

# 2020-2021 ANNUAL REPORT



YOUR PARTNER IN CONSERVATION

education and outreach  
habitat restoration  
research and monitoring  
landowner assistance  
wildfire resilience

## FROM OUR EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Friends of the RCDSMM,

2020-21 brought welcome changes to the RCD. Our RCD family grew with the addition of new staff, including an Administrative Assistant, Grizzly Corps Fellow, Education Coordinator, an additional Conservation Biologist, and another Watershed Stewards Program Member.

Over the past year we adapted to the best of both the physical and digital worlds. While much of our office continues to work from home or remotely, collaboration among departments remains strong. Department updates and highlights from the year include:

- The Community Resilience Department increased its capacity through a number of new grants and is now able to offer several free fire-wise programs, including providing more than 100 free Home Ignition Zone Evaluations.

- The Research and Restoration Department conducted creative outreach to understand community goals for restoring Topanga Lagoon.

- Our Watershed Stewards Program and Grizzly Corps team members continued to be a vital piece of every department at our RCD by conducting restoration and monitoring efforts, leading virtual and in-person education programs and helping create accessible fire-wise material for our communities.

- Our Education Department created a breadth of brand-new curriculum, both virtual and in-person, to offer to students and residents alike.

A special thank you to our partners from the last year, including State Parks, TreePeople, UCLA, MRCA, and the individual collaborators within our community who want the best for the private land they steward in trust for the good of all. Finally, a heartfelt thanks and praise to our devoted volunteers, who among their multiple and diverse efforts, brought water to baby oaks, helped monitor endangered and threatened species, removed invasive crayfish from native streams and cleaned local creeks for the benefit of all riparian dwelling wildlife.

We look forward to new opportunities and remain steadfast in our commitment to growing our district services, geography and demographics, furthering our communal reach, and continuing to monitor and restore local habitat.

Your RCD Executive Officer,  
Clark Stevens



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# YOUR RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Proudly serving our local community for over 60 years, the RCDSMM offers programs and services focused on bettering the environment for people and wildlife through enhancement and stewardship of our natural resources. The RCDSMM restores lagoons and oak woodlands, monitors endangered species, provides environmental education to thousands of students each year, helps landowners prepare for wildfires, educates the public and elected officials about environmental issues, creates conservation plans and designs wildlife passages, among many other things. We are dedicated to making the Santa Monica Mountains a thriving place for people and nature.



## OUR MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains is to promote land stewardship and resource conservation through ecological research, conservation planning and design, habitat restoration and environmental education, while adhering to the highest standards of transparency and accountability as a public agency.

## WHAT IS AN RCD?

A Resource Conservation District (or RCD) is a special district/non-profit organized under the State Public Resources Code. RCDs are directed to promote and provide conservation programs within their communities. Such programs may include, but are not limited to, education, research, and assisting/advising other public and private organizations and local citizens in the areas of land-use planning, soil and water conservation, wildlife habitat enhancement and restoration, control of exotic species, and watershed restoration.

The RCDSMM is part of a national network created by the Soil Conservation Service (now the Natural Resources Conservation Service) during the dust bowl days over 80 years ago. There are 96 Resource Conservation Districts in the state of California alone. The primary objective of California's RCDs is to assess conservation problems, set priorities, and coordinate federal, state, and local resources to bring about solutions.

A RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT IS NOT A RULE-MAKING, REGULATORY AGENCY. It can, however, advise such agencies and act as an intermediary between them and concerned citizens. Certain federal benefits are available to counties and cities only through these special districts. RCDs are governed by a volunteer Board of Directors who live within the District, providing local control to address local priorities. Although some RCDs receive a small property tax increment, RCDs are mostly funded through grants for specific projects, contracts for services and donations.

## YEARLY HIGHLIGHTS

# 2020-2021

### RCD Finds More Bat Species in Topanga Than Previously Thought

The RCD conducted bat surveys to determine the number of species present in the Topanga Creek Watershed. Before the survey, seven bat species had been documented in the area, but RCD surveys discovered that the area is home to 14 unique bat species! Findings will help inform Topanga Lagoon restoration efforts.



