# CALIFORNIA FISH PASSAGE FORUM

Streamlined Permitting
Case Study 2026-01
March 2026

# Finding a Working Strategy and Sticking With It: Utilizing HREA and FRGP to Streamline Permitting for Multiple Projects on Quiota Creek

## Project Permitting Case Study

### *Project Summary*

The Cachuma Operations Maintenance Board (COMB) is responsible for monitoring the southern California Steelhead population downstream of Lake Cachuma, monitoring water quality conditions in the lower river and its tributaries ,and implementing stream and fish habitat restoration projects as outlined by the 2000 Cachuma Project Biological Opinion (BO).

COMB has helped to implement 23  three restoration projects to date, 10 of which address problematic road-stream crossings along Quiota Creek. These projects provide aquatic organism passage and improve riparian habitat and stream function. This case study will elaborate on the details of the Quiota Creek projects, focusing on the permitting experience to bring the improved road-stream crossings to completion.

### *Project at-a-Glance*

**Title:** Quiota Creek Fish Passage Enhancement Projects

**Applicant:** Cachuma Operations Maintenance Board

**Partners:** HDR Fisheries Design Center

**Project Funding Provided By:** California Coastal Conservancy, Cachuma Project Member Agencies, California Department of Fish and Wildlife – FRGP, and Landowners.

**Groups Conducting Monitoring:** Cachuma Operations Maintenance Board

**Project Location:** Quiota Creek, Santa Barbara County, CA

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## Species Benefitted

- Southern California Steelhead *(Oncorhynchus mykiss)*
- California Red Legged Frog *(Rana draytonii)*

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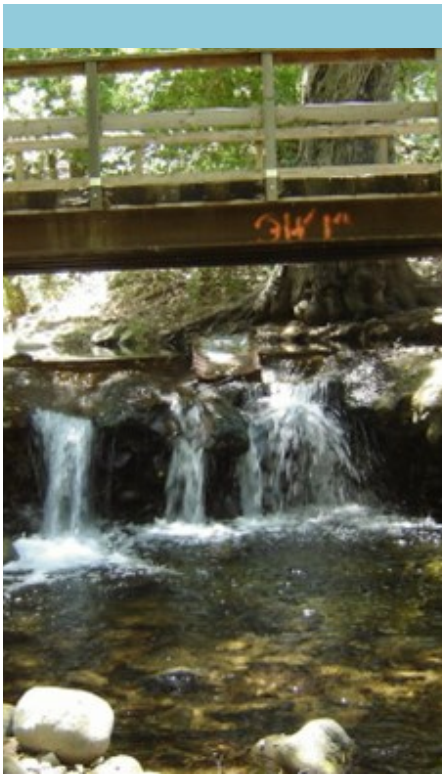


## Permitting Approach

These 10 projects replaced problematic road-stream crossings with prefabricated bottomless-arched culvert bridges from 2008-2020. Because the projects were similar, they were able to utilize a prescribed permitting approach.

COMB used the Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Act (HREA) for Quiota Creek Crossing projects 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9, and received Fisheries Restoration Grant Program (FRGP) funding for Quiota Creek Crossing projects 0A, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9.

HREA was not in place until 2015, after some of these projects had been implemented. The Quiota creek projects were some of the first to utilize HREA after it became available in 2015. All Quiota Creek restoration projects pre-dated the listing of Southern California Steelhead as a candidate species in 2023 therefore CESA coverage was not required.

*(Left) Quiota creek crossing 6 before restoration . (Below) Quiota creek crossing 6 after restoration in 2008.*

***Find tools and resources for restoration project permitting at Accelerating Restoration, the resource website maintained by Sustainable Conservation.***

