

SAN DIEGO RIVER CONSERVANCY'S LEGISLATIVE REPORT 2023-2024



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Table of Contents

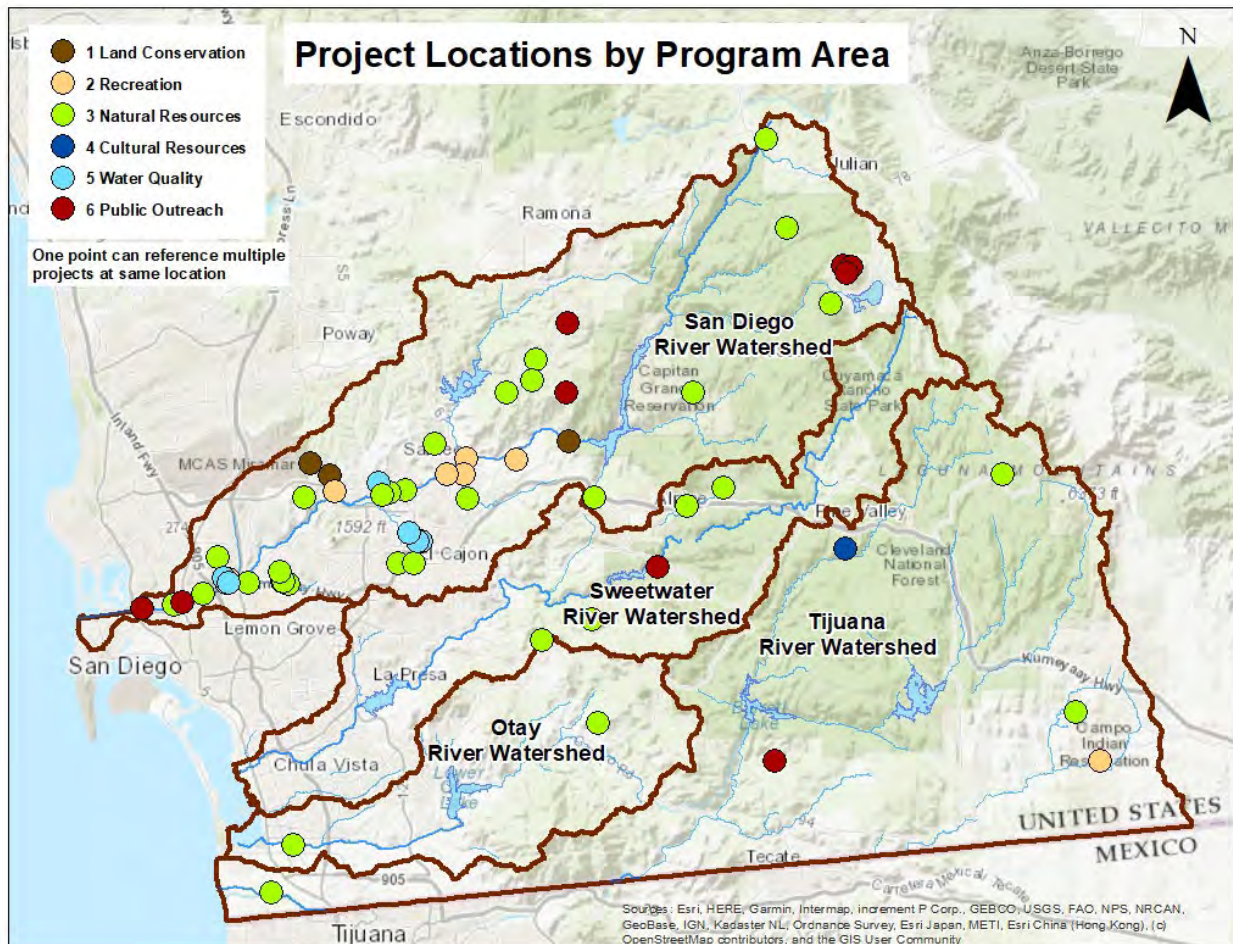
Executive Summary	1
I. Overview of the Conservancy's Highlights.....	3
II. Strategic Plan Update	3
III. Operating Budget.....	4
IV. Summary of Conservancy Projects by Program Area	5
Program 1: Conserve Land within the San Diego River Watershed	5
Program 2: Support and Encourage Recreation and Education	5
Program 3: Preserve and Restore Natural Resources.....	7
Wildfire and Forest Resilience.....	7
Invasive Non-Native Plant Removal and Control Program	10
Program 4: Protect and Preserve Cultural and Historical Resources	11
Program 5: Enhance Water Quality and Natural Flood Conveyance	11
Program 6: Expand the Organization's Capacity and Public Outreach.....	12

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