



UPPER SALINAS-LAS TABLAS  
**RESOURCE**  
CONSERVATION DISTRICT

**ANNUAL REPORT 2020/2021**

# **Our Mission**

*Provide services and education to landowners supporting their management and stewardship of soil, water and natural resources.*



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## A Letter from the Executive Director

**Adversity.** It can highlight the strengths, as well as the weakness, of any individual, organization, or community. This past year we all saw a lot of adversity in both our community and our natural surroundings. COVID-19 spread across the world quickly and we did our best to be proactive to ensure the safety of our employees, while also trying to remain relevant and accessible. Like many organizations, we closed our office for several months while staff tried to adjust to working from home. The positive outcome was we finally assessed the need to have a larger office space and made the move. After nearly 20 years in the same building, we moved to Atascadero, just a few minutes down the road, while still retaining an office with our NRCS and FSA.

If global pandemic wasn't enough, we also witnessed the effects of a changing landscape. Our RCD was awarded one of several grants to address forest health and fire management, a partnership with RCDs in Monterey, Santa Cruz, and San Mateo counties. We were in the nascent stages of developing our plans and projects when the wildfires that ripped through the West Coast consumed hundreds of thousands of acres of open space. ***We must ask ourselves, what can be done to reduce the severity of fire in our community while improving forest health at the same time?*** With technical input and collaboration with San Luis Obispo Firesafe Council, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, and Cal Poly Wildland Urban Interface Institute, we have a better understanding of the high-risk areas, best management practices to reduce the severity of fire, and programmatic opportunities to expedite work on the ground.

After many years of planning, were able to implement a large-scale restoration project in Santa Rosa Creek. The project involved reconfiguring the stream channel to reduce the erosive force of the creek on a failing streambank, potentially compromising Santa Rosa Creek Road. There were many challenges we faced such as having to work

during COVID, dealing with crews on wildfire duties, and the logistics of getting equipment and crew maneuvered around the site. In all, the project was a success and would provide the bank stability to reduce erosion and improve habitat for sensitive species. Then came the storm of 2021. In parts of Cambria as much as 18 inches of precipitation was recorded within a 24 hour window, causing the gentle creek to become a raging river with estimates of over 11,000 cubic feet per second of flow at the mouth of Santa Rosa Creek. Restoration projects need time to come to fruition, to allow the ground to settle, key features to bind together, and for recently planted vegetation to grow.

This next year presents some serious challenges, but also holds enormous promise. As a small organization, we have remained relevant and necessary to help our local growers in improving their land management despite COVID-19. We have secured funding, hired staff, increased board membership, and implemented projects. We continue to be a central figure in conversations about resource issues and community networks. I look forward to the challenges ahead and building long-lasting partnerships. This year has taught us we are adaptive, creative, and resilient. Adversity has been necessary, even if challenging at times.

### Devin Best, Executive Director



## Santa Rosa Creek Bank Stabilization & Habitat Restoration

In the twilight of summer 2020 the RCD received funding to undertake the Santa Rosa Creek Restoration project on Wayne Gerhardt's property in Cambria. Mr. Gerhardt initially reached out to the RCD for assistance with the massively eroded streambank after our board member Mike Broadhurst's suggestion. Executive Director Devin Best ushered in an agreement with the County of San Luis Obispo to provide funding for project designs. The designs were developed by Stillwater Sciences, a local partner in ecological restoration. In 2019 the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) Fisheries Grant Restoration Program (FRGP) funding was pursued for implementation. FRGP staff visited the site with the RCD team and remarked on the need for timely restorative work and the significance of fantastic steelhead habitat at the site. Although the project was not funded by FRGP, CDFW Staff recommended the "Santa Rosa Creek Habitat Enhancement and Bank Rehabilitation Project" to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's (NFWF) Impact Directed Environmental Accounts (IDEA) fund.

The potential for catastrophic failure was ample. Santa Rosa Creek Road hangs perilously over the precipice with an old cattle fence suspended in midair showing just how much the bank has eroded away. If this streambank were to collapse, not only would Santa Rosa Creek Road need to be closed and rebuilt, causing an immense burden to folks east of the washout, but sediment loading in the creek would decimate steelhead habitat.





