

California Big Game Management Account

FY 14/15

Project Title: Avenales Ranch Conservation Easement

Applicant:

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
5705 Grant Creek Road
Missoula, MT 59808

Bob Hammond, Lands Program Manager
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Issue/Problem Statement:

California is in the midst of a serious drought that can imperil wildlife. California government agencies are studying projects and programs that can help mitigate current and future water shortages. The *San Luis Obispo 2014 Integrated Regional Water Management Plan*¹ ranks a conservation easement project with its highest climate change score. The San Luis Obispo plan explains that the conservation easement will “. . .facilitate conservation of local flora and fauna and reduce urban development and associated increases in water demands. . .”

A conservation easement on the 12,711-acre Avenales Ranch – with almost 100 acres of wetlands, over 66 intermittent stream miles, 6 acres of ponds, and 20 springs among its water resources – will permanently protect essential habitat connectivity for big game and alleviate current and future drought impacts to California’s big-game species in this area.



Project Description:

In the 1880s, the Avenales Ranch was homesteaded by the Sinsheimer family (now the Sinton/Schottler/Prunski families) based on the grasslands and wildlife values they found. The family continues to manage and sustainably maintain the native grasslands, oak woodlands, mixed chaparral, valley-foothill riparian areas, and water resources to support both cattle ranching and wildlife habitat values.² Considerable investment in water developments and delivery lines throughout the Ranch ensure protection of sensitive riparian areas and effective distribution of cattle and forage grazing pressure, while also providing numerous alternative watering sites for wildlife. The family operates a successful hunt club for elk, deer, turkey, quail, and wild boar on the main Ranch and allows public hunting on Ranch sections that are in-holdings within the Los Padres National Forest. After the first two weeks of the general hunting season, the family allows public use of the main road through the Ranch to provide public hunting access to National Forest lands.

The proposed 12,711-acre Avenales Ranch Conservation Easement is located in south-central San Luis Obispo County, 20 miles east of the city of San Luis Obispo. (Refer to attached Avenales Ranch Project Map) The Ranch is almost completely surrounded by the Los Padres National Forest, sits between two wilderness areas, and is near other conserved private land. The combination of this public and private

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<http://www.slocountywater.org/site/Frequent%20Downloads/Integrated%20Regional%20Water%20Management%20Plan/IRWM%20Plan%20Update%202014/pdf/SLOC%20IRWMP%20Exec%20Summary%20v7.pdf> page P-50

² Steve Sinton received a national Steward of the Land Award from Washington, D.C.-based American Farmland Trust in 2005 in recognition of his leadership in environmental stewardship and conservation.

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protected land along with the proposed Avenales Ranch conservation easement creates a substantial landscape of conserved land. This proposed project is located within the designated Central California Coast Annual and Perennial Grasslands and contributes to preserving essential landscape habitat linkage between the Central California Coast ecoregion to the west, the Great Valley ecoregion to the east, and the Southern California Valley Foothill ecoregion to the south, as intended by the *California Essential Habitat Connectivity Project: a Strategy for Conserving a Connected California*.³ (Refer to map labeled Avenales Ranch and CEHC)



Based on the Ranch's excellent native habitat conditions and its location adjacent to the Los Padres National Forest, the Ranch was among the California Department of Fish and Game's original tule elk release sites in San Luis Obispo County. The combination of relatively undisturbed Avenales Ranch lands with the surrounding Los Padres National Forest creates excellent breeding, calving, and foraging habitat for tule elk and other big game species including bear, deer, and wild boar. Bob Stafford, from DFW, states that the Avenales Ranch is a source for big game in the adjacent National Forest. As many as 60 tule

elk can be observed on the Ranch during the year.

