

Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan

Adopted by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy
State of California – December 13, 2021



Upper Franklin Canyon Reservoir

Contact - Paul Edelman
Deputy Director for Natural Resources and Planning
edelman@smmc.ca.gov

Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan

Adopted by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, State of California

December 13, 2021

The goal of this Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan (NRPP) is to provide a baseline document that successfully guides all forms of land protection in the portion of the Santa Monica Mountains between Topanga Canyon Boulevard (State Route 27) and the eastern boundary of Griffith Park. Figure 1 shows the proposed Plan boundary. The boundary is dictated by the outer perimeter of the mapped habitat blocks in the following three habitat planning maps adopted by the Conservancy to date (Figures 2, 3 and 4). The *Big Wild - Topanga State Park Core Habitat Area Planning Map* was adopted in June of 2021. The *Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Habitat Linkage Planning Map* was first adopted in January 2017, updated in 2020, and again most recently in April 2021. The *Griffith Park Area Habitat Linkage Planning Map* was adopted in December 2017.

Habitat connectivity in the eastern Santa Monica Mountains is under extreme threat from all forms of development. Multiple prior options for wildlife to move east to west between the 405 freeway and the Mulholland Drive bridge over the 101 freeway in the Cahuenga Pass and into the Griffith Park area have been permanently foreclosed in the last five years alone. This Plan focuses on connectivity via the existing system of non-contiguous habitat blocks (habitat patches) and the pathways that wildlife use to travel between them. Without adequate habitat connectivity at multiple landscape scales, the subject Plan area natural systems will continue to decline.

The principal CEQA lead agency for development in the Plan area is the City of Los Angeles. To date, the City has rejected both the use and scientific validity of the three above-referenced Conservancy planning maps. The maps are not used in the City's environmental reviews within the Plan area. A next step to provide more information for the City to consider in its land use planning and decisions is to combine the three maps into a single unified natural resource protection plan that identifies lands to conserve.

Natural Resource Protection Plans that identify lands for conservation are foundational to the protection of all ecosystems. The Santa Monica Mountains Comprehensive Plan (adopted 1979) specifically identified many significant lands to be protected from Point Mugu to Cahuenga Peak by Griffith Park. Los Angeles County recognized Griffith Park as a Significant Ecological Area (SEA) in the 1980s. The National Park Service's Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area Land Protection Plan (Figure 6) prioritizes most parcels in the central and western part of the range but excludes significant natural

areas east of Topanga Canyon Boulevard and north of Mulholland Drive. Most undeveloped and underdeveloped parcels in the eastern Santa Monica Mountains are not included in any adopted natural resource protection plan that identifies lands for conservation. These are regionally significant resources that warrant the best available natural resource protection plan.

To address this issue, this Natural Resource Protection Plan (NRPP) fuses the three adopted Conservancy planning maps together so that the entire east to west habitat linkage system can be looked at as a unified system. The Conservancy's actions on its three adopted planning maps emphasized that ground conditions change and thus the maps should be iterative and be readopted regularly to reflect new conditions. The same rationale applies to this NRPP for the eastern Santa Monica Mountains. In most cases the changes will represent increased development and reduced connectivity.

All three adopted Conservancy planning maps show the precise boundaries of undeveloped habitat blocks between Topanga Canyon Boulevard (State Route 27) and the eastern boundary of Griffith Park. All three maps accurately show both known and probable habitat linkage/wildlife travel routes between otherwise disconnected habitat blocks. All three maps overlay the most currently then available Los Angeles County Assessor's parcel line data.

The three maps fit together to represent a single habitat system that currently possesses enough function for individuals of most larger wildlife species periodically to successfully cross the San Diego (405) freeway in several locations in the Sepulveda pass and the Hollywood (101) freeway in the Cahuenga Pass in at least one location. National Park Service tracking data and citizen reports confirm there is some mountain lion breeding in the 20,000-acre Big Wild - Topanga State Park core habitat area. This area is the main source for new animals and new genetic material to move eastward in the range to the Griffith Park core habitat area. Likewise juvenile animals can disperse across the 405 freeway westward into the Big Wild. The locations of these existing freeway crossing structures are shown on Figures 2, 3, and 4.

