



# 2023 ANNUAL REPORT



**RESOURCE  
CONSERVATION  
DISTRICT**

Greater San Diego County



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# 2023 IN REVIEW

2023 was a great year for the Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego. We continued to grow our programs, partnerships, and staff this year and welcomed a new member to our Board of Directors.

The year started with a challenge. Like so many others in San Diego, we experienced flooding at two sites we manage: the Tijuana River Valley Community Garden (TRVCG) and Wild Willow Farm. When these agricultural sites flood edible crops must be removed, and food growing is paused while the soil recovers. This causes delays in gardeners being able to access their community garden plots, and farmers at the TRVCG quarter acre plots must wait months until they can plant and harvest again. At Wild Willow Farm we also must wait for the soil to be ready for planting; however, despite not being able to grow food for a period of time, we were quickly able to bounce back and offer workshops, field trips, and volunteering opportunities, allowing the community to continue to spend time at the farm.

In 2023, our agricultural programs continued to grow. We partnered with Mission RCD to implement the County Water Authority's Agricultural Water Management Program, expanding the irrigation audit services we offer to farmers and ranchers in our district. In partnership with the San Diego Local Area Formation Commission, we completed the Sustainable Agriculture Planning Project, a look at the County's ag land and what is needed to preserve agriculture in San Diego County for generations to come. This project resulted in ten policy recommendations developed with farmers and ranchers, decision makers, and agricultural stakeholders.

We continued to unfurl our pollinator programming in 2023, work made all the more successful by collaborating with amazing partners. Our Working Lands for Pollinators Program received additional funding to install pollinator habitat on farms and ranches and we continue to endeavor to spread native milkweed far and wide across the County.

This year, we continued to build on our forestry and fire prevention programs. Through this work, we partner with dozens of agencies, organizations, and tribes to increase the pace and scale of training and forest health programs so that our communities become more resilient to wildfire. San Diego is home to more community Fire Safe Councils than anywhere else in the nation, and in partnership with the Fire Safe Council of San Diego County, we continued to support this network with education, outreach, planning, and development.

Our amazing staff managed over 30 grants and contracts in 2023 and the RCD grew from 20 to 24 employees to meet the needs of our increased workload. We are grateful to serve our district with conservation programs and to collaborate with so many incredible partners in this work. 2024 looks set to be another busy and successful year and we look forward to sharing it with you!



