



Sustainable Conservation

# Creating a Statewide Program for Voluntary Restoration on Private Lands



PROMOTING STATEWIDE PERMIT COORDINATION  
OCTOBER 2011

# Executive Summary

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The Partners in Restoration (PIR) Program provides programmatic permitting, technical assistance, and cost-share funding to private and public landowners seeking to implement voluntary small-scale erosion control and habitat enhancement projects across California. Since 1996, Sustainable Conservation has partnered with the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), local Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs), and regulatory agencies to design and implement PIR programs on the countywide or watershed level<sup>1</sup>.

The partnership was created in response to the fact that the time, cost, and complexity of navigating environmentally beneficial projects through the permit process at the federal, State, and local levels of government was too daunting for private landowners wishing to pursue restoration work. The regulations developed to implement the environmental laws were creating disincentives to landowners who wished to restore natural resources on their lands, and were therefore having the unintended consequence of impeding the achievement of the goals for which the laws were enacted.

## BASIC MECHANICS OF COORDINATED PERMITTING FOR RESTORATION ON PRIVATE LANDS

Historically, PIR programs have been initiated by RCDs to enable farmers and ranchers to adopt conservation practices on their private lands. The RCDs collaborate with NRCS to tailor conservation practices drawn from NRCS' standardized technical guide to the specific needs of landowners within a prescribed geographic area, i.e., a watershed or a county served by the RCD. Sustainable Conservation supports RCDs by drafting technical documents and environmental protection measures corresponding to the selected conservation practices, and the RCDs in turn send these documents to the agencies so regulators can authorize the implementation of the conservation practices with programmatic permits that apply to the prescribed area. In turn, federal, State, and local agencies utilize the regulatory documents drafted by Sustainable Conservation to write the permits that they issue to the RCDs.

In many cases, this collaborative process is enabled by Sustainable Conservation serving as a neutral facilitator, negotiator, and honest broker. Once the agencies issue the permits and the RCDs have the permit packages in hand, the RCDs enroll landowners into the voluntary restoration program, and the landowners agree to the terms and conditions of the permits and environmental protection measures in exchange for the convenience of having their restoration projects covered by the programmatic permits. The conservation practices are installed on private properties and paid for with funds derived from multiple sources.

<sup>1</sup> In this report, a PIR program (lower case "p") refers to a single program established at a countywide, regional, or watershed level, and administered by one or more RCDs (past, present, and future). In contrast, the PIR Program (upper case "P") refers to both the sum total of all the countywide- and watershed-based programs established by NRCS, the RCDs, and Sustainable Conservation since 1996.





## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

To date, a total of 227 individual restoration projects have been completed under eight PIR programs covering all or portions of eight counties. In 2011, three more PIR programs are expected to be implemented across four counties in California's Central Coast region. All ongoing and planned programs comply with detailed and rigorous environmental protection measures that the partners have collectively developed for the permits issued by federal, State, and local agencies.

**“We have utilized PIR for almost all of our implementation projects. It has been an essential component for our on-the-ground restoration...We turn people away, the demand (for the PIR program) is so high.”**

— Karen Christensen, Executive Director, RCD Santa Cruz County