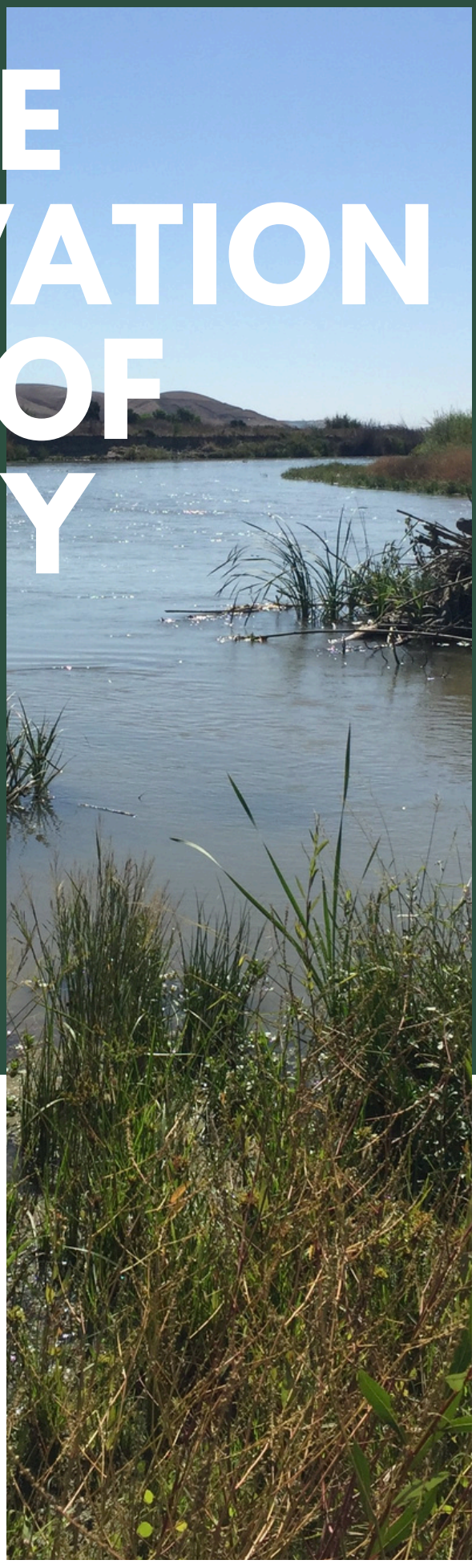
RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT OF MONTEREY COUNTY



Annual Report 2024

RCDMC
RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT OF MONTEREY COUNTY

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A WORD FROM OUR BOARD

At the Resource Conservation District of Monterey County, we are focused not only on conserving land and water but also on cultivating the future of agriculture. That future is well represented on our own board, where members like Jynel Gularte, Ignacio Mendoza, and Jazmin Lopez bring fresh energy, lived experience, and deep commitment to the land. These young professionals bring firsthand experience from across the agricultural sector and are helping guide the RCD's work to support the next generation of producers.

One of our long-term goals is to create a conservation demonstration farm—a place to showcase sustainable practices and provide transitional, multi-year leases to small and growing farming operations. This would help bridge the critical gap between start-up and land ownership, giving beginning farmers the runway they need to build viable businesses. We're working with local partners, donors, and granting agencies to bring this vision to life.

At the same time, the RCD continues to serve as a convener—bringing together farmers, landowners, residents, and agencies to address issues like water quality, flooding, forest health, and habitat restoration. Along the Salinas River, we are working closely with the Groundwater Sustainability Agency, the Water Resources Agency, and local landowners to address overlaying river and water management challenges. We're now exploring how to expand this model to other waterways, such as Santa Rita Creek and other streams that flow through Salinas.

One thing that sets the RCD apart is that we are non-regulatory. Our work is rooted in voluntary action, not enforcement—focusing on practical, cooperative solutions that benefit our shared environment and the people who depend on it.

With a dynamic board and dedicated staff, the RCD is charting a path that blends conservation with opportunity—for farmers, for land stewards, and for the broader community.