Ann Baldrige, RCDGSDC Executive Director

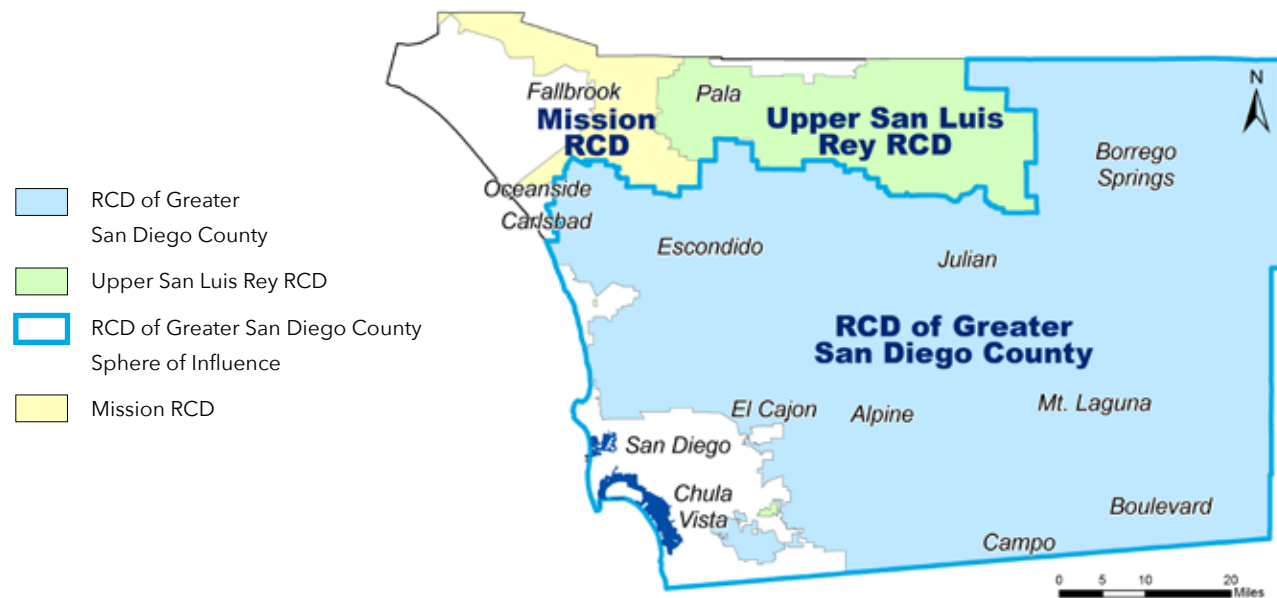


# WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

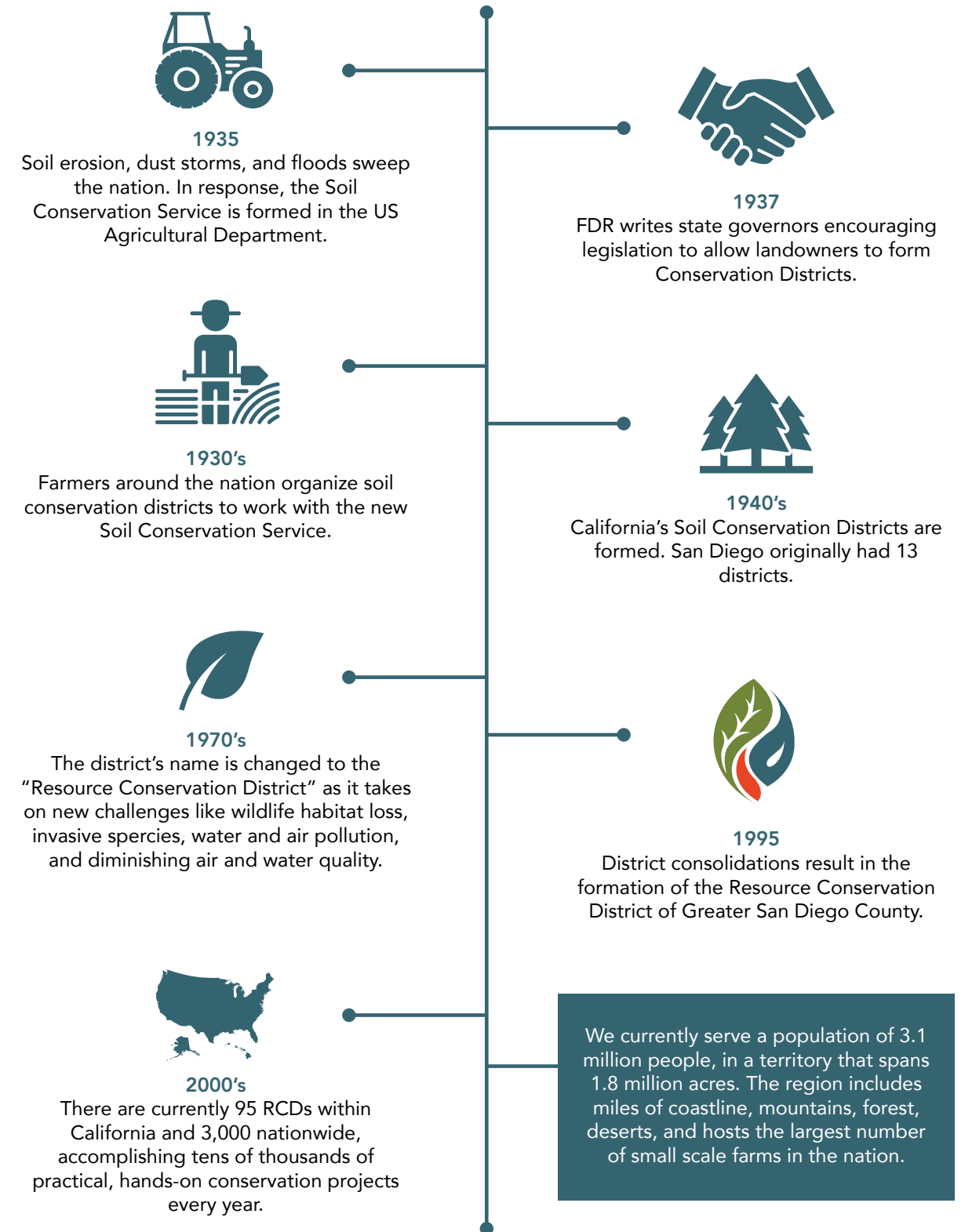
Protecting, conserving, and restoring natural resources across 1.8 million acres, the Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego County (RCDGSDC) is a non-regulatory Special District organized under Division 9 of the California State Public Resources Code. The RCDGSDC administers programs to restore and protect San Diego County watersheds, prevent wildfire damage through education and fuel reduction, promote nutrition and stewardship through sustainable agriculture, and revitalize pollinator habitats. As stewards of the regional environment, we partner with a diverse group of landowners, public and private institutions, and concerned citizens to address the diverse conservation and environmental concerns that are unique to San Diego County.

## OUR SERVICE AREA

- 1,847,300 acres or 2,886 square miles San Diego County
- Population: 3.1 million
- Fifth highest populated county in US
- 19th largest agricultural economy in US
- Largest number of small farms (more than 5,000) in US San Diego County
- San Diego has the largest number of part-time farmers
- Second largest number of farms with women as principal operator
- Adjacent to 18 federally recognized Tribal Nation Reservations
- Topography: San Diego is considered a biodiversity hotspot. It is home to more than 30 vegetation communities as well as hundreds of rare plant and animal species
- Encompasses mountains, deserts, forest, and coastal resources
- Includes 11 watersheds with streams, rivers, sloughs, lakes, beaches and bays, as well as urban, agricultural, and suburban areas



# OUR HISTORY - 1940'S TO TODAY



### Finances

Our District’s programs, projects, and services are primarily funded by local, state, and federal grants and donations. In addition, we receive income in the form of lease rentals from the Tijuana River Valley Community Garden and the Sweetwater Community Garden, and fees from workshops, courses, field trips, and flower sales at Wild Willow Farm, which we manage. The RCDGSDC receives annual tax apportionment funds allocated from the countywide 1% property tax revenue (assessed land values only). We conduct annual financial audits by an independent auditing firm. Our most recent audit, covering fiscal year 2022-2023 was conducted by Nigro & Nigro PC. This audit and previous audits can be found at our website (<https://www.rcdsandiego.org/district-transparency>). Our audits show the RCDGSDC to be solvent and stable.

**\$5.8M**

At the close of 2023, the RCDGSDC was managing 35 grants totaling more than \$5,812,000

**\$4.7M**

Total Net Assets of the District for 2023: \$4,746,830 (vs \$3,757,115 in 2022)

**\$889K**

Net Assets not invested in buildings, land or equipment (i.e. unrestricted assets): \$889,100 (vs \$852,292 in 2022)

**\$444K**

Total Tax Assessment dollars deposited to the District: \$443,728 (vs \$401,703 in 2022)

**\$1.17M**

Operating Budget 2022-2023: \$1,169,355

**\$1.7M**

Operating Budget 2023-2024: \$1,714,583



## Community Gardens

### *Growing Locally for the Community*

The RCD manages two South San Diego community gardens: the Tijuana River Valley Community Garden (TRVCG) and the Sweetwater Community Garden. The gardens comprise 29 acres of land in total – 25 at TRVCG and four at Sweetwater.

For over two decades the TRVCG has been serving the residents of the South Bay, offering them the ability to grow fresh produce for themselves and their families. The garden includes 210 plots that are rented to residents, and there is a waitlist over one year long for this highly desirable location.

The TRVCG is also home to 10 quarter acre plots for small-scale farmers who want to start their own farm business. In 2023 we hosted Pixca Farm, Grow Eco Farm, and Kind Folk Farms, among others. Offering these spaces to farmers increases access to land, fresh food to the local community, and encourages healthy soil practices. It's one way we are working to reduce barriers to land access in our region, which is a huge challenge for small and beginning farmers. There is also a strong culture of growing locally to support the South Bay community with increased access to sustainably grown produce; you can see this in action every Saturday at Pixca's farm stand on the corner of Hollister Street and Sunset Avenue.

