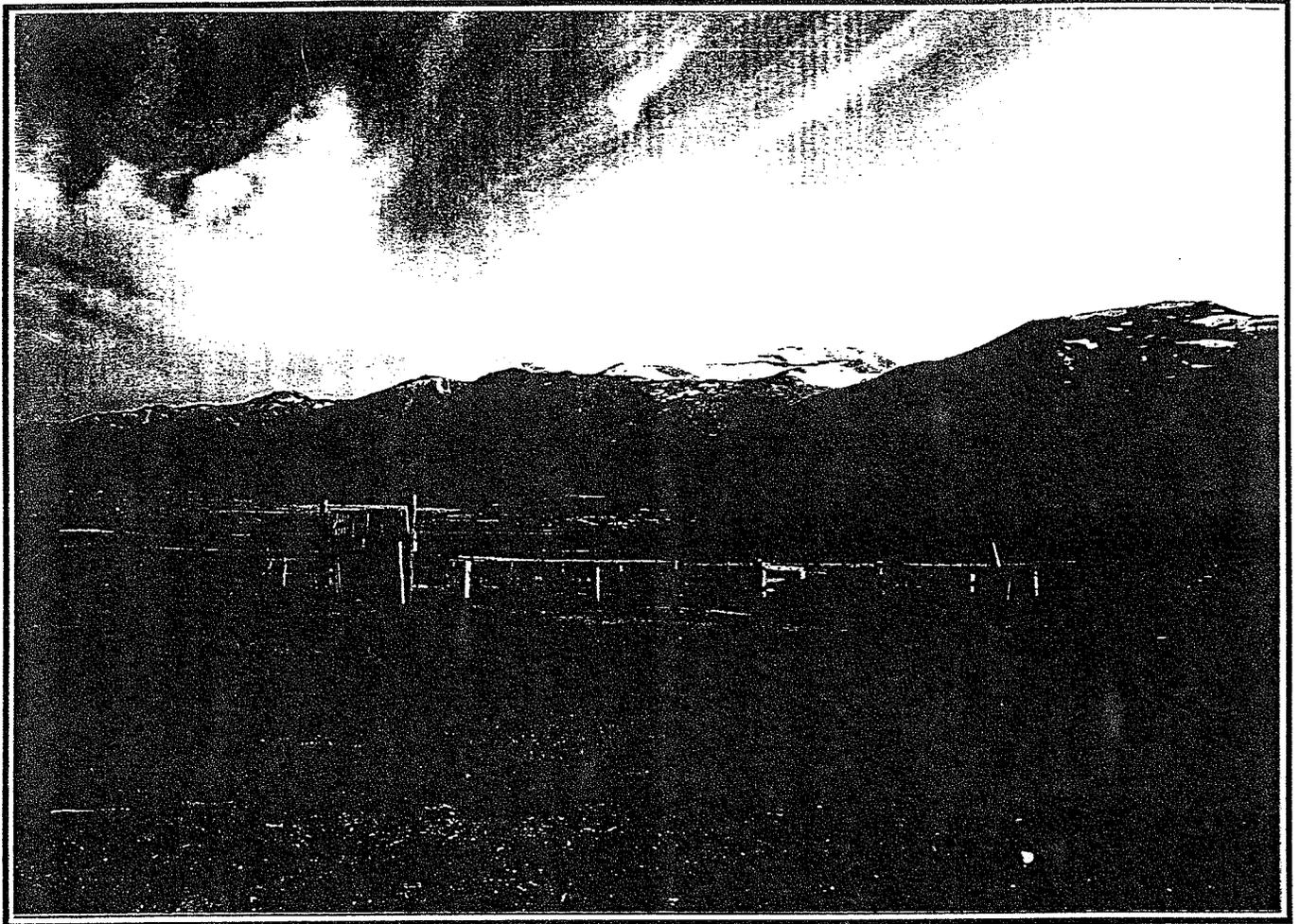

CONWAY RANCH

Mono County, California



A Request for Funding Through the
Habitat Conservation Fund Program

Sponsored by Mono County

**CALIFORNIA WILDLIFE PROTECTION ACT OF 1990
HABITAT CONSERVATION FUND PROGRAM APPLICATION**

THIS FORM AND REQUIRED ATTACHMENTS MUST BE SUBMITTED FOR EACH PROJECT SITE

PROGRAM TYPE (check one below)