### Community Helps RCD Exceed End of the Year Campaign Goals

The RCD community came together for another successful fundraising campaign! Our community raised over \$10,000 to restore the Mountains, save endangered species and educate the next generation of environmental scientists! Generous donations demonstrated the resilience and commitment of our community despite a year of isolation.



### Distance Learning with the Season of STEM

At the end of 2020, your RCD joined the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Season of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) initiative. This program brought science educators from all over southern California to students virtually. Our impressive team of virtual educators reached over 2,500 students during the fall, spring and summer quarters with innovative and interactive environmental education.



### Monitoring the Tidewater Gobies of Topanga Lagoon

Thanks to funding from CA State Parks and in partnership with Brenton Spies, the RCD worked to document and monitor populations of federally endangered tidewater gobies in Big Sycamore, Malibu and Topanga Lagoons. Monitoring efforts will help inform future lagoon restoration efforts to ensure survival of this ecologically essential wetland species.



### Sepulveda Basin Begins to Recover from Fire

In September of 2020 a fire ravaged Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Reserve. This area is near and dear to RCD's heart as our education department has been leading programs there for decades. Though our community was devastated by the fire, we have been working hard, alongside many local and state agency partners, to restore this critical urban oasis.



## YEARLY HIGHLIGHTS

# 2020-2021

### Decades of Amphibian and Turtle Monitoring Continue

Continuing two decades of research, the RCD conducted western pond turtle and threatened amphibian surveys again this year. These efforts will help RCD biologists protect and preserve our vital local critters, ensure their habitat remains suitable, and allow the RCD to locate these creatures for future monitoring work.



### Training Community Scientists to Track Bad Beetles

Our Research & Restoration team led several trainings of community members to track and monitor the spread of invasive beetles throughout Los Angeles and Ventura Counties. These beetles pose fatal threats to local urban and wildland tree canopies, which continue to struggle as a result of increased temperature and prolonged drought.



### Wildlife Crossing Underpass Restoration Completed

The RCD completed the restoration of the Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing Underpass. This area will not only provide an alternative means of safe passage under the freeway, but will welcome and entice local wildlife to cross the future overpass and allow them to safely traverse one of California's busiest highways. We will continue to monitor the growth and progress of this restoration area into 2022.



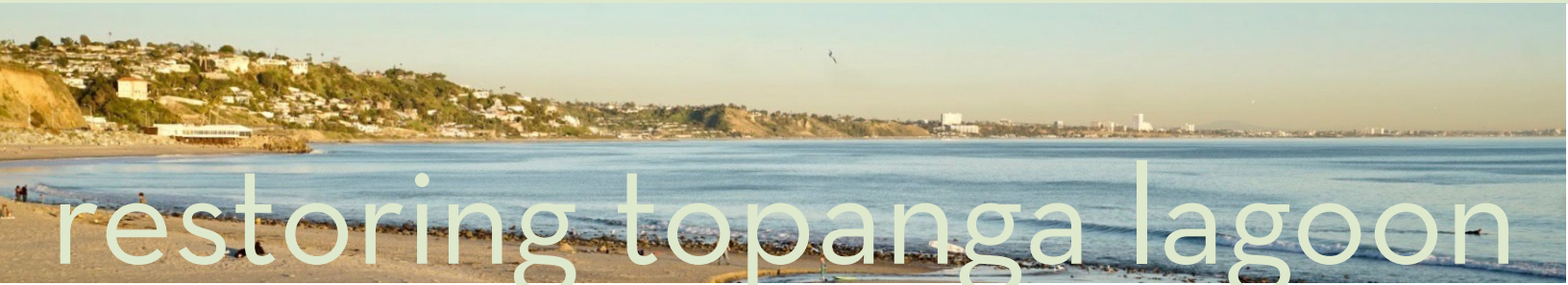
### Removing Invasive Crayfish from Local Creeks

Crayfish are a serious problem for native aquatic species in the Santa Monica Mountains. Last year, the RCD removed over 30,000 invasive crayfish from Las Virgenes Creek. In addition, RCD Stream Team members tested a new type of crayfish trap in Topanga Creek utilizing wildlife cameras to ensure efficacy. Finally, the RCD kicked off a series of volunteer events to promote and continue removal efforts.

