

Case Study: Ojai Valley Land Conservancy

Watershed: Ventura River Watershed

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Year	Grant Program	Project Title	Watershed	Award Amount
2010-2014	DOC Watershed Program	Watershed Coordination for the Ventura River Watershed	Ventura River	\$277,446
2014	DOC Watershed Program	Drought Emergency Response Extension	Ventura River	\$3,397.84

This case study involves an assessment of a single coordinator grant received by the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy. Findings of this research are based on interviews with stakeholders involved and a review of documents associated with the grants.

Overview

The Ojai Valley Land Conservancy (OVLC) received a Department of Conservation Watershed Coordinator Grant in 2011 on behalf of the Ventura River Watershed Council and hosted the position during the three-year grant period. The watershed coordinator grant was extended by six months in 2014 as part of the grant program's Drought Emergency Response Extension. OVLC is a nonprofit land protection organization supported by private donations and is an active member of the Ventura River Watershed Council leadership committee. The Council maintains a balanced and diverse leadership committee with stakeholder representation from government, water and sanitary, land management and recreation, environmental, and business and landowner entities. See *Appendix A* for list of current participants.

Following the Department of Conservation grant period, a collection of stakeholders extended financial resources to support a part-time coordinator position for the Ventura River watershed. For the first few years following the grant, the position was contracted and housed by the Ventura County Watershed Protection District. The position is currently housed at the Casitas Municipal Water District. The Council continues to meet at least six times per year and serves as a forum for stakeholders to discuss projects and watershed improvement efforts in the Ventura River watershed.

The Ventura River Watershed

The Ventura River watershed comprises 226 square miles and is the smallest of three major watersheds in Ventura County. Major watersheds in Ventura County include the Ventura River, Santa Clara River, and Calleguas Creek. The Ventura River stretches 33.5 miles from its

headwaters in the Transverse Ranges to the Pacific Ocean near the city of Ventura. Major tributaries include Matilija Creek, North Fork Matilija Creek, San Antonio Creek, and Canada Larga. Lake Casitas is the major water supply reservoir in the watershed. Agricultural and municipal water demands in the Ventura River watershed are met with 100% local water supplies. The northern portion of the watershed lies in the Los Padres National Forest, and the southern half encompasses the cities of Ventura and Ojai and several unincorporated communities. Agriculture is the dominant land use in the watershed, consisting of mostly small, multi-generational family farms. Only 13% of the land in the watershed is developed, and 57% is open land in protected status (Management Plan, 2015).

Stakeholders consider the Ventura River watershed a model for addressing watershed management issues in California as the watershed contains an active consensus-based stakeholder group working to address a range of issues that commonly affect water quality and water supply throughout the state. Key elements represented in the Ventura River watershed include a mix of urban and rural communities, agricultural land use, forest, open space, a large obsolete dam (Matilija Dam), a functioning reservoir, water diversion systems, and numerous public and private water agencies. Additionally, the Ventura River watershed provides habitat for one of the southern-most steelhead populations in the state.

Background

The Ventura River Watershed Council formed in 2006, stemming from the countywide Integrated Regional Water Management Plan (IRWMP) developed by the Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County (WCVC). California Coastal Conservancy's Wetlands Recovery Task Force of Ventura County originally proposed the formation of the council (Management Plan, 2015). During its first five years, the council was coordinated by the WCVC program manager and focused primarily on IRWM processes.

The DOC watershed coordinator grant presented an opportunity to develop a comprehensive watershed management plan for the Ventura River watershed and improve the governance structure of the council and diversity of stakeholders represented. The Ojai Valley Land Conservancy worked with other members of the council to apply for the grant, and accepted the grant award on behalf of the council in 2011.

