

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
December 2, 2004

**ESTERO AMERICANO RANCH IMPLEMENTATION**

File No. 04-003  
Project Manager: Richard Retecki

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$650,000 to the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District for the implementation of ranch resource restoration projects in the Estero Americano watershed in Marin and Sonoma Counties.

**LOCATION:** Estero Americano watershed, Marin and Sonoma Counties (Exhibits 1 & 2)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Project Location

Exhibit 2: Watershed Map

Exhibit 3: Watershed Map with Ranch Parcel Lines

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

Exhibit 5: RCD's CEQA Notices of Exemption

Exhibit 6: Email from Department of Fish and Game Biologist

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed six hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$650,000) to the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District for the implementation of ranch resource restoration projects on agricultural properties in the Estero Americano watershed in Marin and Sonoma Counties.

Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds with respect to a particular site:

1. The Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“the Executive Officer”) shall approve in writing a work plan, budget and project schedule, and any contractors and subcontractors to be employed in the project.

2. The grantee shall provide a signing plan for the projects, to include appropriate acknowledgement of the Conservancy.
3. The Gold Ridge RCD shall enter into agreements satisfactory to the Executive Officer with the landowners of that site for the provision of access to the property and maintenance of each project.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Guidelines and Selection Criteria adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The portions of the project located within the coastal zone have been identified in the Marin County and Sonoma County Local Coastal Plans as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource problems.”

**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The proposed authorization would disburse up to \$650,000 to the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (RCD) for the implementation of ranch resource restoration projects in the Estero Americano watershed in Marin and Sonoma Counties. (See Exhibits 1 & 2)

The RCD has worked with landowners on a voluntary basis through educational and outreach processes to prepare ranch resource restoration plans and specific resource restoration projects throughout the watershed. At this time, there are eight ranches with a combined total of 24 resource restoration projects awaiting implementation. The implementation recommendations are tailored to the individual situations found on each ranch. They have been refined and include final design and engineering for specific implementation projects, a budget and timeline, permitting, and necessary monitoring activities.

The ranch restoration projects and monitoring procedures will impact eight ranches that total roughly 5,100 acres, or approximately eight square miles. (Exhibit 3). All of the project implementation work will take place on ranches where the RCD has been granted access by the landowner and the landowner agrees to maintain the improvements.

Pursuant to the Conservancy planning grant, authorized in March 2002, each ranch has been evaluated for natural features, environmental assessment of its land and operations, roads, and other facilities. The resulting ranch management plans recommend specific restoration measures and a monitoring approach for each ranch. Some of the management practices suggested throughout the watershed include: water quality and temperature measurements, water conservation practices, soil conservation practices, riparian corridor restoration, road design and grading, and, recommendations for the location of future roads and facilities. Specific ranch restoration projects are discussed in the CEQA Compliance section of this staff recommendation.

The RCD will meet with individual landowners to devise a schedule for ranch implementation activities. Once that schedule is established, contractors will be retained for the construction work. The landowner will share the cost of project implementation and be responsible for the maintenance of the completed projects.

The Gold Ridge RCD has a long successful history of involvement in the Estero and other coastal and inland watersheds. Its jurisdiction is in southwest Sonoma County, and adjacent areas, as in the ranch enhancement design process, because the Estero Americano watershed lies in both Sonoma and Marin Counties, it is working cooperatively with the Marin RCD. Currently, it is involved in similar planning and implementation for the Salmon Creek watershed and landowners.

**Site Description:** The Estero Americano is a very diverse and valuable natural area. The Estero is a coastal estuary that flows to the Pacific Ocean from seven miles inland. The Estero makes up the western portion of the boundary between Marin and Sonoma Counties. The rolling but steep hills are surrounded by agricultural operations on both sides of the stream. The Estero consists of open water, freshwater marsh, brackish marsh, mud flats, coastal grasslands, and a narrow coastal strand.

The Estero Americano is considered one of the most naturally diverse areas on the Northern California coast. It is an area rich in wildlife, migratory waterfowl, and wetland habitats. The waterway and environs are part of the Gulf of Farallones National Marine Sanctuary and lie within the United Nations Central Coast International Biosphere Reserve. There are indications of use of the Estero by coho salmon and steelhead trout.