A goal of this Plan is also to emphasize the importance of protecting the few remaining viable habitat linkages across the cross mountain busy arterial roadways that include Sepulveda Boulevard, Beverly Glen Boulevard, Benedict Canyon Drive, Coldwater Canyon Avenue, and Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Metro is also planning a new rail route through the Sepulveda Pass.

Another goal of this Plan is to recognize the ecological value of all mapped habitat blocks. Outlier habitat blocks offer refuge for birthing and raising young, as escape locations from wildfire, refuge from predators, and generators of small prey animals.

The three Conservancy adopted planning maps combined into a unified NRPP provides the needed baseline document with precise parcel boundaries to address potential parcel specific impacts. There is no question that development continually changes baseline ground conditions on many parcels. In addition, fine scale biological land use analyses require some current ground truthing. However, without a solid and comprehensive baseline map with delineated habitat blocks and their potential connectivity routes, no biological impact assessment can be adequate.

This NRPP addresses habitat connectivity for all plant and animal species. The new candidate status of the local mountain lion population under the California Endangered Species Act adds urgency to the issue. All portions of the Santa Monica Mountains that mountain lions manage to reach represent habitat for the now State candidate threatened evolutionarily significant mountain lion population. Security camera footage in the Plan area shows that no habitat block mapped in the Plan can be considered unreachable and usable by mountain lions. Eastern Santa Monica Mountain's mountain lions regularly use paved public streets and private yards to move between habitat areas. This camera data frequently confirms the function of mapped wildlife movement routes particularly on the *Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Habitat Linkage Planning Map*. The camera data also reveals new, large mammal travel routes through developed neighborhoods.

Ground truthing for habitat linkages on all private lands for an area this large is not financially feasible and would require obtaining permission from thousands of property owners. Street-facing walls and fences and thick tree canopy cover hide many potentially used wildlife travel routes that remain to be discovered on a case-by-case basis.

Conservation biology and reserve design both stress the need for redundancy in the connections between habitat areas. In the case of the Plan area, that is particularly true when under current City of Los Angeles entitlement conditions, a large habitat block, or even a large portion of the Plan area, could be permanently severed by a new, lone single-family home or remodel expansion approved under a Categorical Exemption.

Figure 5 shows mapped perennial water sources for wildlife in the Plan area east of the 405 freeway. This mapping is from a Conservancy-funded collaboration with the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority.

Public Resources Code Section 33001 states:

"The Legislature hereby finds and declares that the Santa Monica Mountains Zone, as defined in Section 33105, is a unique and valuable economic, environmental, agricultural, scientific, educational, and recreational resource that should be held in trust for present and future generations; that, as the last large undeveloped area contiguous to the shoreline within the greater Los Angeles metropolitan region, comprised of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, it provides essential relief from the urban environment; that it exists as a single ecosystem in which changes that affect one part may also affect all other parts; and that the preservation and protection of this resource is in the public interest."





The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) is a CEQA Trustee agency because it is a state agency which has jurisdiction over the natural resources of the Zone. The Conservancy was created to address fractured land use in the Santa Monica Mountains that negatively impacts recreational and environmental values. This NRPP is the best available resource to identify lands needed for conservation.

