

CAPITOL OFFICE
1021 O STREET, SUITE 8720
SACRAMENTO, CA 95814
TEL (916) 651-4017
FAX (916) 651-4917

MONTEREY DISTRICT OFFICE
99 PACIFIC STREET, SUITE 575-F
MONTEREY, CA 93940
TEL (831) 657-6315
FAX (831) 657-6320

SAN LUIS OBISPO DISTRICT OFFICE
1026 PALM STREET, SUITE 201
SAN LUIS OBISPO, CA 93401
TEL (805) 549-3784
FAX (805) 549-3779

SANTA CRUZ DISTRICT OFFICE
701 OCEAN STREET, SUITE 318A
SANTA CRUZ, CA 95060
TEL (831) 425-0401
FAX (831) 425-5124

SANTA CLARA COUNTY SATELLITE OFFICE
TEL (408) 847-6101

California State Senate

SENATOR
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SEVENTEENTH SENATE DISTRICT



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May 7, 2024

Secretary Wade Crowfoot
Deputy Secretary Meaghan Hertel
California Natural Resources Agency
715 P Street, 20th Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

Subject: Pathways to 30x30 California – Implementation on California’s Central Coast (updated)

Dear Secretary Crowfoot and Deputy Secretary Hertel:

As California’s Senator representing the 17th Senate District, I wrote the attached letter in early February 2022 in response to the draft Pathways to 30x30 California report (2022 Letter). That letter included a list of specific projects and programs that, along with local partners, I advocated to implement the state’s ambitious biodiversity agenda within California’s Central Coast.

I am happy to report that, two years later, significant progress has been made, and many of the projects and programs contained in the 2022 Letter have now been successfully completed, or are on the right path to do so. In addition, new and ambitious objectives have been envisioned to protect the biodiversity of lands and waters along the Central Coast. It seemed appropriate, then, to write this new letter to applaud the excellent work already done by local and other partners and to highlight where new efforts should be focused. I will begin with a discussion of initiatives that span the 17th Senate District, followed by county-specific projects, as follows below.

I’d like to note that this letter was prepared with the thoughtful input of many local land trusts, environmental organizations, Resource Conservation Districts, tribes, as well as regional, state, and federal agencies. I’m grateful for the considerable time and effort they invested in providing the information contained herein, and for their continued efforts on the ground (and in the waters) throughout the Central Coast, to help achieve the state’s ambitious 30x30 biodiversity goals. Also, while this list of priority biodiversity/conservation projects is meant to be thorough, it undoubtedly and unintentionally has multiple omissions. My sincere apologies for that, and I welcome any reader to provide suggestions for future revisions.

Districtwide Biodiversity Initiatives

The following high priority biodiversity and conservation initiatives have a regional focus, stretching across the county boundaries contained in Senate District 17, and embracing biodiversity protection on a landscape scale:

- Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary – Thanks to the work of the Northern Chumash Tribal Council (NCTC), the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, we are approaching the final stages of the formal designation of a new marine sanctuary, located between the existing Monterey and Channel Islands national marine sanctuaries. We should not waiver at this opportunity to finally (after a multi-decade effort) designate this new sanctuary to protect iconic marine species; a diverse ecosystem of marine, wetland, and estuary resources; extensive Chumash sites and sacred areas; and world-class scenic vistas and outdoor recreational opportunities. As advocated by NCTC and all three Central Coast wind energy leaseholders in their April 19, 2024 letter, we can achieve this sanctuary designation using a phased approach, in cooperation with the thoughtful development of offshore wind on the Central Coast -- an essential component to achieving the state’s ambitious clean-energy goals and responsibly facing the climate crisis and its potentially devastating impacts to humankind and biodiversity.
- San Andreas Wildlife Corridor – California’s Inner Coast Range contains a unique wildlife linkage running along the San Andreas Fault in eastern San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties and beyond, where rich biodiversity exists, including endemic plants and iconic species such as the tule elk and pronghorn. A series of critical wildlife corridors that span nearly 600,000 acres should be protected, to sustain the region’s native species in the face of climate change and habitat fragmentation. Some important conservation strides have already been made -- including the inspired 2022 acquisition of the **13,500-acre Las Piletas Ranch** by The Nature Conservancy and this year’s successful conservation easement on the 27,500-Camatta Ranch (described below) -- but additional efforts are needed to connect the Carrizo Plain National Monument to lands of the Los Padres National Forest, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Forest Service. As an added benefit, projects in this interior region of the state are much cheaper, which significantly leverages limited conservation dollars toward maximum biodiversity protection.
- Santa Cruz Mountains/Gabilan Range/Pajaro River/Watsonville Slough Linkage – The Santa Cruz Mountains have a critical ecological connection to the Gabilan Range to the south. Thanks to the efforts of the Peninsula Open Space Trust and the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, we know more now about this connection and wildlife corridor, and key conservation actions have occurred, including the much-celebrated, 2022 acquisition of the **2,600-acre Rocks Ranch** (in Monterey and San Benito counties). Other critical acquisitions should be supported, including 1,200 acres near Mount Madonna County Park, and a 200-acre area in San Benito County near a crucial chokepoint for animals crossing Highway 129. Critically important, too, is the need to protect and restore the native habitat and agricultural lands of the Pajaro River and its watershed, including the Watsonville Slough, located between these mountain ranges. We need to explore and promote the compatibility and coexistence between people, agriculture, and wildlife, to protect the floodplain