## Table 1: Project Details
## For more information see the COMB Quiota Creek StoryMap

| Name | Date | Treatment | Pathways Used | Funding |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Crossing 6 | 2008 | 48-foot prefabricated Contech bottomless-arched culvert bridge* | 401 – COMB<br>404 – COMB<br>1600 LSA - COMB | Funding: $371,000 California Coastal Conservancy; $506,627 Cachuma Project Member Agencies |
| Crossing 2 | 2011 | 60-foot prefabricated Contech bottomless-arched culvert bridge* | 401 – COMB<br>404 – FRGP<br>1600 LSA - COMB | $700,528 CDFW-FRGP; $117,654 Cachuma Project Member Agencies |
| Crossing 7 | 2012 | 60-foot prefabricated Contech bottomless-arched culvert bridge* | 401 – COMB<br>404 – COMB<br>1600 LSA - COMB | $400,108 CDFW-FRGP; $357,018 WCB; $137,975 Cachuma Project Member Agencies |
| Crossing 1 | 2013 | 60-foot prefabricated Contech bottomless-arched culvert bridge* | 401 – COMB<br>404 – FRGP<br>1600 LSA - COMB | $521,141 CDFW-FRGP; $150,000 WCB; $228,681 Cachuma Project Member Agencies |
| Crossing 3 | 2015 | 53-foot prefabricated Contech bottomless-arched culvert bridge* | 401 – FRGP<br>404 – COMB<br>1600 LSA - HREA | $705,205 CDFW-FRGP; $219,863 Cachuma Project Member Agencies |
| Crossing 0A | 2015 | 55-foot prefabricated Contech bottomless-arched culvert bridge* | 401 – FRGP<br>404 – FRGP/COMB<br>1600 LSA - COMB | $604,637 CDFW-FRGP; $50,000 Landowner; $133,801 Cachuma Project Member Agencies |
| Crossing 4 | 2016 | 54-foot prefabricated Contech bottomless-arched culvert bridge* | 401 – FRGP<br>404 – FRGP<br>1600 LSA - HREA | $937,838 CDFW-FRGP; $181,034 Cachuma Project Member Agencies |
| Crossing 5 | 2018 | 59-foot prefabricated Contech bottomless-arched culvert bridge* | 401 – FRGP<br>404 – FRGP<br>1600 LSA - HREA | $893,287 CDFW-FRGP; $234,450 Cachuma Project Member Agencies |
| Crossing 9 | 2019 | 60-foot prefabricated Contech bottomless-arched culvert bridge* | 401 – FRGP<br>404 – COMB<br>1600 LSA - HREA | $993,121 CDFW-FRGP; $217,852 Cachuma Project Member Agencies |
| Crossing 8 | 2020 | 54-foot prefabricated Contech bottomless-arched culvert bridge* | 401 – FRGP<br>404 – FRGP<br>1600 LSA - HREA | $1,010,700 CDFW-FRGP; $174,129 Cachuma Project Member Agencies |

## Biological Impacts

The improved road-stream crossings have reopened habitat for rearing, over-summering refuge, and spawning areas in the upper section of Quiota Creek, a NOAA-NMFS designated critical habitat for the recovery of endangered southern California steelhead. The full span bridges also allow terrestrial species such as the California red-legged frog the option to cross underneath the new bridge and avoid being potentially killed or injured by vehicles along roads crossing the Creek.

Appropriately designed fish passage restoration projects can benefit both aquatic and terrestrial species which travel along riparian corridors, as well as improving flood and stormwater conveyance, and improving vehicle safety.

## Permitting Pathways Used

The permits required by any restoration project depend on the nature of the project, its size, likely impacts, species present in the area, and the location. Each Quiota Creek project was slightly different; however, COMB was able to utilize either one or a combination of two streamlined permitting pathways for the projects.

### *CDFW Fisheries Restoration Grant Program (FRGP):*

FRGP funds a wide range of projects that lead to process-based restoration, enhancement, or protection of anadromous salmonid habitat in California.
Uniquely, FRGP provides the following coverage for all eligible funded projects:

1. California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND);
2. Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 401 certification, State Water Resources Control board; and
3. CWA Section 404, Army Corps of Engineers permit.

Here are some resources to help you understand if the FRGP permitting pathway is the correct one for your project:

- CDFW FRGP Web Page
- Projects Funded in Previous Years: FRGP Funded Project Summaries
- Sustainable Conservation FRGP Web Page

### *CDFW Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Act (HREA):*

For small-scale habitat restoration projects throughout California, the HREA provides a faster and simpler process with one single approval from CDFW. Eligible projects must not exceed a maximum project size of 5 acres or a cumulative 500 linear feet. HREA process can be especially helpful for those qualifying projects that would otherwise need *both* a Section 1600 Lake and Streambed Alteration Agreement (LSAA) and California Endangered Species Act (CESA) authorization. Projects that require authorization for take of fully protected species should consider applying for the Restoration Management Permit. Projects that receive funding through the Fisheries Restoration Grant Program can also apply to use the HREA.