On January 17, 2023 the TRVCG and surrounding area experienced a devastating flood where the water rose up to three feet in some areas. The flood damage and contamination of the water put our farmers out of business for three months. Through collective efforts and independent fundraising more than \$40,000 was

distributed by Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) and donated by Propagate Investments to gap the loss of income and equipment damage. Our farmers and gardeners were back on their feet by May 2023.

TRVCG's sister garden in Bonita, the Sweetwater Community Garden, opened in 2019 and offers 200 garden plots to residents from neighboring communities. The garden is thriving and has nearly reached gardener capacity.

In partnership with 'I Love a Clean San Diego' we held two clean-up days at each location this year, engaging many garden members and community volunteers. The focus of the clean-ups is general care and beautification of the spaces: trash pick-up, clearing abandoned plots, weeding, mulching, and communal fruit tree management. On average we remove a combined eight tons of trash and organic waste per seasonal event.

Through a National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) grant awarded in 2022, RCDGSDC staff was able to continue providing technical assistance and education to gardener members on a multitude of subjects including efficient irrigation systems, pest management, soil health, and composting.

In 2023, we were awarded a grant through the San Diego Foundation to support the TRVCG and fund us to develop an active and involved garden committee, host events and workshops, revive fallow gardens, and lastly, hire another staff member to assist in beautifying the landscape of our community gardens.



Garden plot at Sweetwater Community Garden

### 2023 COMMUNITY IMPACT

- 49 new gardeners received plots at the Sweetwater Garden
- 11 new gardeners received plots at the Tijuana River Valley Community Garden
- 180 garden members participated in garden clean-up events hosted with I Love a Clean San Diego
- Received a \$100,000 grant from the San Diego Foundation
- 2 gardener potlucks held at the Tijuana River Valley Community Garden
- Provided 60 one-to-one gardening consultations and 11 free workshops on topics such as tree maintenance, irrigation efficiency, creating pollinator habitat, compost, and the basics of growing vegetables



## Agricultural Technical Assistance Programs

Agriculture is vital to our region's economy and culture, and yet the amount of agricultural land in use decreases every year due to lack of support and value for this key industry. The RCD is committed to supporting farmers and ranchers by monitoring soil health and water efficiency, educating about on-farm conservation practices, and helping producers to access funds and other resources.

2023 was a busy year for our Ag Team for program development and expansion. We have added pump testing to our irrigation evaluation service for farmers and ranchers funded by the California Department of Agriculture (CDFA). With these funds, we were able to provide pump tests for 35 producers and supported training of a new local practitioner, AWPS Engineering, to make pump testing more accessible in San Diego County. We also began to offer disaster relief assessments and irrigation application assistance.

Through our San Diego Agriculture Planning Program in collaboration with San Diego LAFCO and other partners, we engaged more than 150 stakeholders in the ag industry in policy advocacy discussions, culminating in 10 policy recommendations there were presented at 14 municipal, regional, and state meetings. The policy recommendations can be found on our website, here: San Diego Agricultural Planning Program - Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego County ([specialdistrict.org](https://specialdistrict.org)).

We continue to offer technical assistance to farmers and ranchers in our district including soil testing, support with CDFA Healthy Soils Program funding applications, targeted support for underserved farmers to ensure they can connect to available resources, irrigation evaluations, and support with conservation planning. We also continue to offer education and outreach to farmers and ranchers and other agricultural stakeholders through meetings, workshops, events, and our newsletter. In addition, our Farm Conservation Advisor received certifications that allow us to offer specialty assistance.

This year, we increased support of the quarter acre, or incubator, plot farmers at the Tijuana River Valley Community Garden. This included economic relief following the 2023 January flooding in the Tijuana River Valley.

**2023 COMMUNITY IMPACT**

- 115 farms advised.
- 77 farms provided technical assistance services such as resource assessments, irrigation testing, grant management, economic relief, etc.
- 78 soil samples collected and added to the regional carbon farming database.
- Provided technical assistance for conservation practices on 1,350 acres.
- Conducted 30 irrigation evaluations.
- Provided 35 pump tests.
- Hosted 12 events attended by 249 participants, of which 115 were farmers or ranchers.
- Tabled at 22 meetings and events.
- Translated 69 pages of materials to Spanish.
- Newsletter subscribers total 300, half of which are farmers and ranchers.
- Worked with more than 25 partners to further agriculture in San Diego County.

## Southern California Soil & Water Hub

In October, RCDGSDC joined with Mission, Upper San Luis Rey, Coachella Valley, and Inland Empire RCDs to form the Southern California Soil and Water Hub, part of a statewide network of regional Hubs supporting growers with climate smart farming practices. The Regional Hubs were established through a partnership between RCDs, the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts, and the Carbon Cycle Institute. Our Regional Hub Coordinator, Rachel Petitt, was hired in 2023 to work within our region and with the statewide network of Hubs to leverage and expand agricultural conservation partnerships and programs to:

- Expand technical and financial assistance programs.
- Foster innovation and development of regionally appropriate climate ag solutions.
- Strengthen collaboration among producers, agencies, organizations, researchers, and policymakers.
- Assess regional needs and opportunities through understanding our diverse agricultural, ecological, and social landscapes.

**AGRICULTURE IN SAN DIEGO (PER THE 2022 AG CENSUS DATA AND CROP REPORT):**

- 4,031 farms, 7,489 producers
- Average farm size 44 acres
- 38,384 acres of irrigated land (tie to our irrigation efficiency program)
- 5,257 acres in conservation easement
- 663 farms practice no till or reduced till
- 262 farms are USDA certified organic
- 3,212 female producers
- 302 farmers less than 35 years old
- 774 have military service

## Carbon Farming Network RCD Regional Hubs

*Scaling climate-beneficial agriculture requires investing in local and regional agricultural conservation partnerships.*

### WHO WE ARE

A growing network of farmers and ranchers, technical assistance providers, researchers and educators across California dedicated to advancing climate-beneficial agriculture, coordinated through our local Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs).