Jennifer Clarke

RCDMC BOARD VICE PRESIDENT

SALINAS RIVER

SALINAS RIVER ARUNDO PROGRAM

Program Lead

EMILY ZEFFERMAN, ECOLOGIST
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In 2024, the Salinas River Arundo Control Program continued its work to rid the greater river channel of this invasive scourge. With funding from the US Bureau of Reclamation, our contractors chemically treated over 108 net acres of arundo between Soledad and Gonzales. We also treated 13 acres near Chualar under the USDA NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program. After the 2023 floods, arundo spread downstream from untreated upstream populations, but fortunately we were able to spot-treat new arundo plants on 1028 acres of riparian floodplain between King City and Soledad with funding from the Department of Water Resources and the Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner.

ACS Habitat Management staff treating a stand of invasive arundo in the greater Salinas River channel.

We continue to appreciate our excellent contractor, ACS Habitat Management, for their expert work effectively treating arundo while avoiding native species and habitat. Our Wildlife Biology team worked diligently to protect sensitive resources, track project progress, and facilitate work. Wildlife populations in the river corridor are still recovering post-2023 flooding, but willows, cottonwoods, and other riparian vegetation are popping up, showing the resilience of this unique riparian ecosystem.

SALINAS RIVER

SALINAS RIVER STREAM MAINTENANCE PROGRAM

Program Lead

JAIME GONZALEZ CANON
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The Salinas River Stream Maintenance Program (SMP) brought on a new Coordinator, Jaime Gonzalez Canon while continuing forward with creation and maintenance of Secondary Channels. The Program is designed to use such secondary channels to mimic the historic, braided channel pattern of the Salinas River to increase flood flow capacity and efficiency while protecting and adding complexity to river wildlife habitat. 2024 SMP activities included maintenance of 19 existing channels and initiation of 3 new ones. Work involved sediment removal, grading, vegetation clearing, and arundo treatment. In total, 109.64 acres of native and nonnative vegetation were removed from those work areas, along with 25,164 cubic yards of sediment.

Secondary channel after flood event of 2023 and prior to any maintenance work with the Stream Maintenance Program (SMP).

Program habitat improvement and mitigation activities included herbicide treatment and mowing of arundo across 29.37 acres.
RCD staff continued to gather information from landowners, farmers and agricultural workers regarding the impacts of the 2023 flood events that caused dramatic changes to the river channel and adjacent farmlands in many places along the river corridor.

Secondary channel shown after maintenance activities of sediment removal and grading.

The Salinas River SMP is included as a relatively small sub-project in the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation's $71.1 million NOAA Climate Resiliency Grant, awarded in spring 2024. This major initiative involves numerous public and private partners across coastal Monterey and Santa Cruz counties. For the SMP part of this effort, we look forward to supporting work on three new secondary channels in areas near Marina, Spreckels, and Chualar.

FOREST AND FIRE

FOREST HEALTH AND WILDFIRE RESILIENCE PROGRAM

Program Lead

JAMIE TUITELE-LEWIS, FOREST HEALTH AND WILDFIRE RESILIENCE PROGRAM MANAGER
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Ventana Forestry hand crew worker piles cut madrone on Skinner's Ridge on the Los Padres National Forest near Pico Blanco.

2024 was a busy year for the RCDMC Forest Health and Wildfire Resilience Program with major project implementation in Big Sur, new partnership programs, and eucalyptus removal for defensible space in North Monterey County.

In summer 2024, we wrapped up the $3.34 M CALFIRE-funded Los Padres Strategic Community Fuelbreak Collaborative Project (LPSCFCP) with major fire risk reduction work. Under the LPSCFCP, Forest Health Program Manager Jamie Tuitele-Lewis oversaw over 57 acres of fuel break maintenance on Skinner's Ridge in the Los Padres National Forest and 75.5 acres of roadside fuelbreak and ecological restoration work at Rancho Rico in Big Sur, using Ventana Forestry as the competitively- selected contractor for both projects.

