RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT OF MONTEREY COUNTY

YEAR IN REVIEW 2023

Strategic Collaborations for a Resilient Future

During our five-year Strategic Plan update this past winter, we identified our superpowers: a blend of people skills and technical expertise. Our highly skilled technical team has built and continues to maintain relationships rooted in trust and integrity, always dedicated to a collaborative approach.

In Monterey County, the RCDMC plays a unique role as a nimble, small, non-regulatory agency capable of addressing a broad range of natural resource challenges. After the damaging floods of winter 2023, we collaborated with organized landowners, local agencies, and the agricultural industry to gather new aerial survey data along the Salinas River. This data is crucial for new stream management planning and dialogue with regulatory agencies, aiming to enhance the efficacy of our multi-benefit work in the valley.

We have initiated several fuel break projects in the Santa Lucia Mountains near Big Sur to prepare for future wildfire prevention. To combat urban food insecurity, our Agriculture Team has partnered with local non-profits, cities, and residents to lead the Monterey Community Gardens Network.

These initiatives are just a few examples of our consistent pattern: bringing technical skill, respect, and dedication to the collaborative table so good people can do good work.

Our Strategic Planning process also highlighted necessary organizational changes to continue and expand our service to the community and land. A key change is to work creatively with you—everyone can be a partner—to generate more stable, locally-based funding to reduce our dependence on state and federal grants. By working together, we can achieve our vision of developing natural resource solutions that foster thriving and resilient ecosystems, communities, and economies. Stay tuned!

Sincerely, *Jennifer Clarke*

2023 Highlights

- Urban Agriculture
- Fire Fuels Reduction
- Salinas River Programs
- Fish Passage and Permit Streamlining
- Irrigation Management and Engineering
- RCDMC Welcomes New Staff
- Fiscal Year Final Summary

The Mission of the Resource Conservation District of Monterey County is to conserve and improve our natural resources, integrating the public interest for environmental protection with the needs of agricultural and urban users.

Who's Who

RCDMC Directors
Benny Jefferson, President
Jennifer Clarke, Vice-President/Secretary
Bill Lipe, Treasurer
Brent Plemmons, Director
Jynel Gularte, Director
Aurelio Gonzalez, Director
Ignacio Mendoza, Director

Advisors
Paul Binsacca, John Doud, Linda Ferrasci,
Emily Gardner, Rebecca King

RCDMC Staff
Paul Robins, Executive Director
Maggie Errea, Finance Manager
Emily Zefferman, Ecologist
Megan Barker, Environmental Scientist
Laura Murphy, Soil Scientist
Adrienne Carter, Civil Engineer
Jasmine Ruvalcaba, Field Manager
Jamie Tuitele-Lewis, Forest Health Program Manager
Aysha Peterson, Agroecologist
Audrey Garcia, Programs Assistant
Zoe Curcio, Conservation & Urban Ag Assistant
Geri Kavanagh-Baird, Wildlife Biologist
Evelyn Nordberg, Ag Team Coordinator
Kasey Butler, Ag Projects Manager
Jaime Gonzalez-Canon, Program Coordinator
Estrella Cruz, Grower Engagement Assistant

Natural Resources Conservation Service
James Booth, Acting District Conservationist
Allison Tokunaga, Soil Conservationist
Javier Flores, Ag Engineer
Janelle Vasquez-Nicholas, Soil Conservationist
Alisha Adams, Soil Conservationist

Spring BBQ Benefit 2023

The 2023 Monterey County Stewardship Benefit BBQ held at the Monterey County Fairgrounds was a huge success thanks to the outpouring of support from local sponsors and in-kind donors raising over $29,000! All funds raised help support community education and organizational costs of RCDMC 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, Big Sur Land Trust, Braga Fresh, Burleson Consulting, CalAm, CCOF, Franscioni And Griva Corp, Friends of Seaside Parks Association, Anonymous Farming Families, Green Rubber Kennedy Ag, Henry Hibino Farms, JRG Attorneys at Law, Noland Hamerly Etienne & Hoss, Pan American Insurance, Rava Ranches Inc., Smith Family Wines, and Sturdy Oil.