### Understanding Barriers to Wildfire Preparation for Homeowners

The RCD surveyed Santa Monica Mountain residents to better understand individual home and landscape wildfire preparation. We received 257 responses and without surprise, the financial cost of home and landscape improvements ranked #1. Ranking #2 was permitting costs and issues, proving there is an urgent need to streamline the county's permitting process to support homeowners. We expect more lessons to be learned as we analyze written comments and responses.





## RCD & COMMUNITY WORK TOWARDS REVITALIZATION

Picture yourself standing on Pacific Coast Highway where Topanga Creek meets the sea. Facing south you see surfers perched on their boards, gently bobbing with the ocean tide, and immediately in front of you, separated from the ocean by an ever-changing sand bar, you might see a small pond of water. When you turn to face north, you'd see a thin creek overwhelmed by arundo and leafy riparian canopy. Topanga Lagoon didn't always look this way.

A hundred years ago if you were facing north on what is now PCH, you would have seen an expansive lagoon teeming with native fish and pelagic birds. The RCD has been working for over twenty years to restore this vital wetland.



Thanks to funding from the State Coastal Conservancy, the first of three public community meetings was held in February of 2020 and the second, due to pandemic restrictions, was held virtually in February of 2021. Feedback from both

community meetings helped inform the design of three unique alternative restoration plans. The major takeaway was that the public wants the most habitat restoration possible while preserving and enhancing recreational features like the Topanga Ranch Motel and beach space.

The RCD's work around Topanga Lagoon extends beyond hosting community meetings, though. Over the spring and summer of 2021, the RCD worked to survey and monitor native bat species, small mammals, tidewater goby, and tree species in the proposed restoration area.

Thank you to the Stream Team members, state workers and volunteers that made this work possible, and to the community members who took time out of their busy weekends to provide valuable input. If you want your voice to be heard, be sure to stay up-to-date on the latest happening in the restoration of Topanga Lagoon via the RCD's website and social media platforms (@rcdsmm).







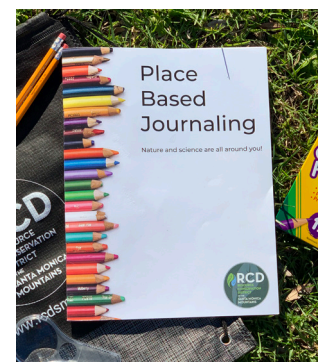
# place based learning

## THRIVES FROM A DISTANCE

At the beginning of the 2020 academic year, most schools in the area were resolutely moving forward with distance learning, meaning schools were not scheduling field-based environmental education programs like the RCDs'. Thanks to funding from the California Association of RCDs, the San Fernando Valley Audubon Society and Havasi Wilderness Foundation, your RCD prepared and delivered environmental education to students wherever they were.

Our Education Department spent the prior summer developing a schoolyard program called Place Based Journaling (PBJ), which was quickly modified to fit a virtual world. Staff mailed, drove and dropped off over one thousand PBJs to schools, then scheduled virtual introductory lessons with classes across LA and southeastern Ventura Counties. As students progressed through their journals, they learned valuable scientific observation skills, developed personal connections with the nature that existed around them and even deepened their creative and artistic skills.

The beauty of PBJ is that each students' experience is completely unique and inspires them to connect to science and nature in their own way. For example, during the Build Your Own Super Insect lesson one student might produce a detailed, imaginative illustration of an insect inspired by the bug they see around their home while another may tell a wonderful and descriptive story about an insect based on their favorite video game character. This place-based curriculum allowed students to connect with the nature that exists around them, no matter where they live.