The land within the watershed is comprised of the Merced Formation, characterized by shallow soils and easily eroded landforms. The terrain of gently rolling hills is dotted with ranches, small communities, rural residential development, and eucalyptus windrows. The nature of the terrain makes the watershed a wind-gap area for the passage of wind from the coast to the inner Bay area.

The Sonoma County Coastal Wetlands Enhancement Plan (1987), adopted by the Conservancy, identifies the Estero Americano as degraded and states that bank erosion, gully erosion, loss of riparian habitat, and sedimentation are common in the watershed. The plan also notes that several reaches of the Estero and some tributaries will continue to provide higher rates of sediment that would naturally occur. Increased sediment will continue to degrade open water and marsh areas and will impact aquatic habitat. The current authorization will help to address these problems. All of the restoration projects will occur on private land, with access being granted by way of a signed agreement with the landowner. The Estero has also been identified by the Nature Conservancy as one of its “Portfolio Conservation Areas” due to the importance to its coastal wetland system.

**Project History:** Through Conservancy and other grant programs funded by public agencies the Gold Ridge RCD has conducted water quality, riparian corridor, and sediment control project implementation in the Estero watershed. The project-by-project implementation is singularly effective but does not provide a comprehensive approach for the watershed. It became apparent to the RCD that a comprehensive approach was essential to solve the watershed’s problems.

Through a grant from the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, and with its assistance, the ranch planning process was begun in 1999 as part of the Marin Coastal Watershed Enhancement Project. In 2002, Conservancy funds were authorized for additional ranch plans to provide a comprehensive approach for watershed restoration. The ranch planning process included an educational/seminar process, identification of restoration techniques, landowner outreach, and the recommendation of specific implementation projects for the ranches that are involved.

The end result of the planning process was an evaluation of each ranch's current condition and a ranch plan to implement corrective measures. Also, potential environmental impacts were evaluated, and monitoring programs are recommended to track improvements in the ranch environment. The ranch plans include a description of livestock and ranch operations and current management practices, a facilities inventory, and evaluation of the condition of facilities and resources, and a section of maps.

The Estero Americano Ranch Enhancement Design, authorized in March 2002, addressed the implementation process, its cost, funding, and the timing to complete the seasonal work. The proposed authorization would now provide for on-the-ground improvements to benefit sensitive natural resources.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$650,000
Gold Ridge RCD	160,000
Marin RCD	80,000
Other Funding Sources	<u>269,000</u>

**TOTAL** **\$1,169,000**

The other sources of funds for Estero watershed projects consist of the following:

State Water Resources Control Board	\$247,000
Department of Conservation	15,000
United States Department of Agriculture	<u>7,000</u>

**TOTAL** **\$269,000**

The expected source of Conservancy funds is Proposition 40, which provides funds for the restoration and enhancement of natural resources.

The Sonoma County Water Agency has expended funds within the watershed for water quality and sedimentation projects; the Department of Fish and Game funding relates to stream bank and riparian corridor restoration projects; the California Department of Conservation has funded landowner outreach and planning seminars; and the United States Department of Agriculture provided funds for public meetings and landowner outreach for the Environmental Quality Improvement Program.

**PROJECT SUPPORT:** The proposed authorization has support from landowners, public agencies, environmental organizations, community groups, including State Senator Wes

Chesbro, Assembly Member Joe Nation, the Marin County Resource Conservation District, the Valley Ford Citizens Coalition, and the Department of Fish and Game. See Exhibit 4.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The project is consistent with Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the enhancement of coastal resources:

Section 31251 of the Public Resources Code authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of improper location of improvements, natural or human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. The proposed projects will enhance coastal resources through the construction of a series of individual site improvements that protect riparian corridors, and minimize erosion and sedimentation.

Section 31251.2(a) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources, including watershed resources that lie partially outside of the coastal zone. The Estero Americano watershed lies partly inside and partly outside of the coastal zone. The proposed project will enhance habitat both inside and outside the coastal zone, and, by decreasing erosion and sedimentation, will improve a sensitive coastal resource, the Estero Americano.

Consistent with Section 31252, both the Marin and Sonoma County Local Coastal Programs (LCP) identify the need for public action and assistance to resolve existing problems in special resource areas, such as the Estero Americano. See "Consistency with Local Coastal Program" section below.