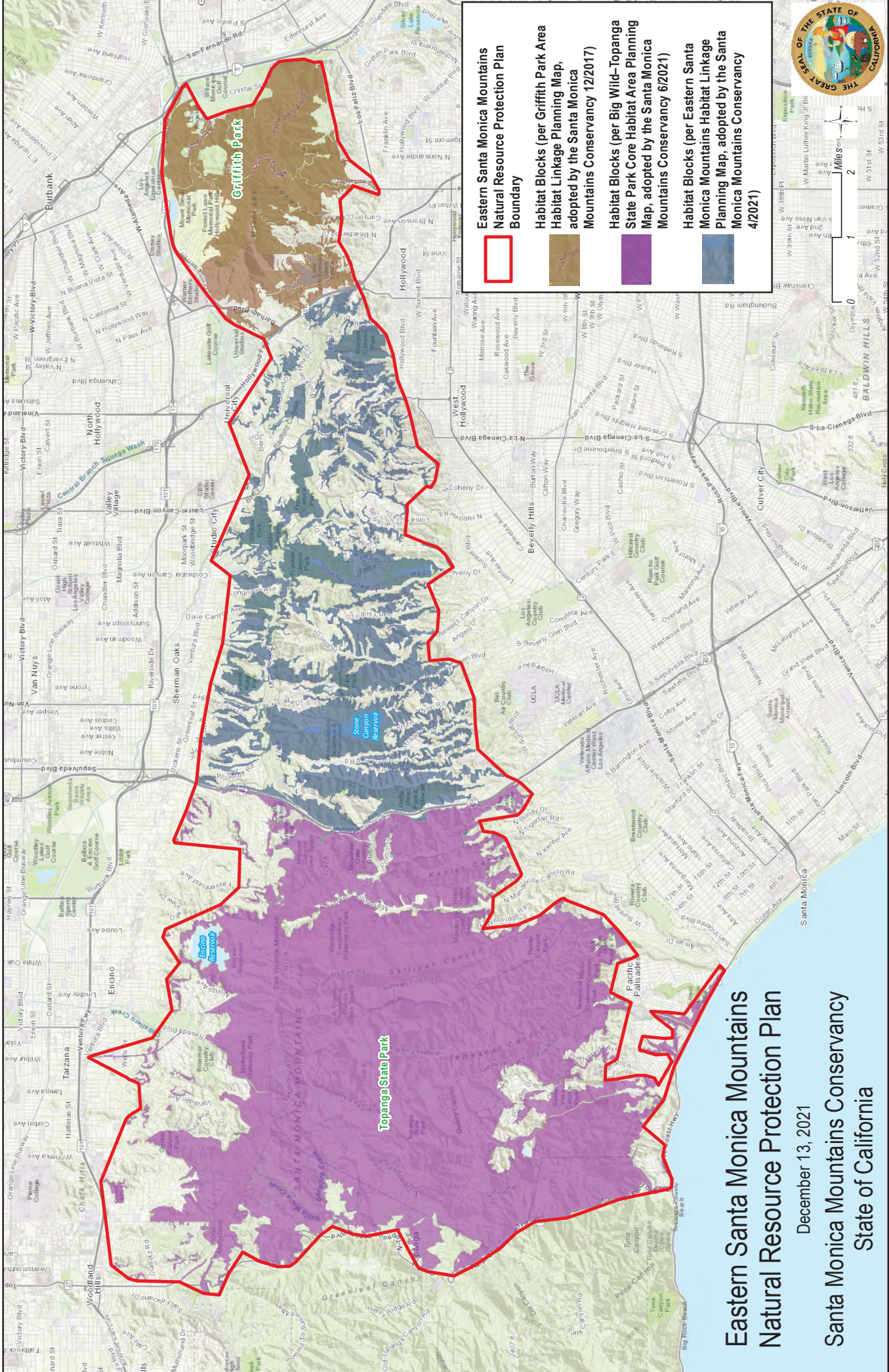
Notes on Mapping Methodologies

The three habitat planning maps are all constructed by GIS staff using the best available electronic data and some ground truthing. The perimeters of habitat blocks are depicted from the most recent and highest resolution aerial photography publically available at the time of adoption. Most often that is Google Earth aerial photography. Often back year aerial photography shows a particular sub-area much better than the most current available photography. The accuracy of the lines showing habitat connections are often enhanced with Google Earth street view photography.

For the subject *Big Wild - Topanga State Park Core Habitat Area Planning Map* the aerial photography within the delineated habitat blocks is from February 2, 2020 0.5 meter MAXAR aerials from ESRI base maps. The area shown outside the habitat blocks is based on 2014 LARIAC data. All the subject area is covered by the Google Earth 2020 aerial photography layer. The Conservancy does not have access to the County's 2019 LARIAC data.