The RCD contracted with the California Conservation Corps (CCC), Stillwater Sciences, and Molnar General Engineering to implement the restoration project. The first phase began with erecting block nets for the project area and electrofishing to count, collect, and relocate all of the fish and instream wildlife between the block nets. Once all aquatic and semi-aquatic wildlife was relocated the team de-watered the site.

After the site dried enough to enter with heavy machinery the team built log and boulder linked structures emulating natural instream features. These structures are built to serve not only as steelhead habitat, but also as fundamental structural bank elements engineered to hold the newly contoured streambank in place for a 100-year flow event. Within the streambank and beneath the log and boulder structures, a woven willow mattress was installed to aid in quick revegetation and bind the bank together. A total of 11 log and boulder linked structures were installed. Erosion control jute netting, hydroseeding, and revegetation followed the construction phase.

The project was implemented successfully and rewatered in early October. This would be a nice end to the story, but unfortunately there was a major storm event in January of 2021, only a little over 3 months after implementation. *Streamflow gauge data in Cambria estimated the storm event and subsequent flow to have reached well over a 100-year event*. The project was designed to withstand a 100-year event, and the establishment of rooted vegetation between and within the instream log and boulder structures as natural anchoring was vital to long term success. At least a season or two of usual rainfall is needed to establish critical root structure. The perfect/imperfect storm was enough to unravel most of the northern bank of the project area. All the log and boulder linked structures remained on site, but high flows eroded the bank from around four of them. There is very little doubt that had the project not been implemented prior to this unprecedented storm event, Santa Rosa Creek Road would have been lost at this location. The new task at hand is the pursuit of further funds to rebuild the bank and re-incorporate the bank structures to serve as a buffer against the possible destruction of the road and further reduction in habitat. Flashy and unpredictable storm events are becoming the norm in our region. Appropriate and ecologically beneficial designs for projects like this are going to become more difficult to plan.



Storm Damage

# Forest Health and Fire Resiliency



The RCD has received a grant from the Coastal Conservancy to develop the **Central Coast Forest Health and Fire Resiliency Program**. This grant will provide critical support for increased technical capacity, stakeholder coordination, education and outreach, planning, permitting, and implementation of demonstration projects to improve climate change resiliency and to safeguard forests and communities on the central coast. The partnerships, plans, and projects developed through this grant will set up the central coast region for multiple years of implementation of high priority forest health projects and raise local capacity for sustained coordination and technical assistance to improve forest resiliency.

Through the increased capacity this grant has allowed, the USLTRCD has been appointed to a Board of Director's position on the San Luis Obispo Community Fire Safe Council. This new role will cement a working relationship between our two organizations to expand the capacity of both. This partnership was fruitful in the recent production of the Draft Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan (PWP) developed by the RCD. The goal of the PWP is to meet the need for programmatic permitting for high-priority forest health and fuels management projects to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire and improve ecological conditions for forests, woodlands, and grasslands within the coastal zone.

This grant is also funding the RCD's development of a Regional Priority Plan to help prioritize forest health projects within the district. Beyond the

PWP the RCD will build capacity to navigate the permitting process necessary to get forest health projects off the ground. We are continuously approached by concerned landowners wanting to know how they can proactively protect their homes and property from wildfire. Each project is different depending on the scope, scale, and setting. The RCD can provide technical assistance to get projects through the permitting labyrinth.

Decades of fire suppression on California wildlands have produce unnatural fuel loads. The best ecological solution would be using fire to fight fire through prescribed burning. Consider prescribed burns as a vaccination for catastrophic fire. Unfortunately, most wildlands are beyond the point where a prescribed burn can be implemented safely and require preliminary fuel management. Manual fuel reduction, prescribed grazing, and other fuel reduction projects can emulate natural fires. Knowing what is and isn't allowable can be difficult, but the RCD is here to help.



# Efforts to Save the Western Monarch Population

**W**estern monarch populations have dropped by over 99% since the 1980s (Pelton EM, et. al., 2019). Studies indicate the critical importance of restoring breeding and migratory habitat in California as monarch populations may be near their extinction threshold. Farmers and ranchers on the Central Coast manage essential overwintering and migratory habitat for western monarch populations.