We initiated two new grant-funded projects: a $823 K Forest Health Capacity Building project in partnership with State Coastal Conservancy (funder), Central Coast Prescribed Burn Association (CCPBA), Carmel River Watershed Conservancy and Fire Safe Council for Monterey County; and a $5.47 M project under the NOAA Climate Resiliency program for prescribed burning and cultural resource management, noted earlier. The State Coastal Conservancy block grant enables the RCD to support the CCPBA's development into an independent non-profit organization.

In the second half of 2024, the RCDMC also led the administration of a $1M North Monterey County 'defensible space' eucalyptus removal pilot program made possible by Supervisor Glenn Church and State Senator John Laird. With support from the Supervisor's office, the RCD reviewed, processed and oversaw implementation of project applications for 90 participating homeowners' removal of hazardous eucalyptus trees near their homes with assistance from the local Aromas Tri-County and North Monterey Fire Protection Districts.

AGRICULTURE

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE WITH SMALL-SCALE FARMERS

Program Leads

LAURA MURPHY, SOIL SCIENTIST
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AYSHA PETERSON, AGROECOLOGIST
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The Ag Team has continued to work with several partner organizations to provide technical assistance to farm owner-operators of all scales in our area, with several key programs emphasizing work with growing farm businesses who are Spanish-speaking and operating on a small-scale (approximately 0.5-20 acres).
One day each week, our staff visited the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) to a provide one-on-one and group trainings on irrigation and nutrient management to farmers in ALBA's Organic Farm Incubator program. We also worked with researchers at CSU Monterey Bay and UC Davis to build out our Sustainable Ag Program, which provides technical assistance and financial incentives to a 4-year cohort of 25 Spanish-speaking, small-scale farmers – many of whom are ALBA alumni – for compost application, cover crop planting, and implementation of best nutrient management practices.

In collaboration with neighboring RCDs and farmers of varying scales, we continued to implement our compost cost-share program using funds from SB 1383.

We also helped to plant cover crop in accordance with the cover crop credit proposed for the Regional Water Quality Control Board's Ag Order 4.0, and administered a block grant from the California Department of Food and Agriculture's (CDFA's) State Water Efficiency Enhancement Program to fund irrigation system improvements.

Agroecologist Aysha Peterson (left) and Grower Engagement Specialist Estrella Cruz (right) work with a small farmers to measure water output from individual emitters on their drip tape as part of an irrigation system evaluation.

Additionally, we continued to assist farmers to access federal and state funding through conservation incentives programs such as the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program and CDFA California Underserved and Small Producer Program. Throughout these activities, we worked closely with Kitchen Table Advisors to provide coordinated conservation technical assistance and business advising services. Altogether, during this past year we provided one-on-one technical assistance to over 100 farm owner-operators and supported many more through group workshops at several conferences.

POLLINATOR HABITAT

Caption

POLLINATOR HABITAT IMPLEMENTATION

Program Leads

LAURA MURPHY, SOIL SCIENTIST
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EMILY ZEFFERMAN, ECOLOGIST
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This was the most productive year for the Pollinator Program to-date! We were thrilled to begin work on new demonstration pollinator gardens at the Gonzales Community Garden, Johnson Canyon Landfill (Gonzales), and Monterey Adult School (Seaside). We also helped Citizens for Sustainable Marina plant pollinator habitat at the Marina Library and expanded pollinator habitat at Rancho Cielo Youth Campus and Santa Rita Creek Park (both in Salinas). We supported pollinator hedgerow maintenance and expansion at five small organic farms throughout the county. This work resulted in 863 native plants installed.

Soil scientist Laura Murphy (far left) works alongside California Climate Action Corps Fellows and community partners to install over 4,000 sq ft of pollinator habitat on an erosion-prone slope.

A CSUMB College Corps Fellow helping to install over 70 native plants from the Xerces Society at Monterey Adult School, transforming a slope of nonnative iceplant into thriving pollinator habitat.