-  Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan Boundary
-  Habitat Blocks (per Griffith Park Area Habitat Linkage Planning Map, adopted by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy 12/2017)
-  Habitat Blocks (per Big Wild-Topanga State Park Core Habitat Area Planning Map, adopted by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy 6/2021)
-  Habitat Blocks (per Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Habitat Linkage Planning Map, adopted by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy 4/2021)



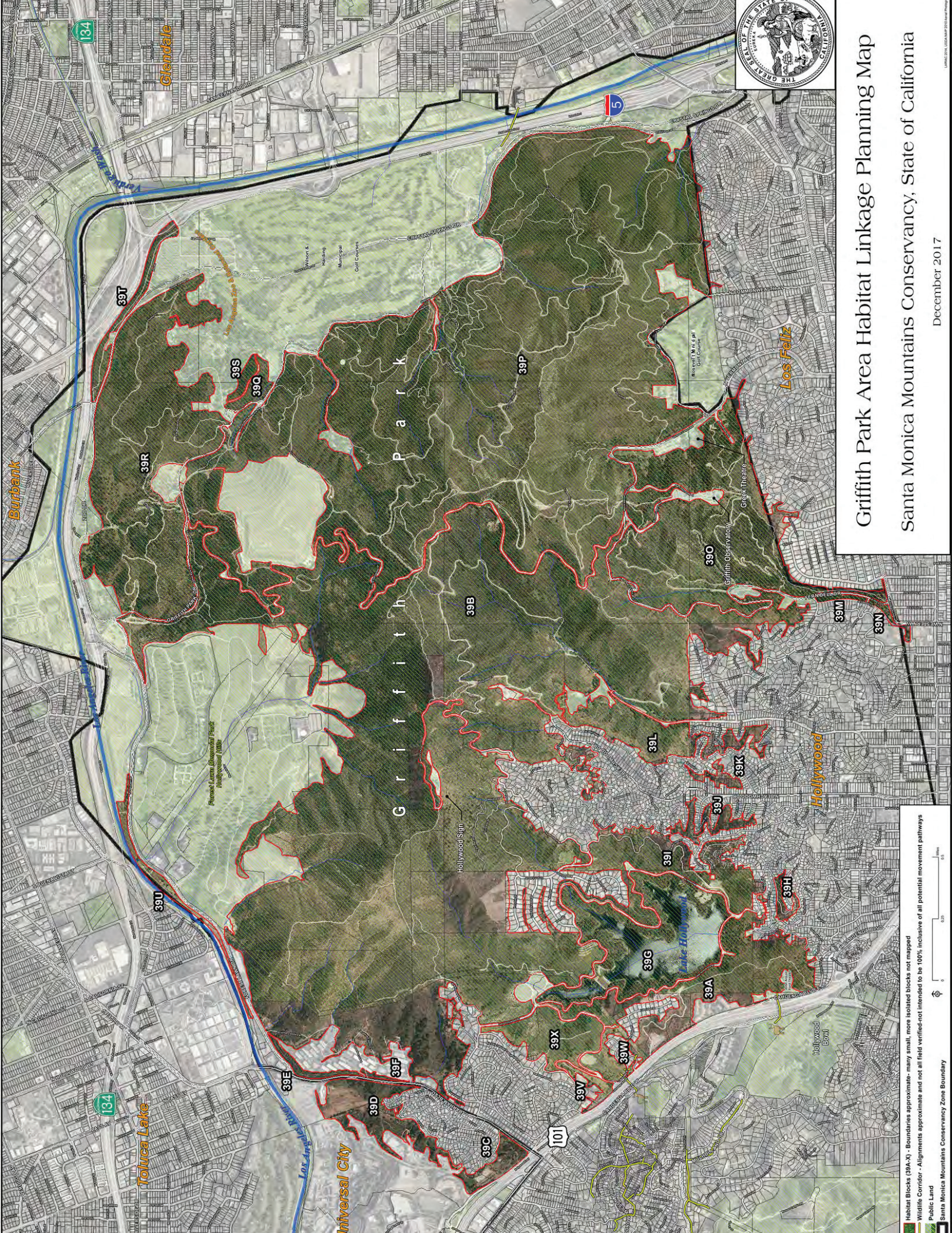
**Eastern Santa Monica Mountains
Natural Resource Protection Plan**
December 13, 2021
Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy
State of California



