

CALIFORNIA CONSERVATION FUND

Protecting wetlands, informing large-scale strategies

S. D. BECHTEL, JR.
FOUNDATION
STEPHEN BECHTEL FUND

The California Conservation Fund supported waterfowl habitat in California through stewardship of wetland and associated upland areas between 2000 and 2016. Its work inspired and informed the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation in making major investments in water management and land conservation.

OVERVIEW

The California Conservation Fund was a charitable operating foundation established by Stephen D. Bechtel, Jr. to protect and restore waterfowl habitat. The Fund's primary impact was the conservation of more than 4,000 acres of prime habitat. Its secondary impact, while less direct, was larger in scale: Fund activities yielded insight into the underlying dynamics of wetland and open space management in California and, in turn, deeply influenced S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation Environment Program investments. In the Foundation's spend-down years, its Environment Program focused on systemic issues highlighted by the California Conservation Fund's efforts, and worked toward a California that manages, stewards, and conserves its water and land to support a resilient environment and economy.

GENESIS OF THE FUND

As California's wetlands were converted to agricultural and other uses throughout the 1800s and 1900s, an estimated 95 percent of the state's historic wetlands were lost. California is a critical bird migration stopover point along the vast Pacific Flyway spanning Alaska to Patagonia. Dramatic reduction of wetlands in the state disrupted migratory patterns and led to a decline in duck and other waterfowl populations.

An avid hunter and outdoorsman, Stephen D. Bechtel, Jr. values preservation of wetlands and the bird species that depend on them. Mr. Bechtel's interests in wetlands and waterfowl led him to establish two nonprofit enterprises early in the new century. One was the California Retriever Training Association, focused on providing quality grounds for hunting dog training and field trials. The second was the California Conservation Fund. Incorporated in 2000, the Fund's purpose was the "promotion and protection of natural resources through the preservation, conservation, and management of significant wetland areas and associated uplands located in California."



ABOUT THE FUND

All California Conservation Fund activities were anchored in protection and restoration of wetlands, including stewardship of uplands that are part of wetland habitat ecosystems. During its lifespan, the Fund purchased and restored properties in both Southern and Northern California, investing about \$10 million to acquire and care for more than 4,000 acres.

Initial acquisitions took place in Kern County, involving about 2,000 acres in the southern San Joaquin Valley – a highly productive and significant agricultural region that historically flooded seasonally, creating vast expanses of wetlands. The Fund went on to purchase another 2,000 acres, primarily in the Suisun Marsh – the largest contiguous brackish marsh remaining on the west coast of North America, and a vital part of the San Francisco Bay-Delta estuary ecosystem.

The Fund's lands were restored in partnership with conservation organizations such as the [California Waterfowl Association](#).

Once lands were restored, the Fund pursued a range of land uses consistent with its commitment to habitat management, including limited and regulated waterfowl hunting, retriever dog training and field trials, and bird watching.

As the Fund evolved, its board also encouraged and supported youth engagement and environmental education on lands it held.

Mr. Bechtel was the major donor to the California Conservation Fund. In addition, any income generated from individuals or organizations using Fund-owned properties was applied to support restoration and stewardship of its lands.

The Fund began to wind down its operations in 2014, initiating the transfer of its approximately 4,000 acres of migratory bird habitat to the California Waterfowl Association. This transfer concluded in 2016, and the Fund formally dissolved that year.

GOVERNANCE AND STAFFING FACILITATED KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Bechtel family members guided the California Conservation Fund from the outset. Mr. Bechtel was board chair throughout the Fund's history. Mr. Bechtel's spouse, Elizabeth H. Bechtel, and children, Lauren B. Dachs and Gary Bechtel, were board members at the Fund's inception. Joined in time by grandson Evan Johnstone, the board featured three generations of Bechtel leadership. Because most of these family members were also on the board of the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, insights gained through the work of the California Conservation Fund readily illuminated Foundation approaches.

The Fund and Foundation also shared staff, including Allison Harvey Turner who began her tenure with the organizations in 2003. Allison became director of the Environment Program of the Foundation, overseeing development and implementation of program strategies informed by the experience of the California Conservation Fund.

A LABORATORY FOR LEARNING, A CALL TO DEEPER COMMITMENT

The California Conservation Fund's land and water holdings in Kern County provided its board and staff with hands-on experience navigating California's complex water management system. Situated at the southern end of the massive San Joaquin Valley, Kern County is at the center of California's water issues. The remarkable agricultural production of the region was made possible by myriad irrigation and flood control projects, the first dating to the 1870s. These water management projects make up a vast plumbing system that provides water in the summer and keeps it away in the winter. While this water system enabled California's dramatic agricultural and urban growth, that growth has exceeded the capacity of the system. More water is used in this area than is delivered to it. As a result, local groundwater is overpumped and rivers, some of which are hundreds of miles away, are drained.

