

SAN DIEGO RIVER CONSERVANCY'S LEGISLATIVE REPORT 2023-2024



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San Diego River Conservancy
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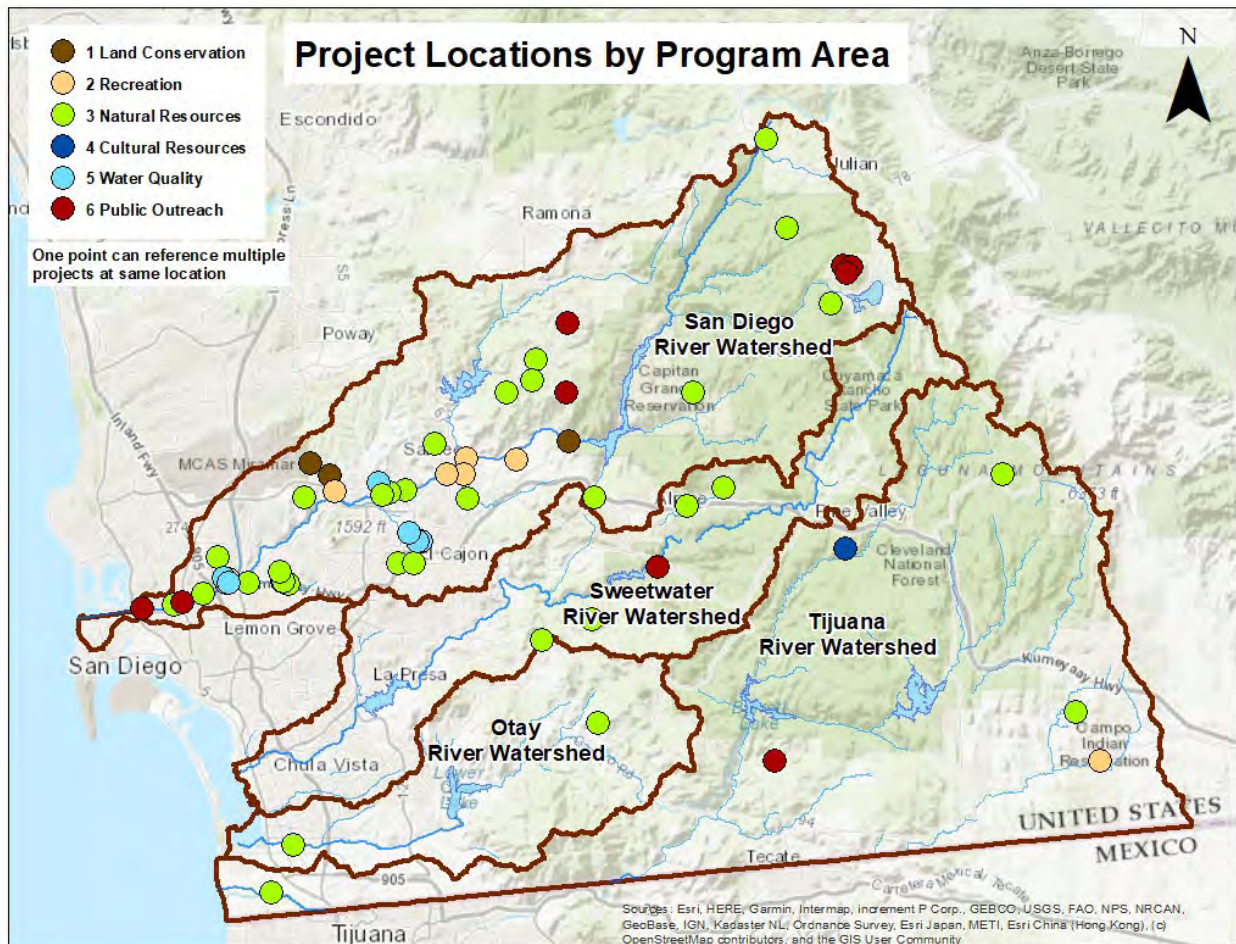
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Executive Summary

The San Diego River Conservancy, established in 2002, was created by the Legislature to conserve land, protect and preserve natural, cultural, and historic resources, and provide recreational opportunities for the public within the San Diego River watershed. A key part of its mission is to promote outdoor recreation and education while engaging the public in conservation efforts. The headwaters of the San Diego River start in Julian, flow southwest through the Cleveland National Forest and collect at El Capitan Reservoir, continuing westward through rural Lakeside, suburban Santee and urban San Diego before finally reaching Ocean Beach at the mouth of the river. The Conservancy's goals include conserving land and completing the San Diego River Trail from the Pacific Ocean to the Cuyamaca Mountains.