and reduce downstream flood risk that has proven disastrous to communities in this region. Toward that end, pending efforts by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County to acquire key properties near the mouth of the Pajaro River (including the 247-acre Beach Ranch) should be encouraged and supported.

- Salinas River Corridor – Stretching for over 150 miles from the Los Padres National Forest in central San Luis Obispo County, through the Salinas Valley, and emptying into the Monterey Bay, the “upside down” Salinas River is one of the most important rivers in the State of California. Many Central Coast cities, farmers, ranchers and vintners rely on its water. Its corridor supports biodiversity of terrestrial and aquatic wildlife, in various levels of riparian health. To support the ecosystem of the Central Coast, we need to prioritize the Salinas River’s wise use and recovery for long-term sustainability. Among other projects, and in coordination with the Salinan Tribe of San Luis Obispo and Monterey Counties and other regional tribes, a comprehensive management plan should be completed to, among other things, include restoration projects of degraded areas. We should also support educational and recreational programs around the river, including the Salinas River Trail, Salinas River Center, and the projects of the SLO Beaver Brigade and Ecologistics, to promote the stewardship, revitalization, water resiliency, and biodiversity of the Salinas River.
- California Native Tree Protections - California’s rich biodiversity stretches across all ecosystems, but certain areas -- including the state’s iconic forests and woodlands – are considered “biodiversity hotspots.” And yet these native tree ecosystems are facing increasing threats, due to habitat destruction, fragmentation, wildfires, and other climate-related impacts. We should consider efforts to strengthen forest and woodland protections statewide, with a focus on redwood forests and native oak woodlands. Not only will this boost the biodiversity in these regions, but protections of these species are key to a climate resilient future because of their powerful role in carbon sequestration.
- Wildlife Crossings. One of the grave threats to California’s rich biodiversity is the network of highways, roads, and other infrastructure that cut across historic wildlife corridors. But with the greater knowledge we now have about these corridors, as well as new strategies to reduce wildlife/vehicle collisions, we can move forward on initiatives to increase the safe migration of species as well as improve highway safety for people. The Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing underway in Southern California (with an expected completion in 2026) is an excellent example of how we can address the challenge. A recent local success is the completion of the undercrossing at Laurel Curve on Highway 17 in Santa Cruz County. As the former California Natural Resources Secretary, I supported this project to significantly reduce the high number of wildlife collisions on this stretch of the highway. We should continue to support science-based studies that illuminate the priority wildlife crossings, such as those by the Caltrans and the Wildlands Network. We should also prioritize implementing the projects statewide that could make the difference between species recovery and extinction. Priorities to secure wildlife corridors in the 17th Senate District include the following:
 - Santa Cruz County – Watsonville/Highway 129; Larkin Valley/Highway 1; Highway 17
 - Santa Clara County – Coyote Valley/Monterey Road
 - San Luis Obispo County – Cuesta Grade/Highway 101; Highway