Reliable water resources on the Avenales Ranch provide ecological security for many wildlife species. Water resources, wetlands, and riparian areas attract big game and a variety of other animals to the project area, providing drinking, cooling, foraging, cover, nesting, and roosting habitat. The northwest to southeast orientation of the Ranch uniquely provides headwater drainages to the Salinas River, which eventually flows into Monterey Bay, and also drainage to Alamo Creek, which eventually flows into the Santa Maria River. Water for wildlife and stock comes from ponds, springs, wells, and numerous intermittent streams⁴. The following water resources are located on the Avenales Ranch:

Avenales Ranch Water Resources	
Intermittent Streams	66.82 miles
Freshwater Forested/Shrub Wetlands	99.66 acres
Freshwater Emergent Wetlands	5.09 acres
Riverine	1.11 acres
Ponds – perennial	.8 acres
Ponds – intermittent	6.1 acres
Developed ponds	14
Developed springs	20
Water troughs	40+
Wells	6

³ <https://www.dfg.ca.gov/habcon/connectivity/#CaliforniaEssential>

⁴ Streams on the property include Alamo Creek, Kennel Creek, Los Machos Creek, Salinas River and Sheep Creek.

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Except for a domestic water supply from one well, all water resources are managed for both cattle and wildlife.

Wetlands, riparian areas, and riverine areas on the Avenales Ranch provide important habitat for migratory birds, small mammals, three special status amphibians, and one special status reptile – namely, arroyo toad (Federal/Endangered) California red-legged frog (Federal/Threatened), , western spadefoot toad (DFG/Species of Concern⁵), and western pond turtle (DFG/Species of Concern). (Refer to the attached table of big game and special status species at the Avenales Ranch for a more extensive listing.)



Linkage between Avenales Ranch Conservation Easement and conservation plans

The Avenales Ranch is within the *California Wildlife: Conservation Challenges*' Central Coast Region. The Wildlife report states that riverine and riparian habitats in the Central Coast are important to amphibian and reptile species, including the species named above. The report recommends the following:

State and federal agencies should work with cities and counties to secure sensitive habitats and key habitat linkages.

- The state should partner with federal and local land managers, land trusts and conservancies to prioritize and secure, through purchase, swaps or easements, important habitat linkages and other priority sites that are not now protected.

The United States Fish & Wildlife Service (US FWS) *Recovery Plan for California Red-legged Frog* calls for the following actions:

- Protect known populations and reestablish populations
- Protect suitable habitat, corridors and core areas

The US FWS *Recovery Plan for the Arroyo Southwestern Toad* calls for action to identify and secure suitable arroyo toad habitat and populations.

The US FWS *Recovery Plan for the California Condor* includes re-introduction of California condors in their historic range and ensuring suitable habitat. Avenales Ranch is within the historic range. A condor population was re-established approximately 5 miles west of the Ranch in the High Mountain-Beartrap Condor Critical Habitat Area on Bureau of Land Management land.

The Nature Conservancy developed the *San Luis Obispo County Project* due to increasing population threats and the potential for fragmentation and conversion of grasslands to more intensified uses, such as vineyards and orchards⁶. The species that The Nature Conservancy seeks to support include the following on the Avenales Ranch: bobcat, tule elk, California red-legged frog, and western pond turtle.

⁵ DFG is now Department of Wildlife, but species data still use the DFG reference

⁶ <http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/california/placesweprotect/san-louis-obispo-county.xml>

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Expected Benefits from the project are:

1. Approximately 12,711 acres on the Avenales Ranch will be placed under a permanent conservation easement to preserve wildlife values for the following big game species: tule elk, deer, bear, and wild boar.
2. A conservation easement on the Avenales Ranch will preserve intact landscapes and effective connectivity between three major eco-regions to secure wildlife travel corridors, provide habitat resiliency, and encourage genetic diversity among wildlife populations.
3. A conservation easement on the Avenales Ranch will help maintain water level fluctuations and surface flow regimes to protect biotic community structure and functions.
4. A conservation easement on the Avenales Ranch will protect the habitat from future development/encroachment and will avoid future development demands on water resources.
5. More than 100 acres of wetlands on the Avenales Ranch will be permanently protected under a conservation easement for the benefit of federal and state species of concern.
6. More than 66 miles of intermittent streams that form headwaters for the Salinas River and the Santa Maria River will be protected under a conservation easement.

