



# Permitting Restoration Case Study Partners in Restoration Permit Coordination

Santa Cruz County, CA

## Sustainable Conservation's Partners in Restoration Program

In response to the barriers created by permitting issues, and to encourage farmers in their stewardship role, Sustainable Conservation launched the Partners in Restoration (PIR) project in 1998, in collaboration with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and local Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs). Piloted in Elkhorn Slough, Monterey County, PIR is a one-stop permit program, bringing all relevant agencies under one umbrella and requiring only one coordinated permit. Since its development, PIR has been used as a model for "...coordinated, multi-agency regulatory review that ensures the integrity of agency mandates, but makes permitting more accessible to rural landowners, farmers, and ranchers than does the traditional approval process" (RCDSCC). The project has served as a precedent for many jurisdictions, including Santa Cruz and Alameda Counties as detailed in the following case study as well as *Permitting Restoration Case Study: Stock Pond Restoration & Permit Coordination*.

The steep terrain, highly erosive soils, and high rainfall levels characteristic of Santa Cruz County make sedimentation a significant threat to water quality in the county's watersheds. The Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) has identified activities such as farming, real estate development, and road construction, most of which occur on private lands, as primary sources of sediment, a non-point source pollutant. By 2003, coordinated watershed planning efforts were underway in the county, and eight watershed assessment and enhancement plans had been completed. The plans identified a broad spectrum of resource issues (fish passage barriers, water quality impairment, and degraded habitat). In order to implement as many of the high priority restoration projects recommended in the watershed plans, the Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County (RCDSCC) and the California Coastal Conservancy (CCC) began to discuss strategies to facilitate on-the-ground projects.

In light of this challenge, and using the Elkhorn Slough Partners in Restoration (PIR) as a model, Sustainable Conservation, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and RCDSCC collaborated to expand PIR into the first county-wide permit coordination program. Focusing on erosion control and fisheries habitat enhancement practices for small projects with a net environmental benefit, the permit coordination program was identified as a tool to implement watershed recommendations and assist private landowners in Santa Cruz County with implementing voluntary restoration projects.

# Regulations



The agencies identified by PIR for participation in the Santa Cruz Countywide Permit Coordination Program included the County of Santa Cruz, CCC, the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), and RWQCB. Initial conversations with regulatory partners began in 2003 and the program was initiated in 2005.

Fifteen conservation practices were identified for the program and environmental protection measures were developed with the permitting agencies to ensure a net environmental impact for all projects. The program allowed RCDSCC and NRCS to “batch” projects, expediting the permitting review and reducing permit-related fees. While regulatory agency participation was required during development of the program, the program reduced overall staff time during the 5-year program.

The original coordinated permit was put in place for a period of five years (2005–2009). In 2009, RCDSCC initiated the process of renewing the permit for an additional 10 years. During this renewal process, RCDSCC and NRCS conducted an analysis of the 5-year program and revised the practices that would be included in the renewal, replacing several with practices that better addressed the county’s current priority resource issues.

# Hurdles



While the permit coordination program has been extremely successful, there have been a number of challenges:

- A. Development of the program can be costly. Finding grant funding to support development can be challenging and often can expire before all permits are issued.
- B. For the original 5-year program, FWS and the Corps were unable to issue programmatic permits until 2007, creating a two-year separation between federal and local/state permit expiration. Staggered permits can be challenging when it is time to renew.
- C. CDFG has not been able to discontinue the requirement of individual streambed alteration

agreements for each project, although it is anticipated that the agency will in the near future.

- D. The coordinated permit program has reduced staff time for the local, state, and federal permitting agencies; however, RCDSCC and NRCS have absorbed some of the work to ensure consistency with regulations, requiring staff to spend an average of 50 hours on permitting tasks per project.
- E. Staff turnover within the permitting agencies has led to a lack of continuity, requiring RCDSCC and NRCS to explain the process and program to new contacts, and re-forge inter-agency relationships.

# Resolution



Overall benefits to the watershed have been substantial, as demonstrated by the differential between the number of pre- and post-permit coordination projects implemented in the county. According to RCDSCC, 53 projects were completed in the first 5 years of the program (10.6 per year compared to less than one per year prior to the effort), restoring a total of 5,000 acres of land, enhancing 20 miles of stream habitat for salmonids, and preventing 14,000 tons of sedimentation per year from entering water courses. During this time, 280 landowners have partnered in exploring and/or initiating projects and more than \$4.5 million has been leveraged for PIR projects. Instead of the multiple years and thousands of dollars to get a project permitted, which was common before permit coordination, current projects typically take less than one year from start to finish and cost no more than \$1,000 in permitting fees. In addition, the program has strengthened inter-agency relationships, improving collaboration and conversations beyond permit coordination projects.

*Primary Sources: Camara, Kelli, Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District. Phone interview. August 31, 2010; Sustainable Conservation. <http://www.suscon.org/pir/index.php>. Accessed September 1, 2010.*

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