- San Benito/Santa Clara Counties - Highway 101 at State Route 152
- Coastal California Protection - A key to maintaining the biodiversity of – and public access to – California’s iconic 840-mile coastline is to maintain the integrity of the Coastal Act. Along the Central Coast itself, Coastal Act policies were integral in protecting hundreds of thousands of acres, including the Hearst Ranch, the Fiscalini Ranch Reserve, the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Preserve, and the Monterey Pine Forest, to name a few.
- Marine Protected Areas – Over two decades ago, the California legislature passed the groundbreaking Marine Life Protection Act, which facilitated the creation of a network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) along California’s coast, including several within the Central Coast. As the Natural Resources Secretary, I supported the designation of MPAs, as providing crucial protection for the state’s embattled marine life, and recognize today their essential role in the success of the 30x30 Biodiversity Initiative. The current Decadal Management Review process to inform the MPA management program has provided an important forum for productive community conversations about the MPA network’s future management, and these conversations should continue. We should also support the exploration of additional MPAs, based on solid science and extensive public input.
- California Coastal Trail - The California coastline is world-class, and visitors and residents alike are drawn to our iconic sandy beaches, stunning ocean vistas, picturesque coastal cliffs, unique dune environments, and rich evergreen forests. To protect the biodiversity of the state’s coastal region, it’s not enough to conserve the lands. We also need to encourage and foster compatible public uses, which educate and inspire the next generations to care for this land and ensure its ecological sustainability, while promoting local economies and the good physical and mental health of our citizenry. Completion, then, of the 1,230-mile California Coastal Trail stretching from Oregon to Mexico must be a high priority of the 30x30 Biodiversity Initiative. Significant progress toward this goal has already been made along the Central Coast (including the projects listed below), but much work remains. We need to prioritize the implementation of current coastal trail extension efforts at the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes, between Morro Bay and Cayucos, at the Hearst Ranch/SLO North Coast, along the Big Sur coastline, and elsewhere where the California Coastal Trail is fragmented and incomplete.

Countywide Biodiversity Initiatives

The following high priority biodiversity and conservation initiatives have a countywide focus, although the benefits and outcomes of these projects will often serve regional biodiversity and conservation objectives:

MONTEREY COUNTY

Conservation Success Stories

- Rana Creek Ranch – In the 2022 Letter, I urged the protection of the **12,000-acre Rana Creek Ranch**, the largest inholding in the Carmel Valley, containing seasonal creeks, vernal pools, and listed species including the red-legged frog and California tiger salamander. The project will protect a key wildlife corridor between the Salinas Valley and Los Padres National Forest as well as provide public recreational opportunities for underserved communities in the Salinas Valley. Thanks to the hard work of The Wildlands Conservancy (TWC) and partners, escrow successfully closed on this project in 2023, and the Rana Creek Ranch is now protected in perpetuity! The land will be co-managed by TWC and the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County, with plans to open it to the public.
- Basin Ranch – In the 2022 Letter, I urged the acquisition of the **5,000-acre Basin Ranch**, to augment the landscape-level protection provided in connection with the Rana Creek Ranch conservation (per above), and to bridge the connection between Bureau of Land Management lands to the east and the Los Padres National Forest, protecting a key wildlife corridor, protection of listed species, and augmenting public recreation in underserved areas. Because of the efforts of the Big Sur Land Trust (BSLT) and partners, escrow successful closed on this project in 2023, and Basin Ranch is now protected in perpetuity! The BSLT and the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County are currently working on a co-management agreement.
- Hiss Property – In the 2022 Letter, I urged the acquisition of the **84-acre Hiss** property, consisting of coastal native grasslands, riparian areas, and oak woodlands along the scenic Highway 68 corridor, while connecting conserved lands to the Joyce Stevens Monterey Pine Forest and other protected regional properties, and thereby augmenting public access to trails in the region. The Big Sur Land Trust successfully closed escrow on this project this year and the property is now protected in perpetuity! Efforts continue to secure long term stewardship funding, which should be supported.
- Camp Pico Blanco – In 2002 Letter, I urged the acquisition of the **718-acre Camp Pico Blanco** on the Big Sur Coast, for the protection of its redwood canyons and waterfalls, in addition to the opportunities for public access and trails. The project successfully closed in 2023, enabling ownership by the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County as well as by non-profit groups that will offer youth camping opportunities, including for children with disabilities.

