

Case Study: Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains

Watershed: Santa Monica Bay Watershed

Researchers: Lauren Miller and Jeff Borchers

Year	Grant Program	Project Title	Watersheds	Award Amount
2004-2007	Department of Conservation- Watershed Coordination Grant	Watershed Coordination Grant for RCD of the Santa Monica Mountains	Malibu Creek	\$171,542
2011-2014	Department of Conservation- Watershed Coordination Grant	Watershed Coordination Grant for RCD of the Santa Monica Mountains	Malibu Creek, Topanga	\$155,949

This case study involved assessments of two coordinator grants received by the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains. Findings of this research are based on interviews with stakeholders involved and a review of documents associated with the grants.

Santa Monica Bay Watershed

The Santa Monica Bay watershed encompasses 414 square miles of diverse terrain. With the Santa Monica Mountains to the north, the Los Angeles plains to the east, and extensive urban development along the coast (e.g., Malibu, Santa Monica, Venice.), Santa Monica Bay watershed is a combination of both urban and rural areas. As one of the largest sub-watersheds in the Santa Monica Bay Watershed, Malibu Creek consists of undeveloped mountains, wildland habitat, and large residential tracts. The Malibu Creek sub-watershed drains 109 square miles of the Simi Hills and the Santa Monica Mountains. The Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains, the Joint Powers Authority of the Las Virgenes Municipal Water District, and the Triunfo Sanitation District have identified the following as key impacts on the watershed: high levels of nutrient and bacteria, migratory barriers for fish, impairment of lagoon functions, septic tank effluent, pesticide and fertilizer run-off, and erosion from development.

Topanga Creek watershed is a sub-watershed in the area. Topanga Creek is the third largest sub-watershed in the Santa Monica Bay Watershed, draining 18 square miles of terrain. Topanga Creek is known for its abundance of native plants and animals, and supports the greatest diversity of species in the Santa Monica Bay watershed (Department of Public Works, n.d.).

Organization & Grants

The Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains (RCDSMM) is a specially designated district created for the promotion of conservation in and around the Santa Monica Mountains. The organization offers a variety of conservation programs, including education, research, and assisting organizations and local citizens in land-use planning, soil and water

conservation, wildlife habitat enhancement and restoration, control of exotic species, and watershed restoration.

Coordinator grants

The RCDSMM was part of the 2000-2002 Pilot Watershed Coordinator Grant Program and the 2002-2004 extension that was specifically made available to Resource Conservation Districts. While these grants are not included in the study, they laid the groundwork for subsequent coordinator grants. Following the pilot program, the RCDSMM received two coordinator grants with one extension (2004-2007, 2011-2014, 2014 six-month extension), which are the focus on this report. The watershed coordinator acquired local financial support to sustain the position during a period without DOC coordination funding (2008-2011).

Coordinator grant (2004-2007)

Prior to the 2004-2007 watershed coordinator grant, there were two watershed coordinators hired for the pilot program, one in Topanga Creek and one in Malibu Creek. According to one of the pilot program watershed coordinators, owing to the “very flexible” grant structure and requirements, the two coordinators collaboratively designed an approach, following general DOC guidelines. According to grant documentation, the 2004-2007 watershed coordinator similarly followed general DOC guidelines consisting of three main objectives: 1) development of environmental sustainability in the Santa Monica Mountains by providing environmental education to the community, 2) environmental restoration work in the Malibu Creek and Topanga Creek Watersheds, and 3) reduction of water consumption and improvement in water quality by suggesting lifestyle changes.

Coordinator grant process and outcomes

Throughout the 2004-2007 grant period, the watershed coordinator focused on facilitating interactions among stakeholders to increase collaborative watershed efforts. Prior to the coordinator’s facilitation efforts, many of the groups involved in watershed activities worked independently, unaware of other watershed efforts. Facilitation brought at-times contentious environmental nonprofits, as well as water districts, city and county representatives, State Parks, and the RCD together to share their concerns, efforts, and needs in regards to the watershed in a consistent and structured manner. Bi-monthly meeting of group representatives with a facilitator created a space where more productive conversations emerged as information, project ideas, and project updates were openly shared. With a place for sharing among stakeholders, representatives from participating groups were able to cultivate a stronger awareness and better understanding of the state of the watershed, as well as the activities taking place in the watershed, and convey the information back to their respective organizations and agencies.

Watershed coordinator facilitation efforts and bringing together diverse stakeholders stimulated the development of numerous partnerships. Through these partnerships, organizations were able to pool technical and financial resources. This sharing of resources aided in the acquisition of extensive open space for habitat restoration, including the former Tokyo-based Soka International University property (now King Gillette Ranch), the Las Virgenes Canyon Open

Space Preserve (formerly Ahmanson Ranch), the Malibu Legacy Park, and 10 acres adjacent to the Malibu Lagoon.

