

Measure M2 Environmental Mitigation Program Saddle Creek South

Measure M2 Overview

In 2006, Orange County voters approved the renewal of Measure M, effectively extending the half-cent sales tax in the County from April 2011 to March 2041. Renewed Measure M (or Measure M2) will continue to provide funding for transportation projects and programs in the County, including select freeway and roadway improvements, transit programs, and two environmental programs.

OCTA's M2 Freeway Environmental Mitigation Program (EMP) provides comprehensive mitigation to offset the environmental impacts of the 13 Measure M2-funded freeway projects. The EMP is spearheaded by the Environmental Oversight Committee (EOC), which is made up of OCTA Board members and representatives from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), resource agencies, environmental groups, and the public.



Environmental Mitigation Program (EMP)

Instead of mitigating the natural resource impacts of Measure M2 freeway projects on a project-by-project basis, the EMP presents a comprehensive mitigation approach that provides not only replacement habitat, but also provides the opportunity to improve the overall functions and value of sensitive biological resources throughout Orange County. Working collaboratively with the resource and regulatory agencies, it was ultimately decided by OCTA that creation of a Natural Community Conservation Plan (NCCP)/Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)/Master Streambed Alteration Agreement (MSAA) would best serve as the main implementation tool for the EMP.

Based on the evaluation of mitigation opportunities in the County, Priority Conservation Areas (PCA) were identified, which included candidate parcels and properties that could be considered for open space purposes. A standardized criteria and prioritization process was also developed to facilitate the property evaluation and assessment. Properties for acquisition and restoration were selected based on:

- Conservation Values
- Policy Considerations
- Mitigation Credits
- Mitigation Plan Review and Adoption and
- Real Estate Value/Economics.



Saddle Creek South

Only weeks after the start of Measure M2, OCTA successfully acquired the 84-acre Saddle Creek South property. This property has a variety of habitats including: grassland, oak woodland, riparian, scrub vegetation, and chaparral. This property is located on the south side of Live Oak Canyon Road in the eastern portion of unincorporated Orange County, north of Rancho Santa Margarita. Saddle Creek South is located at the western base of the Santa Ana Mountains and features a series of low, east-west trending hills. It provides habitat for two sensitive species: the coastal California gnatcatcher and the intermediate mariposa lily.

The property is located within the Northern Foothills core habitat area, and identified as a PCA in the Conservation Assessment. The Northern Foothills core habitat area supports primarily low elevation vegetation and includes relatively large blocks of intact habitat with high biodiversity. Conservation of the Northern Foothills core habitat area, including Saddle Creek South, would accomplish the following objectives:

- Minimize interior fragmentation and maintain connectivity to the Santa Ana Mountains;
- Conserve regionally under-protected vegetation communities (annual grasses and forbs);
- Conserve core populations of filtered species including arroyo toad, coastal cactus wren, coastal California gnatcatcher, bobcat, mountain lion, intermediate mariposa lily, many-stemmed dudleya, and peninsular nolina.

Further, Saddle Creek South lies between the Santa Ana Mountains and Live Oak Canyon/O'Neill Canyon, and its preservation would protect wildlife movement between these two areas.

The acquisition of Saddle Creek South is the EMP's first step in joining together adjacent open space areas at the foothills, while at the same time limiting urban encroachment into the hillsides. This property also provides opportunities for the restoration and enhancement of native vegetation and habitat for sensitive species, in line with the major objectives of the EMP.



California Gnatcatcher

Acquisition Process

The evaluation of the acquisition properties resulted in the hierarchical ranking of properties. The highest value properties that will benefit the EMP were recommended for the first two rounds of funding, based on willing interest. Properties that would be acquired or restored under the EMP would be integrated into the NCCP/HCP/MSAA.

The first of a handful of properties to be acquired during the first two rounds of funding is the Saddle Creek South property.