Ongoing or New Conservation Initiatives

- Palo Escrito Peak – The almost 9,900-acre Palo Escrito Peak in Carmel Valley is unique in its extensive and undisturbed cultural resources and sacred sites of the Esselen People, as well as biologically diverse habitats, ancient oaks, important steelhead habitat, and the highest peak in the Sierra de Salinas Range. The Trust for Public Land is working closely with the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County to acquire these ancestral lands for permanent conservation, wildfire management, habitat restoration, and tribal ownership and access. The closing of the project is expected in 2025, but may be imperiled by the state’s budget crisis, and thus creative solutions must be found to secure the protection of the property in perpetuity.
- Tularcitos Ridge (Rana Creek Ranch, Part II) – After The Wildlands Conservancy’s (TWC) acquisition of the larger portion of the Rana Creek Ranch (as described above), TWC and the Esselen Tribe are working together to protect the additional 1,720-acre southwestern portion of the Rana Creek Ranch located south of Carmel Valley Road. As one of the oldest and largest villages sites within Esselen ancestral territory, this acquisition should be supported, to enhance the protection of the entire Rana Creek Ranch landscape, and to return nature-based and indigenous-based practices to the land and implement youth cultural education programs.
- Carmel River Floodplain Restoration and Environmental Enhancement (“Carmel River FREE”) – This multi-benefit project will restore natural floodplain function to Carmel River’s lower floodplain/estuary system, while increasing riparian and wetland habitat for sensitive species, reducing flood risk to adjacent residential communities, facilitating public access, and preserving 36 acres of coastal farmland. Funding is still being secured, and should be supported, to begin construction on this long-needed and long-planned hazard mitigation and climate resiliency project.
- Ensen Community Park at Carr Lake - After several years of community-based design, environmental review, and permitting, the Big Sur Land Trust has begun construction on the Ensen Community Park at Carr Lake, in the heart of Salinas. This multi-benefit green infrastructure project will provide critical park-related recreational opportunities for Salinas families and will include the restoration of wetlands and riparian habitats and associated improvements to water quality. Efforts to construct and open the entire 73-acre park by 2026 should be supported.
- CEMEX – We should continue to support efforts to acquire this 400 acres of rich coastal dune habitat and provide protection for the area’s snowy plover population, while building upon existing protected property in the coastal region and augmenting public access to the coast.
- Big Sur Coast – We should continue to support efforts to acquire inholding properties (e.g., Yamagata and Edmonson) within the ecologically and culturally rich Big Sur region, containing old growth forests, redwood groves, and mixed evergreen forests for large-scale landscape protection and to augment existing public holdings and improve trail access.
- Elkhorn Slough Watershed – The Elkhorn Slough and Watershed is one of California’s most important coastal wetlands. It is the site of the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research

Reserve owned and managed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, which works closely with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Elkhorn Slough Foundation, a local land trust. Together, these partners have conserved over **6,500 acres in the slough watershed**. We should continue to support efforts to acquire key remaining in-holdings in this ecologically rich estuary and tidal salt marsh, which contains an unusual diversity of resident and migratory birds and marine mammals. We should also support restoration efforts on the degraded tidal marsh lands to improve water quality, conserve native species, and protect important coastal infrastructure.

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

Conservation Success Stories

- Camatta Ranch – In the 2022 Letter, I urged the acquisition of a conservation easement on the scenic and stunning, **27,500-acre Camatta Ranch**, which hosts threatened foothill oak woodland habitat currently under-represented in the existing public lands network, as well as a critical wildlife corridor between the Carrizo Plain and inland mountains. I secured the first funding (\$2.5 million) towards this project in the 2022 State Budget, and the remainder was put into place due to heroic efforts by the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County, the Wildlife Conservation Board, and the State Coastal Conservancy. Escrow closed on this project in April 2024, and the Camatta Ranch is now protected, in perpetuity!
- Warren Ranch – In the 2022 Letter, I supported the acquisition of a conservation easement on the **712-acre Warren Ranch** in the Upper Santa Rosa Creek watershed, to buttress other conservation projects in the region and protect coastal streams, threatened and endangered species habitat, oak woodlands, and productive rangeland. The Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County successfully completed this acquisition in 2023, and the land is now protected in perpetuity!