Local sponsors, donors, and guests gather at the RCDMC Annual Fundraiser BBQ

FARMS Field Day Santa Rita Creek

RCDMC Staff collaborated with the Center for Land Based Learning to host local high school students participating in the FARMS Leadership Program at a developing community garden site in Salinas. Students learned about watersheds and how the location of this garden along Santa Rita Creek is affected by upstream runoff and erosion. Students were also introduced to the concept of a food forest and the role of community gardens in increasing food security. Activities included identifying native and invasive plants with a bingo game, weeding and controlling the invasive Himalayan blackberry, discussing the use of microtopography on a slope for water conservation and applying those concepts when planting a mulberry tree. RCDMC Soil Scientist Laura Murphy, Field Manager Jasmine Ruvalcaba, and Program Assistant Zoe Curcio along with two local community garden stewards discussed career pathways in natural resources conservation and answered questions with students.

Programs and Results

Conservation Ag Technical Assistance

Beginning Farmer Technical Assistance:

The Ag Team continued our collaboration with the Agriculture Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) to provide regular one-on-one and group training to farmers in ALBA's incubator program. During regular field visits, staff provided irrigation and nutrient management assistance, including laboratory soil sampling and results interpretation, irrigation system efficiency evaluations and recommendations, soil nitrate quick testing, and training with the CropManage web application. The Ag Team also worked with various partners to host workshops at ALBA, the EcoFarm conference in Pacific Grove, the CAFF Small Farm Conference, and elsewhere on topics related to irrigation and nutrient management, cover cropping, and accessing conservation funding programs.

Conservation and Urban Agriculture Assistant Zoe Curcio (left) and Agroecologist Aysha Peterson (right) installing a datalogger as well as soil moisture sensors

Irrigation Water Efficiency:

Staff supported farmers with water use efficiency by providing 42 irrigation design and scheduling consultations, scheduling five pump efficiency tests, and connecting farmers with NRCS staff for EQIP applications and other funding sources. While the 2023 statewide SWEEP program was cancelled unfortunately, RCDMC staff continued to assist farmers in applying for cost share through a locally-held SWEEP Block Grant.

Sustainable Agriculture Program:

RCDMC has partnered with CSU Monterey Bay and UC Davis on a project funded by a USDA Climate Smart Commodities grant to form the RCDMC Sustainable Agriculture Program. In this 4-year program (summer 2024 to summer 2028), we will work with a cohort of 25 small and historically-underserved farmers to implement conservation practices and open marketing channels for 'Climate Smart' products. Farmers will receive technical and financial assistance for compost, cover crop, and nutrient management practices. We are especially excited to have hired Estrella Cruz as our Grower Engagement Assistant to help with the rollout of this new program.

Disaster Relief Funding:

In the wake of massive flooding events in early 2023 and ongoing drought, the Ag Team partnered with Kitchen Table Advisors, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), California FarmLink, neighboring RCDs, and other local and regional partners to assist farmers with applications to various disaster relief programs. So far, we have supported farmers with applications to the California Department of Food and Agriculture's (CDFA's) California Underserved and Small Producer (CUSP) Program, the California Office of the Small Business Advocate's (CalOSBA's) California Small Agricultural Business Drought and Flood Relief Program, and CAFF's Family Farmer Emergency Fund, and have connected farmers with our colleagues at the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to access federal relief programs. Funding recipients have been able to receive tens of thousands of dollars to alleviate the impacts of crop loss and property damage.

Soil Health Promotion Program:

The Ag Team continues to expand our Soil Health Promotion Program, which provides cost-share for compost and cover crop practices. During 2023, this program was able to support compost application on approximately 40 farms throughout Monterey County. This program has also supported soil testing and implementation of mustard cover crops in strawberry furrows for winter erosion prevention. For more information regarding these programs, please contact Ag Team Coordinator Evelyn Nordberg.