Whether our educators are leading in-person or virtual programs, the goal remains the same: helping students connect to and develop personal relationships with nature, no matter where they are. Your RCD is looking forward to the future of environmental education with the confidence that our educators can adapt to anything.



# rcd's newest department

## PREPARES COMMUNITIES FOR WILDFIRE

The Community Resilience department was born in July 2020 with the goal of increasing the safety of our communities while promoting land stewardship. The RCD believes that community resilience includes the safety of human communities AND the sustainability of our natural ecosystems. Unnaturally high wildfire frequency threatens both, so our focus is on home-hardening and incorporating ecologically appropriate defensible-space.

One of the department's first projects was creation of the website [defensiblespace.org](https://defensiblespace.org), which provides best practices for sustainable defensible landscaping and has become a recognized source of information by regional partners. Funded by a CalFire grant, the website contains a wealth of information for homeowners looking to improve the resistance of their home to windborne embers and reduce the risk of ignition on their property. There is a rich collection of material on incorporating native plants into landscaping to reduce wildfire risk, prevent erosion, and reduce habitat fragmentation.



To address home hardening, the new department began offering Home Ignition Zone (HIZ) evaluations to district residents, offering individualized tips and information on how to make the home more ember resistant. By May 2021, 100 HIZ evaluations had been completed! To expand the program, the RCD began training additional volunteers to conduct HIZ evaluations.

Other initiatives launched in 2020-21 include a Community Chipping and Mulch Program to help homeowners reduce hazardous vegetation and several informational webinars such as Protecting Your Home from Wildfire and a Firewise Landscaping Class, which you can find on our YouTube channel.



The Community Resilience Department has brought in almost \$1.8 million for wildfire risk reduction in the district, with another \$1.6 million coming in 2021-22. Reducing wildfire risk and maintaining natural habitats is a community effort! We are excited to offer practical science-based solutions to create communities that are more resilient and resistant to wildfire.





# services

HABITAT RESTORATION

RESEARCH AND MONITORING

WATERSHED PROTECTION

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION  
OF NATURAL RESOURCES

LANDOWNER ASSISTANCE

COMMUNITY WILDFIRE RESILIENCE

The RCDSMM works with public and private landowners to conserve natural resources.

We focus on the following in our projects and activities: restoring native habitat and monitoring endangered species, providing environmental education to local schools, translating scientific research into practical solutions, promoting water conservation and improving water quality, collaborating on local projects with our partners, including local, state and federal agencies and organizations, and offering a variety of volunteer opportunities.



## OUR PARTNERS

CalTrout  
 California Association of  
 Resource Conservation Districts  
 California Climate Investments Program  
 California State Coastal Conservancy  
 California Department  
 of Conservation  
 California Department  
 of Fish and Wildlife  
 California Department  
 of Forestry and Fire Protection  
 California Department  
 of Water Resources  
 California Fire Science Consortium  
 California Oaks Coalition  
 California Science Center  
 California State Parks  
 CalTrans-District 7  
 City of Agoura Hills  
 Conservation Biology Institute  
 County of Los Angeles Fire Department  
 EarthEcho International  
 Havasi Wilderness Foundation  
 Heal the Bay  
 LA County Fire Forestry Division  
 LA County Beaches & Harbors  
 LA County District 3 Supervisor Sheila Kuehl  
 Las Virgenes Municipal  
 Water District  
 Las Virgenes  
 Unified School District  
 Linkage Implementation Alliance  
 Los Angeles Audubon Society  
 Los Angeles County  
 Department of Public Works  
 Los Angeles County  
 Department of Regional Planning  
 Los Angeles Regional  
 Water Quality Control Board  
 Los Angeles Unified School District  
 NASA DEVELOP