Itemized Budget

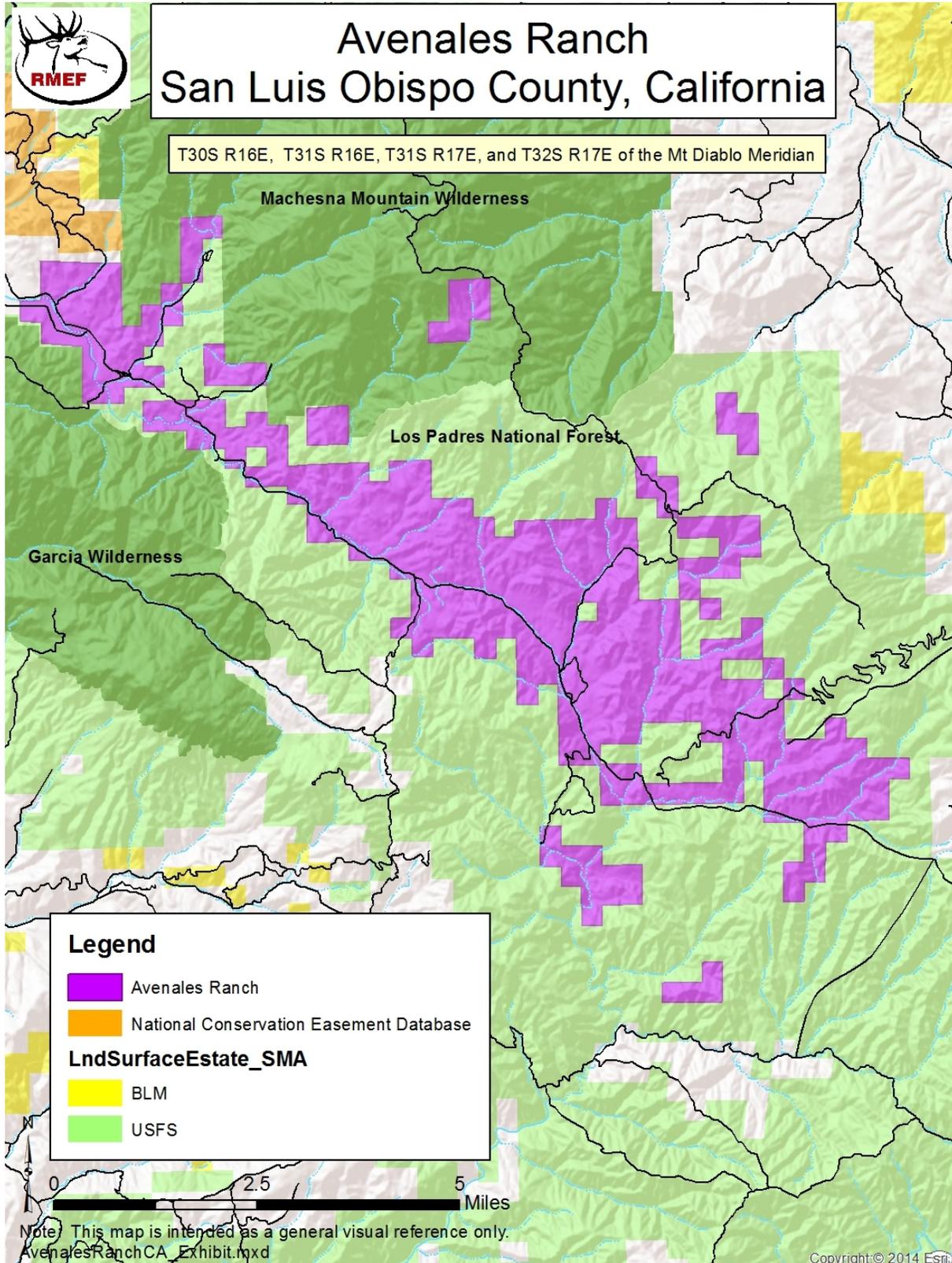
The estimated value for the conservation easement is over \$7,000,000. The landowner has agreed to a significant bargain sale with the California Rangeland Trust (CRT); both have signed a written purchase agreement.