Numbers from 2023

1130	Acres of arundo re-treatment on Salinas River floodplain
117	New acres of arundo mastication
20	Stream Maintenance Program secondary channels managed
70+	Participants in 2023 Central Coast Prescribed Burn Training Exchange
40	Farms participated in Soil Health Promotion Program

Urban Agriculture

The Urban Ag Program involves work with a wide network of local partners to provide education and improve community gardens and parks.

In the City of Seaside, RCDMC has supported a coalition of volunteers and organizations (including but not limited to the Friends of Seaside Parks Association, the Blue Zones Project for Monterey County, Sustainable Seaside, the Parks & Recreation and Environmental Commissions of the City of Seaside, the International School of Monterey, the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History and the Habitat Stewards Project) to improve public parks, with an emphasis on planting and maintaining native pollinator habitat. RCDMC has also received a grant from CDFA to create conservation plans for these garden areas. We are working with volunteers to develop long term plans and conduct outreach for potential conservation contracts with NRCS.

Soil Scientist, Laura Murphy (kneeling, right) works with partner CADRE (Community, Advocacy, Diversity, Resilience, Empowerment) participants at a local community garden

In 2023, RCDMC Soil Scientist Laura Murphy was appointed as co-chair of the Monterey County Garden Network, a subgroup of the Monterey County Food Systems Coalition. With the partner Blue Zones Project, RCDMC co-administers this peer-learning network for urban gardeners and educators. This network hosts quarterly technical workshops and monthly virtual gatherings to discuss experiences and opportunities.

RCDMC currently partners with Communities for Sustainable Monterey County and the Monterey Adult School to host a monthly gardening class. RCDMC staff also provide a weekly program at the Salinas Juvenile Hall's school garden, where we assist students with garden maintenance and provide technical training on skills such as irrigation, composting, cover crop, pruning techniques, and disease identification. For more information, please contact Ag Team Coordinator Evelyn Nordberg.

Forest Health and Wildfire Resilience Conservation

In 2023, the RCDMC Forest Health and Wildfire Resilience Program built on previous years' work to initiate implementation of large-scale CALFIRE-funded wildfire mitigation and forest health projects, partner on major 'good fire' education efforts, and continued to seek new funding with partner organizations to promote ecosystem health, reduce wildfire risk and help local communities with technical assistance for forest and wildfire work.

Forest Health Coordinator Jamie Tuitele-Lewis continued our engagement with the Central Coast Prescribed Burn Association (CCPBA), helping with planning and implementation of a successful 2023 Central Coast Prescribed Burn training exchange. The 'TREX' included over 70 participants including people from five different countries and application

of prescribed fire on approximately 15 acres in three different counties. The TREX would not have been possible without strategic fund-raising and a diverse, creative partnership.

Spot pile burning at the 2023 Central Coast Prescribed Burn training exchange (TREX)

The Los Padres Strategic Community Fuelbreak Collaborative Project: With CALFIRE grant funding, the RCDMC Forest Health Team oversaw three lines of activity: First, RCDMC oversaw our first major fuel break project on a piece of private property just east of Pico Blanco in Big Sur. Contractor Ventana Forestry implemented approximately 28 acres of shaded fuel break work in steep, treacherous terrain, completed in June 2023. Second, our partners at the Santa Lucia Conservancy oversaw implementation of over 280 acres of roadside vegetation shaded fuelbreak in the Santa Lucia Preserve in Carmel Valley. Third, RCDMC staff and contractors conducted surveys for California spotted owl and marbled murrelet near a 2024 project area on Skinners Ridge in the Los Padres National Forest, in the Big Sur region.

The Carmel Valley Fuelbreak Project: Under a separate CALFIRE grant, RCDMC engaged Denise Duffy and Associates to help complete environmental analysis for the Garland Ranch Fuel Treatment Project that will remove approximately 12 acres of eucalyptus trees in Garland Park. RCDMC is working with the Monterey Peninsula Regional Park District to start implementation in 2024. We are also analyzing other subprojects for California Environmental Quality Act compliance and permitting needs and will expect to start implementation in late 2024.

