Executive Director's Report

Chris Coburn, Executive Director

The Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County (RCD) serves as hub for conservation, connecting people with the technical, financial and educational assistance they need to conserve and manage natural resources. A defining characteristic of RCDs is that we provide non-regulatory, confidential assistance. There are nearly 100 RCDs across the state, and the amount of baseline funding each district receives varies greatly. In Santa Cruz County, the RCD is fortunate to receive a small amount of funds each year through local property tax and augmentation funds provided by the County. Those funds are critical in supporting the day to day function of the district. But in order to deliver our mission we rely heavily on grants, and through necessity have become effective grant writers. As the table below shows, the RCD brings in nearly $40 in state and federal funds for every dollar we receive in local funding. This funding is applied directly to local projects that protect our water, soil, air, agriculture and wildlife.

Moreover, as we protect our natural resources, we also support our local economy. A recent analysis of local benefits of stewardship actions implemented in Santa Cruz County between 2005 and 2012 found that these investments resulted in 140 jobs and a total economic output of $38 to $43 million for the County. But better yet, investment in stewardship yields a suite of ecosystem service benefits – such as clean water, carbon sequestration, recreational opportunities and local food production that have tremendous intrinsic and economic value.

In 2017 the RCD will celebrate its 75th anniversary. Our success is achieved through strong, long-term partnerships with dedicated landowners, organizations and partner agencies. As we mark this milestone, we cannot help but think of our friend and colleague, Karen Christensen, who was a driving force in building these partnerships. Her vision of inclusive collaboration continues on not only at the RCD but also in programs statewide. During the year we hope to broaden the conversation with our community and partners around of the value of natural resources, the importance of stewardship, and the role of the RCD. As we look forward to celebrating this anniversary milestone with our community, the Board of Directors and staff at the RCD are optimistic about our future and are committed to our mission of working voluntarily with people to protect, steward and restore natural resources.

RCD Fiscal Year Budgets

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<td>Total</td>
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*The difference between income and expenses represents grant money spent but not yet received by the RCD.*
Improve Stream Conditions and Demonstrating Partnerships on Soquel Creek

Since childhood, Robert Tomlin has been hiking, camping, and fly fishing giving him a great appreciation for the outdoors. In 2013, during treks near his home on the east branch of Soquel Creek, Robert began to wonder what effect the large boulders that were placed along ~1,500 feet of the creek were having on its natural function. The boulders were originally placed as flood protection in the early 1980’s by a previous landowner. Robert contacted the RCD and we pulled together a team that included the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Southwest Fisheries Science Center (NOAA) and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and determined that the rock negatively impacted stream condition and function. It was also limiting steelhead and coho salmon movement to much needed high quality rearing habitat upstream.

Wanting to improve the stream, Robert, the RCD and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) designed a solution that would return the stream to its natural function. Designs included large redwood logs with root wads, rock barbs, a secondary flow channel to reactivate the adjacent floodplain, a bench below the adjacent landslide to collect fine sediment and planting of trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants to improve the riparian corridor. Restoration was completed in 2015 with funding from the State Coastal Conservancy and Wildlife Conservation Board through the Integrated Watershed Restoration Program with significant contributions from Robert himself. Permitting and design assistance was provided by NRCS, National Marine Fisheries, CDFW, the County of Santa Cruz and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

NOAA placed a monitoring antenna on the property that will allow tracking of fish passage through this stretch of Soquel Creek. The data will be extremely valuable in estimating annual population numbers that will help the RCD evaluate the long-term effectiveness of the project.

The RCD was thrilled to work on such a large and important restoration project with an enthusiastic landowner, and hope it will inspire others interested in completing restoration projects on their properties.

“Or whole riparian corridor already looked more natural on the day construction was completed, just with its straw covered slopes. Constructed elements all were already showing promise of a much better habitat. I plan to invite all my neighbors downstream to come see the project and ask if they would be interested in getting advice and help improving the riparian habitat in their sections of the stream”. – Bob Tomlin, property owner

Bryant-Habert Seasonal Wetlands Enhancement Project

Watsonville Slough Farm (WSF), owned by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, is a model for a balanced approach that supports both working lands and natural resources. The Bryant-Habert / Wait Ecological Restoration project, located on a part of the WSF, will improve approximately 8.5 acres of seasonal wetland, riparian and grassland habitat. To recover wetland hydrology at the historic junction of the Watsonville Sloughs and Pajaro River, topographic variability will be restored by grading and replanting the site with native grassland and wetland vegetation. This project was made possible through planning and design support from the Technical Advisory Committee and highlights a successful partnership between the RCD, the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, Watsonville Wetlands Watch, Natural Resources Conservation Service, United State Fish and Wildlife Service, and the State Coastal Conservancy. Project construction was funded by the California Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) through an award of $337,000 to the RCD.
The RCD’s Agriculture and Conservation Technical Assistance Program has been active for the past decade, but thanks to new funding and partnerships, we have a significant boost to our internal capacity to work with growers and implement various conservation programs on agricultural lands. Gerry Spinelli, a recent PhD graduate from UC Davis, joined the RCD team in 2015 as an agronomist tasked with development of an internal Irrigation and Nutrient Management Technical Assistance program to work directly growers.

Achieving the program goals requires continuous collaboration with interested growers and a great deal of technical assistance ability. With Gerry’s expertise, the RCD and our partners are equipped to offer a mobile irrigation lab that provides comprehensive irrigation evaluations and recommendations, monitoring and reporting of water and nitrogen use efficiency, irrigation system design planning for beginning farmers, and development of a monitoring system for salt management. This builds upon our strong partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and is a natural complement to the conservation planning and funding incentives they provide to growers.

