

Project maps Rose Canyon watershed



The Rose Creek watershed encompasses 26,000 acres from Scripps Ranch to Mission Bay, where the creek empties into the Rose Creek Inlet near DeAnza Point.

BPP Photo/Paul Hansen

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From Scripps Ranch to the north of Mission Bay, Rose Canyon gullies, canyons and inlets stretch into Miramar Marine Air Corp Station, Clairemont, Mira Mesa, University City, La Jolla and Pacific Beach.

Although it encompasses more than 26,000 acres, relatively little is known about how the watershed affects not only the bay and ocean, but also all of the surrounding areas near the expansive gorges.

The Rose Creek Watershed Opportunities Assessment Project, a new project managed by San Diego EarthWorks, is working to change that.

The project is the first comprehensive study ever conducted on the area, designed to ultimately provide opportunities and constraints for habitat protection, habitat restoration, enhancement and protection of cultural resources, as well as public-access improvements.

Before those goals can be achieved, a thorough assessment of the area is necessary, said project manager Ann Van Leer.

"Eventually, we'll be able to say, 'I want a trail here and more access here,' but we're just not there yet," she said.

To help EarthWorks get there, a team of public and private professionals in fields such as biology, hydrology, land use planning, landscape architecture, archaeology and recreation are working to create an existing conditions report (ECR). Van Leer hopes to be able to release the results of the study to the public in early November.

In addition to reviewing current studies and data, the team visits sites throughout the watershed to assess the condition of the area, determine what wildlife and vegetation exist there, and what improvements can be made.

The team is working closely with property owners and residents in the study area, as well as with the city and the Marines.

With space in Southern California becoming increasingly scarce, environmental projects often involve conflict and contention. The watershed project has proven to be an exception to the rule, although it involves agencies at the state, county and local levels.

"There are a lot of good efforts being intertwined," Van Leer said. "Everyone has been very cooperative."

The Coastal Conservancy is funding most of the project through a \$200,000 grant. County Supervisor Pam Slater-Price also contributed \$21,000 to the assessment project, as well as \$5,000 toward the development of a Rose Creek Web site.

"Supervisor Slater-Price is committed to the environment and San Diego County," said Joe Sheffo, a policy aide with Slater-Price's office. He added that maintaining open space, San Diego's unique flora and fauna, and ensuring water quality are among her top priorities.

The City's Storm Water Pollution and Open Space divisions are also assisting with the project by providing access to city property as well as existing data on the watershed. In addition, they are conducting water-quality testing and providing in-house services such as mapping of the area.

"It's staff assistance we might otherwise have to pay for," Van Leer said.

Although much of the funding has been secured, San Diego EarthWorks is also seeking additional contributions to eventually develop a fire-management plan.

"At the end of the day, there will be a fire plan for the entire watershed," Van Leer said.

On the cusp of the one-year anniversary of the devastating wildfires that scorched much of San Diego County, fire management is a priority for both EarthWorks and the city. Before an effective plan can be established, Van Leer said, it's crucial to determine exactly what they're dealing with.

"The first step is the ECR and knowing what's on the ground right now," she said.

In addition to making the area safer, Van Leer said she hopes the project increases awareness of the unique area and encourages residents and visitors to take advantage of it.

"Not every neighborhood can boast such wildlife in its own backyard, literally," she said.

Van Leer also hopes to make good on the Coastal Conservancy's mandate of allowing access by enhancing the access points at Clairemont and University City.

"These are public lands. They belong to the public and we want people to get out and enjoy them," she said. "You walk under the sycamores and think, 'Wow, this is really neat.'"

"There are a lot of wonderful people who have worked in the past to preserve it," Van Leer said. "It's very inspiring to see what these people do, pulling weeds and making trails. We want to build and extend on that, so it will there to enjoy for future generations."

In an area much revered for its oceans, Van Leer emphasized that it's important to respect all of San Diego's natural landscape.

"It's all one system but people don't necessarily think about that," she said. "Whatever we do upstream affects what happens down on to the oceans and the bay."