Over the years, the Conservancy's scope has expanded to include preserving cultural and tribal resources connected to the river and increasing biodiversity and wildlife corridors through native habitat restoration while balancing the need for public access. In this report, the Conservancy outlines its highlights, its operating budget, and summarizes its 2023-2024 accomplishments under each of the six program areas within its strategic plan and by funding source.

Map 1. Conservancy Projects Identified by Program Area and Location



The Conservancy received allocations from the Budget Acts of 2022-23 and 2023-24 for wildfire and forest resilience projects and nature-based solutions from the State's general fund. This money, along with other funding sources, was crucial in implementing various projects. Grant funds were used to implement projects that reduce flammable fuel loads on public and private lands, decrease the risk and intensity of wildfires in the San Diego region, and restore the ecological health of native habitats within the San Diego, Sweetwater, Otay, and Tijuana River watersheds, see Map 1 on page 2. (One point may represent more than one project)

In summary, during 2023 and 2024 the Conservancy:

- Awarded approximately \$47.6 million in grants
- Completed 33 projects
- Initiated 35 new projects
- Reduced hazardous fuel loads on 2,586 acres
- Invested \$7 million in historically underrepresented communities
- Contributed over \$2 million to expand capacity and public outreach

The Conservancy continues to focus on expanding its capacity and public outreach by strengthening existing partnerships and forming new ones when feasible to support statewide initiatives and the impacts they have on our communities. In this report, the Conservancy gives an overview of its grant projects that utilize nature-based solutions, protect biodiversity, and mitigate climate change. Working alongside California Native Americans further amplifies our efforts. Additionally, investments in disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities and vulnerable populations help contribute to healthier ecosystems, improve water quality, increase public access to parks and open spaces, and enhance wildlife connectivity. Through these strategies, the Conservancy's mission aligns with the California Natural Resources Agency's priorities.

I. Overview of the Conservancy's Highlights

The Governing Board has approved projects that align with the Conservancy's mission and help the Conservancy build connections with various communities and stakeholders in the San Diego region to promote equity and environmental justice. The Conservancy continues to invest in historically underrepresented communities.

Tribal

- 7 projects
- \$3.1 million
- Procurement of fire engines, emergency vehicles, handheld communication devices, wildfire supplies, personal protective equipment, and other park improvements.

Critically underserved, low-income and disadvantaged communities

- 5 projects
- \$3.9 million

Multi-benefit

- 24 Projects
- \$18.1 million

II. Strategic Plan Update

For the 2024-2028 Strategic Plan Update, the Conservancy engaged San Diego Canyonlands, a community benefit organization, to assist with public outreach. Over 200 community members were surveyed, including key stakeholders, agency leaders, land managers, and others for insight into their perspective on the role and efficacy of the Conservancy's program areas.

Community members voiced support for projects that are multi-benefit (i.e., projects that support multiple Strategic Plan program areas), that contribute to regional climate and fire resilience, and that support outdoor recreation and equitable access to nature.

The Conservancy considered new data on climate change impacts, mitigation opportunities, water quality challenges, and community needs as well as evolving conservation priorities from the State of California consistent with statutory obligations of the Conservancy in drafting this Update. Click here for a PDF version of the: [Conservancy's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan Update](#).

III. Operating Budget

- State Operations Budget \$411,000; Environmental License Plate Fund for FY 2023-24
- State Operations Budget \$431,000; Environmental License Plate Fund for FY 2024-25
- The Conservancy's accounting, budget, and human resources services are provided by the Department of General Services – Office of Fiscal Services, Contracted Fiscal Services, and Office of Human Resources.

Current Bonds

State bonds provide funding to the Conservancy through:

- Proposition 1: \$17 million allocated through the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014. Twenty-four projects awarded.
- Proposition 68: \$12 million allocated through the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018. Twelve projects awarded.
- Proposition 4: \$25.5 million allocated for watershed improvements, restoration and wildfire resilience and \$48 million for climate resilience projects as allocated through the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024.