- Deer Lion Wetlands Anadromous and Trout
 RTEP Riparian Trails and Programs

*20-25-001
76*

PROJECT NAME Conway Ranch	AMOUNT OF GRANT REQUESTED <i>(minimum grant — \$20,000 except trails)</i> \$ 500,000
	ESTIMATED TOTAL PROJECT COST <i>(State grant and other funds)</i> \$ 3.3 million

GRANT APPLICANT (agency and address, include zip code) Mono County Energy Management Department P.O. Box 347 Mammoth Lakes, California 93546	COUNTY Mono	NEAREST CITY Lee Vining
	PROJECT ADDRESS	
	NEAREST CROSS STREET 395 and 167	
	SENATE DISTRICT NO. 5	ASSEMBLY DISTRICT NO. 4

GRANT APPLICANT'S REPRESENTATIVE AUTHORIZED IN RESOLUTION (Name typed) Dan Lyster	TITLE Director	PHONE <i>7160</i> 619-924-5452
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PERSON WITH DAY-TO-DAY RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROJECT IF DIFFERENT FROM AUTHORIZED REPRESENTATIVE (Name typed)	TITLE	PHONE
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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

The \$500,000 HCF grant request, together with \$500,000 in matching funds, will acquire approximately 312 acres of deer habitat as part of the 1,031 acre Conway Ranch acquisition project. Some 720 mule deer travel through Conway Ranch, part of an important migration corridor that includes adjacent public lands managed by the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Conway Ranch's public acquisition and protection as open space will ensure the maintenance of this critical migration corridor in the Eastern Sierra as well as the overall natural quality of the Mono Basin.

For Development projects, Land Tenure-Project is _____ acres.	For Acquisition projects, Project land will be <u>312</u> acres.
_____ Acres owned in fee simple by Grant Applicant.	<u>312</u> Acquired in fee simple by Grant Applicant.
_____ Acres available under a _____ year lease.	_____ Acquired in other than fee simple (explain) _____
_____ Acres other interest (explain) _____	_____

I certify that the information contained in this project application form, including required attachments, is accurate and that I have read and understand the important information and assurances on the reverse of this form.

SIGNED *Dan Lyster* Grant Applicant's Authorized Representative as shown in Resolution 10-1-97 Date

CONWAY RANCH

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2. Categorical Exemption Documentation
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4. Acquisition Map
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6. Acquisition Schedule
7. Amount, Type, and Source of Funds
8. Photographs of Project Site

* The Mono County Board of Supervisors will consider the Authorizing Resolution contained in the Procedural Guide for the Habitat Conservation Fund Program on October 21, 1997. Once approved, an original copy of the resolution will be forwarded to the Local Services Section of the State Department of Parks and Recreation under separate cover.

CONWAY RANCH

I. BASIC ELIGIBILITY

Are you authorized by statute to operate and manage park, recreation facilities, open space or wildlife areas?

Mono County ("County") is operating pursuant to Section 50020 et cet., California Government Code, and is duly authorized to provide for the acquisition, management and operation of parks and open space.

II. ACTION TO BE TAKEN

Describe the number of parcels and acres to be acquired and any unusual or unique circumstances that may impact the acquisition.

The HCF grant and its match, totalling \$1,000,000, will buy 312 acres of critical deer habitat located on Conway Ranch in Mono County. The overall Conway Ranch protection effort will result in the public acquisition of land totalling approximately 1,031 acres. The estimated purchase price of the entire property will be \$3,300,000 (by current appraisal which was reviewed by the County and submitted to the State Department of Parks and Recreation). This request will complement other grants already approved for the acquisition of the property, including \$492,500 from HCF/Fiscal Year 1997-98, and \$200,000 from the Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program ("EEMP"). An HCF grant of \$500,000 this year will be matched with contributions of land and cash from the Trust for Public Land ("TPL") (\$300,000), and a pending grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Grant ("NFWF") (\$200,000). An additional EEMP grant of request of \$500,00 will be submitted in November, 1997. An appropriation in Fiscal Year 1998-99 from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund ("LWCF") to the Bureau of Land Management ("BLM") will be pursued for the acquisition of the remaining acreage on the ranch.

III. ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITY

1. What is your experience in administering grants?

The County has a long history of administering grants. The Planning, Energy Management, and Public Works departments are presently administering grants.

2. What is your experience in operating/maintaining this type of project or other similar recreation or wildlife area projects?

The County is currently maintaining parks, campgrounds, and other recreational facilities.

3. *How do you propose to maintain and operate the project?*

The 312 acre portion of the 1,031 acre property will be maintained as open space/wildlife habitat. The remaining property will be maintained and operated in a manner compatible with these uses.

IV. *PROJECT READINESS*

1. *How soon after the funds become available can the project be started? What is projected date for project completion?*

Conway Ranch is available immediately for acquisition from a willing seller. The funding package will include a land value donation from TPL and allocations of funding from EEMP, LWCF and an outstanding request from NFWF. TPL exercised its option to purchase the property on July 30, 1997 and is acting as bridge funder for Mono County. TPL and Mono County have signed a purchase and sale agreement which commits them for a period of one year to work together to secure funding for the acquisition of the property.

2.

a. *Is there a willing seller?*

Yes. TPL exercised its option to purchase the property on July 30, 1997. TPL is willing to sell Conway Ranch to the County. TPL and Mono County have signed a purchase and sale agreement which commits them for a period of one year to work together to secure funding for the acquisition of the property.

b. *Does an appraisal of the property exist?*

Yes. The appraised value is \$3.3 million. TPL will donate \$300,000 in land value and sell Conway Ranch to the public agency for \$3.0 million.

c. *Do you have an option to purchase the property?*

Yes. TPL and Mono County have signed a purchase and sale agreement which commits them for a period of one year to work together to secure funding for the acquisition of the property.

d. *Do you have a preliminary title report?*

Yes. The County has a title report.

V. *NEED FOR THE PROJECT*

1. Community Need

a. Why should this particular project be funded?

Conway Ranch is significant on several levels. With the dramatic eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada just a half mile to the west, Conway Summit one mile to the north, and Mono Lake three miles to the south-east, Conway Ranch is the most prominent private land in the Mono Basin. In addition to the protection of a critical deer migration corridor, public acquisition of the Conway Ranch property will protect critical wetland and riparian habitat, enhance the ongoing effort to restore the natural integrity of Mono Lake, and preserve an important local historic resource.

The \$500,000 HCF grant, plus the \$500,000 in matching funds and land value, will allow for the acquisition of approximately 312 acres of deer habitat. Mule deer are the most important big game species of the eastern Sierra Nevada, and the California Department of Fish and Game ("DFG") devotes considerable effort to their management. Conway Ranch is an important link in the route of the Mono Lake herd during its seasonal migrations between its summering grounds at high elevations in the Sierra Nevada and wintering grounds in western Mineral County, Nevada. Some 720 deer travel through or immediately adjacent to the land each year. (For more specific information, please refer to Section 2 - Wildlife Habitat Justification.)

The riparian and wetland resources of Conway Ranch draw the mule deer and other wildlife populations to the property, including mountain lion which help naturally control the deer population and ensure deer health. Wilson Creek traverses public land as well as Conway Ranch for approximately 1.2 miles. Additional riparian vegetation exists along Mill Creek, to the south of the property. Approximately 171 acres of jurisdictional wetlands are located on the property, 140 of which are existing wet meadows. The wet meadow community on Conway Ranch contains several perennial freshwater springs, and is dominated by several species of sedges, rushes and grasses. The wet meadows of the Mono Basin are extraordinarily rich in the occurrence of butterflies - several uncommon species have been observed on Conway Ranch, including the Apache silverspot. The northern bog violet is found throughout the wet meadow community and is the larval hostplant of the Apache silverspot. The property's migration corridor, riparian and wetland resources also provide valuable habitat for sage grouse, red-tailed hawk, northern harrier, great blue heron and various species of songbirds and water fowl. Pronghorn antelope have also visited the property for extended periods of grazing.

The 1,031-acre property dominates the viewshed from Conway Summit and serves as the northern gateway to Mono Lake. With Mono Lake just three miles from the property, the acquisition of Conway Ranch will advance the local, state, and federal effort to protect the overall natural integrity of the lake and the Mono Basin. The property also played a significant role in the County's local history - what is referred to in this grant request as "Conway Ranch" is actually two historic ranches, those of the Mattly and Conway families.