Mountains Restoration & Conservation  
 Authority  
 National Marine Fisheries Service  
 National Park Service  
 Natural Resources  
 Conservation Service  
 North Topanga Canyon  
 Fire Safe Council  
 Oak Park Unified School District  
 San Fernando Valley  
 Audubon Society  
 Santa Monica Bay  
 Restoration Commission  
 Santa Monica  
 Mountains Conservancy  
 Santa Monica Mountains  
 Fire Safe Alliance  
 Santa Monica Mountains  
 National Recreation Area  
 Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians  
 Southern California Coastal  
 Water Resources Program  
 The Bay Foundation  
 The Boeing Company  
 Theodore Payne Foundation  
 TreePeople  
 UCLA Institute of the Environment and  
 Sustainability  
 UCLA Stunt Ranch  
 US Fish and Wildlife Service  
 (Ventura and Carlsbad)  
 US Geological Services  
 Santa Monica Mountains Reserve  
 University of California Cooperative  
 Extension - Los Angeles County  
 Urban EcoScapes  
 Ventura County Fire Department  
 Water Education Foundation-  
 Project WET  
 Western Rivers Conservancy  
 Wildlife Conservation Board  
*...among many other partners  
 too numerous to list.*





## STREAM TEAM MEMBERS AND VOLUNTEERS CONTINUE TO SUPPORT VITAL RESTORATION IN THE SANTA MONICAS

With masks at the ready and social distancing skills honed, our Stream Team members launched into another year of critical restoration work. During 2020-21, Stream Team members completed imperative conservation work such as setting up wildlife cameras to document tidal changes in threatened lagoons, snorkeling streams to monitor southern steelhead trout, catching crayfish utilizing brand new trapping strategies, monitoring small mammals, bats and trees throughout the future restoration zone of Topanga Lagoon and so much more!

Volunteers continue to be an important part of native oak restoration efforts through our bi-monthly oak care events. They even helped us re-launch our popular Adopt-An-Oak program and pledged to care for young oak trees on their own. With a 79% survival rate, we'd call this program a success!

We want to express immense gratitude to our Stream Team Members and volunteers alike. Without you, most of our restoration work would not be possible!





## OUR EDUCATORS



## OUR PASSIONATE TEAM OF SKILLED EDUCATORS

Our Education Department would not function without our dedicated, qualified and impassioned team of educators! We began the 2020 school year by launching into virtual programming, without knowing when schools were going to be welcoming students back onto campus. Our impressive educators continued to engage students, no matter their age or technological skills, via virtual activities throughout 2020 and into the 2021. Our first in-person program happened in the summer of 2021, where students built their own aqueduct! We cannot wait to see what the 2021-22 school year holds as we begin to welcome back on-campus and field programs!