Regional Hubs leverage and expand agricultural conservation partnerships and programs to:

- Expand technical and financial assistance programs and services to support agricultural conservation
- Strengthen collaboration among producers, agencies, organizations, researchers, and policymakers
- Foster innovation and development of regionally appropriate agricultural climate solutions
- Assess regional needs and opportunities through understanding our diverse agricultural, ecological, and social landscapes

**Pollinator Health:**

***Supporting Native Habitat on Private, Public and Working Lands***

The RCDGSDC supports pollinator health through education, outreach, and in-ground pollinator habitat projects. This year, we focused on working directly with farmers and ranchers to create more pollinator habitat on working lands and hosted the first ever San Diego Pollinator Week, in addition to continuing our regular programming and partnerships.

**SAN DIEGO POLLINATOR WEEK**

We were inspired by the Pollinator Partnership’s National Pollinator week that is hosted annually in June. However, that does not align with our most abundant bloom season and thus we decided to build our own San Diego Pollinator Week, from May 8 through May 14. Through support from the San Diego Gas & Electric Community Investment Fund, we were able to organize nine events during the week including:

- Two milkweed swaps, in which community members could bring invasive tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*) and receive free native milkweed (*Asclepias fascicularis*) in exchange; growing partners were local nurseries Caterpillar Chow and Native West and 368 plants were swapped.
- Beneficial Pollinator Habitat on Working Lands Field Day, where farmers and ranchers toured Ramona Ranch Vineyard & Winery and learned from members of the Wild Farm Alliance about beneficial insects for common vineyard pests.
- Guided Native Plant and Pollinator Hike in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, led by CA State Park botanists and an entomologist from the San Diego Natural History Museum, and joined by ethnobotanists from the Native American Climate Corps.



Ranger shares native plant information during a Pollinator Week event

- Pollinator Gardening Presentation and Guided Native Plant Walk for garden enthusiasts, hosted by the San Diego County Master Gardeners at Mt Helix Park.
- Pollinator Research Presentation given by UCSD Department of Biological Sciences and hosted at the San Diego Botanic Garden.
- Pollinator Gardening Planning Workshop for community gardeners at the Sweetwater Community Garden, guide by partners from the San Diego Pollinator Alliance.
- Family Pollinator Scavenger Hunt and Volunteer Day organized by the Earth Discovery Institute at their native milkweed farm.
- Native Plant and Pollinator Photography Workshop led by local photographers on site at Wild Willow Farm.

**WORKING LANDS FOR POLLINATORS PROGRAM**

Our goal is to establish more native pollinator habitat on San Diego farms and ranches. With a field team of partner biologists and botanists from Point Blue Conservation, Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Earth Discovery Institute, we conduct site assessments and offer technical assistance and resources for the incorporation of land management practices that benefit pollinators and other wildlife. Our original program, funded by the US Fish and Wildlife Service’s Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program, was primarily limited to technical assistance but in 2023 we applied to and received grants to fund the implementation of habitat projects.

**SAN DIEGO NATIVE MILKWEED PROJECT**

The objective of the San Diego Native Milkweed Project is to develop and sustain a source of native milkweed seed and plants for local pollinator habitat creation at both the garden and restoration project levels. In 2023, our commercial growing partners at S&S Seed Company harvested 35lbs of regionally native *A. fascicularis* (Narrowleaf milkweed) seed. This seed was purchased directly by fellow conservation partners, as well as used in our programs.



Volunteers at the Earth Discovery Milkweed Farm

**SAN DIEGO POLLINATOR ALLIANCE**

The RCDGSDC is a founding member of the San Diego Pollinator Alliance (SDPA), a network of agencies and organizations working together to raise awareness about the plight of pollinators, while empowering local residents to take action to support pollinators. Membership has grown to include 26 partner organizations, with two new members from the San Diego Botanic Garden and Wings of Change. The SDPA was approached by UCSD Department of Biological Sciences to support an initiative to get San Diego certified as an official Bee City. It was approved and in 2024, we will serve as a member of the Bee City Committee that will work with the city of San Diego to meet the certification requirements.

**2023 COMMUNITY IMPACT**

- Attended 4 public fairs to promote pollinator awareness and resources.
- Presented at 2 conferences and 1 regional meeting about our pollinator programs.
- Conducted 8 site visits for the Working Lands for Pollinators program and selected 5 to begin project planning and implementation.
- Distributed 2.85 lbs of free, regionally native *A. fascicularis* (Narrowleaf milkweed) seed to over 200 community members through direct mail, partners, and public events.
- 368 invasive tropical milkweed plants were swapped for local native milkweed.
- 250+ community members attended San Diego Pollinator Week events.





## Habitat Restoration

The RCD of Greater San Diego County is committed to habitat restoration, especially along the riparian corridors of our reservoirs and rivers. We address this through grant funded work to collaborate with partners on projects that protect and restore important habitat and overall watershed health.

The RCD is engaged in regional and state-wide efforts to advocate for and conserve habitat. For example, staff hold places on the San Diego Association of Governments Habitat Conservation Task Force and the State of California's Rangeland Management Committee. We partner with San Diego Management and Monitoring Program for regional habitat conservation efforts on conserved lands including ranches. And at the end of 2023, we received a grant award from Wildlife Conservation Board for a restoration planning project in the Otay Valley Regional Park in partnership with Green Infrastructure Consortium and others.

This year, we completed the San Diego River Healthy Headwaters project. The goal of this project was to survey and treat invasive vegetation along San Diego River tributaries, replant with natives, create interpretive signage, and conduct education and outreach. This work was funded by a California Department of Water Resource Proposition 84 Block Grant to San Diego County Water Authority and led by our RCD. Partners contributed match funding to leverage grant dollars and exceed the projects' goals.

*The RCD is engaged in regional and state-wide efforts to advocate for and conserve habitat.*

### THIS MULTI-YEAR PROJECT RESULTED IN THE FOLLOWING OUTCOMES:

- 5,348 acres of habitat surveyed for invasive plants
- 94 acres treated for arundo, tamarisk and other invasives
- 800 native plants installed along 0.5 miles of riparian corridor
- 64 events to educate the public
- 20 miles of trails stabilized
- Control of 162 feral pigs and 2,206 invasive aquatic organisms

## Wild Willow Farm & Education Center

Located in the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park, Wild Willow Farm is a peaceful community space where visitors of all ages can connect with nature, the land, and food. Through regenerative farming practices, the farm focuses on growing soil, produce, and community.