2011-2014 Watershed Coordination Grant and Drought Emergency Response Extension

Grant summary

The Ventura River Watershed Council identified several goals to be accomplished during the term of the watershed coordinator grant: build a more robust council, develop a mission

statement, design and maintain a website, establish a formal governance structure, boost stakeholder participation in council activities, and develop a watershed management plan for the Ventura River watershed. Specific tasks outlined in the work plan include: (1) identify common goals for the watershed and develop new goals and objectives, (2) agree upon measures of success for each of the identified goals, (3) assess the gaps between current and desired conditions, (4) develop a resource inventory, (4) identify actions to achieve shared watershed goals, (5) complete a formal management plan for the Ventura River watershed, and (6) begin to coordinate the implementation of actions identified in the plan, including securing funding sources (Final report submitted to DOC, 2014).

Four tasks were added during the grant's six-month Drought Emergency Response Extension, including the development and advertisement of a "Save More Water" website; the facilitation of drought-focused discussions at council meetings; completion of the Ventura River Watershed Management Plan with added emphasis on drought readiness, water conservation, and water use efficiency; and coordination with the Ventura County IRWMP to pursue additional grant funding.

Throughout the course of the grant, a range of accomplishments were achieved that both satisfied grant goals and contributed to successful outcomes. The watershed coordinator facilitated processes that led to the development of the council's mission statement, logo, website, and governance charter.¹ Additionally, as a result of the coordinator's facilitation and outreach efforts, stakeholder involvement in meetings nearly tripled and the council's leadership committee further diversified, including more business and landowner representatives. The watershed coordinator and supporting staff compiled an online-accessible inventory of watershed-related materials, produced an online watershed atlas that included 47 maps and an interactive online map viewer, and issued nearly 35 e-newsletters each year to a distribution list of roughly 350 stakeholders and interested public. Throughout the course of the grant, the coordinator was able to secure an additional \$98,500 to augment funding for watershed coordination support staff and the development of the management plan, enabling the plan's completion and council approval by March 2015. The management plan remains an active resource in the watershed today by establishing a platform in which stakeholders can pursue funding opportunities, enhance projects, and connect with other interests in the watershed.

Ventura River Watershed Management Plan

Through an inclusive stakeholder process, the watershed coordinator worked with council stakeholders and paid consultants and volunteers to author an 837-page Ventura River Watershed Management Plan over the course of two and a half years. Stakeholders characterized the management plan as a fair reflection of diverse voices, highly comprehensive, technical, and

¹ http://venturawatershed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/VRWC-Charter_Dec-2014.pdf

resourceful. With facilitation from the watershed coordinator, council members identified a purpose, goals, objectives, and values to guide the development of the plan. Four components identified in the plan's purpose are to: tell the story of the watershed, identify and prioritize water-related concerns in the watershed, outline a strategy to solve shared problems and collectively manage shared resources, and expand funding opportunities (Management Plan, 2015). The watershed coordinator facilitated the formation of Technical Advisory Committees (TACs) within the Council to refine language surrounding identified goals and draft sections of the plan.

The management plan frames actions and projects into six focused "campaigns." The group determined the campaign approach to be more effective than identifying priority projects in a "short-term action plan" due to the campaigns' ability to incorporate broader perspectives, allow new projects to be framed within existing concepts, and acknowledge the cyclical nature of watershed management. The six campaigns include: (1) River Connections, (2) Resiliency Through Infrastructure and Policy, (3) Extreme Efficiency, (4) Watershed-Smart Landscapes and Farms, (5) Arundo-Free Watershed, and (6) Healthy San Antonio Creek (Management Plan, 2015). Specific projects are organized into tiers; tier-one projects are feasible projects that have gained some level of stakeholder support, and tier-two projects are more conceptual. Each campaign is led by a sub-committee of council members, and identified projects are achievable by individuals or organizations working independently or collectively. The Arundo-Free Watershed Campaign and the San Antonio Creek Campaign have been the most active of the six.