Griffith Park Area Habitat Linkage Planning Map

Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, State of California

December 2017

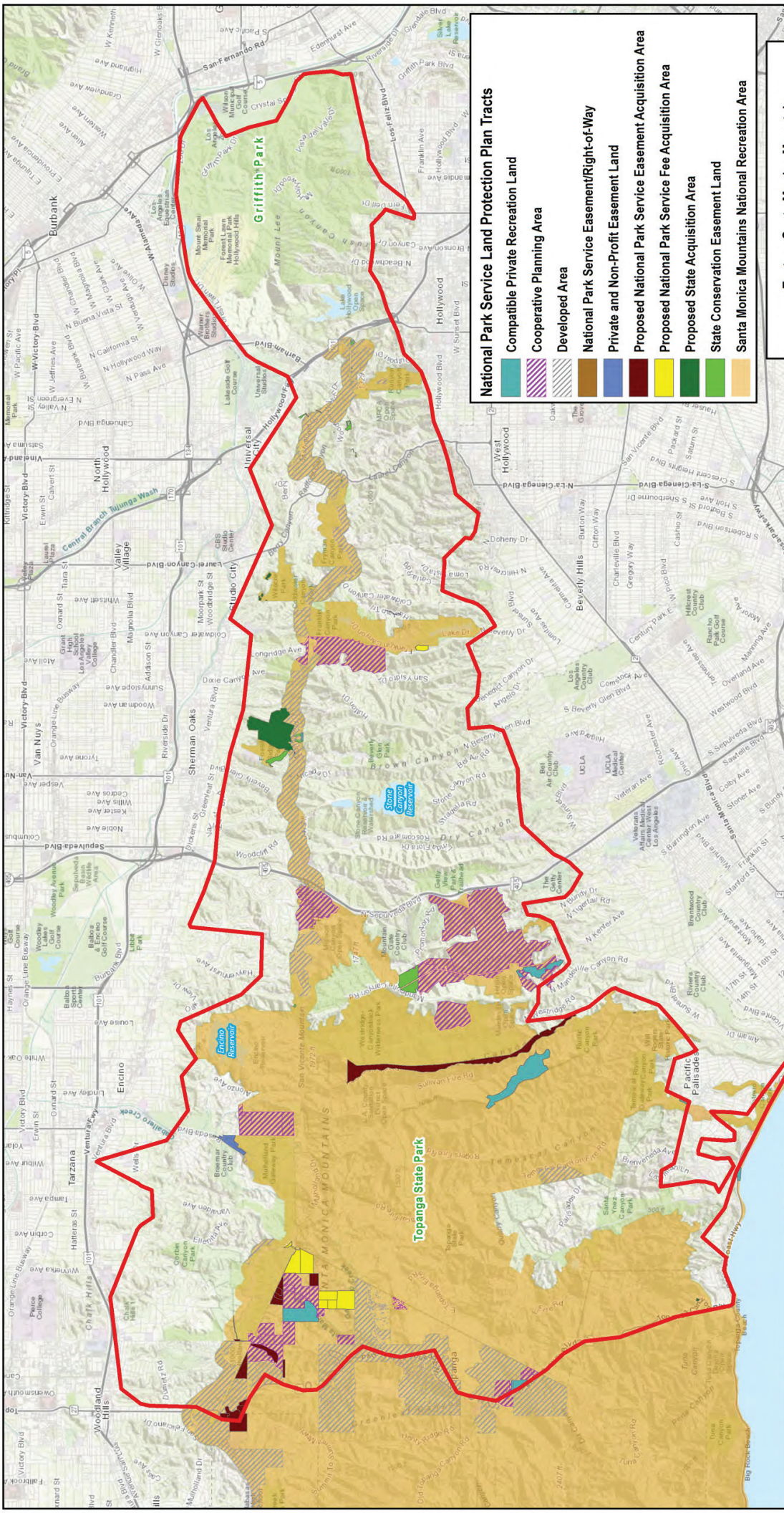


Habitat Blocks (39A-X) - Boundaries approximate - many small, more isolated blocks not mapped