Throughout 2023, Wild Willow Farm opened its doors to community members, offering opportunities to participate in volunteer days, workshops, field trips, farm stands, and tree planting events. These activities not only provided outdoor fun for locals but also served as a chance to learn and connect with others who share similar interests.

Through support from a CDFA Farm to School grant, we were able to purchase a tractor and implements to develop a new field focused on growing fresh produce for the Sweetwater Union High School District. Another important part of the grant is conducting workshops for the high school students who manage a newly forming school farm at Southwest High School, just one mile from Wild Willow Farm. In September, farm staff lead a workshop to teach students how to use a BCS walk-behind tractor. We also began helping to plan the development of the new farm field and orchard at the school.

Through an event with OneTreePlanted, 37 new fruit trees were planted at Wild Willow in 2023. In the fields, we increased production to continue providing the community with fresh fruits and vegetables. The farm expanded production of flowers following flooding in January of 2023 as a way of diversifying income during future floods.

During the summer months we opened the farm for a tomato and flower U-pick opportunity which brought in new connections that resulted in more volunteers and interns. The farm also hosted a "Fall at the Farm" event at the end of October. This event included a pumpkin patch, kids' activities, a farm stand, flower u-pick, a plant walk, tea making, and a seed swap and attracted over 300 attendees. This was the first big event at the farm since the COVID pandemic and it was very inspiring to have so many new faces come visit the farm!



Bee on tithonia flower

**Field Trips:** We welcome schools, groups, and clubs of all kinds to visit the farm to see first-hand how a small working farm operates. During field trips, students learn about compost, seeds, regenerative agriculture, and the roles that animals play on a farm. In 2023, we taught approximately 1,820 students through 62 field trips for local schools and groups.

**Workshops:** From beer brewing and beekeeping to mushroom cultivation and baking with ancient grains, we teach a diverse array of fun and educational workshops. We hosted 38 workshops over the course of the year and sold 328 tickets. We also continued our partnership with external educators and invited five to join us at the farm and share their knowledge through new workshops.

**Farm School:** For the more serious minded, we offer an eight-week course teaching the fundamentals of regenerative farming. In 2023, we taught three sessions of Farm School and educated 58 students about the importance of sustainable farming.



Wild Willow Farm field trip

**Internships:** Our 12-week internship program develops individuals into budding new farmers and/or good food community advocates. Interns work alongside staff in tending the fields, harvesting and packaging produce, and supporting all other farm activities. In 2023, we hosted 13 interns who paired their internship with knowledge from classes and workshops. Several of these interns did their internship while simultaneously attending school for agriculture or sustainability.

**CSA Farmshare (Community Supported Agriculture):** In 2023 our CSA program was put on pause from January - July 2023 due to flooding in the Tijuana River Valley. When we began harvesting again, we focused on the local communities first and membership was offered for pick up at the farm and delivery to Imperial Beach, serving 10 households weekly.

**Foodshed:** In 2023, we continued working with Foodshed, a cooperative that works directly with farmers, eaters, and entrepreneurs to cultivate an equitable food system in San Diego while addressing the challenges posed by the climate crisis. Wild Willow Farm produce was included in FoodShed's CSA program and was available at their City Heights hub.

**Volunteers:** Wild Willow was open to the public one day a week to give community members a taste of the things a farmer does while preparing and growing seasonal produce

in San Diego. In 2023, the farm welcomed 1,300 volunteers who provided 3,159 hours of labor and assisted with animal care, CSA harvest, weeding, and planting.

**Community Functions & Events:** Individuals, clubs, and corporate groups are all welcome to get their hands dirty by volunteering at the farm. The farm is also available to host weddings, meetings, birthday parties and outside workshops. This year we hosted 7 field events with approximately 230 participants.

### 2023 COMMUNITY IMPACT

- 300+ attendees at Fall at the Farm event.
- 62 field trips reaching 1,820 students.
- 38 workshops with 328 tickets sold.
- 58 students taught through Farm School.
- Hosted 13 interns.
- 1,300 volunteers provided 3,159 hours of service.
- 7 field events / experiences reaching 234 participants.



Watershed Connection presentation

### The Watershed Connection Education Program: *Reducing Pollution and Protecting San Diego*

In the past year, the RCDGSDC continued its collaboration with the Port of San Diego to educate elementary students on watersheds and pollution prevention. This year marked the return of our presentation to the classroom setting, garnering tremendous support. Students expressed a longing for the hands-on aspect of the activity, and being back in person has reignited enthusiasm and active participation.

During this one-hour session, students learn about watersheds and how pollution travels from urban areas, meanders through creeks and rivers, and ultimately reaches bays and oceans. This interactive, science-centered educational program empowers students to take action in safeguarding their local watersheds, mitigating pollution in their communities, and embracing roles as environmental stewards. With over 25 years of experience in delivering this program, the RCDGSDC continues to be inspired by the fervor it ignites among students.

In 2023, the RCDGSDC made significant strides in enhancing this program by hiring a new Education Assistant, who joined the team in October. The Watershed Program has since expanded in response to her contributions.

Furthermore, in early 2023, we hosted our Watershed Program Internship for college seniors, offering them

valuable career experience and teaching skills. This internship not only bolsters program staffing but also strengthens our partnerships with local colleges while aiding the RCDGSDC in fulfilling match funding requirements, as intern time is quantified as an in-kind contribution.

**2023 COMMUNITY IMPACT**

- 83% of the elementary school teachers rated the program experience and content delivery as excellent.
- One college intern supported the program by providing 105 volunteer hours.
- Hired one new RCDGSDC staff member to support the program.
- Pre- and post-test records indicated that every participating class had an increase in understanding the connection between pollution & watershed health.
- Students “pay it forward,” by sharing their new-found knowledge with family members.
- We educated 1,118 students through 44 presentations at schools within the San Diego Bay Watershed.