Cost Category	Cash	In-Kind	Total
<i>Support Costs</i>			
RMEF		\$12,000	\$12,000
<i>CE Acquisition</i>			
CDFW	300,000		300,000
RMEF	100,000		100,000
CRT	1,500,000		1,500,000
Pending	2,100,000		2,100,000
Total	\$4,000,000	\$12,000	\$4,012,000

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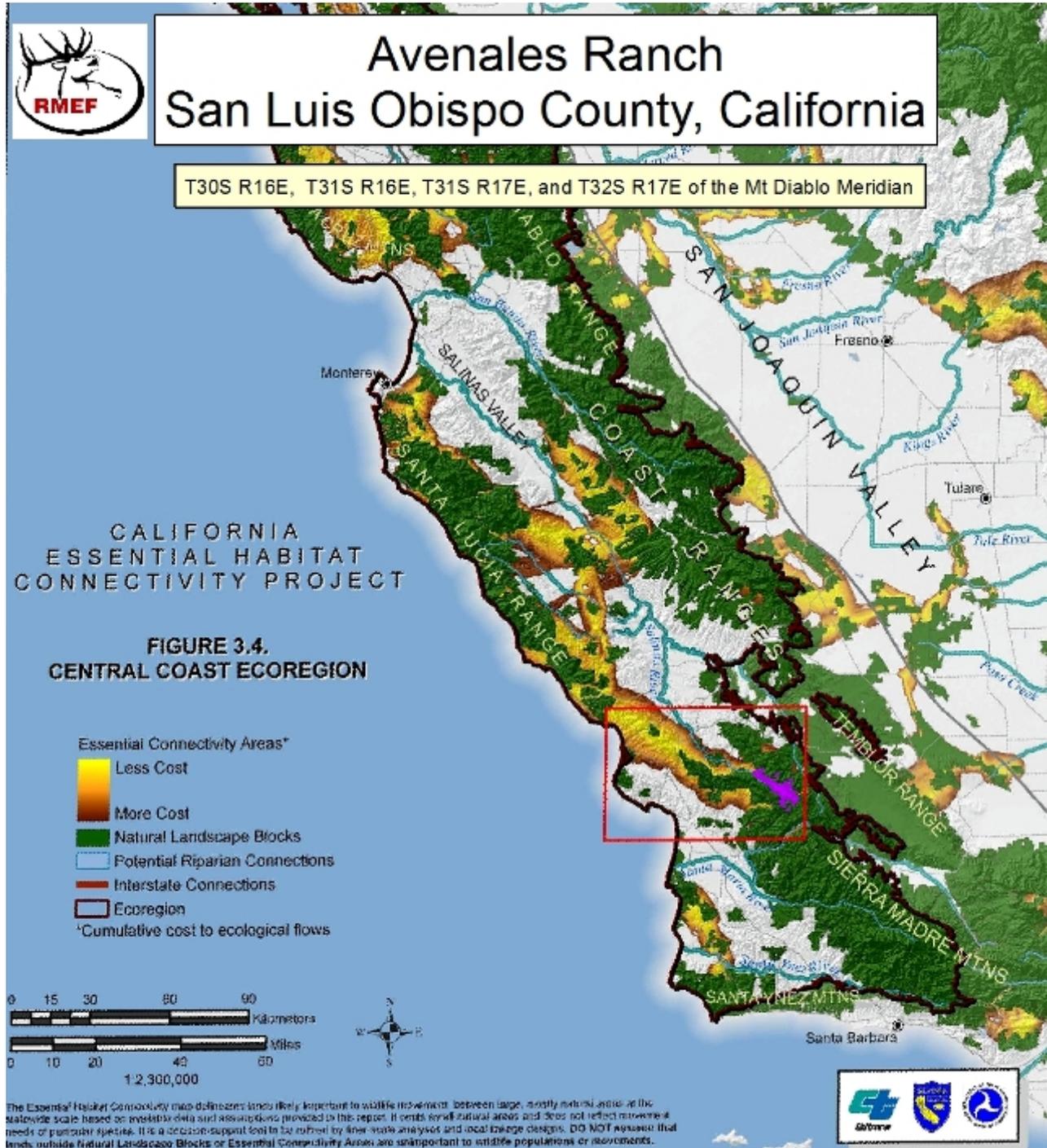
Project Map: Avenales Ranch Conservation Easement



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Avenales Ranch and the California Essential Habitat Connectivity Project



