



News Release

October 10, 2018

Mojave River Oasis Now Permanently Protected as a Haven for Native Fish and Wildlife

Helendale, California—The 1,647-acre Palisades Ranch on the Mojave River has been permanently conserved as a haven for wildlife, thanks to the efforts of Western Rivers Conservancy, the Mojave Desert Land Trust, the California Wildlife Conservation Board, California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In time, the land with over 39 protected wildlife species will also benefit nearby communities.

Palisades Ranch, which Western Rivers Conservancy transferred to the Mojave Desert Land Trust last week, spans 3.5 miles of a rare stretch of the Mojave River known as the Transition Zone, where the river flows above ground. Most of the Mojave flows underground, but in the 15-mile-long Transition Zone, the underlying bedrock forces the river to the surface.

Palisades Ranch contains the most significant stands of riparian forest within the Transition Zone, making it one of the Mojave Desert's most important habitat areas for fish and wildlife. The rich plant community and presence of surface water attract 39 federally and state listed special-status wildlife species.

Once slated for 1,300 homes and a golf course, the former ranch was identified in 2010 by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife as a high-priority acquisition in southern California because of the property's outstanding habitat values.

The Mojave Desert Land Trust aims to restore this complex desert river ecosystem while also introducing compatible public access opportunities on the property for the high desert community, particularly the nearby cities of Victorville and Barstow. The ranch lies within a 30-minute drive for over 350,000 residents.

Stunning rainbow-colored palisade bluffs lined with 65 ancient creosote rings overlook more than 800 acres of cottonwood-willow riparian habitat. To the west, the property borders the Fremont-Kramer Area of Critical Environmental Concern, and conservation of the property will promote habitat connectivity for wildlife.

“This spectacular ranch has huge potential as a wildlife refuge, with a constant source of water in an increasingly arid landscape. There are also potential educational opportunities. We believe Palisades Ranch can become a sustainable and resilient oasis in the West Mojave and are excited

to begin the hard work of restoration,” said Joshua Friedes, executive director of the Mojave Desert Land Trust.

“This stretch of the Mojave River is the rarest of the rare, a free-flowing desert stream that sustains abundant life in the harsh Mojave Desert,” said Peter Colby, WRC’s California program director. “Western Rivers Conservancy is proud of protecting this lush and incredibly important property for the fish and wildlife of southern California and for future generations.”

Western Rivers Conservancy purchased the Palisades Ranch in 2016, seeking to protect crucial habitat for imperiled Mojave Desert species. Recent surveys on the property revealed nine reptile, 76 bird and seven mammal species; these include desert tortoise, Cooper’s hawk, willow flycatcher, brown crested flycatcher, least Bell’s vireo, yellow warbler, yellow breasted chat and summer tanager, all species of special concern. A total of 59 annual and perennial plants have been observed on the land.

Given the ranch’s importance to fish and wildlife, both the State of California and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, along with their partners, sought to conserve the property for many years. The transfer of the ranch from Western Rivers Conservancy to Mojave Desert Land Trust was funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act), generated from the Land and Water Conservation Fund; and by the the California Wildlife Conservation Board.

“Palisades Ranch is a jewel in the desert that provides vital riparian habitat to a variety of bird, mammal, reptile and amphibian species. The Wildlife Conservation Board salutes our partners, the Fish and Wildlife Service, Mojave Desert Land Trust and Western Rivers Conservancy for a job well done,” said John Donnelly, executive director of the California Wildlife Conservation Board.

“The Department is proud to be a partner in conserving this significant property within the Transition Zone of the Mojave River. The Department is committed to continuing to work with its partners to protect, enhance and restore important habitats and the species that depend upon them as needed into the future,” said Alisa Ellsworth, Region 6 Lands North Manager of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

“The Service supports these collaborative efforts to identify and conserve key habitats across Southern California,” said Mendel Stewart, field supervisor for the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “We look forward to partnering with the Mojave Desert Land Trust on the restoration of Palisades Ranch to benefit native species.”

Other animals that will benefit from the partners’ efforts include migratory birds, Mojave River vole, western pond turtle, long-eared owl, vermilion flycatcher, burrowing owl, Mohave ground squirrel, and Mohave shoulderband snail.

Potential habitat for the endangered arroyo toad and the endangered Mohave tui chub also exist within this stretch of the Mojave River, and upland habitat supports several federally listed species, including desert tortoise and least Bell’s vireo.

There are many opportunities for restoration on the ranch, from replanting riparian species to removing illegal roads and invasive plants. The Mojave Desert Land Trust envisages that planning efforts will outline a long-term vision for the ranch that includes compatible public access in line with the conservation requirements of the project's grant funding.

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About the Partners

Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy acquires lands along rivers throughout the West to conserve critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By cooperating with local agencies and organizations and by applying decades of land acquisition experience, WRC secures the health of whole ecosystems. WRC has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great western rivers, including the Klamath, Eel, Goose Creek/Smith, Rio Grande, Yampa, John Day, Salmon, Snake, North Umpqua and Madison Rivers. To learn more, visit www.westernrivers.org.

Mojave Desert Land Trust

The Mojave Desert Land Trust is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with the mission to protect and care for lands with natural, scenic, and cultural value within the Mojave Desert. Since its founding in 2006 the land trust has conserved more than 71,368 acres, donating more tracts of land to the National Park Service in the last decade than any other organization. In addition to acquiring land, the land trust established a seed bank to ensure the preservation of native species. MDLT operates an onsite nursery at its Joshua Tree headquarters which propagates native species for ecosystem restoration. MDLT educates and advocates for the conservation of the desert, involving hundreds of volunteers in our work. For more information, visit www.mdlt.org.

California Wildlife Conservation Board

The California Wildlife Conservation Board protects, restores and enhances California's spectacular natural resources for wildlife and for the public's use and enjoyment in partnership with conservation groups, government agencies and the people of California. The primary responsibilities of WCB are to select, authorize and allocate funds for the purchase of land and waters suitable for recreation purposes and the preservation, protection and restoration of wildlife habitat. WCB approves and funds projects that set aside lands within the State for such purposes, through acquisition or other means, to meet these objectives. WCB can also authorize the construction of facilities for recreational purposes on property in which it has a proprietary interest. Visit www.wcb.ca.gov for more information.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife

The mission of the Department of Fish and Wildlife is to manage California's diverse fish, wildlife, and plant resources, and the habitats upon which they depend, for their ecological

values and for their use and enjoyment by the public. Visit www.wildlife.ca.gov for more information.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. Visit www.fws.gov for more information.

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