and Concord. Five in-person and six phone interviews were conducted with a diverse group of stakeholders, including representatives from the City of Concord, the Contra Costa RCD, the Contra Costa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, community volunteers, former watershed coordinators, and a professor from a local college. All available documents were reviewed.

## **Appendix B. Participants**

Landowners

Current and former employees of the Contra Costa Resource Conservation District

City of Concord

Community volunteers

Contra Costa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District

Local college professor

**Appendix C. Available Grant Documents**

<b>Contra Costa Resource Conservation District</b>	<b>Individual Grant Proposal</b>	<b>Catalogued Description</b>	<b>Annual Update(s)</b>	<b>Individual Final Report</b>	<b>Catalogued Final Reports</b>	<b>Other</b>	
Project (2003-2004)		x				x	Watershed Inventory
Coordinator (2004-2007)			x		x		

## **References**

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