Monterey County Wildfire Resilience and Capacity Project: RCDMC, the Fire Safe Council for Monterey County, the Carmel River Watershed Conservancy, and the CCPBA requested and were awarded a $787,400 grant from the State Coastal Conservancy to support capacity-building for organizational capacity-building, North Monterey County fire prevention planning, strategic vegetation mapping in Carmel Valley, and crafting of a Regional Priority Plan that is key for future state grant applications for forest health work. This new grant will help sustain the CCPBA until June 2026 and launch them towards becoming an independent non-profit organization. For more information, please contact Fire Fuel Mitigation Program and Forest Health Coordinator Jamie Tuitele-Lewis.

Engineering Services

RCDMC Civil Engineer Adrienne Carter developed engineered conservation project designs and guided construction for multiple farming companies in the region. Engineering assistance included supporting irrigation design, stormwater management and erosion control practices. Carter and Environmental Scientist Megan Barker worked with a Lower Salinas Valley landowner to develop a set of farm BMPs and creek improvements (including multi-year maintenance) that will qualify for streamlined environmental review with the goal of implementation in the upcoming year. Carter also increased her work with conservation partners Central Coast Wetlands Group and Central Coast Water Quality Preservation, Inc. to review collaborative, multi-farm water quality improvement projects in the Alisal and Chualar Watersheds. Carter continues to assist the NRCS with their site visits and provides general erosion control recommendations for agricultural lands as part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). For more information, please contact Civil Engineer Adrienne Carter.

RCDMC survey being performed in a creek adjacent to strawberry fields

Salinas River Stream Maintenance Program

Devastating flooding of farmland adjacent to the Salinas River in January and March 2023 generated new interest in the Salinas River Stream Maintenance Program, which is designed to improve stream flow and reduce flood risk. A record number of participants signed up to do work, but unfortunately, due to tight ranch management budgets and/or lack of available construction equipment needed for post-flood restoration efforts, much of the proposed new work was not implemented. It was nonetheless a productive season: vegetation removal, sediment removal, and/or channel smoothing occurred in 20 secondary channels and one selective treatment area along the Salinas River main stem and in San Lorenzo Creek, resulting in removal of 116.40 acres of vegetation in those areas. As mitigation for program impacts, arundo was treated on 97.27 acres.

Masticating Arundo donax as mitigation for Stream Maintenance-Program activities in a work area near Chualar

In 2023, RCDMC and the Salinas River Management Unit Association began working with the state and federal permitting agencies to update and improve Stream Maintenance Program permits with a goal of reducing administrative costs and increasing effectiveness. Through funding secured from the CA Department of Water Resources' Integrated Regional Water Management Program, we are continuing to incentivize new participants into the program. We look forward to another busy work season in 2024. For more information please contact Program Manager Jaime Gonzalez-Canon.

Salinas River Arundo Control

RCDMC celebrated our tenth arundo control season with 101 acres of new arundo mastication under US Bureau of Reclamation funding between Soledad and Gonzales, continuing our downstream march. We also conducted arundo re-treatments on 1,130 acres of Salinas River floodplain between King City and Soledad with funding from the Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner and the California Wildlife Conservation Board, and assisted a private landowner

Wildlife Biologist Geri Kavanagh-Baird standing next to arundo growth

near Chualar with mastication of 16.4 acres of arundo under the USDA NRCS Regional Conservation-Partnership Program.

In response to the devastating floods of winter 2023, RCDMC worked to assemble funds to acquire new LiDAR data and high-resolution aerial imagery for the Salinas River and floodplain, to update hydraulic models and outdated maps of arundo and other vegetation types. The information will be used to inform future river management activities. We appreciate the contributions from the Monterey County Water Resources Agency, Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner, Salinas Valley Basin Groundwater Sustainability Agency, Grower Shipper Association, Salinas Basin Water Alliance, and Salinas Valley Water Coalition to make this effort happen. For more information please contact Ecologist Emily Zefferman.