The watershed coordinator applied various tactics to increase awareness and draw attention and financial support to projects in the watershed. This included workshops for the public, as well as meetings with organizations and agencies working in the watershed. Workshops were promoted in the local press and via social media to include local communities and engage, inform, and educate residents about the watershed and the local organizations conducting work in the watershed. One informant discussed how during the workshops, the coordinator acted as a “cross pollinator,” spreading watershed awareness and connecting communities with local watershed organizations and watershed organizations with funding sources: “All five cities know the coordinator, what the coordinator is doing and why it is important.” This demonstrates the extensive connections and watershed awareness the watershed coordinator has developed across the watershed.

In the Malibu Creek Watershed, there are a variety of groups, residents, and organizations residing in both rural and urban areas. This has required the coordinator to employ diverse approaches to connect with these stakeholders, three of which will be discussed. First, the watershed coordinator revised and reprinted a guide on how to be a more conscientious inhabitant of the mountains, called the “Living Lightly Guide.” This guide was delivered to the homes of approximately 90,000 residents in Malibu and the Santa Monica Mountains and made available online (<http://www.livinglightlyguide.org>). All informants referenced the significance of the Living Lightly Guide and commended how successful this project was in reaching residents and encouraging an awareness of how lifestyle choices impact the watershed. The Living Lightly Guide also provided techniques to follow a more watershed-conscious lifestyle.

In addition, the watershed coordinator assisted with the filming and airing of a documentary, “The Clean Water Act and Our Backyards: Improving Water Quality in the Santa Monica Mountains,” on public access and city TV stations, reaching over 250,000 people. Finally, the watershed coordinator organized the Water Runoff Conference (2008), sharing a DVD of the conference with the community. Conference topics included information on low impact development, native landscaping, green roofs, best irrigation practices, run-off ordinances, and enforcement programs. Both of these efforts attempted to raise public watershed awareness and affect behavior, specifically aiming to improve water quality and reduce water consumption.

Many of the efforts pursued by the watershed coordinator during this first grant cycle focused on developing watershed awareness and building relationships among agencies and organizations. Some of the newly formed partnerships set the stage for connecting funding sources to projects in the watershed in subsequent years, including encouraging more active participation of the Malibu Creek Watershed Council. During this first coordinator grant, the watershed coordinator was able to secure an additional \$1,281,046 of funding, equating to 747% of the original grant received, to support projects and land acquisitions in the watershed.

In 2007, the coordinator grant ended and various local stakeholders and institutions stepped forward to fund the watershed coordinator. The contributors and approximate dollars included the RCDSMM (\$25,000), Malibu Coastal Land Conservancy (\$10,000), Natural Resource

Conservation Service (\$7,500), and Las Virgenes Municipal Water District (\$5,000). The Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission also pledged money. Additionally, the Water Runoff Conference brought in about \$46,000, and a large portion of the water coordinator's time was covered by the conference in the months leading up to the conference. Over this three-year period, the entire suite of funds paid for a quarter to halftime coordinator position, depending on when they were received. The funding came directly from the coordinator's requests to funders and according to the coordinator, "was obtained because key partners were very upset to see the program end and made the offer."

Coordinator grant (2011-2014)

The watershed coordinator pursued objectives similar to the first coordinator grant (2004-2007) throughout the final coordinator grant (2011-2014). For the 2011-2014 grant, the coordinator continued to build awareness, encourage partnerships and collaboration, and seek out fiscal support for local watershed projects. Additionally, the watershed coordinator applied for and received a six-month "drought extension" for coordination funding in 2014.

Coordinator grant process and outcomes

The 2011-2014 watershed coordinator continued to develop watershed awareness throughout the Santa Monica Bay Watershed. To heighten watershed awareness, the watershed coordinator facilitated a public screening of the Wild and Scenic Film Festival in the City of Malibu in 2013. This brought residents together to learn about current and on-going environmental challenges, and inspired attendees to participate in local watershed improvement efforts. Following this first well-attended film event, the coordinator screened another film, "Watershed," and convened a panel on the Colorado River at Pepperdine University following the film. While not specifically focused on a local watershed, this event generated attention toward, and created a space for, productive conversations about more general watershed challenges.

During the 2011-2014 coordinator grant, the watershed coordinator sought financial support, acquiring \$10,000 in funding from the California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) for the development of public outreach and understanding regarding the potential removal of the Rindge Dam, a 100-foot tall structure on Malibu Creek located approximately three miles from the coast in Malibu Creek State Park. Outreach efforts included a presentation, a guest speaker, and preliminary designs for a website. An additional \$47,000 of funding was secured to conduct another update of the "Living Lightly Guide." Funding was used to develop a web-based update with monthly publications. Finally, through the procurement of \$650,000 to fund the Liberty Canyon underpass wildlife corridor project, the watershed coordinator assisted in fundraising, bringing in partners, and raising awareness of human-wildlife interactions. This project is still in progress.

Not only did the watershed coordinator support activities to build awareness and acquire a significant amount of funding (including \$1,299,706 in additional funds), the coordinator also assisted in developing Santa Monica Mountains Watersheds Council, modeled on the already existing Malibu Creek Watershed Council. Through facilitating meetings, the watershed

coordinator assisted the Council in creating a watershed project list and drafting a watershed plan for the Santa Monica Mountains Watersheds.