### School Garden Support

When young students are taught to garden it creates a strong connection to the land as well as an understanding of where food comes from and exposure to healthy food choices. Bringing students outside allows them to learn in a tactile way and helps to release stress.

In 2023, the RCDGSDC supported school gardens by offering free vegetable and herb seedlings through our Annual Plant Giveaway in partnership with Altman Plants. We also provided school garden resources through an email newsletter and offered an educational program to teach students about the importance of pollinators.

Through our pollinator education program, RCD instructors visited local schools to engage students in learning about western monarch butterfly conservation. This free program was designed to build student awareness of their environment and the importance that pollinators play in our everyday lives.

We also brought our pollinator education program to the Sunflower Farms at the San Diego County Fair! We worked with students from all over San Diego County and taught them about pollution, parts of a flower, and why monarchs are important.



Recipients of veggie starts from our Plant Giveaway

**2023 COMMUNITY IMPACT**

- 2,500 vegetable & herb seedlings were given away to support 250 school gardens and local backyards.
- Two School Garden Newsletters provided school garden resources and funding opportunities.
- Talked with over 1,000 students about pollinators & pollinator habitat at the Sunflower Farms exhibit at the San Diego County Fairgrounds.
- Taught 136 students through 5 presentations about the importance of pollinator habitat and monarch conservation.
- Provided resources to local museums to educate the public about pollinator support.



## School Garden Support

### Quotes from the Plant Giveaway

*"I wanted to thank you so very much for the wonderful plant giveaway you held on Thursday. The assorted vegetables, fruits, and herbs look so good and healthy - I'm so excited to plant these in our Burbank ES garden beds with the students next week! "*

*– Heidi Hauch from Burbank Elementary School*

*"Thank you so much for the plants! I had my 3rd graders harvest our winter garden and plant the new seedlings-they loved it! I have all my 2nd-8th graders work in the garden, study soil science and learn about farm to table in Science. Thanks!"*

*– Caitlyn Toropova from Children's Primary School*

*"Thank you for your generous donation. My gardening club students were excited to plant the herbs, vegetables, and the beautiful Plumeria"*

*– Parnak Mermar from Pacific Trails Middle School*



## Supporting High School Conservationists: Creating Environmental Stewards for the Future

Each year, the RCDGSDC diligently works to preserve and safeguard our natural resources through a range of programs. However, without a concerted effort towards educating today's youth, these efforts would be futile. As stewards of the earth, we recognize that one day we will entrust the care of our planet to the next generation. That's why we prioritize education, equipping future generations with the knowledge and tools necessary to coexist harmoniously with our environment. Our commitment extends to supporting high school seniors with a passion for environmental science and agriculture. Through initiatives such as college scholarships, Range Camp, and hands-on learning experiences, we inspire students to explore sustainability and consider careers in conservation.

Our scholarship program allows us to support conservation-minded high school seniors with college scholarships, a program we have proudly maintained for 36 years running! This year we awarded seven students with \$1,000 scholarships to use towards their tuition while studying majors involving environmental sciences.

"Thank you so much for selecting me as a recipient of your scholarship! This scholarship will greatly help me with pursuing my goal of becoming an Agriculture Teacher! I really appreciate you supporting students working to protect our environment" - Morgan Nelson, 2023 Scholarship Winner

In addition, we were able to send two students to Range Camp. This is a week-long opportunity where students learn about soil, plant families, creek health and wildlife surveying techniques. The goal of Range Camp is to introduce students to the professional world of plant, animal, and landscape management.

**2023 COMMUNITY IMPACT**

- Seven environmentally-conscious high school seniors received \$1,000 college scholarships to pursue degrees in conservation-related fields.
- Received 21 Conservation Scholarship applicants.
- Two students were awarded the Range Camp sponsorship and had the chance to learn about agriculture and conservation in Half Moon Bay.
- Supported two high school interns at Wild Willow Farm.



Conservation Scholarship recipients



High school students learning to use a BCS tractor

## Fire Safe Council of San Diego County

The RCDGSDC partners with the Fire Safe Council of San Diego County (FSCSDC) to assist residents with defensible space and wildfire preparedness and to support the network of Community Fire Safe Councils across the county.

Historically, the FSCSDC has offered two programs to assist residents with creating and maintaining defensible space: the No-Cost Chipping and Defensible Space Assistance Programs. These programs were designed to help residents create and main defensible space and reduce hazardous fuels in communities. In 2023, we received grant funding from California Fire Safe Council through CAL FIRE to redesign these programs to increase efficiency, collaboration, and education. The new Home Assessment Program will educate homeowners about defensible space, fire preparedness, and the importance of protecting their structures and communities, and will provide support to meet defensible space requirements.

### In 2023, our programs provided:

- 360 no-cost chipping services:
  - 3,089,592 cu/ft of fuels treated
  - 3,812.82 acres protected, 700.80 acres treated
- 216 defensible space assistance program services provided to disadvantaged homeowners:
  - 8,766,373 cu/ft of fuels treated
  - 797.91 acres protected, 100.92 acres treated



Fire Safe Council volunteers and supporters

### SUPPORTING COMMUNITY FIRES SAFE COUNCILS

Community Fire Safe Councils are at the forefront of localized wildfire preparedness and education. These volunteer groups work within their communities to raise awareness, support hazardous fuel reduction, and help their neighbors be better prepared for wildfire. San Diego County has more community FSCs than anywhere else in California! We support this network of 40 Fire Safe Councils through education and outreach, help with establishing and strengthening their local FSCs, networking opportunities, and assistance with preparing or updating Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs).

### In 2023, we provided the following support:

- Hosted 1 workshop focused on fire in the Wildland Urban Interface.
- Hosted 3 Last Chance Survival workshops.
- Participated in 2 Wildfire Safety Fairs.
- Hosted 6 FSC Coffee Chats.
- Hosted 6 General Meetings for community FSCs.
- Hosted 2 CWPP workshops to help FSC write their CWPPs.
- Supported 5 communities with creation or amendments to CWPPs.
- Offered 3 Community Chipping Days.