Wildlife Corridor - Alignments approximate and not all field verified - not intended to be 100% inclusive of all potential movement pathways

Public Land

Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Zone Boundary



- National Park Service Land Protection Plan Tracts**
- Compatible Private Recreation Land
 - Cooperative Planning Area
 - Developed Area
 - National Park Service Easement/Right-of-Way
 - Private and Non-Profit Easement Land
 - Proposed National Park Service Easement Acquisition Area
 - Proposed National Park Service Fee Acquisition Area
 - Proposed State Acquisition Area
 - State Conservation Easement Land
 - Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area

**Eastern Santa Monica Mountains
Natural Resource Protection Plan
Boundary**



**Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area Land Protection Plan Properties Within
SMMC Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan**

December 13, 2021
 Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy
 State of California

Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

December 13, 2021

From :  Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Hon. ASLA, Executive Director

Subject: **Consideration of resolution adopting Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan, City of Los Angeles.**

Staff Recommendation:

That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution adopting an Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan, City of Los Angeles.

Legislative Authority:

Section 33211 of the Public Resources Code.

Background:

Natural Resource Protection Plans that identify lands for conservation are foundational to the protection of all ecosystems. The Santa Monica Mountains Comprehensive Plan (adopted 1979) specifically identified many significant lands to be protected from Point Mugu to Cahuenga Peak by Griffith Park. Los Angeles County recognized Griffith Park as a Significant Ecological Area (SEA) in the 1980s. The National Park Service's Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area Land Protection Plan prioritizes most parcels in the central and western part of the range but excludes significant natural areas east of Topanga Canyon Boulevard and north of Mulholland Drive. Most undeveloped and underdeveloped parcels in the eastern Santa Monica Mountains are not included in

any adopted natural resource protection plan that identifies lands for conservation. These are regionally significant resources that warrant the best available natural resource protection plan.

To address this issue, staff has prepared a Natural Resource Protection Plan (NRPP) that embodies the following three eastern Santa Monica Mountains habitat planning maps that the Conservancy has adopted to date. The *Big Wild - Topanga State Park Core Habitat Area Planning Map* was adopted in June of 2021. The *Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Habitat Linkage Planning Map* was first adopted in January 2017, updated in 2020, and again most recently in April 2021. The *Griffith Park Area Habitat Linkage Planning Map* was adopted in December 2017. The scope of the proposed Eastern Santa Monica Mountains NRPP is essentially defined by the outer limits of these three adopted planning maps. Just as the Conservancy's action on these three maps have emphasized, ground conditions change and thus the maps and also a new NRPP should be iterative and be readopted regularly with changes.

All three of these maps show the precise boundaries of undeveloped habitat blocks between Topanga Canyon Boulevard (State Route 27) and the eastern boundary of Griffith Park. All three maps accurately show both known and probable habitat linkage/wildlife travel routes between otherwise disconnected habitat blocks. All three maps overlay the most currently then available Los Angeles County Assessor's parcel line data.

The three maps fit together to represent a single habitat system that currently possesses enough function for individuals of most larger wildlife species to periodically successfully cross the San Diego (405) freeway in several locations in the Sepulveda pass and the Hollywood (101) freeway in the Cahuenga Pass in at least one location. National Park Service tracking data and citizen reports confirm there is some mountain lion breeding in the 20,000-acre Big Wild - Topanga State Park core habitat area. This area is the main source for new animals and new genetic material to move eastward in the range to the Griffith Park core habitat area.

The combination of freeways, roads, development pressure, existing habitat fragmentation, smaller parcel sizes, lack of political conviction, and other factors place the eastern Santa Monica Mountains at greater risk for continued rapid habitat fragmentation leading to the loss of wildlife species. The subject area is all part of the Santa Monica Mountains Zone.

