

**** PRESS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE ****



Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks
Melanie Schlotterbeck
714-501-3133 (cell)
GreenVision@FHBP.org
www.FHBP.org

CONSERVATION GROUPS APPLAUD TRANSPORTATION AGENCY PLAN TO PERMANENTLY PROTECT AND RESTORE ORANGE COUNTY LANDS

Newport Beach, CA, Monday, June 19, 2017 – The regional non-profit Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks (FHBP) announces an environmental victory 12 years in the making. After successfully incorporating a comprehensive mitigation program into the Orange County Transportation Authority's (OCTA) sales tax measure, Tuesday agencies put pen to paper and sign a countywide Conservation Plan.

To finalize this plan, OCTA worked closely with Caltrans, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The plan outlines the terms by which 1,300 acres of acquired land must be protected and 400 acres of degraded lands restored.

In 2005, conservation groups led by FHBP approached OCTA about adding a comprehensive environmental mitigation program into the ½ cent sales tax (Renewed Measure M) going before voters. Early indications were positive that decision makers could support the concept if environmental groups rallied support for the measure. Ultimately more than 30 conservation and community groups supported it because of the great benefits of the mitigation program. “This marked the first time in Orange County that conservation groups supported a transportation measure,” says FHBP Green Vision Coordinator Melanie Schlotterbeck. “This funding source allowed park advocates to continue protecting important landscapes throughout the county.”

To date, OCTA has acquired seven properties for permanent habitat conservation, and 11 restoration projects have been funded, all of which provide environmental mitigation for 13 freeway projects the transportation agency plans over the next 30 years. “This is an important milestone for Orange County following years of hard work and strong coalition building between OCTA, state and federal officials, and local environmental community leaders who all care deeply about preserving our wildlands for generations to come,” said OCTA Director Lori Donchak, who chairs the Renewed Measure M Environmental Oversight Committee.

Benefits of the environmental mitigation program are many. For the transportation agency, the program streamlines permitting and expedites project timelines; for wildlife and permitting agencies, the program leads to better conservation outcomes and builds on the existing network of open spaces and wildlife connections; for FHBP and the conservation community, it protects coveted lands identified on the Green Vision Map—a “wish list” of open space acquisition opportunities.

Jonathan Snyder, Division Chief for the United States Fish and Wildlife Services adds, “This Conservation Plan includes a unique approach for offsetting environmental impacts from transportation projects. Under this Plan, impacts from multiple freeway projects are offset by pooling the mitigation funding for these projects and targeting the areas that are most important for conservation.”

At a time when cooperation and victories may seem hard to come by, these non-traditional partners have aligned goals and advanced important conservation objectives. “This process has demonstrated how it’s possible to move forward toward enhancing our transportation system while still protecting the environment that attracts so many of us to Orange County in the first place,” said OCTA CEO Darrell Johnson. “We are proud to be fulfilling the promises we made to voters through Measure M and we hope others in the state will follow the innovative and cooperative effort that dates back more than a decade.”

###

FHBP is a non-profit organization working to protect the natural lands, waterways, and beaches of Orange County.