With guidance from the watershed coordinator, drafts of each section of the plan were circulated to council members for approval. On more contentious topics, the watershed coordinator facilitated and worked with opposing viewpoints to develop and refine language that effectively represented the different perspectives. The watershed coordinator ultimately made the final decision on items included in the management plan, and most stakeholders agreed that decisions made were fair. Stakeholders noted that contentious moments during the process did not change the overarching priorities of the council.

Outcomes and process

Overall efforts stemming from the Ventura River Watershed Council under the guidance and facilitation of a full-time coordinator have resulted in numerous positive environmental, social, and economic outcomes in the Ventura River watershed. The council was made more robust through consistent coordination, facilitation, and continued outreach, which resulted in a larger and more diversified council as participation nearly tripled. Under a full-time watershed coordinator, council meetings took place more frequently, including two evening meetings each year that promoted public participation. During the first year of full-time coordination, the watershed coordinator developed a governance charter, which was accepted and approved by the

council, and set the ground rules for engagement among entities during council activities. Improved governance structure of the council enabled, as a stakeholder described, “fruitful collaboration” and nurtured the development of new and stronger relationships between diverse entities in the watershed. Stakeholders emphasized that the governance structure effectively promoted an increased understanding of how different groups depend on and value resources in the watershed. The working environment of the council provides a forum that is both productive and accepting of differences where members can openly disagree, establish a compromise, and move forward in achieving mutually identified goals. Differing views were depersonalized, and entities did not compete over grant opportunities but instead supported each other while considering the greater benefit of the watershed.

During the grant program, the watershed coordinator secured an additional \$98,500 in grant funding from the Bureau of Reclamation to support the development of the management plan. In partnership with the WCVC, the watershed coordinator helped bring in over \$3.2 million to the watershed to implement projects through the IRWM program. Many stakeholders agree that the DOC grant program provided a seed that led stakeholders to further recognize the value of watershed coordination and financially support the position beyond the terms of the grant. The range of outcomes accomplished under the watershed coordinator grant demonstrated to the members of the watershed council the value of ongoing watershed coordination, resulting in the present arrangement where most stakeholders in the council contribute to a collective fund to maintain a part-time (30%) watershed coordinator position in the Ventura River watershed still today. The funds support the watershed coordinator’s facilitation of six yearly meetings and fulfillment of associated logistical tasks, though many stakeholders have noted that the shift from full-time to part-time has resulted in fewer meetings overall, less website maintenance, and fewer e-newsletters issued. While some characterize the council as having a “shifting dynamic” and “limping along,” others say despite the decrease in coordination capacity, the group is still quite functional.

The existence a comprehensive management plan and an active watershed council has provided a ready vehicle for discussions focused on planning and implementing projects and has been an important forum in coordinating landscape-level initiatives (e.g., post-fire recovery). The comprehensive management plan encouraged the integration and advancement of current studies, including topics like surface and groundwater interaction, water supply and demand, water quality, and in-stream flows, throughout the watershed. The studies continue to use the council as a forum to coordinate efforts, leverage fiscal resources, and incorporate broad stakeholder feedback into the planning process.

The Ventura River was identified as one of five priority streams for the California Water Action Plan Instream Flow Program in 2016.² As part of the action plan, the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) are working to identify actions that would establish instream flows for stream systems that support anadromous fish habitat in the five pilot streams selected. While numerous factors influenced the selection of priority streams, many stakeholders noted that the existence of an active and formal watershed council and a comprehensive management plan for the Ventura River watershed likely contributed to its selection for the instream flow program.

Council discussions resulted in increased support from local, state, federal, and private agencies to remove the Matilija Dam, an endeavor that has been a priority in the watershed for many years. Once described as “the elephant in the room,” the Matilija Dam project is now moving forward with secured funding and stakeholder and political support. Construction of the Matilija Dam was completed in 1948, and studies to remove the dam began in 1998 with support from Ventura County. Data revealed that the Matilija reservoir capacity was reduced by 90% due to sediment entrapment, which prompted officials to classify the dam as obsolete. The watershed coordinator has participated in the Matilija Funding Committee that has successfully secured funding for the dam removal design as well as downstream projects that must be completed prior to dam removal. Removal of the dam will help the recovery of anadromous fish populations and replenish natural sediment on Ventura Beach.