Budget Acts – General Fund Allocations

Conservancy grant awards typically cover multiyear projects. Some projects discussed in this report were funded by prior budget years and are currently in progress.

- The Budget Act of 2022-23 allocated \$13 million to the Conservancy for climate or wildfire resilience projects, community access, nature-based solutions, and a two-year pilot program for the Native American Conservation Corps.
- The Budget Act of 2023-24 allocated \$9.3 million to the Conservancy for programs and activities that advance wildfire protection, multi-benefit and nature-based solutions.

IV. Summary of Conservancy Projects by Program Area

Program 1: Conserve Land within the San Diego River Watershed

In this reporting period, the Conservancy played a key role in protecting approximately 185 acres of land in San Diego County for the long term. Specifically, the Conservancy awarded \$3.1 million to the Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation to purchase approximately 108 acres of land in the East Elliot area of Mission Trails Regional Park, located in the city of San Diego. This land will be preserved permanently and will offer multiple benefits, including public access to open space, outdoor recreational opportunities, and protection of wildlife corridors. These land acquisitions align with the State of California's and Natural Resources Agency's goal to conserve 30% of California's land and coastal waters by 2030.

Table 1. Project List for Program 1

| Grantee | Title | Amount | Funding Source | Status |
|---|-----------------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Lakeside's River Park Conservancy | Digenan Appraisal 75 Acres | \$8,750 | General Fund | Completed |
| Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation | East Elliott Acquisition 55 Acres | \$1,109,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation | East Elliott Acquisition 53 Acres | \$2,000,000 | General Fund | In Progress |

Program 2: Support and Encourage Recreation and Education

The Conservancy helps provide access to the outdoors by including Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility, multilingual interpretive panels, informational kiosks, digital maps and educational engagement for local, regional, and state parks, federal forests and open spaces. This program supports the Natural Resources Agency's Outdoors for All initiative. Below is a table of projects supporting access to recreational opportunities and park facilities:

Campo Band of Mission Indians

Ralph Goff Community Park improvements include a new self-contained, 2-unit prefabricated accessible vault restroom with potable water, erosion control measures and one shade structure for the playground.

Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation

Install 50 multilingual interpretive panels throughout Mission Trails Regional Park (MTRP). MTRP is one of the largest urban parks in the country consisting of 8,000 acres of natural and developed recreational areas. MTRP averages more than 2 million visitors annually.

Table 2. Project List for Program 2

| Grantee | Title | Amount | Funding Source | Status |
|--|---------------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| County of San Diego, Dept. Parks and Rec | Cactus County Park Improvements | \$2,000,000 | General Fund | In Progress |

| Grantee | Title | Amount | Funding Source | Status |
|--|--|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation | 50 Bilingual Interpretive Panels | \$150,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| County of San Diego, Dept. Parks and Rec | Historic Flume Trail Improvements | \$500,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| County of San Diego, Dept. Parks and Rec | Lindo Lake East Basin (Phase 1) | \$250,000 | Proposition 68 | Complete |
| County of San Diego, Dept. Parks and Rec | Lindo Lake West Basin (Phase 2) | \$2,000,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| Campo Band of Mission Indians | Ralph Goff Community Park Improvements | \$950,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| Lakeside's River Park Conservancy | San Diego River Science Field Station | \$1,200,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| San Diego State University | SDSU Mission Valley River Park Restroom | \$738,000 | Proposition 68 | Complete |
| San Diego State University | Mission Valley River Park Interpretive Signage Project | \$150,065 | General Fund | Completed |

Project Highlight: San Diego State University's River Park

San Diego State University installed a 6-stall prefabricated gender-neutral restroom, 11 interpretive panels, both of which are shown in the images below, boulder etchings, mileage medallions, and other interpretive elements which can be found throughout San Diego State University's River Park at Mission Valley.