This year 14,850 square feet of habitat was created and 65 linear feet of hedgerow was expanded through funding from the California Wildlife Conservation Board. We are grateful to the many partners who assisted with on-the-ground implementation, including the Monterey County Workforce development (CADRE) program, the Monterey County Garden Network, Blue Zones Project for Monterey County, CSUMB College Corps, California Climate Action Corps Fellows, Communities for a Sustainable Monterey County, Salinas Valley Recycles, Master Gardeners, Habitat Stewardship Project, Xerces Society, Neighborhood Services Salinas, Save the Whales, and our amazing community volunteers

PROJECT SPOTLIGHTS

CACHAGUA CREEK FISH PASSAGE

Project Lead

MEGAN BARKER, ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENTIST
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The Cachagua Creek Fish Passage Project #3 was completed this fall, removing the last of the three highest-priority steelhead passage barriers on this tributary to the Carmel River. Prior to dewatering the creek and demolishing the barrier—an old cement ford—and replacing it with a free-span bridge, over 1,100 juvenile steelhead were captured and relocated by a NOAA-approved biologist. The project was completed with State Coastal Conservancy and CDFW Fisheries Restoration Grant Program funding because it will allow Federally threatened steelhead trout to migrate further upstream into important spawning and rearing habitat.

Before: Old Cement ford on Cachagua Creek, prior to fish rescue and relocation, stream dewatering, and demolition.

After: New free-span bridge that allows fish passage.

MONARCH CONSERVATION PROJECTS

Project Lead

EMILY ZEFFERMAN, ECOLOGIST
emily.zefferman@rcdmonterey.org

Wildlife Biologist Geri Kavanagh-Baird (fourth from left) poses with volunteers from CSUMB's Habitat Stewardship Project Monterey Bay at a milkweed planting site at Fort Hunter Liggett.

In addition to our work on agricultural and urban areas, we had the privilege of enhancing monarch butterfly habitat on Fort Hunter Liggett with partner Habitat Stewardship Project Monterey Bay. With funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, we installed 300 milkweed plants in March 2024 to support the monarch butterfly, which was recently proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act. We also continued to assist the California Central Coast Joint Venture with a milkweed habitat restoration experiment on a private ranch under US Fish and Wildlife Service funding.

PROJECT SPOTLIGHTS

ELKHORN RANCH STORM WATER DETENTION PROJECT

Project Lead

ADRIENNE CARTER, CIVIL ENGINEER

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In collaboration with NRCS, RCD of Santa Cruz County and the owners of Elkhorn Ranch, RCDMC successfully designed and oversaw the construction of an expanded stormwater detention pond. This pond collects runoff from nearby strawberry fields, slowing peak runoff flow rates after large storms. A weir structure controls the pond's outlet, allowing water to remain in the basin and provide habitat for native frog and salamander species. The project involved the owners and tenant farmers in planning, protecting sensitive species, and restoring the area with native vegetation.

The expanded stormwater detention pond at Elkhorn Ranch is designed to capture runoff from nearby strawberry fields—helping to prevent flooding while creating valuable habitat for local wildlife.

RCDMC Engineer Adrienne Carter and Environmental Scientist Megan Barker provided essential project management, topographic surveying, design services, environmental permitting, and construction oversight. They also coordinated cultural and tribal monitors, geotechnical investigations, and county inspections.

SMALL FARMER LAND ACCESS AND CONSERVATION ASSISTANCE PROJECT

Project Lead

PAUL ROBINS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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In spring 2024, the RCD initiated a 'Capacity Building' process with a CA Department of Conservation Sustainable Ag Land Conservation Program grant to be able to take our first steps towards a long-desired farmland acquisition project to host and demonstrate conservation agriculture and bolster new farm operations' success in Monterey County. During the second half of 2024, the RCD collaborated with partners ALBA, California FarmLink, Kitchen Table Advisors, and La Cultiva to identify the steps needed to bring the RCD (and partners) to readiness for pursuing opportunities, acquiring land, and managing leases and projects on that land. With that work completed, we are ready to commence with a property and purchase development search in 2025!