Gerry has a life-long agricultural background, having grown up on an olive and vegetable farm on the hills overlooking Florence, Italy. Prior to coming to the US, he worked on agricultural development projects through the Italian International Cooperation Agency in Lebanon and Honduras. He studied agronomy and tropical agriculture at the University of Florence, and more recently completed a PhD in horticulture and agronomy at UC Davis, focusing on plant physiology and water stress in almond orchards. Through his contagious creativity, enthusiasm and resourcefulness he has multiplied the number of growers we assist, expanded the services and equipment we can offer, and improved our ability to collect, process and report data back to growers to assist with their management decisions. He has been a tremendous addition to our team.

This past March, the Board of Directors of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency (PV Water) approved a program titled Recharge Net Metering (ReNeM), the first of its kind in California, as part of a comprehensive effort to improve groundwater conditions in the Pajaro Valley. The five-year pilot program begins in October 2016, and will operate as a partnership between PV Water, staff from the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC) and the RCD. The ReNeM program will create financial incentives for willing landowners to infiltrate stormwater from surrounding hillslopes, roads, and fields during large rainstorms, helping to replenish underlying aquifers.

Over the past two year, with funding from the State Coastal Conservancy, the RCD had been working with UCSC to create detailed maps to pinpoint potential project sites in locations where the conditions for infiltration and groundwater recharge are especially favorable.

Under the ReNeM pilot program, the construction of up to ten projects is planned initially, with one or two added for each of the next five years. A formula will be applied to calculate the rebate. To start, the formula will be 50% of the unit water cost that is currently charged by PV Water customers as an augmentation fee for water pumped from wells. The program is structured to incentivize long-term recharge projects by offering rebates every year the project is operational. Infiltration benefits from recharge basins will be validated by a third party certification carried out by UCSC and the RCD.

The ReNeM program supports the implementation of Best Management Practices and builds upon the coordinated efforts of the Community Water Dialogue (CWD) Recharge Working Group, who together with UCSC, the RCD and local landowners, have been constructing, testing and monitoring various recharge basins in the valley for the past five years. Long term, as the state begins to monitor ground water, ReNeM could serve as an effective model for the rest of California.

The Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County is primarily funded by grants and contracts with public and non-public entities. Private donations help to further the mission of the District and can be targeted toward your area of interest. The RCD can receive tax deductible donations under Internal Revenue Service Code Section 170 (b) and 170 (c) (1). Feel free to contact us with any questions at 831.464.2950 or online at www.rcdsantacruz.org.
Roads Program Helps Reduce Sediment in the San Lorenzo River

As urban development advanced throughout the San Lorenzo River Watershed, poorly constructed and maintained roads, historically used as logging roads, became significant contributors of sediment to the San Lorenzo River. Its tributaries deposit fine sediment into the waterways increasing the volume and timing of runoff. In response, the RCD developed the Rural Roads Erosion Control Assistance Program (RRECAP) through a grant from the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board with funding from the EPA’s 319 water quality program. The goal of the program is to work voluntarily with landowners and road associations to reduce the amount of sediment delivered to the river and its tributaries through road repairs and maintenance. The improvements are often multi-beneficial and can increase the longevity of the road and even improve driving conditions.

Over the past three years, the program educated over 250 people through workshops and technical trainings resulting in 21 different property owners who voluntarily made at least one sediment reduction improvement at their own home or property. Through cost-share incentives, the RCD was able to work with landowners to install sediment reduction projects that prevented an estimated 2,000 tons of sediment from entering the San Lorenzo River and its tributaries. A new addition to the program was Rural Road Rapid Assessment Methodology (RAM), developed in partnership with consulting firm 2NDNATURE to track and evaluate the effectiveness of our work. Collaborating with a Technical Advisory Committee of area professionals, we established a simple, rapid, standardized and repeatable method that determines and tracks rural road condition. Using past data collection and road assessments, we were able to show progress from as far back as 2006, with notable improvements made by the City of Santa Cruz Water Department over the past 10 years on properties they own in the San Lorenzo Valley and on private properties that received previous technical assistance from the RCD.

This grant period closed in 2016, but the RCD is working on several different approaches to re-institute funding for educational, technical and cost-share support for this important program that benefits both County residents and the environment. The outreach materials and technical guides are available through the RCD website at www.rcdsantacruz.org.

Countywide Fire Safe Council

Although the rain this winter was enough to spring up new vegetation, our watersheds still remain critically dry and primed for wildfire, as evidenced by the recent Loma fire. A wildfire in Santa Cruz County could have disastrous impacts, including jeopardizing the water supply of over 90,000 residents and severely impacting habitat for threatened and endangered species.

The County Board of Supervisors asked the RCD to assist with the formation of a county-wide fire safe council (FSC). The RCD will work with representatives from the existing regional FSCs (Bonny Doon, South Skyline, Santa Clara and Soquel), local fire districts, CalFire, local jurisdictions and private entities to establish the Countywide FSC. This is an opportunity for improved coordination, administration and an opportunity to bring more resources and funding to Santa Cruz County, as well as services to large portions of the County that are not currently included in one of the existing FSCs.

Fire Safe Councils (FSCs) are grass roots community-based organizations that help residents create fire breaks in and around their communities, improve emergency access roads and help low-income residents clear defensible space from around their properties to protect them from fire.