Public Resources Code Section 33001 states:

"The Legislature hereby finds and declares that the Santa Monica Mountains Zone, as defined in Section 33105, is a unique and valuable economic, environmental, agricultural, scientific, educational, and recreational resource that should be held in trust for present and future generations; that, as the last large undeveloped area contiguous to the shoreline within the greater Los Angeles metropolitan region, comprised of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, it provides essential relief from the urban environment; that it exists as a single ecosystem in which changes that affect one part may also affect all other parts; and that the preservation and protection of this resource is in the public interest."

The combination of freeways, roads, development pressure, existing habitat fragmentation, smaller parcel sizes, lack of political conviction, and other factors place the eastern Santa Monica Mountains at exceptional risk for continued rapid habitat fragmentation leading to the permanent loss of wildlife species. For example the subject eastern section of the range is bisected by multiple busy arterial roadways that include: Sepulveda Boulevard, Beverly Glen Boulevard, Benedict Canyon Drive, Coldwater Canyon Avenue, and Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Metro is planning a new rail route through the Sepulveda Pass.

All proposed NRPP area planning entitlement decisions east of Topanga State Park are made by the City of Los Angeles (other than Metro and Caltrans). To date the City Planning Department and City Attorney's office have rejected both the planning and scientific validity of the Conservancy's three maps on the grounds that they are not precisely mapped and that the Conservancy staff does not have adequate knowledge or standing to prepare such maps. There is no better expertise in the world on these habitat and linkage issues than the Conservancy staff.

No approved City planning documents recognize either specific habitat blocks or habitat linkages (wildlife corridors, wildlife travel routes). City land use decisionmakers have no baseline map or document that recognize the values of any habitat block or any habitat linkage in the proposed NRPP area. As a result, habitat connectivity, particularly leading up to and east of the 405 freeway, is at great risk. The new candidate status of the mountain lion under the California Endangered Species Act adds urgency to the issue. The three Conservancy adopted planning maps combined into a unified

NRPP provides that needed baseline document at parcel line scale to address potential parcel specific impacts. Development continually changes baseline ground conditions. Furthermore, the finest scale land use analyses require up to date ground truthing, but without a solid and comprehensive baseline, no habitat impact assessment can be adequate.

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) is a CEQA Trustee agency because it is a state agency which has jurisdiction over the natural resources of the Zone. The Conservancy regularly comments on development projects that affect natural resources within the Zone. The Conservancy was created to address fractured land use in the Santa Monica Mountains that negatively impacts recreational and environmental values. The Conservancy is the public agency best suited to prepare a Natural Resource Protection Plan (Plan) for the eastern Santa Monica Mountains.

This month the Los Angeles City Council approved a motion, proposed by all five hillside councilmembers, for the Planning Department to report back in 90 days with an analysis that assesses and identifies parcels of land that are appropriate for conservation as determined by trustee agencies such as the Conservancy. It further called for the Planning Department to report back within 90 days with an update on existing and future natural community conservation efforts such the City's Wildlife Pilot Study, Ridgeline Protection Ordinance, and Hillside Construction Regulations. It finally requires another report on the Planning Director's memorandum that unilaterally removed most projects in the Mulholland Specific Plan Area from review by the Mulholland Design Review Board. The City cannot be relied upon to produce its own natural resource protection plan that identifies lands for permanent conservation.

A second motion again proposed by all five hillside councilmembers, recognizes the Conservancy as a trustee agency for projects that may affect natural resources in the Santa Monica Mountains Zone. It further recognizes the above three referenced Conservancy-adopted Planning Maps as well as future spatial habitat protection maps prepared by the Conservancy to ensure the protection and conservation of sensitive habitat areas. The City Attorney's office is advising those Councilmembers not to recognize the Conservancy's maps because of pending litigation. However, even before that private litigation was instigated, the City Attorney's office had repeatedly claimed that the Conservancy's maps were not valid for a multitude of reasons not based in fact. Staff will continue to work with the City Council toward adoption of this second motion.