EVENTS

2024 MONTEREY COUNTY STEWARDSHIP BENEFIT BBQ

Our annual fund- and friend-raising event held at the Monterey County Fairgrounds in April 2024 was a huge success thanks to the outpouring of support from local sponsors and in-kind donors raising over $36,000! All funds raised help support community education and organizational costs of RCDMC that are not covered by our grant funding.

Guests enjoyed delicious local BBQ, playfully battled over auctions items and watched a brief program celebrating the year's partners, accomplishments and challenges. Event sponsors included Alliant Insurance Services, American Ag Credit, American Takii Inc., Big Sur Land Trust, Braga Fresh, Terracon Consultants, Driscoll's Inc., Franscioni-Griva Corp, Pacific Ag Rentals, Merrill Farms, Rain for Rent, Wish Farms, Rava Ranches, Salinas Valley Basin Groundwater Sustainability Agency, and Sturdy Oil.

Proud winners of silent auction items pose with their prizes—generously donated by local businesses—at the 2025 Monterey County Stewardship Benefit BBQ.

ENGAGEMENT WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS: 2024 TOURS

In 2024, we collaborated with partners to connect with local and federal elected officials and increase awareness of our programs and projects with two County Supervisor mini-tours and one fall legislators' tour. In spring 2024, the RCDMC Board hosted Monterey County District 2 Supervisor Glenn Church on a eucalyptus-removal site tour with Elkhorn Slough Foundation, and in August 2024, we partnered with the Center for Land-Based Learning to meet with District 1 Supervisor Alejo and tour a community garden at Natividad Creek Park in Salinas.

State Senator John Laird (left) and U.S. Representative Zoe Lofgren (right) pose with small organic farmer Yadira Mendiola (center) after visiting her farm to learn more about RCDMC's technical assistance services for small farmers.

In October 2024 we held a Fall Legislators Tour, which brought together federal, state, and local legislators along with our partners to highlight our collaborative work in the region. This tour featured two key programs: the North County Eucalyptus Removal Pilot Program and our technical assistance for small farmers.

COMMUNITY

CARCD ANNUAL HIGHSCHOOL SPEAK-OFF

Last October, RCDMC coordinated the Monterey County level of the CARCD High School Speak-Off Competition. Contestants delivered timed speeches to an audience of RCDMC staff, board members, and NRCS staff on the topic, “What is the role of agriculture in meeting California’s climate goals?”

Maria-Angela Sario-Perez (right) poses with CARCD staff after earning second place in the statewide Speak-Off Competition at the CARCD Conference.

Both students performed with confidence. In the end, Maria-Angela Sario-Perez was selected as our champion to represent Monterey County at the CARCD Central Coast Regional Meeting later that month held at Paicines Ranch. We are proud to report that last December, Maria-Angela advanced to the state-wide speak-off competition held at the CARCD conference in Sacramento, CA. She performed exceptionally well, representing the Central Coast, and we are thrilled to announce that she secured second place!

OUR TEAM IS GROWING!

We are thrilled to introduce several new members to the RCD of Monterey County team:

Jaime González-Canon joined as Program Coordinator in May, coordinating the Salinas River Stream Maintenance program. Jaime brings diverse experience and is fluent in three languages, focusing on conservation, environmental policy, and regenerative farming.

Jazmin Lopez, Compliance & Special Projects Manager at Pisoni Farms, joined our Board of Directors in October. Her expertise in regulatory compliance and sustainability is invaluable.

Eve Mannix became our Operations Manager in November, dedicated to streamlining internal systems and processes for our continued success and growth in serving our community.

From left to right: Program CoordinatorJaime Gonzalez-Canon, Board Director Jazmin Lopez, and Operations Manager Eve Mannix

We also bid farewell to Board Director Aurelio González, thanking him for his support since 2023, and Watershed Program Manager Brandt Bates, wishing him well in Colorado.