## Our Board of Directors



R.C. Brody  
President



Steve Rosentsweig  
Vice President



Nancy Helsley  
Treasurer



Beth Burnam  
Director



Laurie Price  
Director



Dennis Washburn  
Associate Director

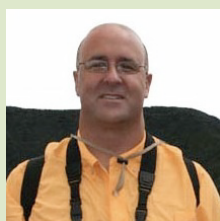


Deborah Klein Lopez  
Associate Director

## Our Staff



Clark Stevens  
Executive Officer



John Hendra  
Finance &  
Operations Officer



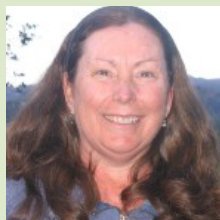
Lyn Rauls  
Administrative  
Assistant



Kelly Kazmirchuk  
Education  
Coordinator



Jelly Kahler  
Education &  
Communications  
Specialist



Rosi Dagit  
Senior Conservation  
Biologist



Jamie King  
Conservation Biologist



Antoine Kunsch  
Community Resilience  
Coordinator



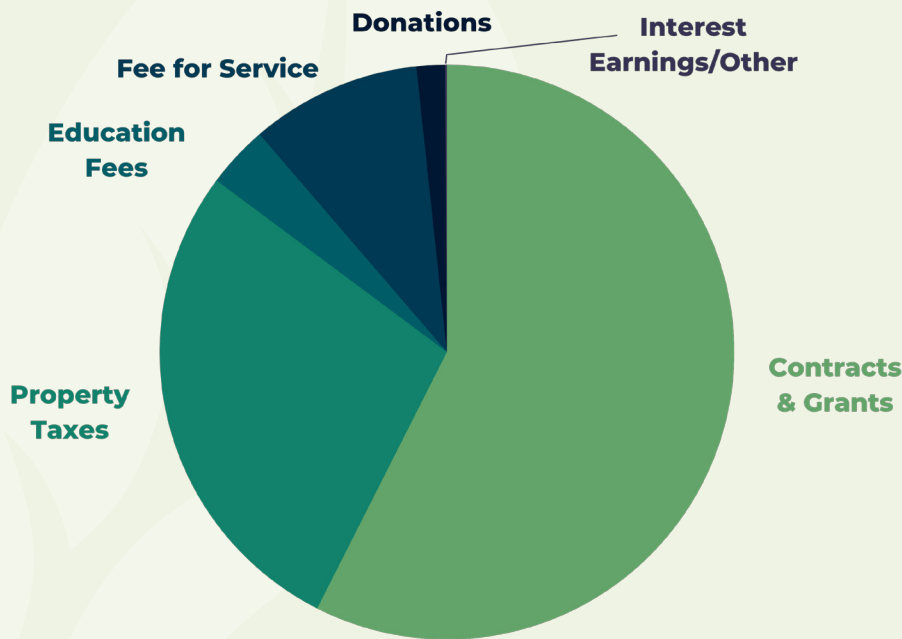
Claire Sanders  
Watershed Steward

# FINANCIAL INFORMATION

For every \$1 of property tax invested in the RCD, we brought \$2.70 into the district to enhance and protect our community's natural resources.



## Revenue by Source



## Actual Revenues and Expenditures

Revenues	
Contracts & Grants	\$835,205
Property Taxes	\$403,238
Other	\$215,713
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,454,156</b>
Expenses	
Personnel	\$924,776
Contract Services	\$343,105
Other Expenses	\$117,858
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,385,739</b>
<b>Net Change in Funds</b>	<b>\$68,417</b>

The RCD of the Santa Monica Mountains is funded by competitively sought grants from public agencies, private foundations, contracts for education, research, and restoration services and from donations. As a non-profit local government special district, the RCD can receive tax deductible donations under Internal Revenue Service Code Section 170 (b) and 170 (c) (1). The RCDSMM is partially funded by a <0.001% portion of residents' regular property taxes, an investment the RCD uses to bring 2.7 times this funding into the district for projects and programs. The RCD is audited annually by an independent CPA firm as required by California Public Resources Code Section 9528 and Government Code Section 26909. Please see our website for the most recent audits.





## SUPPORT THE RCD WITH YOUR DONATION

Supporting the RCDSMM means supporting your local community and helping to conserve your local soil, water, and wildlife.

### Why donate?

# donate

RESTORE NATIVE OAK WOODLANDS

ENHANCE HABITAT FOR ENDANGERED  
AND THREATENED SPECIES

PROVIDE INVALUABLE ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL STUDENTS

INCREASE COMMUNITY WILDFIRE RESILIENCE

PROVIDE LOCAL VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

SUSTAIN NATURAL RESOURCES OF THE  
SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS



Your donation supports our work to restore habitat, monitor wildlife, conduct research and provide environmental education to all students throughout Los Angeles and Ventura Counties.

Most of our annual budget is supported by competitively sought grants and contracts, which is not enough to support our entire staff and all the projects we hope to accomplish. Without your generous donations, the RCD could not accomplish vital community building and conservation work.

All donations made to the RCD are tax-deductible.





## HELP THE RCD WITH YOUR DONATION

Supporting the RCDSMM means supporting your local community, and helping to conserve your local soil, water, and wildlife. Make a donation now:

[rcdsmm.org/donate](http://rcdsmm.org/donate)



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