Given the Planning Department's and the City Attorney's ongoing rejection of the Conservancy's maps, more planning tools are necessary to affect land use entitlement outcomes in the City's hillside areas. Unfortunately now, months after the comment period closed, a small but vocal group of residents is attempting to gut the City's nearly-completed Wildlife Ordinance which would have required some land protection through development application approvals but would not have identified lands for conservation. On the other hand, private litigation is chipping away, case by case, at the City's resistance to habitat protection and recognition of wildlife corridors. Staff has begun to work with staff from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) on ways to pressure the City to now recognize that all of the Santa Monica Mountains represent habitat for the now State candidate threatened evolutionarily significant mountain lion population. The adoption of the proposed NRPP is part of this uphill climb to maintain species diversity in the Santa Monica Mountains from Griffith Park to Topanga State Park all within the City boundary.

The presence of the proposed NRPP will complement efforts of the CDFW as a co-trustee agency for the plan area. It will also help solidify baseline justifications for individuals donating property interests in navigating with the IRS. It further will be helpful to bolster grant applications for funding to further protect or enhance natural lands.

Attached:

[Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan](#)

[ESSM Habitat Linkage Planning Map 5 2021a](#)

[Griffith Park Area Habitat Linkage Planning Map](#)

[Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Big Wild – Topanga State Park Core Habitat Area Planning Map 6 2021](#)

[ESSM-Habitat-Linkage-Planning-Map-5-2021a4](#)

[Griffith Park Area Habitat Linkage Planning Map5](#)

[Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan water sources6](#)

December 13, 2021

Resolution No. 21-73

RESOLUTION OF THE SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY
AUTHORIZING ADOPTING EASTERN SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS NATURAL
RESOURCE PROTECTION PLAN, CITY OF LOS ANGELES

WHEREAS, a natural resource protection plan is essential to prevent the loss of species in the Santa Monica Mountains east of Topanga Canyon Boulevard (State Route 27);

WHEREAS, the Santa Monica Mountains Comprehensive Plan and the National Park Service's Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area Land Protection Plan only identify a limited number significant lands to protect east of Topanga Canyon Boulevard;

WHEREAS, the Conservancy is a State trustee agency for natural resources within the Santa Monica Mountains Zone;

WHEREAS, the Conservancy has adopted three precise and detailed habitat planning maps for the portion of the range between Topanga Canyon Boulevard and the eastern boundary of Griffith Park;

WHEREAS, the proposed Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan identifies specific properties for permanent conservation in the Santa Monica Mountains Zone;

WHEREAS, the proposed Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resource Protection Plan identifies the boundaries of specific habitat blocks and connecting habitat linkages overlain with Los Angeles County Assessor's parcel data;

WHEREAS, all portions of the proposed Natural Resource Protection Plan are located within the Santa Monica Mountains Zone;

WHEREAS, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy is the principal State planning agency for the Santa Monica Mountains; and

Therefore Be It Resolved, That the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy hereby:

1. FINDS that the proposed action is consistent with the Santa Monica Mountains Comprehensive Plan;
2. FINDS that the proposed action is consistent with the Conservancy's Strategic Objectives;

3. FINDS that the proposed Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Land Protection Plan identifies critical lands to conserve;
4. FINDS that the proposed action is exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA);
5. ADOPTS the staff report and recommendation dated December 13, 2021 for this item;
6. ADOPTS all of the preceding whereas clauses;
7. AUTHORIZES adoption of the Eastern Santa Monica Mountains Natural Resources Protection Plan; and
8. FURTHER AUTHORIZES the Executive Director to perform any and all acts necessary to carry out this resolution; without limiting the generality of the foregoing, such authority shall include those provisions that he shall determine in the exclusive exercise of his discretion are necessary to carry out the purposes of this resolution and to comply with the policies of the Conservancy, and to otherwise carry out the provisions of state law and regulations.

~End of Resolution~

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the foregoing resolution was adopted at a meeting of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, duly noticed and held according to law on December 13, 2021 at various locations via videoconferencing, California.

Date: December 13, 2021


Executive Director