### VOLUNTEER AWARDS

The FSCSDC held its annual Volunteer Awards appreciation in Poway on May 30, where we honored the outstanding work of community fire safe councils and agency partners, with special recognition to seven awardees. Partners including San Diego Gas and Electric, San Diego Regional Fire Foundation, the United States Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management, CAL FIRE, San Diego County Fire, San Diego Fire-Rescue, and Elected Officials from federal, state, and local agencies were in attendance. This event was co-hosted with the Poway Neighborhood Emergency Corps/ Poway FSC and Chief Chumbley of Poway Fire.

### COMMUNITY FSC GRANTS

A new partnership between the FSCSDC, San Diego Regional Fire Foundation, and San Diego Gas and Electric was cultivated this year. By aligning efforts and funds for Fire Safe Council capacity building, the three agencies were able to award \$123,610 to support the work of 19 fire safe councils in San Diego County.

## Building Regional Capacity for Wildfire Resilience

### REGIONAL FOREST AND FIRE CAPACITY PROGRAM

Being part of the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity (RFFC) Program has allowed us to develop and strengthen partnerships and become better connected with regional and statewide efforts - and it comes at a critical time. Our changing climate, with longer droughts and more extreme weather, means that our fire season is now year-round and our already high wildfire risk landscapes are at greater risk.

Through our ongoing work as an RFFC block grantee, we finalized and published our first Regional Priority Plan (RPP) and priority project list in 2023. The purpose of the RPP is to address the immediate needs to increase regional capacity to identify, plan, and implement strategies and projects that create fire adapted communities and landscapes. This is a living document that includes collaboration and input from a range of regional stakeholders: tribal nations, agency partners, non-profit organizations, fire safe councils, practitioners, community groups, researchers and advisory groups. The RPP serves as a tool to continue engaging and coordinating with partners to track priority projects, wildfire funding, capacity, and other needs and barriers for the region to advocate on their behalf.

The RPP can be read on our website, here: <https://www.rcdsandiego.org/rffc>.

In addition to regional planning, our RFFC block grant helps to support the work of many partners engaged in forest health and wildfire resilience projects. In 2023 this included:

- Girls Scouts San Diego Imperial District at their Camp Winacka property to help them obtain CEQA compliance for, then begin to implement, their Forest Management Plan.
- Climate Science Alliance and the La Jolla Band of Luiseño to develop an Indigenous Forestry and Fuels Crew.
- La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians and the community of Oak Grove to combat the Gold Spotted Oak Borer (GSOB), a beetle that poses a significant threat to oak trees.

We are committed to supporting research and management of this pest in San Diego County to help reduce tree mortality and resulting fuel loads. Our team supported two GSOB management and research projects in 2023:

We support research and a capacity building demonstration project in collaboration with **La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians**. This project has many facets including felling and processing dead oak trees, planning, researching new treatments, and workforce development- to name a few. Joelene Tamm, a Native American researcher, is collecting data to observe how cultural burning can be used as a treatment tool to combat GSOB to save heritage oak trees.

Learn more about her research [HERE](#).

Additionally, we support the **Oak Grove GSOB Project** in collaboration with researcher Dr. Tom Scott of University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UCANR), and state-licensed and county-registered pesticide applicator and arborist Green Tree Forest Service. This demonstration project supports annual monitoring and treatment of 2,700 trees as part of a 10-year research project.

### GRIZZLYCORPS

GrizzlyCorps is an AmeriCorps fellowship program that connects recent college graduates with organizations working to promote regenerative agri-food systems and fire and forest resilience. In 2023, we hosted two GrizzlyCorps fellows and renewed our partnership with this UC Berkeley based program by creating a fellowship opportunity for the 2023-24 service year.

### NATIVE AMERICAN CONSERVATION CORPS (NACC)

In May 2023, we completed our two-year pilot NACC program with funding from the RFFC Program and San Diego River Conservancy, in collaboration with CA State Parks. Due to the success of the pilot, we continued to collaborate with CA State Parks to offer the program for a third year with a crew that began work in November 2023.

The program is designed along the lines of a Conservation Corps with the objective to offer youth from local tribes on-the-job experience and certifications during their six-month

training session in the Cuyamaca Rancho and Palomar State Parks. Ultimately the goal of the NACC program is to provide youth with the training and experience needed to access careers in forest management and wildland fire.

Participants begin their cohort year by being outfitted with PPE and attending two weeks of safety and basic wildland fire training. Several partners supported this including CAL FIRE, Red Cross, US Forest Service, the Cahuilla Band of Indians, and the La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians.

Participants also received training in Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Chainsaw Use in Wilderness, Basic First Aid and CPR, Native and Invasive Plant Identification, and GPS training (with programs such as Avenza and Collector). They also gained skills in navigating job postings and the job application process using resources such as CalCareers. Having completed their six-month program, these local youth are prepared to enter the workforce either within their communities or with a state or federal agency.

### PALOMAR MOUNTAIN: SAVING SAN DIEGO'S LAST MIXED CONIFER FOREST

This four-year project, funded through a CAL FIRE Forest Health Grant, utilizes a collaborative approach to manage and protect the health of our forests and watersheds to ensure resilience to future wildfire on a landscape scale.

In 2023, work continued with the final treatments being implemented by five state, federal, tribal, and private landowners. The project includes active fuels reduction and reforestation on roughly 1,575 acres on Palomar Mountain. Multiple sustainable benefits to these treatments include improved forest health and wildlife habitat, increased carbon storage, and community protection.

## Goldspotted Oak Borer (GSOB)

"Fighting the Goldspotted Oak Borer" is an instructional video guide that shows proven techniques for understanding, identifying, and treating GSOB. Oak Grove, a small San Diego backcountry community on the north slope of Palomar Mountain, is a success story in stopping an invasive, tree-killing pest from attacking California's beautiful native oaks. This film documents how they've done it and how California oak woodland stakeholders can save the greatest number of oak trees at the least cost.



# RESOURCE CONSERVATION FOUNDATION OF GREATER SAN DIEGO

*Expanding the Reach and Impact of the RCD*

The Resource Conservation Foundation of Greater San Diego - a 501(c)(3) non-profit - was created in 2016 to help expand the RCDGSDC's programs and capabilities. Like the RCDGSDC, the Foundation's mission is to protect, conserve, and restore our County's natural resources through education and fundraising.