The Conway family ranch site, complete with corral and homestead, dates back to the days of the Gold Rush when the property was used to raise cattle for the town of Bodie.

The property has an approved specific plan calling for the construction of 600 units of housing, a 27-hole golf course, an equestrian center, conference facilities, a shopping center, and a fly-fishing resort on the property. In order to facilitate the Conway Ranch protection effort, TPL exercised its option to purchase the property on July 30, 1997. TPL and Mono County have signed a purchase and sale agreement which commits them for a period of one year to work together to secure funding for the acquisition of the property. If an agency is unable to secure sufficient funding to acquire the property, TPL may proceed to return it to sale on the private market.

b. Is there a deficiency of similar opportunities?

This is a unique opportunity to acquire and preserve a property that has been the target of a controversial housing and resort development for many years. Moreover, the acquisition of Conway Ranch represents a chance to protect a large tract of land, rich in wildlife habitat, and maintain the natural qualities and biodiversity of the Mono Basin.

c. Is there support for the project (citizen involvement, donated land or materials, volunteer labor, outside funds, letters of support?)

A variety of outside funding sources, including public agency grants and a donation of land value from TPL, will be used to complete the acquisition of the 1,031-acre property.

The Conway Ranch protection effort involves a community-based evaluation process called CREW (Conway Ranch Evaluation Workgroup) whose participants have included Mono County, the Mono Lake Committee, the People for Mono Basin Preservation, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB), California Department of Parks and Recreation, California Regional Water Quality Control Board, State Lands Commission, California Department of Transportation, US Forest Service (USFS), BLM, Southern California Edison, CalTrout, Ducks Unlimited and TPL, among others. In addition to pursuing the property acquisition, the County is facilitating this consensus building process with the SWRCB to determine the long-term management of the property and its resources.

The public acquisition and protection of Conway Ranch is supported by federal, state, and local agencies as well as private conservation groups. Letters from the specific groups and agencies will be forwarded under separate cover.

d. Is the project consistent with state, regional or local plans?

Yes. Several agencies own and manage land in this area. Conway Ranch lies just outside the Mono Basin Scenic Area ("Scenic Area"), which is managed by the USFS in an effort to preserve the unique character of the region. BLM and DFG both own land that borders Conway Ranch and manage it for habitat protection and public recreation. As Conway Ranch is the Board of Supervisors' top priority for acquisition, the project is clearly consistent with local plans.

e. Does the project connect to or complement other recreation or wildlife areas or facilities?

Yes. Located at the base of Conway Summit, Conway Ranch is fundamental to the scenic and natural character of the area. The majority of the land surrounding Conway Ranch is publicly-owned and managed for habitat protection. DFG's property, which borders the ranch just to the north, is the continuation of the deer migration route that crosses Conway Ranch. The lands to be acquired with HCF and other funds will directly aid DFG in achieving its goals of protecting the deer habitat and maintaining this corridor. In addition, Conway Ranch is a perfect complement to the neighboring Scenic Area and the BLM-designated "Conway Summit Area of Critical Environmental Concern" ("ACEC") (which is located within a mile of Conway Ranch), much of which is protected for waterfowl and migratory bird habitat.

f. Describe public access to the project site and any barriers to public access.

Conway Ranch has improved vehicular access via US Highway 395 and County roads 3049

and 3052, all of which traverse the property. The majority of the ranch will be open to the public, subject to the conditions needed to maintain the deer migration route.

2. *Wildlife Habitat Justification (Based on information provided by Terry Russi, Wildlife Biologist, BLM, Bishop Resource Area)*

a. *Describe the occurrence of mountain lions in the project area.*

Mountain lions are attracted to the project area due to the annual fall and spring migration of several hundred mule deer through the Conway Ranch and surrounding area. The small number of deer (an estimated 20-30 individuals) that occur on the Conway Ranch and in the immediate area in the summer, in addition to the influx of domestic livestock on the surrounding public land, causes mountain lions (an estimate 2-3 individuals) to have a continuous presence from spring through early winter in most years. Mountain lions probably do not occur in the project area during most of the winter.