Improving water management is a complex task involving a disparate set of natural and human factors. Solutions must take into account the characteristics of affected habitats, the priorities and practices of land and water rights owners, the regulations governing changes to wetlands or waterways, and the interests of stakeholder communities and advocacy groups involved with potential changes.

The California Conservation Fund's involvement in wetlands restoration in Kern County helped Mr. Bechtel and other leaders of the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation gain appreciation for the hydrological, economic, social, and political factors affecting water management statewide. Foundation leaders also realized that, in California in the 2000s, there was relatively little philanthropic involvement with water management. The California Conservation Fund's experience, including the relationships developed with water stakeholders in the southern San Joaquin Valley, led to a series of S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation investments in water management and land conservation.



Without going through the difficulties faced by the California Conservation Fund in acquiring and stewarding wetlands, the Foundation would probably not have developed the interest or ability to take on some of the more daunting, systemic water management challenges confronting the state.

LAUREN B. DACHS
BOARD OF DIRECTORS, CALIFORNIA CONSERVATION FUND
PRESIDENT AND VICE CHAIR, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, S. D. BECHTEL, JR. FOUNDATION



Our experience with the California Conservation Fund opened our eyes to the broader conservation sphere. We saw that, yes, it's good to invest in habitat and land protection, and in restoration. But we also saw that unless California figured out how to make long-term stewardship easier both financially as well as legally, the state's conservation efforts were not going to be successful.

ALLISON HARVEY TURNER
DIRECTOR, ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM, S. D. BECHTEL, JR. FOUNDATION AND
CALIFORNIA CONSERVATION FUND

GREATER IMPACT AT SCALE

California Conservation Fund activity was well-timed to influence the Environment Program strategies of the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation as the Foundation made decisions during its spend-down years. The hands-on work of the California Conservation Fund highlighted the importance of policy reform, research, and capacity building relative to direct habitat protection and restoration. As a result, the Foundation invested in strategies to create the conditions for communities, farmers, nonprofit organizations, and governmental agencies to successfully pursue land and water conservation and stewardship.

INVESTING IN SCIENCE-BASED, SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The Foundation Environment Program commissioned scientific research through institutions including the Public Policy Institute of California, Stanford University, and the University of California, Davis. It supported the effectiveness of nonprofits positioned to partner with communities to contribute to systems change, and pursued solutions that sought to balance the needs of people and nature.

In 2008, the Foundation supported Audubon California, Point Blue Conservation Science, and The Nature Conservancy in California to launch the Migratory Bird Conservation Partnership. The Foundation's investment in this effort, which would eventually reach more than \$25 million, was inspired and informed by its experience with the California Conservation Fund.

When the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation board decided, in 2009, to spend down all Foundation assets, it cited water management as a critical challenge facing California that required resources and solutions in the near term. Between 2009 and 2020, the Foundation would go on to commit more than \$120 million to initiatives and organizations working for integrated water management solutions, including investments in building knowledge and information systems supporting water management. In tandem, the Foundation evolved its portfolio of land conservation programs to focus increasingly on systems change to support long-term land stewardship, investing more than \$100 million in such approaches.

Virtually all the Foundation's Environment Program strategies had antecedents in the learning and networks developed through the California Conservation Fund. These strategies resulted in signature achievements, including enhancements to 100,000 acres of private lands, and the enactment of new policies, such as the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.



ON-THE-GROUND PERSPECTIVE INFORMS STRATEGY

In reflecting on the lessons from the California Conservation Fund experience, and its implications for major investments formulated and conducted by the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, two leaders offer these observations:

We learned a lot by actually being in a place and working to acquire, restore, and steward the land held by the California Conservation Fund. This is not work you can just dip into lightly, because there are so many people with so many different ways of trying to tackle water issues, including sustainable farming and ranching. The more we really understood the issues on the land and the issues in the communities, including the cultures of different groups involved, we saw that if we were going to play a role it was going to take a big investment of blood, sweat, and tears as well as resources. We couldn't just drop into this work and expect to have any kind of real effect.

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Our experience with the California Conservation Fund taught us enough to know that before launching the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation's water program, we needed to spend time listening and learning from those in the field. Building from relationships developed through the Fund and considering what we were learning in that work, we spent a year on a listening tour. We held more than 40 conversations, always asking those we were with to tell us whom we should talk with to hear a different – perhaps opposing – viewpoint. This grounding exercise, which Mr. Bechtel led, focused our water investments on amplifying the “radical middle” and we built the program with alignment across the Foundation.

ALLISON HARVEY TURNER
DIRECTOR, ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM, S. D. BECHTEL, JR. FOUNDATION AND CALIFORNIA CONSERVATION FUND