This year, the US-LT RCD was awarded multiple grants to help improve monarch habitat on working lands within our district. While many landowners may be interested in doing their part to help this iconic species, the cost for planning, implementing, and maintaining monarch habitat can be prohibitive. Our grant funding helps provide technical guidance to landowners to improve monarch habitat through site specific plans and native species recommendations. Additionally, the formation of a Regional Monarch Working Group is a key component to one of our monarch grant programs. The goal of the Regional Monarch Working Group is to help local partners collaborate on monarch conservation to scale up and speed up restoration efforts on the Central Coast.



# More Space for the RCD To Grow

For the first time in nearly 20 years, the Upper Salinas – Las Tablas Resource Conservation District has moved offices! We have been co-located with the Natural Resource Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency in Templeton, California for many decades.

However, as we have grown, we managed to grow out of the office space provided by our federal partners and had to make the hard decision to either stay small and stay put or to recognize we needed a change, and a big one.



After a long discussion with our board, it was finally determined in order to meet the increasing demand for our time and services, we needed to find an office space that could accommodate a growing staff and provide a better work environment.

In November 2020, the Executive Director entered into an agreement and signed a lease for the new office space. Over the next few months, staff worked on moving furniture, setting up infrastructure such as phones, internet, utilities, and making a plan for a safe return to work. We've settled in and have been working in the new office since mid-January.

This past year has highlighted the resiliency of our small organization. We have managed to stay engaged, informed, relevant, and true to our mission. It goes without saying we are excited to start this new endeavor!



*We look forward to opening our doors to the public at 9481 El Camino Real, Atascadero. And don't forget, we still have our office with NRCS/FSA at 65 S. Main Street, Templeton.*





## A New Partnership for the USLTRCD

This year we partnered with GrizzlyCorps, an AmeriCorps program designed by Project Climate at UC Berkeley's Center for Law, Energy, and the Environment. Our goals closely align with GrizzlyCorps' mission, to build community resilience by preparing, mitigating, and responding to climate change through community engagement. We hope that a continued partnership with GrizzlyCorps can further build our capacity to provide services and education to landowners supporting their management and stewardship of soil, water and natural resources. While the program aims to expand capacity for organizations working on community resilience and climate action, they also hope to bolster the next generation of professionals at the forefront of climate change solutions.

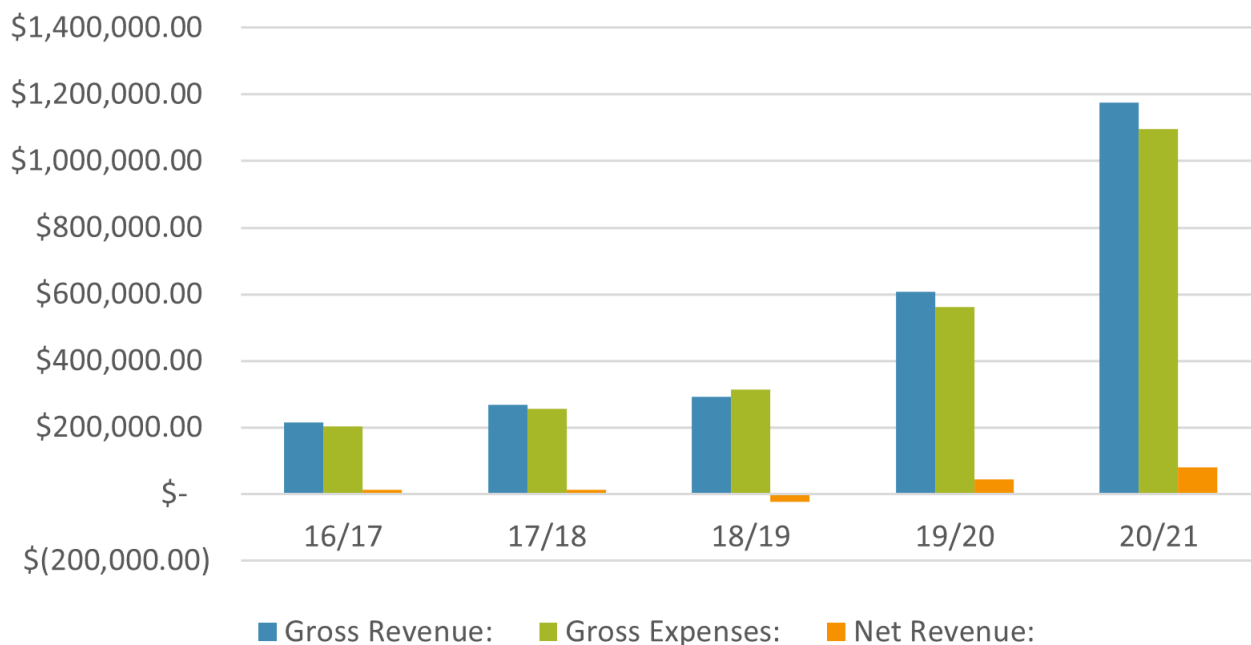
Our 2020-21 GrizzlyCorps fellow, Liz McDonald, provided capacity building across a range of programs and projects. Right away, Liz jumped into the implementation phase of the Santa Rosa Creek Habitat Restoration Project in Cambria, which addressed an infrastructure problem in a way that benefits wildlife habitat. During a global pandemic and a virtual year, Liz assisted RCD staff in organizing virtual workshops covering topics such as invasive species management and practices that build soil health. She was an integral part of a vineyard vermicompost demonstration project funded by the California Department of Food and Agriculture through the Healthy Soils Program. Her work on Carbon Farm Planning, Mobile Irrigation Labs, general project support, and ongoing maintenance of restoration and mitigation sites throughout the year was instrumental. Equally so, the RCD supported Liz's professional development through technical trainings and networking opportunities. During her service year, Liz gained a Wildland Prescribed Firelighter certification, furthering her interest in prescribed fire as a restoration practice.