FINANCES

RCDMC is in an expansion phase as our programs have become established and able to take on and implement new work, as well as build new lines of work—such as the community garden program and our newest venture to address land access for small, growing farm operations. In addition to RCDMC's established programs on the Salinas River, our forest fire resilience and fish passage programs also had new major projects implemented in Big Sur and upper Carmel Valley.

Although this growth is in direct response to local need for our service, our bedrock federal and state funding sources are entering a period of unreliability. In response to this the RCD is increasing its search for more stable private and local funding options, including agency partnerships and creative financing and donor development. If you are interested in learning more, please contact Executive Director Paul Robins.

To provide a donation, please click the button below or simply click donate.

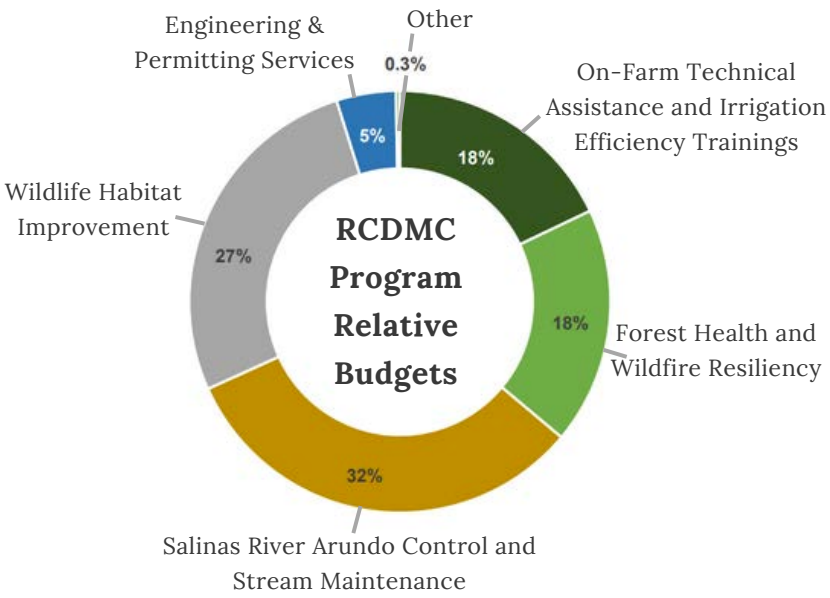
Donate Today

Income Sources
(2023-2024 Audited Reports)

State	$2,222,477
Federal	$1,622,596
Local/Private	$562,048
Donations, Fundraising, Interest	$40,865
Total	$4,447,986

Expenses
(2023-2024 Audited Reports)

Personnel	$1,339,248
Contract Services	$2,723,881
Farmer Payments	$202,199
Office Expenses	$78,519
Project Permits	$48,655
Equipment & Field Supplies	$36,223
Vehicle & Travel	$16,370
Workshops, Meetings & Events	$15,293
Liability Insurance	$12,419
Total Expenses	$4,472,806



STAFF

Megan Barker
Environmental Scientist

Kasey Butler
Ag Projects Manager

Adrienne Carter
Civil Engineer

Estrella Cruz
Grower Engagement Specialist

Zoe Curcio
Conservation & Urban Agriculture Program Assistant

Maggie Errea
Finance Manager

Brenna Fowler
Forest Health & Wildlife Resilience Program Specialist

Audrey Garcia
Programs Assistant

Jaime Gonzalez-Canon
Program Coordinator

Geri Kavanagh-Baird
Wildlife Biologist

Eve Mannix
Operations Manager

Laura Murphy
Soil Scientist

Aysha Peterson
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Paul Robins
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Jamie Tuitele-Lewis
Forest Health & Wildlife Resilience Program Manager

Emily Zefferman
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Jynel Gularte
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Brent Plemmons
Board Director

Ignacio Mendoza
Board Director

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Jennifer Mancera

Rebecca King

Paul Binsacca

Emily Gardner

NRCS STAFF

We work closely with our partners at NRCS.

Ramon Salazar- District Conservationist
Allison Tokunaga- Soil Conservationist
Javier Flores- Ag Engineer
Alisha Adams-Soil Conservationist