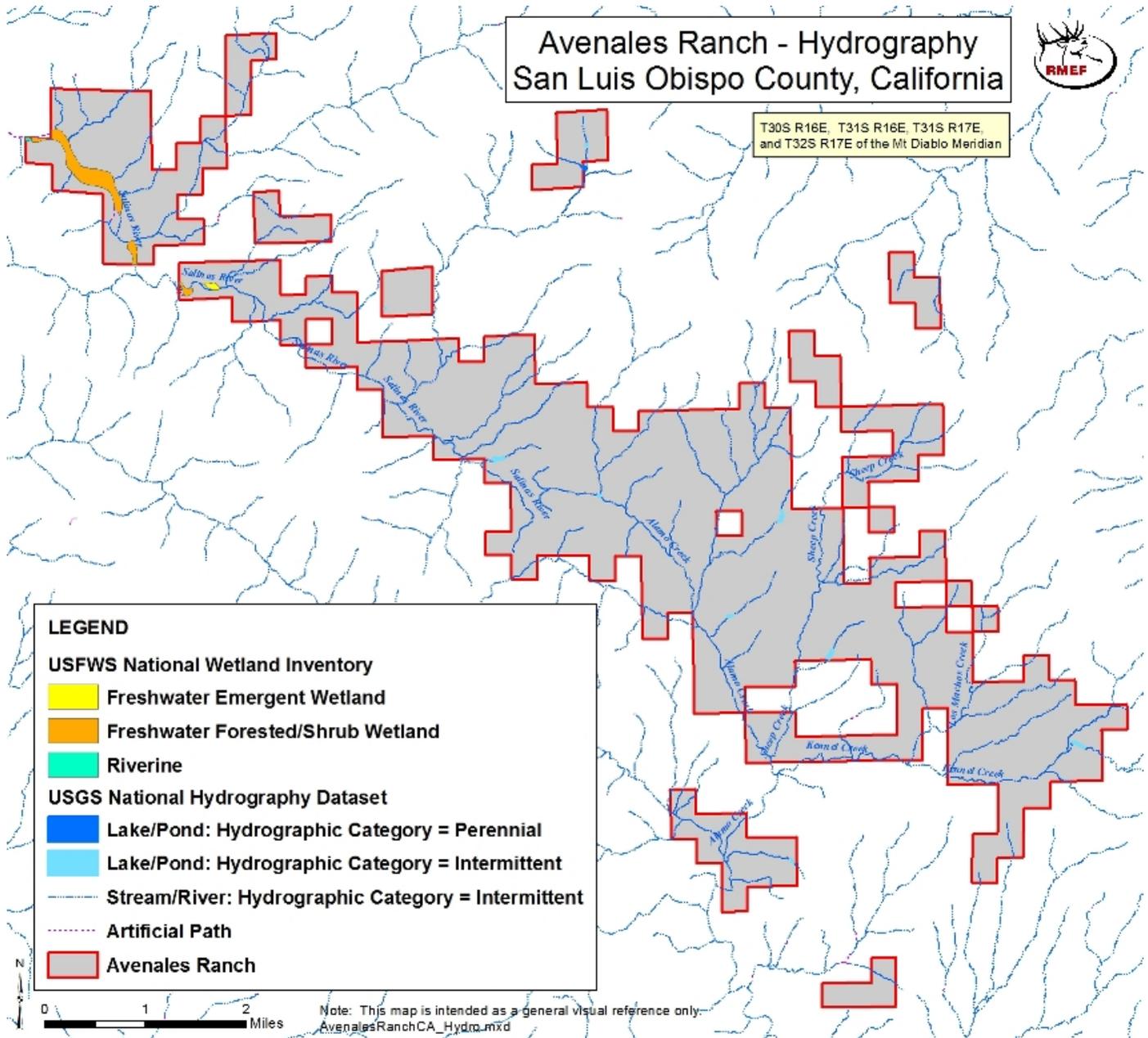
Legend

 Avenales Ranch

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Avenales Ranch Water Resources