Section 31253 enables the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of any enhancement project. The Conservancy's contribution to this project is matched by funds from the Gold Ridge and Marin RCD's for project administration and in-kind services.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL (S) & OBJECTIVE (S):**

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objectives A and B**, the proposed ranch restoration and enhancement projects will restore and enhance the biological diversity of the Estero Americano.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objectives A and B**, the proposed projects will assist with the restoration of a coastal watershed and improve its water quality.

Consistent with **Goal 7, Objective B**, the proposed Estero Americano watershed projects will assist farmers and ranchers with their efforts to reduce impacts of agricultural operations on wildlife habitat and water quality.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** As noted previously, the Estero Americano ranch restoration projects have strong agency and public support.
4. **Location:** The Estero Americano watershed is partly within and partly outside the coastal zone, and is a coastal watershed with diverse and valuable resources and habitat. The watershed falls within both Marin and Sonoma Counties. The implementation recommendations will benefit the watershed, as well as inland and coastal resources.
5. **Need:** The Estero Americano is an area known for its biological and aquatic diversity. It is also an area under various types of land use pressures. The incursion of rural residential development has affected the natural habitat and the continued use of some ranching practices has impacted the tributaries and the Estero itself, plus the surrounding landscape. The resource restoration projects slated for individual ranches will begin to restore this diverse and valuable watershed.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The ranch restoration implementation within the Estero watershed and its habitat will ensure its place as one of the most diverse areas on California's north coast. The Estero is recognized nationally for its unique mix of coastal and inland resources. The restoration implementation will address on-going situations that have degraded the waterways and environment within the Estero.

**Additional Criteria**

7. **Readiness:** The Gold Ridge RCD is ready to begin the ranch restoration implementation projects immediately.
8. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The ranch restoration implementation was discussed in the Sonoma County Coastal Wetlands Enhancement Plan (1987). The proposed authorization would enable implementation of a number of projects recommended through the previously Conservancy funded ranch restoration planning project of March 2002.
9. **Cooperation:** The ranch restoration implementation project is a cooperative effort among the Conservancy, the Gold Ridge and Marin Resource Conservation Districts, and private landowners within the watershed. In addition, the Sonoma County Water Agency, the State Department of Fish and Game, and the Department of Agriculture have contributed to this project or to recent related projects within the watershed.

**CONSISTENCY WITH**

**THE COASTAL ACT:** The proposed authorization is consistent with Section 30231 of the Coastal Act which states that “the biological productivity of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries and lakes... shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored.”

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

**Sonoma County**

The proposed authorization is consistent with the Sonoma County Local Coastal program, certified in 1981 and revised on August 3, 1999, in the following respects:

**IV. Resources: Agriculture**

**Land Management:** Implementation of ranch restoration projects may be conducted for the purposes of improving agricultural viability and watershed conservation. The implementation measures will correct detrimental land use and operational practices. Hopefully, once the restoration is completed, agricultural viability will be improved as will the overall health of the watershed.

**Marin County**

The proposed authorization is also consistent with the Marin County Local Coastal Program for Unit II, Northern Marin, adopted December 9, 1980 by the Marin County Board of Supervisors and certified on April 1, 1981 by the State Coastal Commission, as amended, in the following respects:

**Section II, Resource Protection-Agriculture, Agricultural Policies, Policy 98:** “ Marin County intends to protect the existing and future viability of agricultural lands in its coastal zone. Those policies are also intended to protect coastal wildlife, habitat and scenic resources in accordance with Section 30240 of the Coastal Act.” The Estero Americano ranch restoration projects will help maintain and enhance the viability of agriculture. Also, the projects will reduce erosion and sedimentation, improve water quality, and enhance riparian corridors.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:** The Gold Ridge RCD ranch-implementation planning process for the Estero addressed 13 ranches. Plans and restoration projects for eight of the ranches are now complete, ready for implementation, and the subject of this authorization. The ranch numbers below correlate with the numbers found on the map attached as Exhibit 3 and with the discussion in Exhibit 5. Exhibit 5 consists of the RCD’s Notices of Exemption, along with a description of Best Management Practices to be utilized during construction and adopted by the RCD in September 2004. Additionally, a Department of Fish and Game District Field Biologist recently visited proposed RCD project sites and determined that none of the projects has the potential to cause an adverse impact on the waters of the State or on any other sensitive biotic resource. (See Exhibit 6, biologist letter.)