Images 1 and 2. Prefabricated gender-neutral restrooms (left) and one interpretive panel (right) installed throughout San Diego State University's River Park at Mission Valley. (Photo courtesy San Diego State University)

Program 3: Preserve and Restore Natural Resources

The majority of the Conservancy's projects are dedicated to safeguarding natural resources from the constantly changing climate. This program actively supports the Natural Resources Agency's Protecting Biodiversity and confronts climate change through Expanding Nature-Based Solutions. Nature-based solutions harness the power of nature to bolster climate resilience for future extreme weather events, protect vulnerable communities, and utilize carbon sequestration to mitigate climate change. Projects encompass wildfire and forest resilience, invasive plant control, and restoration. In 2023-2024, the Conservancy's grantees treated 1,364 acres through hazardous fuels reduction, invasive plant control, and removal of dead, dying, and diseased trees, marking a significant increase over previous years.

Wildfire and Forest Resilience

The Governing Board of the Conservancy has approved 19 projects totaling over \$19.4 million to help reduce the risk and intensity of wildfires in the County of San Diego. This program supports wildfire and climate resiliency. For Fiscal Year 2023, the Conservancy's funds were used to treat 2,203 acres, provide defensible space for 286 homes, and support for 10 fire districts/departments, 35 fire stations and 13 Fire Safe Councils. A grant from the Conservancy funded a new helicopter landing zone, parking for emergency vehicles and three 10,000-gallon underground water storage tanks. The image below depicts the trailhead where facilities were upgraded to improve safety during wildland fires and other emergencies. For a video by the National Forest Foundation, click here: ["Popular Cha'Chaany Hamuk Trailhead Receives Major Recreation Improvements."](#)



Image 3. In May 2024, the Conservancy attended the renaming of the Three Sisters Falls Trailhead to Cha'channy Hamuk in the Cleveland National Forest through a partnership with the National Forest Foundation and the Wildlife Conservation Board.

Table 3. Project List for Program 3: Wildfire and Forest Resilience Projects

| Grantee | Title | Amount | Funding Source | Status |
|---------------------------|--|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Cleveland National Forest | Cleveland National Forest Wildfire Program | \$4,900,000 | General Fund | In Progress |

| Grantee | Title | Amount | Funding Source | Status |
|--|---|---------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| Lakeside's River Park Conservancy | East County Fuels Management | \$649,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| Kumeyaay Diegueño Land Conservancy | Equipment for Fire Management | \$800,000 | General Fund | Completed |
| Campo Band of Mission Indians | Fire Equipment, Tools and Supplies | \$560,619 | General Fund | Completed |
| Viejas Band of the Kumeyaay Nation | Type 3 Fire Engine and Vegetation Management | \$983,911 | General Fund | In Progress |
| County of San Diego, Dept. of Parks and Rec | Fuel Reduction in County Parks | \$3,450,000 | General Fund | Completed |
| San Diego Fire-Rescue Foundation | Fire Engine, Supplies and Fuel Reduction | \$411,701 | General Fund | In Progress |
| City of Santee | Fuel Treatment and Outfit Type 6 Fire Engine | \$1,117,568 | General Fund | In Progress |
| Girl Scouts San Diego | Fuel Reduction and Nursery at Camp Winacka-Camp Whispering Oaks | \$759,158 | General Fund | In Progress |
| Mission Trails Regional Park Foundation | Mission Trails Regional Park Fuels Reduction | \$1,800,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| San Diego Regional Fire Foundation | Fire Vehicles, Equipment and Fuels Management | \$2,710,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| San Diego Fire-Rescue Foundation | City of San Diego Fuel Reduction | \$366,949 | General Fund | Completed |
| San Diego Canyonlands | Canyons Wildfire Reduction | \$1,070,563 | General Fund | Completed |
| City of Santee | San Diego River Bottom Fuels Reduction | \$500,000 | General Fund | Completed |
| Alpine Fire Protection District | Type 6 Wildland Fire Engine and Fuels Removal | \$800,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego County | Making San Diego Fire Safe | \$3,500,000 | General Fund | Completed |
| San Diego Regional Fire Foundation | Fuels Reduction and Support for Fire Safe Councils 2023 & 2024 | \$378,958 | General Fund | Completed |
| Barona Band of Mission Indians | Brush Rig | \$350,000 | General Fund | Completed |

| Grantee | Title | Amount | Funding Source | Status |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| San Diego State University Research Foundation | Wildfire Resilience at SDSU | \$656,815 | General Fund | In Progress |
| Lakeside's River Park Conservancy | El Monte Valley Fuels Reduction | \$500,000 | General Fund | Completed |
| City of El Cajon | El Cajon Vegetation Management Plan | \$3,125,000 | General Fund | In Progress |