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Avenales Ranch Special Status and Big Game Species			
SPECIES	Statusⁱ	Data Source	NOTE
Arroyo toad	F/E	Bob Stafford - DFW	Reported on Avenales Ranch
California red-legged frog	F/T	California Red-legged Frog - Final Critical Habitat, USFWS [ds246] California Red-Legged Frog Range - CWHR [ds587]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
Western spadefoot toad	DFG/SSC	Western Spadefoot Range - CWHR [ds590]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
Burrowing owl	DFG/SSC	Burrowing Owl Range - CWHR [ds907]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
California Condor	F/E	California Condor Range - CWHR [ds916]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
California spotted owl	DFG/SSC USFWS/BCC	Spotted Owl Range - CWHR [ds897]	About 1/3 of Avenales Ranch is Range
Grasshopper sparrow	DFG/SSC	Grasshopper Sparrow Range - CWHR [ds974]	In San Luis Obispo County
Golden eagle	USFWS/BCC	Bob Stafford - DFW	Reported on Avenales Ranch
Long-eared owl	DFG/SSC	Long-eared Owl Range - CWHR [ds980]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
Olive-sided flycatcher	DFG/SSC USFWS/BCC	In general ranch area	DFG on-line range map
Purple martin	DFG/SSC	In general ranch area	DFG on-line range map
Tricolored blackbird	DFG/SSC USFWS/BCC	Tricolored Blackbird Range - CWHR [ds942]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
Yellow warbler	DFG/SSC USFWS/BCC	Yellow Warbler Range - CWHR [ds607]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
Black bear	DFG/Game species	Black Bear Range - CWHR [ds792]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
Mule deer	DFG/Game species	Mule Deer Range - CWHR [ds795]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
Tule elk	DFW/Game species	Elk Range - CWHR [ds945]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
Wild boar	DFW/Game Species	Bob Stafford - DFW	Reported on Avenales Ranch
Townsend's big-eared bat	DFG/SSC	Townsend's Big-eared Bat Range - CWHR [ds902]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range
Western pond turtle	DFG/SSC	Western Pond Turtle Range - CWHR [ds598]	Entire Avenales Ranch is Range

ⁱ F/E = Federal/Endangered; F/T = Federal/Threatened; DFG/SSC = California Department of Fish and Game (now Fish and Wildlife)/ Species of Special Concern; US FWS/BCC= US Fish and Wildlife Service/ Birds of Conservation Concern



State of California - The Natural Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
1234 East Shaw Avenue
Fresno, California 93710
<http://www.dfg.ca.gov>

EDMUND G. BROWN, Jr., Governor
CHARLTON BOHNAM, Director



August 19, 2013

California Rangeland Trust
1225 H Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Subject: Conservation Easement
Avenales Ranch, San Luis Obispo County

To whom it may concern:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) enthusiastically supports the efforts of the California Rangeland Trust in procuring a conservation easement over the Avenales Ranch in San Luis Obispo County.

The approximately ~12,500 acre Avenales Ranch is located at the headwaters of the Salinas River and is bordered by the La Panza and Santa Lucia mountains in an area considered by the Department to be essential for statewide habitat connectivity. Habitats on site include blue oak woodland, valley oak woodland, mixed chaparral, coastal scrub, annual grassland, and valley foothill riparian. The location of the ranch adds to its importance as it bounded by the Machesna and Garcia Wilderness' of the Los Padres National Forest.

Based upon field data and habitat types in the area, the Avenales Ranch likely has at least 33 species of special concern using the property including Pacific pond turtle (*Emys marmorata*), California legless lizard (*Anniella pulchra*), Blainville's horned lizard (*Phrynosoma blainvillii*), northern harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), yellow warbler (*Dendroica petechia*), California spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis occidentalis*), Townsend's big eared bat (*Corynorhinus townsendii*), red bat (*Lasiurus blossevillii*), and two-striped garter snake (*Thamnophis hammondi*). The ranch is frequently utilized by California condors (*Gymnogyps californianus*) and is within designated critical habitat for California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*). In addition, the property provides important habitat for tule elk (*Cervus elaphus nanodes*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) and an expanding black bear (*Ursus americanus*) population.

The long time owners of the ranch have, and continue to be, outstanding conservationists with a long history of restoring and enhancing wildlife habitat. The proposed conservation easement will only help to cement this legacy and help maintain a vital link in conserving California's biodiversity.

Conserving California's Wildlife Since 1870

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If you have any questions, please contact Bob Stafford, Environmental Scientist, at (805) 528-8670; or Rocky Thompson, Senior Environmental Scientist, at (805) 594-6175.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey R. Single, Ph.D.
Regional Manager

ec: T. Palmisano, R. Thompson, B. Stafford, R-4 lands files