

CALAVERAS TO RETURN \$10K IN FAILED HABITAT PLAN EFFORT

WORK FUNDED BY GRANT WAS NEVER FULLY COMPLETED

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May 29, 2013

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SAN ANDREAS - Calaveras County supervisors voted Tuesday to return more than \$10,000 in grant money the county spent in an abortive attempt to solve its habitat conservation woes.

Although it stung to have to return the money, the bigger problem is that Calaveras never managed to create a habitat conservation plan, officials say. Many California counties, including San Joaquin, have detailed habitat conservation plans that spell out exactly what developers must do to make up for habitat loss caused by their projects.

Without such a plan, every individual development must perform costly studies that can tangle, delay and sometimes even kill otherwise worthy projects.

"It really helps on all projects," Calaveras County Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Merita Callaway said of the benefit of having a habitat plan.

Back in 2008, Calaveras officials accepted a \$46,000 grant from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy to launch the effort to create a plan. That \$46,000 was really just a down payment, enough to conduct some initial basic studies and to complete an application for a much larger federal grant that could fund the entire project.

Rebecca Willis, the current planning director for the county, said county elected leaders at that time may not have understood the magnitude of the habitat conservation plan work, and may have thought the \$46,000 was enough for the whole project.

"It usually takes years and hundreds of thousands of dollars," Willis said of the effort required to complete a habitat plan.

In fact, county officials spent only \$19,551 of the grant, and the only work completed was the application for the larger U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grant.

That money was paid in December 2008 to consultant John McCaull, Willis said.

Federal officials rejected the application for the larger grant, and that stopped the effort in its tracks.

Everyone involved appears to have forgotten the grant and the conservation plan project for four years.

In 2012, Sierra Nevada Conservancy asked Calaveras to show what work had been accomplished with the Conservancy grant.

After seeing the records, the Conservancy asked Calaveras to return \$10,083.58 that the county had spent but that Conservancy administrators said had not resulted in the agreed on work being completed.

"And if we don't pay them back?" asked Supervisor Debbie Ponte.

Willis' answer: "They will activate their attorneys."

The Calaveras board voted unanimously Tuesday to repay the Conservancy.

Board members also, however, asked Assistant County Counsel David Sirias, who was filling in for County Counsel Janis Elliott, to contact consultant McCaull.

Their hope, they said, is that McCaull will return money he received for work that was not completed.

"Is this guy still in business?" Supervisor Cliff Edson asked.

Yes, Willis said, although she added that she and her staff had difficulty locating him last year in order to discuss the matter.

"It took us several months to even contact Mr. McCaull," Willis said.

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