The Foundation allows us more flexibility in pursuing funding opportunities. Diversifying our funding sources enables us to better serve our community and bring greater conservation benefits to San Diego County.

In partnership, the RCDGSDC and its Foundation seek funding to restore and protect the county's watersheds, promote nutrition and stewardship through sustainable agriculture, and revitalize pollinator habitats. The Resource Conservation Foundation supports the work that the RCDGSDC accomplishes; especially at Wild Willow Farm and Education Center.

## RESOURCE CONSERVATION FOUNDATION BOARD MEMBERS

**Donald Butz**, Board President

**Diane Moss**, Director

**Marilyn Huntamer**, Board Vice President

**Neil Meyer**, Director

**Odette Gonzalez**, Secretary/Treasurer

**Maggie Sleeper**, Director



## OUR FUNDERS

*We are grateful for the following funders who support our work*

**California Association of Resource Conservation Districts (CARCD)** - Block grants from Monarch Joint Venture, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, the Wildlife Conservation Board, and CAL FIRE

**California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA)** - Healthy Soils Program, CUSP Economic Relief, Farm to School Program, and Water Efficiency Technical Assistance Program

**CAL FIRE** - Cal FIRE's Forest Health Program, as part of California Climate Investments

**California Fire Safe Council** - County Coordinator Grant funded by CAL FIRE as part of California Climate Investments

**County of San Diego** - Tax assessments

**Department of Conservation** - Regional Forest and Fire Capacity (RFFC) & Sustainable Lands Conservation (SALC) Program

**Hervey Family Fund**

**National Association of Conservation Districts**

**Natural Resources Conservation Service**

**Port of San Diego**

**Private Donors**

**Proposition 84** - Department of Water Resources

**San Diego Foundation** - Community Food Grant program

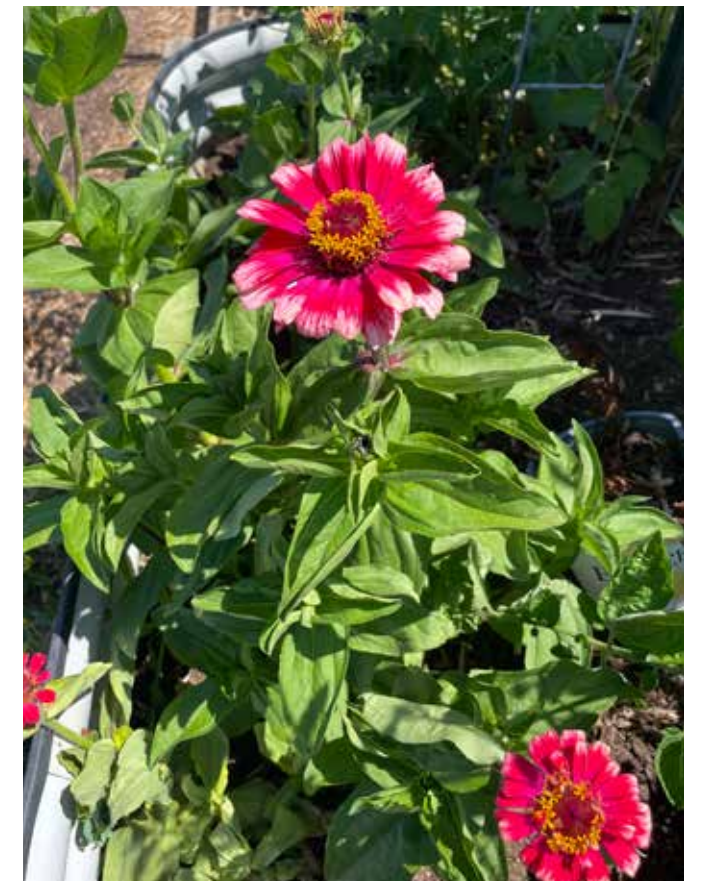
**San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E)** - Environmental Champions & Wildfire Funds Program

**San Diego River Conservancy** - The Governors Wildfire Early Action Plan

**US Fish & Wildlife Service** - Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program

**Wildlife Conservation Board**

**Zero Foodprint** - Restore CA





# OUR PEOPLE

*Dedicated to Serving San Diego County Residents*

## RCDGSDC BOARD MEMBERS

- Donald Butz**, Board President
- Marilyn Huntamer**, Board Vice President
- Odette Gonzalez**, Secretary/Treasurer
- Michael McGrath**, Director

- Diane Moss**, Director
- Neil Meyer**, Director
- Maggie Sleeper**, Director

## RCDGSDC STAFF

- Andy Williamson**, Irrigation Technician
- Ann Baldrige**, Executive Director
- Ashleyann Bacay**, GrizzlyCorps Fellow
- Carolina Guia**, GrizzlyCorps Fellow
- Chris Kelley**, Director of Finance
- Codi Hale**, Community Programs Manager
- Daniela Mejia**, Community Garden Coordinator
- Elizabeth Garcia**, Agricultural Technical Assistant
- Elizabeth Valdez**, Community Garden Assistant
- Erik Rodriguez**, Wild Willow Farm: Operations Manager
- Gregg Cady**, Farm Conservation Advisor
- Heather Marlow**, Director of Forestry & Fire Prevention Programs
- JJ Tidwell**, Wild Willow Farm: Farmer

- Joanna Parra**, Wild Willow Farm: Farmer
- Joanne Sauerma**, Office Coordinator
- Joe Lewis**, GrizzlyCorps Fellow
- Joel Kramer**, Agricultural Specialist
- Kim Hanson**, Wild Willow Farm: Field Trip Coordinator
- Mae Piacenza**, Wild Willow Farm: Assistant Farm Manager
- Morgan Graves**, Fire Prevention & Forestry Coordinator
- Paul Maschka**, Wild Willow Farm: Regenerative Farming Educator
- Rachel Lloyd**, Accounting Clerk
- Rachel Pettit**, SoCal Soil & Water Hub Coordinator
- Sierra Reiss**, Education Manager
- Stan Hill**, Forestry & Fire Prevention Project Manager

Above and right: RCD staff members







**RESOURCE  
CONSERVATION  
DISTRICT**  
Greater San Diego County