Ongoing or New Conservation Initiatives

- Diablo Canyon Lands – In the 2022 Letter, I advocated for the conservation of and public access to the 12,000-acre Diablo Canyon Lands surrounding the Diablo Canyon Power Plant. This involves conserving highly scenic and intact coastal habitat and rocky intertidal zones, protecting sacred Chumash cultural sites, and implementing a managed coastal public access program, including a 20-mile extension of the California Coastal Trail. This vision took a major leap forward when \$5 million in funds that I secured in the 2023 state budget were allocated this year to the State Coastal Conservancy for (1) the creation of conservation easement documents across all 12,000 acres, (2) the completion of pre-acquisition steps on Wild Cherry Canyon (a 2,400-acre unit of the Diablo Canyon Lands), and (3) the implementation of a public and tribal outreach program, all in line with a 2023 Report by the CA Natural Resources Agency, “Diablo Canyon Power Plant Land Conservation and Economic Development Plan.” This is in addition to the \$150 million included in SB 846 (2023) for ultimate transfer and stewardship of these lands from PG&E and its subsidiaries to the yak tityu tityu yak tilhini Northern Chumash Tribe of San Luis Obispo County and Region, possibly other local tribe(s), and State Parks. The acquisition of the Diablo Canyon

Lands is also important in the context of its connection to other protected lands in the adjacent, high-conservation priority Irish Hills/Indian Knob region, including conservation successes at the **Hibberd Preserve, Andre Ranch, Davis Canyon, Irish Hills Natural Reserve, John Guidetti Ranch, and Pismo Preserve**, all totaling some **8,000 acres**.

- Toro Coast Preserve – In the 2022 Letter, I urged the acquisition of almost 2,000 acres of threatened coastal land located between Cayucos and Morro Bay to create a new, premier open space preserve broadly accessible for hiking and other passive recreation. Thanks to the hard work of the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County, the Cayucos Land Conservancy, and the Morro Bay Open Space Alliance, **Phase 1 (350 acres) Toro Creek Preserve** project is now complete, and **Phase 2 (750 acres) Toro Creek Preserve** project is expected to close this year. The final Phase 3 (700 acres) would connect the first two phases and enhance public access to the coast. I am proud to have successfully advocated for \$1.5 million toward the Phase 2 acquisition in the 2022 state budget and urge the completion of the full project by 2030.
- McMillan Ranch – Two conservation easements should be acquired on this 2,500-acre property containing grasslands, oak woodlands, and riparian corridors. This land is adjacent to more than 12,000 acres of existing protected lands and the acquisition would thus augment the landscape-scale protection of this region of SLO County.
- Adelaida Springs Ranch – A conservation easement on this 1,500-acre property should be acquired to support a sustainable livestock ranch and vineyard, while protecting valley oak woodlands and an important wildlife corridor between protected lands of the national forest, Bureau of Land Management, and Camp Roberts. A large portion (75%) of the purchase price has already been funded through the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) program, but the rest is still in need of funding. This is a critical moment for the Adelaida Springs easement, as it is the last active opportunity to secure a large land unit in the “Hearst Ranch-Attiyeh Ranch” conservation zone (the 83,000-acre Hearst Ranch conservation project successfully closed in 2005, and the **7,700-acre Attiyeh Ranch** conservation project successfully closed in 2022).
- Cottontail Creek Ranch – A conservation easement on this 850-acre property near Cayucos should be acquired, to expand upon a large protected area in this scenic Highway 46 West region, including the **1,779-acre Hill Ranch**, the **1,700-acre Santa Rita Ranch**, and the **2,032-acre MK Ranch**. In addition to the property’s grassland, oak woodland, and bay laurel woodland that provides habitat for a range of species, the Cottontail Creek Ranch plays a crucial role in the water quality of Whale Rock Reservoir located immediately downstream.
- Black Lake Canyon and Ecological Area – In this coastal wetland, dune scrub, and peat bog habitat containing threatened and endangered amphibian and plant species, we should ensure permanent protection, while removing invasive species and sediment, and augmenting managed public access to Monarch butterfly overwintering sites. The initial restoration and sediment removal project was completed in 2023, but an additional step is needed to complete the sediment removal to improve the area’s habitat.

- Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes – We should continue to support efforts to enhance habitat on this rare coastal dune ecosystem with high biodiversity value including multiple endemic and rare plant species. This includes weed removal, sustainable management of public access, climate resilience measures, and other rehabilitation projects in light of the potential phasing out of off-highway vehicle access on the Oceano Dunes portion. We should also prioritize the permanent protection of the 680-acre Buffer Area (a site of rare plants) located immediately east of the protected Oso Flaco Lake Natural Area. Oso Flaco Lake itself should also be protected against plans that would fragment the ecosystem and introduce incompatible uses, to ensure continued conservation of this birding area of statewide significance, its rare and highly biodiverse coastal lake, dune, and riparian habitat, and its popular and quiet coastal destination for locals and visitors.
- Carrizo Plain – By virtue of its size, remoteness, and intact landscape, the Carrizo Plain in eastern San Luis Obispo County is one of the few remaining vegetation and wildlife habitats of California’s Central Valley region. Fortunately, the Carrizo has been the focus of significant conservation achievements (including the North and South **Chimineas ranches (29,000 acres total)** and the **American Ranch (10,000 acres)**), thanks to efforts by The Nature Conservancy, the CA Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Bureau of Land Management, Los Padres Forestwatch, the Carrizo Plain Conservancy, and other partners. But to fully protect the region’s unique landscape, additional conservation efforts are needed, including the long-awaited completion of the Land Management Plan for the Carrizo Plain Ecological Reserve. The Land Management Plan will be used as a guide to manage wildlife habitat and public access to this important linkage between Los Padres National Forest and the Carrizo Plain National Monument. Efforts should also be made to conserve the region’s large, unprotected parcels and to otherwise connect this region to the larger San Andreas Wildlife Corridor (described above).
- North Coast – Fortunately, much of the ecologically rich habitat of the County’s north coast has been protected, thanks to the success of the **83,000-acre Hearst Ranch** conservation project as well as other conservation projects in the region, including the **750-acre Harmony Headlands State Park**, the **355-acre Estero Bluffs State Park**, the **1,500-acre Covell Ranch**, and **437-acre Fiscalini Ranch**. However, important efforts to improve public access and habitat remain in this region, including State Parks’ efforts to finally establish a 20-mile extension to the California Coastal Trail on the Hearst coast. We should also support a creative solution to the annual loss of dozens of elephant seal pups at the Piedras Blancas rookery, which are separated from their mothers during increasingly heavy wave action during winter storms, exacerbated by a loss of beach due to rising sea waters.

SANTA CLARA COUNTY

- Coyote Valley – The Coyote Valley is one of the last remaining undeveloped valley floors connecting the Santa Cruz Mountains to the Diablo Range. The Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, the Peninsula Open Space Trust, and other conservation partners have successfully protected over **1,500 acres in the Coyote Valley** for wildlife protection and connectivity. In 2023, the parties secured a \$5 million grant to plan wildlife crossings to span the Valley to increase

permeability for wildlife and reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions. Other work remains to be done, including protecting key Valley inholdings such as the Fisher Creek floodplain, building upon the 2023 success of the **1,900-acre Máyyan ‘Ooyákma – Coyote Ridge Open Space Preserve** within the foothills of the Diablo Range, and improving infrastructure along Monterey Road for safe wildlife passage and to improve driver safety. We should also encourage the appropriate siting of energy projects to avoid wildlife corridors, while advancing California’s transition to clean, renewable energy.

