



Environmental Mitigation Program

2012 Status Report

Conservation. Research. Stewardship.





Invasion of habitat by *Arundo donax*

Habitat Conservation

Since 2008, SANDAG has spent about \$100 million to conserve more than 3,300 acres of sensitive habitat that supports endangered and threatened wildlife, as well as rare plants. Land purchases are done strategically to combine with acquisitions by other agencies to create continuous wildlife corridors.

Removing Invasive Plants

Invasive plants pose a major threat to native species and their habitat. In September 2012, SANDAG finished mapping vegetation throughout western San Diego County and documenting 52 invasive plant species. This effort helps the region determine where funds would be best invested on eradication.



Hidden Valley

Acquisition Highlights

Linking open space in East County

The 1,905-acre Hidden Valley property in Jamul, acquired in June 2012, connects the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge to California's Rancho Jamul Ecological Reserve. SANDAG and the U.S. Department of the Interior, with assistance from The Nature Conservancy, bought the property. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now manages the land, which is the single largest acquisition completed under the EMP.

Protecting coastal land from development

Fulfilling long-time community wishes, SANDAG acquired 5.8 acres in Encinitas overlooking the San Elijo Lagoon in January 2012. This site contains high-quality coastal sage scrub with breeding pairs of endangered California gnatcatchers. Originally slated for development, the land will become part of the San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy.

Restoring vernal pools in South County

Three and a half acres of mesa top in Otay Mesa, acquired in March 2012, will be restored and conserved as vernal pool habitat for the San Diego fairy shrimp and spreading navarretia plant. After restoration, the property will be turned over to the City or County of San Diego, both of which own adjacent open space.

Overview

Meeting the region's transportation needs in an environmentally responsible manner is a top priority for the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), the region's primary public planning, transportation, and research agency.

Through its award-winning *TransNet* Environmental Mitigation Program (EMP), SANDAG purchases, conserves, and restores native habitat as offsets to disturbance caused by transportation projects. *TransNet*, a regional half-cent sales tax for transportation approved by San Diego County voters, sets aside \$850 million

to fund the EMP. The *TransNet* Independent Taxpayer Oversight Committee closely monitors program expenditures to ensure public accountability.

The EMP allows SANDAG to buy land in advance of projects—at lower costs and in larger parcels—and bank it for future mitigation needs. By taking a comprehensive and cost-effective approach, rather than buying land piecemeal to satisfy mitigation requirements project by project, the EMP has become a national model for best practices.

TransNet Environmental Mitigation Program Land Acquisitions

As of December 2012

- 1 **Groves**
268 acres acquired in 2008
- 2 **Morrison**
136.7 acres acquired in 2008
- 3 **Anderprizes**
43.5 acres acquired in 2008
- 4 **Dean Family Trust**
23.1 acres acquired in 2008
- 5 **Zwesteria**
19.4 acres acquired in 2009
- 6 **Sage Hill**
170.8 acres acquired in 2009
- 7 **Hallmark**
19.3 acres acquired in 2009
- 8 **Leung/Lowe**
21.8 acres acquired in 2009
- 9 **Ayoub**
21.7 acres acquired in 2009
- 10 **San Dieguito Lagoon**
107 acres acquired in 2009
- 11 **Lonestar Ranch**
175.3 acres acquired in 2009
- 12 **Tabata**
23.7 acres acquired in 2010
- 13 **Zamudio**
32.5 acres acquired in 2010
- 14 **Mendocino**
19.7 acres acquired in 2010
- 15 **Vessels**
162 acres acquired in 2010
- 16 **Jeffries Ranch**
80.3 acres acquired in 2011
- 17 **Rincon**
37.3 acres acquired in 2011
- 18 **Deer Canyon**
31.4 acres acquired in 2011
- 19 **Rancho Lilac**
902 acres acquired in 2011
- 20 **Laser**
5.8 acres acquired in 2012
- 21 **Otay Mesa Parcel A**
6.7 acres acquired in 2012
- 22 **Time Out Holdings /Stacco**
68.2 acres acquired in 2012
- 23 **Hidden Valley**
953 acres acquired in 2012*



*The remaining 952 acres were acquired by the federal government and donated by the seller.

Restoring native habitat in North County

Nearly 70 acres of fallow agricultural land in the San Luis Rey River Valley were acquired in March 2012. The fields will be restored to coastal sage scrub and riparian habitat. This property is just to the east of the 80.3-acre Jeffries Ranch property already conserved by SANDAG.

Scientific Research

Aiding the recovery of burrowing owls

With partial funding from SANDAG, the San Diego Zoo's Institute for Conservation Research and San Diego State University's Institute for Ecological Monitoring and Management initiated a program in 2011 to assist in the recovery of Western Burrowing Owls and their grassland ecosystem in San Diego County. The owl population has been declining to a point where it may not be self-sustaining. This collaborative effort launched a multi-year study to restore optimal habitat conditions for the species. Researchers re-introduced ground squirrels to the grassland to naturally create new burrows for owls to use for nesting.



Western Burrowing Owl

Monitoring use of wildlife corridors

A key factor in the decline of many species is isolation and fragmentation of habitat caused by urban development. Wildlife undercrossings address this problem by enabling animals to move freely under roads and between open space areas. The U.S. Geological Survey, funded partly by SANDAG, has established a network of monitoring cameras to document the use of these passages. This research will increase understanding of the use of the undercrossings, leading to improved design.



Cameras capturing wildlife using crossings

Environmental Stewardship

Restoring the southwestern pond turtle

With grant funding from SANDAG, the U.S. Geological Survey has been working to restore the southwestern pond turtle population in the Sycuan Peak Ecological Reserve—one of only six remaining populations in the county. Thanks to the removal of non-native predators and captive rearing and release by the San Diego Zoological Society, juvenile turtles have been observed in the habitat. For the first time in more than a decade, there are signs of successful turtle breeding in southern San Diego County.



Southwestern pond turtle

Protecting the California least tern in Mission Bay

Work is underway in Mission Bay to remove invasive plants, restore coastal dune habitat, and promote the conservation of the endangered California least tern and the rare Nuttall's lotus plant. With grant funding from SANDAG, the San Diego Audubon Society is collaborating with San Diego State University and the City of San Diego on the project. The goal is to increase the least tern population by improving its nesting sites and native habitat.



California least tern

Regional Coordination

Through the EMP Working Group, SANDAG regularly brings together regional land managers to discuss mutual opportunities and common issues affecting open space management throughout the county. The ongoing collaboration is crucial, according to a 2012 audit of *TransNet*.

In summer 2013, SANDAG expects to finalize the Strategic Plan for Management of Conserved Lands in Western San Diego County. This plan identifies common challenges from local to regional levels; prioritizes resource needs; and outlines a funding allocation strategy to maximize return. A draft strategic plan for monitoring will follow a year later.

Accomplishments

- 23 properties acquired, totaling 3,329 acres
- Winner of the 2012 Best Practices Award from the California Chapter of the American Planning Association
- \$29,830 average cost per acre, roughly half the original estimate
- \$17.4 million in leveraged funding from acquisition partners
- 55 grants, totaling \$9.3 million, distributed to regional land managers
- \$5.4 million in leveraged matching funds resulting from EMP grants



2012 Best Practices Award

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