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STUDY SHOWS RESTORING SPECIES HABITAT IS ONLY MARGINALLY SUCCESSFUL, RECOMMENDS 15 SOLUTIONS

Newport Beach, CA, Friday, December 27, 2019 – The regional non-profit Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks (FHBP) announces the release of its study on the effectiveness of biological mitigation measures required under environmental laws. Twelve Orange County projects, including residential, mixed use, and infrastructure projects, were evaluated for their success in restoring the natural landscape and promoting ecological function for rare and endangered species impacted by those projects. The average score for restoration projects was a 3.2 on a scale of one (worst) to five (best).

Southern California comprises a biologically rich landscape with a diversity of plants and animals, many of which occur nowhere else in the world. Our native species are increasingly imperiled, not only through removal of natural communities for development, but also through fragmentation and degradation of the remaining habitat areas. Environmental and water laws exist to protect these species and our water quality for future generations.

The research project was funded by The Henry W. and Ellen R. Warne Family Endowment Fund of the Orange County Community Foundation. FHBP's objective included five tasks: to understand whether mitigation measures were tracked, implemented, successful, and monitored; and what may be needed to improve outcomes for species on the brink of extinction. Although our research identified some successful and viable restoration projects, we also found examples of cities, the County of Orange, developers, restoration specialists, and permitting agencies failing to achieve the required levels of mitigation for significant impacts to rare and endangered species.

Melanie Schlotterbeck, the study's lead author states, "Our resource agencies are tasked with protecting species, and if certain mitigation approaches fail to provide adequate protection, we need to know that. By evaluating long-term outcomes, we have identified fundamental issues that may not become evident until years after agencies have signed off on the apparent success of a given mitigation effort.

Ultimately, we hope to assist these agencies in their ongoing efforts to ensure the adequacy of habitat restoration plans, as well as the implementation, monitoring, and documentation of the ensuing restoration efforts.”

Robert Hamilton, the study’s lead biologist notes, “In many cases, natural communities left intact around the periphery of development projects had greater ecological integrity compared with those created by restoration specialists. The most successful restoration projects established diverse natural communities that I could not distinguish from the nearby natural landscape, but others were missing key plants, especially the hard-to-handle cactus species.” He continues, “It’s disheartening to see how many restoration companies fail to remove their materials. Years or even decades after restoration efforts cease, we find such eyesores as PVC pipes, sprinklers, stakes, and erosion-control wattles. In some cases, chain-link fencing has been installed that will permanently inhibit some types of native wildlife from accessing biological mitigation areas.”

Based on the findings, Ms. Schlotterbeck, summarizes: “We developed 15 recommendations intended to guide how decisions are made for biological mitigation. Most critical is more adequately staffing and funding our natural resource agencies.” Agencies are being asked to do more with less—less funding, less staff, and less time. This considerably hampers their ability to fulfill their vital roles. We also observed that large areas of superficially restored natural habitat can be reduced to hillsides of exotic weeds after wildfires. Other issues that impacted success rates included soils incompatible with the types of habitats being restored and inadequate funding of long-term management endowments.

“At a time when our landscapes are enduring more and more assaults from drought, wildfires, and high heat days—we must find ways to protect and co-exist with nature,” says Schlotterbeck. “That’s why we are committed to helping our natural resource agencies and simultaneously finding solutions that advance species protection.” Examples of project-tracking systems, reporting mechanisms, citizen monitoring, non-wasting endowments for mitigation, and impact avoidance were covered.

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