Grantee Highlight: San Diego Regional Fire Foundation

For over 30 years, the San Diego Regional Fire Foundation (SDRFF) has been striving to make San Diego the safest county in the nation. Their mission is to protect lives, property and the environment by strengthening the fire and emergency services system. In addition, the SDRFF is the only fire foundation that supports all 43 fire departments in San Diego County. Over the past few years, the Conservancy has awarded over \$3 million to the SDRFF to acquire wildfire suppression equipment including 4 fire engines, firefighter safety gear, fuels management equipment (2 chippers and a skid steer) to help prevent wildfires in the Wildland-Urban Interfaces and in High Fire Hazard Severity Zones.

Also, the Conservancy has provided the SDRFF \$392,405 to support 13 Fire Safe Councils (FSCs) in San Diego County. The FSC community volunteers contributed over 14,000 hours to chip and remove 900,000 cubic feet of vegetation and conducted community educational sessions attended by 8,000 individuals to learn how to make their properties fire-safe and create evacuation plans and determine escape routes. Below is an image of San Diego County Fire Safe Council representatives and grant funders.



Image 4. The 17th Annual Fire Safe Council Awards ceremony in May 2024. (Photo courtesy of the San Diego Regional Fire Foundation)

Invasive Non-Native Plant Removal and Control Program

The Conservancy and its partners have been implementing this invasive non-native plant control and restoration program for 15 years. At no cost, the Conservancy allows for local entities to use its existing permits under a "Partnership Agreement." During 2023-2024, the Conservancy's grantees and partners implemented fifteen projects working across 814 acres in the San Diego River watershed. Partners such as City of San Diego, Public Utilities Department show commitment by managing El Capitan Reservoir, while the San Diego River Park Foundation and volunteers are dedicated to maintaining downstream areas at Fashion Valley Mall and Mission Valley Preserve. Furthermore, various canyon tributaries are managed by San Diego Canyonlands, giving underserved communities career experience through their workforce development program. These activities provide multi-benefits including weed abatement, hazardous fuels reduction, as well as wildlife habitat restoration.

Table 4. Project List for Program 3: Invasive Non-native Plant Removal and Control Program

| Grantee | Title | Amount | Funding Source | Status |
|--|---|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| San Diego Canyonlands | Ruffin Canyon Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Project Phase 2 | \$600,000 | Proposition 1 | Completed |
| San Diego State University Research Foundation | Alvarado Creek Invasive Restoration - SDSU Phase 5 | \$600,000 | Proposition 1 | Completed |
| California Department of Parks and Recreation | Cuyamaca Rancho State Park Reforestation 2 | \$500,000 | Proposition 68 | Completed |
| Nature Collective | Permit Renewal and Invasive Control | \$81,266 | General Fund | In Progress |
| San Diego State University Research Foundation | Alvarado Creek Restoration Phase 7 | \$1,978,182 | General Fund | In Progress |
| Lakeside's River Park Conservancy | East County Invasive Removal | \$1,917,980 | General Fund | In Progress |
| San Diego Audubon Society | Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary | \$188,510 | General Fund | In Progress |
| Barona Band of Mission Indians | Eucalyptus Removal & Restoration | \$129,016 | General Fund | In Progress |
| San Diego Canyonlands | Navajo Canyon Restoration | \$600,000 | General Fund | Completed |

Program 4: Protect and Preserve Cultural and Historical Resources

To better protect and preserve sensitive cultural resources, funds were awarded to Cleveland National Forest to engage qualified Kumeyaay Cultural Monitors. This grant provides compensation for Kumeyaay cultural monitoring activities during the Wildfire Resilience and Forest Health project in parts of the Conservancy's service areas.

Program 5: Enhance Water Quality and Natural Flood Conveyance

The Conservancy invested \$5 million for water quality and natural flood conveyance projects. Three of the four projects serve disadvantaged communities in El Cajon, located in the San Diego River watershed. This program supports California Natural Resources Agency's initiatives to protect biodiversity and build climate resiliency.