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

Conservation Success Stories

- Little Glen Preserve – In the 2022 Letter, I urged support of land acquisitions to create a wildlife tunnel near the Watsonville Slough Ecological Preserve to connect separate populations and critical habitat for the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander, a state and federally endangered species that occurs only in southern Santa Cruz County and northern Monterey County. Because of the diligent efforts of the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, two properties near important breeding habitat were acquired, and the **14-acre Little Glen Preserve** is now protected in perpetuity! Several other projects to support this salamander are in the works and should be supported, including the **144-acre La Selva Uplands** which is set to close escrow this year.
- Big Basin Redwoods State Park – In the 2022 Letter, I urged support of the rebuilding and reimagining efforts for Big Basin following the devastating CZU Lightning Complex Fire. While fire recovery efforts are still underway, the park is now open for limited, day-use public access. State Parks’ Facilities Management Plan process is also underway and should be supported, to fully reestablish public access in new and more inclusive ways, to connect to indigenous knowledge, and to offer new land management and design features that are climate resilient.
- Swanton Pacific Ranch – In the 2022 Letter, I urged the support of efforts by Cal Poly and its partners (including the Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District) in rebuilding and restoring the highly biodiverse, **3,200-acre Swanton Pacific Ranch** following the CZU Lightning Complex Fire, including creating a new Education Center. As Chair of the Senate Budget Subcommittee on Education, I was able to help secure \$20 million in the 2022 budget to implement the new vision for Swanton Pacific, to enhance research and educational opportunities for statewide California State University staff and students. Recovery and restoration efforts are underway, and students are returning full time at the ranch to provide help in restoration and rehabilitation, while receiving relevant professional training in fire mitigation and resiliency.
- Regional Conservation Investment Strategy – In the 2022 Letter, I urged the support of efforts by the Santa Cruz RCD in implementing a countywide plan (the Regional Conservation Investment Strategy) to conserve natural communities, species, and related biodiversity conservation values. In partnership with the Regional Transportation Commission, the plan was completed in 2023! Efforts to implement the plan should be supported, which can help direct conservation investments

to the highest priority areas through science-based, collaborative, and voluntary actions to achieve more effective conservation outcomes.

Ongoing or New Conservation Initiatives

- Watsonville Slough Farm Community Harvest – This **490-acre property** was acquired to avert a sprawling luxury golf course. The Land Trust of Santa Cruz County is now working to open the area to the public for access to trails, boardwalks, wildlife viewing platforms, and “u-pick” orchards for economically disadvantaged communities in this region containing wetlands, grasslands, forest, and organic farming. These efforts should be supported, for the benefit of the community in general, as well as to offer enriching outdoor educational opportunities for young people.
- West Cliff Drive Adaptation and Management Plan – In 2023, I was able to secure \$1 million in the state budget for the City of Santa Cruz to support repairs and improvements to the West Cliff Drive coastal recreation corridor. This funding will help support the development and implementation of a climate-resilient plan to guide public access, coastal habitat preservation, recreation, cliff protection, and public works projects along this scenic, four-mile drive in the heart of Santa Cruz.
- Santa Cruz Coastal Lagoons and East Cliff Drive Coastal Resiliency. This region constitutes some of the most at-risk areas to sea level rise in the County. We should support efforts to develop nature-based sea level rise adaptation strategies, as the area serves as important State and County parks and coastal access points for the surrounding dense urban environment. This work would also support the protection of the lagoons, which function as critical habitat for endangered aquatic species, migrating birds, and other sensitive and native flora and fauna.
- College Lake Management Plan – In cooperation with the local agricultural community and during a time of transition for this region, we should continue to support the development and implementation of a management plan to ensure protection of this culturally significant area with critical wintering and migratory stop-over habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, and raptors.
- Integrated Watershed Restoration Programs – We should continue to support efforts by the Santa Cruz Resource Conservation District in implementing countywide plans (including the Integrated Watershed Restoration Program) to support amphibian habitat, stream and riparian habitats, dam removals, coho recovery, and other regional efforts to support biodiversity and avert species extirpation.
- Scott Creek – We should support the Scott Creek Coastal Resiliency Project to plan, design, fund, and ultimately replace the aging bridge at Scott Creek and restore its estuary. Once implemented in coordination with multiple regional partners, the project will restore habitat for multiple special status species, including the California red-legged frog, Western pond turtle, Northern tidewater goby, and snowy plover.

I applaud the Governor and the California Natural Resources Agency for your leadership of the 30x30 Biodiversity Initiative, during this critical moment in history as we face the “Sixth Extinction” – a modern, human-created crisis of global consequence. Conservation successes achieved in the 17th Senate District and across the state, nation, and planet, give us hope. But much work remains, and the projects outlined above can make a significant impact. I urge your support of these initiatives; time is of the essence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Laird". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J".

JOHN LAIRD
Senator, 17th District

cc: Governor Gavin Newsom
Central Coast Legislative Caucus