There are two pathways available under HREA, depending on whether the project already has a Notice of Applicability (NOA) under the State Water Resources Control Board's Order for Clean Water Act Section 401 General Water Quality Certification for Small Habitat Restoration Projects (401 SHRP certification).

* Section 1652 - This pathway is appropriate for projects that have not received 401 SHRP certification. CDFW has 60 days to determine if a 1652 request is complete and eligible for coverage under the HREA.
* Section 1653 - This pathway is appropriate for projects that have received 401 SHRP certification. CDFW has 30 days to determine if a 1653 request is complete and eligible for coverage under the HREA.

Here are some resources to help you understand if the HREA permitting pathway is the correct one for your project:

- CDFW HREA Web Page
- Sustainable Conservation HREA Web Page which Includes Application Guidance and FAQs.
- Sustainable Conservation Video Series on HREA Eligibility and Processes

## The Permitting Experience

### *As new pathways develop, they become easier to use.*

Quiota creek projects were some of the first to utilize the HREA pathway. Recognizing the potential for the pathway to simplify permitting for the Quiota Creek projects, CDFW recommended that COMB utilize the HREA for any eligible crossings. COMB established a relationship early with the CDFW staff administering the program.

**Tip: Project proponents should reach out to agency staff and ask for recommendations on how their project may be able to utilize simplified permitting pathways.**

*(Right) Quiota Creek crossing 5 before restoration in 2018*

### *Agency capacity plays a role in approval turnaround time.*

Agency capacity can play a role in how quickly and smoothly review and approvals may be for your project. For the Quiota projects that USACE staff were familiar with they reviewed multiple 404 permits simultaneously allowing for quick turnaround times. For other Quiota creek projects, the 404 applications went into a general mailbox, and turnaround time was longer as staff had no prior familiarity with the projects or COMB.

**Tip: Project practitioners may find it worthwhile to ask about the application review process and adjust expectations accordingly.**

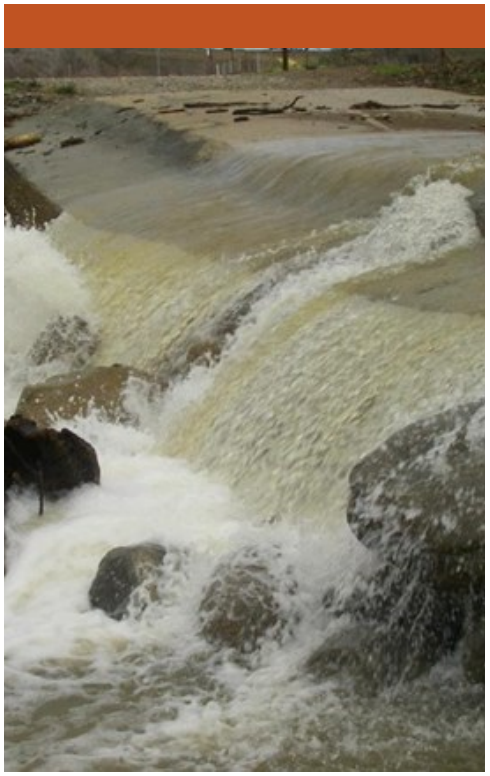
*(Below) Quiota creek crossing 7 before and after restoration in 1007.*

## The Permitting Experience

***Simplified permitting pathways save time and money, even for experienced practitioners.***

CDFW is required to provide a determination on HREA approval requests within 30 or 60 days depending on the approval pathway. For COMB, utilizing HREA 1653 allowed necessary permits for individual crossings to be secured in 30 days. For projects executed before HREA, this process would have taken several months. Additionally, there are significant cost savings using HREA versus a CESA ITP.

**Tip: Take the time to understand what expedited permitting pathways your project may be eligible for to save time and money.**



*(Right) Quiota Creek crossing 0A before restoration*

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***The Quiota Creek projects were also documented in a StoryMap produced by Cachuma Operations Maintenance Board.***

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### *Keep in mind the eligibility requirements.*

In order to utilize HREA, projects must meet eligibility requirements for the State Water Board General Order for Small Habitat Restoration Projects, which includes not exceeding a maximum project size of 5 acres or a cumulative 500 linear feet. One of the first crossings to be implemented and permitted after the HREA pathway became available was Crossing 0A, in 2015. The project involved modifying the streambank in some places and replacing the low flow crossing. Though the added impact area was less than 500 linear feet, the cumulative project area was 550 feet, beyond the eligible length for HREA. Crossing 0A utilized FRGP to secure permits instead.