San Diego State University (SDSU) One Water Center

This project will install a modular lab system to serve as a testing, training, and research facility for water resources in the San Diego region and involve students and professors at SDSU. The living learning laboratory will be located at SDSU's Mission Valley River Park within walking distance to the San Diego River.

City of El Cajon - Broadway Creek Restoration (Phase B)

This second phase of an urban stream restoration project runs through disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities and includes improvements to native habitat and bank stabilization at Broadway Creek, a tributary to the San Diego River in El Cajon.

City of El Cajon - Trash Full Capture Devices

The city of El Cajon installed 70 full capture trash devices in disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities to improve stormwater quality draining through the City of El Cajon.

Table 5. Project List for Program 5

| Grantee | Title | Amount | Funding Source | Status |
|--|--|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| City of El Cajon | Broadway Creek (Phase B) and 70 Full Trash Capture Devices | \$3,000,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| City of El Cajon | Wells Park Sustainability Improvements | \$400,000 | Proposition 1 | Completed |
| East County AWP JPA | East County Advanced Water Purification Program | \$2,000,000 | General Fund | Completed |
| San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board | Technical Assistance | \$175,000 | General Fund | In Progress |

| Grantee | Title | Amount | Funding Source | Status |
|--|--|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| San Diego State University | One Water Living Learning Laboratory | \$2,000,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| County of San Diego, Dept. of Parks and Rec. | Lindo Lake Improvements Phase I – East Basin | \$600,000 | Proposition 1 | Completed |
| San Diego State University Research Foundation | Revegetation and Bioassessment in Alvarado Creek | \$467,691 | Proposition 68 | Completed |
| City of El Cajon | El Cajon Main Street - Green Street Improvements | \$250,000 | Proposition 68 | Completed |
| City of El Cajon | El Cajon Transit Center Improvements | \$250,000 | Proposition 68 | Completed |

Program 6: Expand the Organization’s Capacity and Public Outreach

The Conservancy invested \$2 million to expand Program 6. Projects include procuring over 60 drysuits for City of San Diego and Imperial Beach lifeguards, who are shown in the image below. Other projects include procurement of handheld radios, supporting community wildfire education and outreach, studying carbon sequestration in the San Diego region and preparing the Conservancy’s Strategic Plan Update for 2024-2028.

The San Diego Lifeguard Service established its river rescue team in 1978 to respond to emergencies created by flooding due to heavy rain. The task of the team is to rescue people or property surrounded by water. Image 5 shows the river rescue team in action. In addition to their local responsibilities, the team is assigned to the Urban Search and Rescue Task Force. For a video by CBS News 8, click here: [“San Diego River Rescue team gets new dry suits.”](#)



Image 5 and 6. The City of San Diego’s River Rescue Team (left) wearing new dry suits in San Diego River. Members of the City of San Diego Fire-Rescue, San Diego Fire-Rescue Foundation and the San Diego River Conservancy (right). (Photos courtesy of City of San Diego Fire-Rescue and the Swiftwater and Flood Rescue Team)

Table 6. Project List for Program 6

| Grantee | Title | Amount | Funding Source | Status |
|--|---|---------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| San Diego Fire-Rescue Foundation | Swiftwater and Flood Rescue Team Personal Protective Equipment | \$50,759 | General Fund | Completed |
| San Diego Regional Fire Foundation | 20 Dry Suits and PPE for Imperial Beach Lifeguards and Firefighters | \$75,143 | General Fund | In Progress |
| San Diego Canyonlands | Carbon Storage and Sequestration | \$65,000 | Proposition 68 | Completed |
| Heartland Fire-Rescue Department | VHF Radio Repeater Towers | \$600,000 | General Fund | In Progress |
| San Diego Fire-Rescue Foundation | 30 Dry Suits | \$37,068 | General Fund | Completed |
| San Diego Canyonlands | Strategic Plan Update | \$65,000 | General Fund | Completed |
| Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego County | Native American Conservation Corps | \$338,678 | General Fund | Completed |
| California Department of Parks and Recreation | Native American Conservation Corps | \$545,321 | General Fund | Completed |
| San Diego Canyonlands | Native American Conservation Corps | \$25,000 | General Fund | Completed |