The structure set in place by the council and ongoing coordination continues to advance watershed-level objectives, as well as landscape-level objectives, as demonstrated in recent recovery efforts of the Thomas Fire³ in December 2017. Stakeholders noted that the council has been an important social resource to the post-fire recovery process by providing an available forum for discussions regarding recovery and restoration efforts in the watershed – and the landscape. The network established through the council has enabled response teams to more effectively conduct flood risk preparation, habitat restoration, and drought preparedness, and provide information to residents on what they can and should do.

Key Findings

Outcomes resulting from collaborative efforts in the Ventura River watershed demonstrate the power of a network of people and resources linked and driven by passionate individuals and effective watershed coordination. Notable outcomes stem from focused projects to broad accomplishments, such as a watershed management plan that ultimately has led to increased project implementation. Stakeholders recognize the watershed coordinator as a central liaison

² http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/instream_flows/cwap_enhancing/

³ The Thomas Fire started on December 4, 2017 and burned a total of 281,893 acres in Southern California. The estimated containment date for the fire is January 20, 2018. Source: <https://inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/5670/>

between diverse groups and a “champion” who made many significant outcomes possible. This sentiment is reflected in the stakeholders’ continued contributions to fund a part-time watershed coordinator succeeding the three-year grant term.

Key outcomes summarized:

- Improved trust and respect among diverse stakeholders
- Improved communication
- Improved coordination among stakeholder interests
- Increased funding for project implementation
- Improved access to data and information through the watershed management plan, website and meetings
- Enhanced ability to receive grant funding
- Enhanced ability to coordinate important initiatives and campaigns including recovery from the recent Thomas Fire
- Enhanced ability for stakeholders to respond to regulatory requirements and participate in watershed-based studies and research

From day one in the position the watershed coordinator identified the need to be the “wheel at the center of it all.” This involved reaching out to all the interests in the watershed and linking them together and to the existing watershed council, a task stakeholders recognized as energy-intensive, but a necessary step to develop and foster new relationships and trust. The watershed council provided a ready vehicle for open dialogue between diverse groups where contentious topics could be discussed, collective goals could be identified, and next steps could be established and incorporated into a comprehensive plan. With consensus-based input from stakeholders, the watershed coordinator curated a mission statement and governance charter for the council, which set ground rules for inclusive and respectful engagement and further nurtured trust development. The coordinator’s primary role during the first year was not only to boost stakeholder participation, but also to bring together and organize scattered information that could be used by individuals and groups who held interests in the watershed. By reviewing other management plans and compiling data from existing research in the Ventura River watershed, the watershed coordinator established an information-sharing network that opened communication between potential project partnerships, provided frameworks and contextual data for new project initiation, and identified gaps to be addressed in the watershed management plan. The council’s capacity was augmented through grant funds from the Bureau of Reclamation, which enabled the coordinator to hire consultants and interns to help produce the plan and maintain the logistical tasks associated with council needs. Logistical tasks included writing meeting agendas and minutes, preparing and distributing e-newsletters, and updating the website. During meetings and other events, the watershed coordinator facilitated decision-making processes and mediated conflicts by reinforcing the importance of the governance charter. Many stakeholders reflected that the governance charter legitimized the process and mitigated

exclusivity or one entity from dominating a discussion. It put in place a process that was respected and followed.

As “the glue” that bound entities and resources together, the watershed coordinator embodied characteristics, as described by stakeholders, that both contributed to and resulted in effective coordination, including: dedicated, focused, creative, passionate, humble, a champion, one with creditable objectiveness, and one with the ability to convert challenges into opportunities. The watershed coordinator was a good fit for the position for likely many reasons, including having previous experience in the watershed through employment with the County of Ventura. Stakeholders regarded the watershed coordinator’s previous experience in the region as a beneficial tool that increased access to capital and resources.