The partnership between our RCD and GrizzlyCorps is invaluable, allowing us the support to continue a wide array of projects and programs, while also introducing unique perspectives and experiences. We are very excited to continue to partner with GrizzlyCorps.

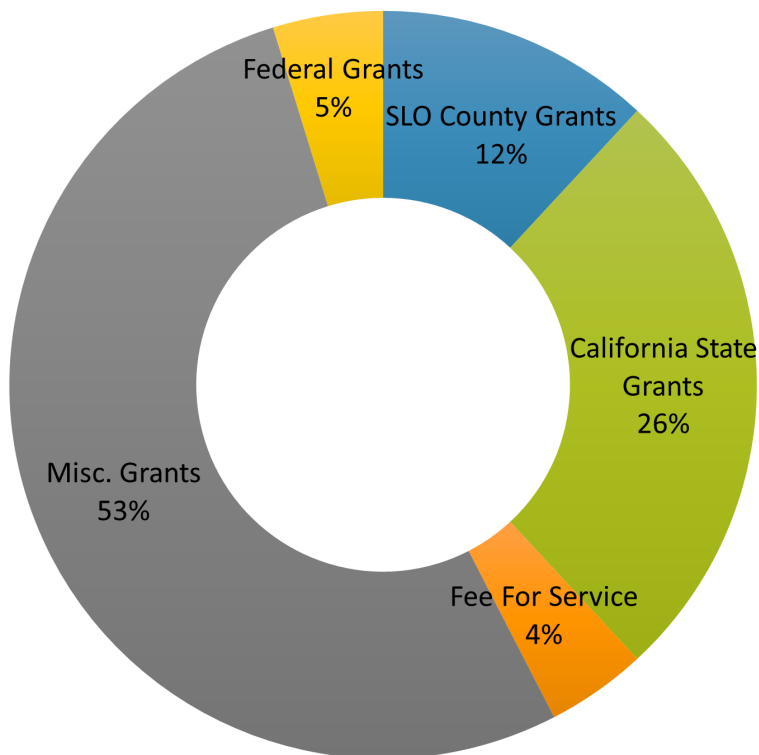


# FINANCES AND FUNDERS

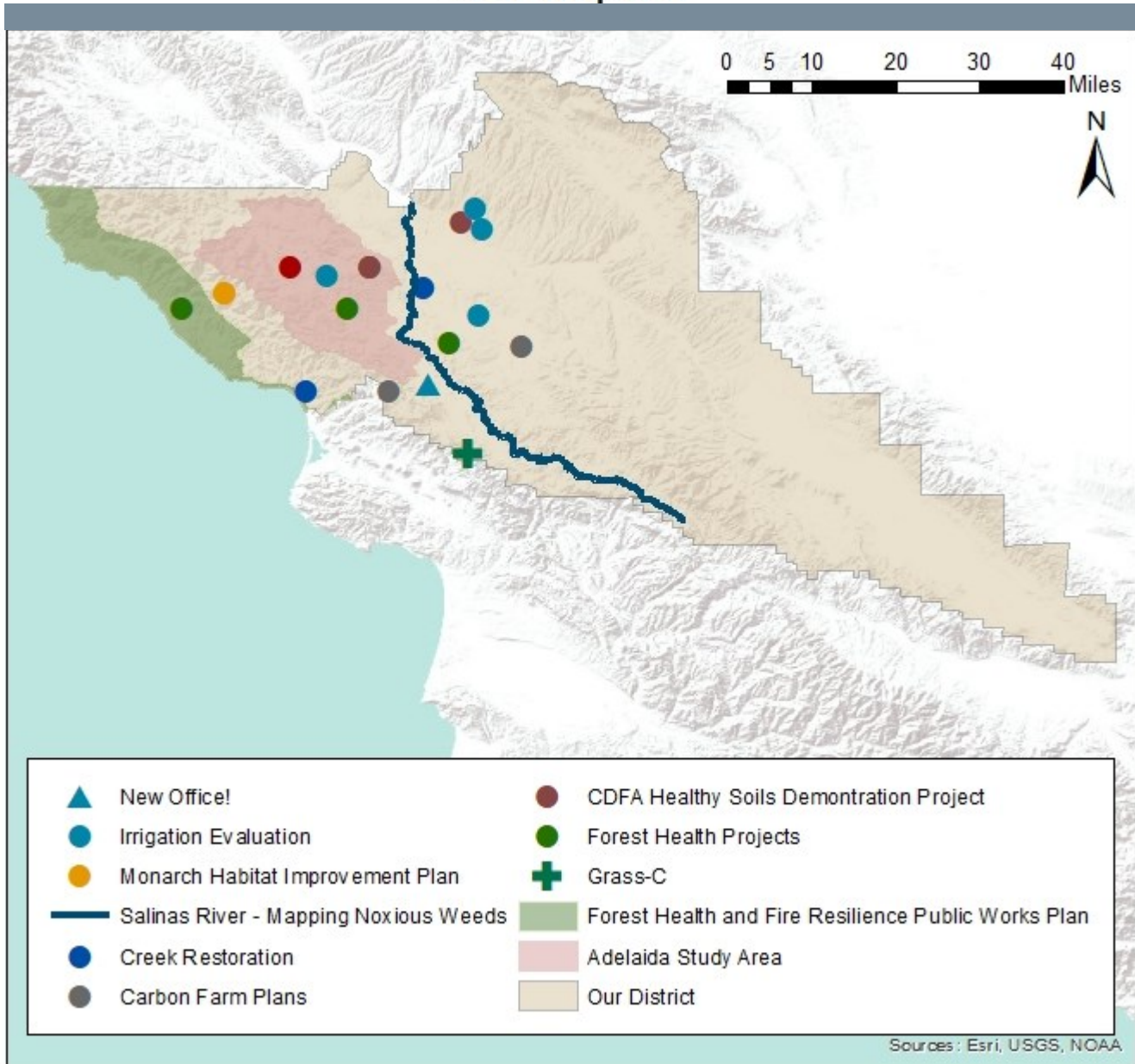
## Revenue and Expenses



## Sources of Revenue



# Our Impact



## Thank You to Our Funders

*Without them,  
our work is not possible*

- ◇ County of San Luis Obispo
- ◇ **California Department of Transportation**
- ◇ California Department of Food and Agriculture
- ◇ **California State Coastal Conservancy**
- ◇ National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
- ◇ **Natural Resources Conservation Service**
- ◇ Patagonia
- ◇ **Pacific Gas and Electric Company**
- ◇ Resource Legacy Fund
- ◇ **Wildlife Conservation Board**

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## STAFF

**Devin Best**

*Executive Director*

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