Other RCD News

RCDMC Welcomes New Team Members

RCDMC is delighted to welcome Evelyn Nordberg and Kasey Butler to the team. Evelyn Nordberg brings her agronomy expertise from her previous positions with NRCS. She joins us as our new Ag Team Coordinator, where she provides project administration, technical assistance, and public outreach. Kasey joins us as Project Manager for our five-person Ag Team. She supports small and Spanish-speaking producers with nutrient management and irrigation and creates conservation plans focused on pollinator habitat and soil health. Before joining us, Kasey worked for 4.5 years on the Ag Stewardship Team at San Mateo RCD. We are excited to have both Evelyn and Kasey on board and look forward to their contributions to our team!

We also celebrate a couple familiar faces as they became permanent employees with RCDMC. Zoe Curcio joined us in 2022 as a Grizzly Corps Fellow and now serves permanently as our Conservation and Urban Agriculture Assistant. Wildlife Biologist Geri Kavanagh-Baird joined us in 2016 as a seasonal biologist and was made a regular employee in 2023 as well. We are thankful to have their expertise and positive attitudes as part of our team.

Ag Team Cordinator Evelyn Nordberg (top left), Ag Projects Manager Kasey Butler (top right), Conservation and Urban Agriculture Assistant Zoe Curcio (bottom left), and Wildlife Biologist Geri Kavanagh-Baird (bottom right) all joined the RCDMC team

Monterey County Permit Streamlining for Conservation Projects

RCDMC has been working on a permit streamlining program with the Monterey County Housing and Community Development to expedite permit application review for environmentally-beneficial projects. In 2023, the Monterey County Planning Department circulated a CEQA Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration to evaluate the potential impacts of the program. They have received and incorporated public comments, and the programmatic permit is nearing completion and approval. With a programmatic permit in place, there will be a streamlined permit application review process that will benefit both the County and local conservation project proponents starting in early 2025. For more information, please contact Environmental Scientist Megan Barker.

Curtis Ranch Stormwater Basin

RCDMC collaborated with RCD Santa Cruz to lead the planning and construction oversight of a large (over 20 acre-feet—imagine two football fields 10 feet deep) stormwater detention basin for a Reiter Affiliated Companies Ranch in the Pajaro Valley near Aromas. Farms in those flat lands with clayey soils tend to flood following significant storm events. This project is designed to capture and detain the stormwater runoff to reduce flooding around the area and hold the water to allow the Ranch to reuse it and offset their groundwater pumping needs. RCDMC Civil Engineer Adrienne Carter worked with NRCS engineers to design the basin while RCDMC Environmental Scientist Megan Barker led the permitting process.

Engineer Adrienne Carter tests soil moisture conditions at the construction site of the Curtis Ranch stormwater basin

Pollinator Projects

RCDMC's pollinator-focused work ramped up in 2023. With block grant funding from the Wildlife Conservation Board through the California Association of RCDs, we began planning new pollinator garden projects at Johnson-Canyon Landfill in Gonzales, Monterey Adult School in Seaside, Rancho Cielo in Salinas, the Marina Library, and Santa Rita Park in Salinas. These projects will provide habitat for a variety of pollinators and other wildlife and serve as "demonstration gardens" for the broader community. We also continued assisting small-scale organic farmers with native plant hedgerow expansion and maintenance to enhance beneficial insect habitat.

Kasey Butler (left) and Zoe Curcio (right) at Johnson Canyon Landfill pollinator garden after installing drip irrigation

Fish Passage Barrier Removal

The first RCDMC-managed fish passage project was completed on Cachagua Creek in fall 2023 under the oversight of former Watershed Program Manager Brandt Bates. The project was funded by CA Department of Fish and Wildlife's Fisheries Restoration Grant Program and the State Coastal Conservancy. Environmental Scientist Megan Barker provided permitting assistance on this project and two other Trout Unlimited-managed fish passage projects, one on Potrero Creek, also constructed in 2023, as well as another project on the Arroyo Seco River, to be constructed in 2025. Barker is also managing the third and last remaining Cachagua Creek fish passage project, to be constructed in 2024.

The new bridge on Cachagua Creek was contructed with CDFW Fisheries Restoration Grant Program and State Coastal Conservancy funding

Thank You to our 2023 BBQ Sponsors!