Key Findings

Institutional Environment

One of the key findings of this study is that the Total Maximum Daily Load Program (TMDL) regulations, Clean Water Act Section 303(d), forced resources to be dedicated to action to address issues in the watershed. This created a hospitable institutional environment encouraging investment in watershed projects led by the watershed coordinator and resulting in positive outcomes in the watershed. In 1998, the Santa Monica Bay beaches were listed as impaired as a result of excessive amounts of coliform bacteria. The TMDL Program includes regulatory requirements that go beyond point source pollution regulations to address nonpoint source pollution. The TMDL regulations incentivized the county and nearby cities to financially invest in watershed projects to help improve water quality or face enforcement action for violations if not in compliance. With these regulations in place, and the presence of a watershed coordinator connecting cities and counties to local watershed groups and projects, several idling on-the-ground projects in the watershed were funded and implemented with county and city support.

Characteristics of Coordination

Characteristics of the watershed coordinator were identified by interviewees as critical to the success of the work included ensuring that the watershed coordinator is organized, accountable, and capable of cultivating relationships and trust among a diverse group of stakeholders. Another key characteristic is neutrality. The presence of a non-partisan individual to facilitate meetings among sometimes-feuding organizations working in the watershed helps partnerships emerge. The outcome of partnerships that share financial and technical resources include large acquisitions of land for conservation, less redundancy in approaches, and technical and financial resources that can lead to on-the-ground implementation of project ideas. As noted by one informant, “We are all connected in the same watershed, the coordinator is that needed connective tissue.”

Role of Facilitation

While not all coordinators take on the role of facilitator, one of the main functions of the RCDSMM was facilitation. As a facilitator, the watershed coordinator acted as a neutral third-party. The facilitation helped bridge and pacify relations among the at-times-contentious stakeholders and helped the diverse stakeholders understand that they were “on the same team.” The coordinator remarked, “Over and over again, I found that there are always some areas where everyone agreed and we could move forward on those items.” With previous training in facilitation, the watershed coordinator structured meetings around educational speakers and experts, updates from agencies and other organizations working in the watershed, and subcommittee reports from work on particular topics, as well as allowing all points of view to have room to speak to the group. Participants expressed how “it was nice to have one primary meeting and the coordinator to encourage key stakeholder groups to have someone there from

each organization at least listening.” Not only did this create awareness among the various groups working in the watershed, but it reduced redundancy in watershed efforts. The watershed coordinator also assumed the role of facilitator for the Malibu Creek Watershed Council, helping the group become a more active participant in the larger watershed efforts. The Council, consisting of volunteers with limited availability, had previously struggled to operate as an active, collective group without the organizational and coordination assistance of a full-time employee to take on those tasks.

One of the key challenges of working in a densely populated, developed watershed is bringing together all of the different stakeholders. The coordinator was crucial in bringing diverse groups together by taking responsibility for making connections and maintaining a space for open and honest conversation. Additionally, the watershed coordinator acted as an information hub, which involved sharing information among groups in the watershed, at times reducing redundancy, and spreading awareness of work and activities being conducted throughout the watershed.

Value of a Watershed Coordinator

Informants discussed how the money spent on a watershed coordinator dramatically amplifies benefits, referencing the numerous projects that were implemented after connecting projects needs to funding sources. Support for the coordinator is evidenced by donations from a variety of organizations that funded the position for a nearly four-year period after the RCDSMM did not receive a coordination grant. Informants also expressed interest in more stable, long-term funding mechanisms to support watershed coordination. One informant recommended a design in which agencies and organizations jointly fund a coordinator via a Joint Powers Authority or a formalized collaborative group. Such a group could provide stable funding, continuity, and ensure stakeholder investment in the coordinator, all of which may result in a greater willingness to remain involved and be held accountable. While this approach has not been developed in the Santa Monica Mountains, neighboring Ventura County has invested in a part-time watershed coordinator with most stakeholders financially contributing to the position.

Appendix A. Methods

Two researchers traveled to the Santa Monica Bay watershed to conduct four in-person interviews. Two additional interviews were conducted over the phone. The researchers were given a tour of the Malibu Creek watershed, visited numerous sites of completed watershed projects and on-going efforts, including: the SOKA property purchased for an open space reserve, the Rindge Dam, which has undergone a feasibility study for removal, and the restoration of Calabasas creek, removing cement and replanting. All available documents were reviewed (see Appendix A). Respondents are not identified for the purpose of confidentiality.

Appendix B. Participants

Resource Conservation District of Santa Monica Mountains

The Las Virgenes Municipal Water District

City Council of Malibu

City of Malibu

Appendix C. Available Grant Documents

Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains	Individual Grant Proposal	Catalogued Description	Annual Update(s)	Individual Final Report	Catalogued Report	Other	
Coordinator (2004-2007)			x		x		
Coordinator (2011-2014 & extension)							
Coordinator (2014 extension)				x			

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