The council faces many challenges in moving forward without a full-time or even a half-time watershed coordinator. When sufficiently supported, a watershed coordinator can save time and money across efforts in the watershed and improve watershed awareness by nurturing trust development, reducing redundancies and overlap, and linking together resources and partners to accomplish multi-beneficial projects. While stakeholders recognize the value of the watershed coordinator and appreciate the capacity that has been built, small agencies and organizations often struggle to secure extra funding to support the position. Mandated processes, such as the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), typically receive priority funding and resource allocation from local agency budgets. Stakeholders predict that the collective fund for basic coordination tasks will continue; however, they do not foresee a significant increase in allocated dollars. The current fund stands at around \$28,000 for one year of watershed coordination. As a result of the foundations established by preceding fulltime coordination efforts, the part-time coordinator is able to maintain the group’s momentum. However, stakeholders noted that the reduction in coordinator hours has necessitated that some duties be taken on by other organizations (e.g., the Watershed Protection District has taken on website hosting and maintenance, etc.).

Stakeholders anticipate the watershed council and management plan to remain an active resource for all interests in the Ventura River watershed, and they predict implementation of outlined projects will be a multi-decadal process. Though implementation of the plan is voluntary and fluctuates with the budgets and boards of organizations and agencies, and may also be contingent on the longevity of the watershed council, many stakeholders are confident that the fruits of watershed coordination will continue long into the future. As one stakeholder summarized, “There is a lot at stake and local stakeholders continue to share a vision and passion for maintaining a healthy watershed for future generations. Everyone recognizes the value of collaboration – that we all need to work together to address the big challenges facing the watershed.”

Appendix A: Ventura River Watershed Council – Leadership Committee

Government

Ventura County Board of Supervisors
Ventura County Watershed Protection District
City of Ventura, Ventura Water
City of Ojai
California Coastal Conservancy

Water and Sanitary

Casitas Water District
Ventura River County WD
Ojai Valley Sanitary District
Meiners Oaks Water District
Ojai Basin Groundwater Management Agency

Land Management/Recreation

Ventura County RCD
Ojai Valley Land Conservancy
Ventura Hillsides Conservancy

Environmental

Surfrider Foundation
Santa Barbara Channelkeeper
Ojai Valley Green Coalition, Watershed Council
Friends of the Ventura River

Business/Landowner

Ventura County Farm Bureau
Pixie Growers Association
Oil Extraction—Aera Energy
Ventura County Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business

Appendix B: Methods

This case study is based on nine stakeholder interviews and a review of grant documents provided by the Department of Conservation and the Ventura River Watershed Council. Two researchers visited Ventura, California to conduct six in-person interviews; three interviews were conducted over the phone. See Appendix C for a list of interview participants. Interviews were recorded by handwritten or typed notes and synthesized into this case study report. The visit to Ventura was part of a five-day trip to the South Coast region, where the two researchers conducted interviews for a total of 11 grants.

Appendix C: Interview Participants

Interview participants include one or multiple representative (s) from each of the following stakeholder groups:

Ojai Valley Land Conservancy

Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County

Surfrider Foundation, Ventura County Chapter

Ventura County Coalition of Labor, Agriculture, and Business

Ventura County Watershed Protection District

Ventura County Supervisor Bennett's Office

Appendix D: Available Grant Documents and References

Ojai Valley Land Conservancy	Grant Proposal (Submitted to granting agency)	Quarterly or Annual Update(s)	Final Report (Submitted to granting agency)	Catalogued Description (Published by granting agency)	Catalogued Final Report (Published by granting agency)	Other
Watershed Coordination for the Ventura River Watershed			X			X

References

Walter, L. Ventura River Watershed Management Plan. Prepared for the Ventura River Watershed Council. March 2015. Retrieved from http://venturawatershed.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/VRWCPlan_Complete.pdf