Alliant Insurance Services
American Ag Credit
Big Sur Land Trust
Braga Fresh
Burleson Consulting
CalAm
CCOF
Franscioni and Griva Corp
Friends of Seaside Parks Association
Green Rubber Kennedy Ag
Henry Hibino Farms
JRG Attorneys at Law
Noland Hammerly Etienne & Hoss
Pan American Insurance
Rava Ranches Inc.
Smith Family Wines
Sturdy Oil

A Special Thank you to the Monterey County Fairgrounds

Summary of Financial Statements (July 2022 to June 2023)

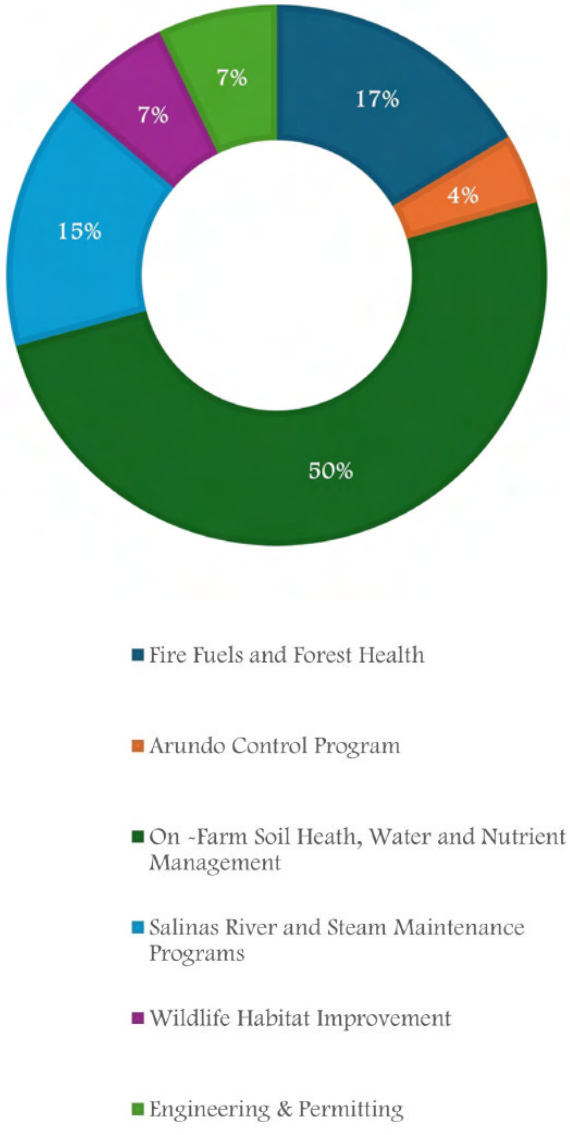
RCDMC is in an expansion phase as our programs have become established and able to take on and implement new work, as well as build new lines of work—such as the community garden program and our newest venture to address land access for small, growing farm operations. In addition to RCDMC's established programs on the Salinas River, our forest fire resilience and fish passage programs also had major projects implemented for the first time in 2023 and will have more in 2024. With the contraction of the state budget, these and other programs will require new federal or local funding sources to continue to meet local demand for conservation assistance. For this reason, we will be developing a large donor fundraising program for implementation starting in 2024 and 2025. This will include opportunities such as donations of stock, legacy giving, or donor-directed funding. 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.

Expenses (per 2022-2023 audited reports)

Personnel	**$985,103.11**
Contract Service	**$1,741,139.25**
Office Expenses	**$44,308.89**
Project Permits	**$40,958.42**
Equipment & Field Supplies	**$23,406.40**
Vehicle & Travel	**$14,085.64**
Workshops, Meetings & Events	**$27,859.63**
Insurance	**$14,353.09**
Total:	**$2,891,214.43**

Income Sources (per 2022-2023 audited reports)

State grants	**$2,400,620.32**
Federal grants	**$356,239.52**
Local and Private Contracts	**$220,178.36**
Donations, Fundraising & Interest	**$163,590.21**
Total:	**$3,140,628.41**

Donate Today!

RCDMC Programs by Relative Budget