

Montaña de Oro to get \$950,000 to help fund expansion into Avila Beach

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The Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board overruled a staff recommendation and allocated nearly \$1 million to a conservation effort that will extend Montaña de Oro State Park to Avila Beach.

The board received more than 100 letters of support for the Wild Cherry Canyon project, said Kara Blakeslee, who heads the conservation effort for the American Land Conservancy. She said she thinks that was crucial in the board's unanimous vote on Friday to support the project.

The group now has \$21 million committed to the project. An additional \$3 million is needed to complete the deal by the end of the year.

The conservancy will concentrate on private foundations and individual donors. The water board's vote was symbolically important to that effort, Blakeslee said.

"It sent a message that this project has positive momentum," she said. "That can be very important when you are doing private fundraising."

Water board staff had recommended that the \$950,000 allocated to the project instead be kept in reserve for a regionwide program that helps local government reduce polluted runoff.

Wild Cherry Canyon is a 2,400-acre ranch in the Irish Hills behind Avila Beach. Once conserved, it will be transferred to the state Parks Department along with other property in the area acquired by The Nature Conservancy and the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County.

Once the deal is complete, Montaña de Oro will stretch from Los Osos to Avila Beach and encompass much of the Irish Hills west of San Luis Obispo.

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