b. *Describe how the proposal encompasses a geographical area which contributes significantly to the maintenance of a relatively large number of deer and/or lions; or describe how the proposal encompasses an area critical to the maintenance of an isolated and/or declining population of deer and/or mountain lions.*

Conway Ranch serves as a critical component of the migration corridor for the Mono Lake mule deer herd. Mono Lake mule deer must leave their higher elevation summer range in the Sierra Nevada before the onset of significant snowfall and move to traditional winter range located in the western portion of Mineral County, Nevada. Mule deer use a route of least resistance (avoiding human development) in their migration through the northwest corner of the Mono Basin. The Conway Ranch is located at the juncture of the lower elevation Mono Basin and the slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the west. The Conway Ranch and immediate area form a natural conduit of habitat types for mule deer to follow in migration. Conway Ranch is used on occasion by pronghorn antelope during the spring and summer when they seek other foraging areas away from the Bodie Hills.

c. *Indicate if the proposal will protect or establish a clearly-defined and discrete corridor(s) linking two or more separate and significant deer/lion habitat areas.*

Public acquisition of Conway Ranch will protect a well-known and significant component of the Mono Lake deer herd migration corridor between the Sierra Nevada, the Mono Basin, and western Mineral County, Nevada.

d. *Describe the specific environmental element(s) at the project site known to be critically important to the maintenance of current deer and/or lion population levels.*

Mule deer consistently occupy the jurisdictional wetland cover types on Conway Ranch, including wet meadow (140 acres) and Modoc-Great Basin riparian scrub (31 acres), and the riparian vegetation found along Wilson Creek which traverses the property for approximately 1.2 miles. Additional wetland and riparian vegetation in the area exists along 1.75 miles of Wilson Creek that crosses public land adjacent to the Conway Ranch. Mill Creek provides other riparian habitat for mule deer one mile south of Conway Ranch. The riparian corridor serves primarily as hiding and resting cover for mule deer, while the adjacent

bitterbrush/sagebrush dominated vegetation community is a high quality foraging area. Sage grouse, another very important game species, also occur on Conway Ranch. The overall mule deer and sage grouse habitat quality is exceptionally good due to the very limited amount of livestock grazing on Conway Ranch and surrounding public land.

Wilson Creek's perennial flows are created with water diverted from nearby Virginia and Mill Creeks. Discussions regarding the possible return of water to restore Mill Creek and its Mono Lake delta are currently underway. The final resolution, pending the completion of studies to determine the affects on riparian vegetation and other resources, will be made by SWRCB. Regardless of the outcome, if Conway Ranch is publicly acquired, historic riparian habitat would be maintained along Mill and Wilson Creeks for the mule deer population.

e. Describe how the land surrounding the project site impacts the project site. Indicate whether adjacent land ownership is public or private.

Most of the land around Conway Ranch is public and under the administration of BLM. The only activity that regularly occurs on the adjacent public lands, to the north and east, is domestic livestock grazing. Some other activities that occur, on a very limited basis, on adjacent public lands include hunting, fishing, scientific research, bird watching, photography, and dirt bike and other vehicle use of two-track dirt roads.

In addition to BLM-managed lands, DFG owns and manages land, directly north and adjacent to Conway Ranch, specifically for the benefit of the mule deer migration corridor. Mule deer are the most important big game species of the eastern Sierra Nevada, and the DFG devotes considerable effort to their management. Conway Ranch is an important link for the Mono Lake herd's seasonal migrations between its summering grounds at high elevations in the Sierra Nevada and wintering grounds in western Mineral County, Nevada. Pronghorn antelope have also visited the property for extended periods of grazing. The acquisition of Conway Ranch will significantly benefit DFG's management goals. The Scenic Area and the BLM-designated ACEC are located within a mile of the lands to be acquired.

f. Discuss what the time frame for completion of the project might be and what will happen to the site if the project is not funded.

Acquisition of Conway Ranch can occur immediately upon availability of HCF grant funds. Conway Ranch has an approved specific plan calling for the construction of 600 units of housing, a 27-hole golf course, an equestrian center, conference facilities, a shopping center, and a fly-fishing resort on the property. TPL exercised its option to purchase the property on July 30, 1997 and is acting as bridge funder for Mono County. TPL and Mono County have signed a purchase and sale agreement which commits them for a period of one year to work together to secure funding for the acquisition of the property.