**Tip: Focus or repair projects may be considered an additive impact area and not cumulative distance. Practitioners interested in this option should reach out to their CDFW permitting contact.**

### *Consider contractual conditions such as maintenance, durability and access in seeking funding.*

While monitoring and maintenance is essential for assessing durability and effectiveness of restoration projects, some permits and funding sources have limits on duration and cost. Since it can be difficult to fund repair-only projects, building maintenance costs into project plans is critically important and a major topic of consideration in the fish passage and engineering world.

**Tip: Restoration practitioners should carefully examine contract conditions and build long-term costs into your project planning.**

*(Below) Quiota Creek crossing 8 before and after restoration .*

## The Permitting Experience

***Even with a cookie cutter approach, waiting until you have important details makes permit writing quicker.***

Even with similar projects, minor differences and uncertainties can change details within your permitting applications and potentially delay approvals if incomplete. COMB utilized a pre-drafting approach to fill in major project information, and then submitted individual project permits once the project was developed enough to confidently draft the permit application.

### Tip: Develop key project details and then start your permit applications.

*(Above) Quiota Creek crossing 1 before and after restoration . (Below) Quiota Creek crossing 2 after restoration in 2011.*

## More Permitting Resources

*COMB Quiota Creek Story Map*

*Sustainable Conservation Web Page of Pathways Listed by Agency or Authority*

*Sustainable Conservation Essential Guide for Accelerated Restoration Permitting*

*Habitat Project Example – Arroyo Grande Creek Stream Gauge Modification*

*Sustainable Conservation USACE Nationwide Permit 27 Web Page*

### Sustainable Conservation

Sustainable Conservation advances the collaborative stewardship of California's land, air, and water for the benefit of nature and people.

Sustainable Conservation developed Accelerating Restoration, a website designed to help restoration project proponents in California find and understand how to use efficient permitting pathways for their aquatic and riparian habitat restoration projects.

- Permitting pathways by agency
- Alphabetical list of all accelerated pathways
- Examples of projects that used accelerated permits

## The California Fish Passage Forum

**The California Fish Passage Forum is a collaborative partnership formed among federal and state agencies, and non-profits to protect and revitalize anadromous fish populations in California by promoting collaboration among public and private sectors for fish passage improvement projects and programs.**

The Forum supports anadromous fish populations by directly funding barrier removals, habitat enhancements, fish passage assessment, monitoring and research projects , facilitating collaboration between agencies and restoration nonprofits, and guiding the development and support of science and data products related to fish passage restoration, such as the California Passage Assessment Database (PAD). Learn more about the Forum at cafishpassageforum.org

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This case study was produced by the California Fish Passage Forum in partnership with Sustainable Conservation.

## NFHP by the Numbers

The NFHP Projects and accomplishments dashboard records the impact of the NFHP program and 20 FHPs since 2006. As of 2026, those are:

- 1,744 projects supported
- $71,223,384 in direct funding
- $351,492,841 in additional leveraged funds
- 12,127 habitat enhancements
- 12,018 river miles conserved
- 126,207 acers conserved
- 3,434 science products produced

## The National Fish Habitat Partnership

The California Fish Passage Forum is one of 20 Fish Habitat partnerships recognized under the National Fish Habitat Partnership. The mission of the National Fish Habitat Partnership is to protect, restore, and enhance the nation's fish and aquatic communities through partnerships that foster fish habitat conservation and improve the quality of life for the American people. NFHP supports the work of the diverse network of fish habitat partnerships, and produces independent data products to assess the state of Americas freshwater and marine fish populations and habitats through the National Assessment.

Fish Habitat Partnerships operating on the Pacific coast include the California Fish Passage Forum, Pacific Lamprey Conservation Initiative (PLCI), the Pacific Marine and Estuarine Partnership (PMEP), and the Western Native Trout Initiative (WNTI). Learn more at www.fishhabitat.org

20 YEARS | NATIONAL FISH HABITAT PARTNERSHIP

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