The Gold Ridge RCD evaluated the following projects in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act and determined that each was exempt as described below:

***Ranch Restoration Project Descriptions and Discussion of Environmental Considerations:***

**Ranch 1, Sonoma County APN 027-170-016-000; 680 Gericke Road, Petaluma:** The project includes the following actions: **a.** Installation of a grade and sediment control structure in a gully. The structure is intended to prevent further down cutting in an actively eroding gully and to trap

sediment and bed-load transported from elsewhere on the property. Approximately 1,500 cubic yards of balanced cut and fill will be used. The embankment will be 18 feet high and 150 feet long; it will create an impoundment of approximately 0.8 acre feet with a surface area of about 0.25 acres. The structure will prevent further down-cutting. **b.** Riparian fencing and planting to exclude livestock and minimize disturbance to the gully bank will be constructed.

The RCD determined that the proposed projects are exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15303, construction of small facilities and structures (fencing); and Section 15330 minimization of release of hazardous substances (sediment).

Staff believes that the projects are exempt under Section 15303 (new construction); Section 15301(i), maintenance of stream channels and stream-flows; Section 15304, minor alteration in the condition of land, water, and vegetation; and, Section 15333, habitat restoration projects not exceeding five acres.

**Ranch 2, Marin County APN 100-030-07, 30501/30201 State Hwy 1, Petaluma:**

Improvements to the property include: **a.** Installation of a grade and sediment control structure on the property lines of two remote rural ranches. The structure will prevent further erosion and sediment from entering a 35-acre watershed. Approximately 4,600 cubic yards of balanced cut and fill will be used. The embankment will be 24 feet high and 100 feet long; it will create an impoundment of about 4.4 acre feet with a surface area of about 0.7 acres. **b.** Fencing will be installed to protect the gully. The structure will prevent further down cutting in an 18-foot-high 300 foot long gully and will trap sediment

The RCD determined that these projects are exempt under #14 Cal. Code of Regulations, Section 15303 the construction of minor facilities (fencing), and Section 15330 minimization of release of hazardous substances (sediment).

Staff believes that the projects are exempt under Section 15303 new construction; Section 15301(i), maintenance of stream channels and stream-flows; Section 15304, minor alteration in the condition of land, water, and vegetation; and, Section 15333, habitat restoration projects not exceeding five acres.

**Ranch 4, Sonoma County APN 026-090-028-000, 11339 Barnett Valley Road, Valley Ford:**

The project includes: **a.** Repair of an unstable gully and banks using rock and biotechnical techniques, including re-vegetation with native plants. The project is located on a tributary of Americano Creek. On-site biological evaluation did not reveal presence of any special status plant and animal species. **b.** Repair of an eroding riparian area with plantings.

The RCD determined that this project is exempt under #14 Cal. Code of Regulations, Section 15330 minimization of the release of hazardous substances (sediment).

Staff believes that the following exemptions apply to these projects: Section 15301(i) maintenance of stream-flows and stream channels; Section 15304 the minor alteration of land, water, and vegetation; and Section 15333, habitat-restoration projects not exceeding five acres.

**Ranch 5, Sonoma County APN: 026-050-008, 14055 Valley Ford Road, Valley Ford:** The project entails: **a.** Repair and upgrade of an existing road and installing rock crossings. **b.** Installation of fencing along riparian areas to exclude livestock.

The RCD determined that the project is exempt under Section 15301 repair of existing natural facilities; and Section 15304 minor alterations of land, water, and vegetation (grading).

Staff believes that the proposed projects are also exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15303, the construction of minor small facilities.

**Ranch 8, Marin County APN: 100-020-11, 2114 Middle Road, Valley Ford:** There are two parts to this project: **a.** Stabilization of a gully and sink holes using rock and biotechnical techniques to reduce erosion and sedimentation. **b.** Fencing along the gully to exclude livestock from the gully.

The RCD determined that the proposed projects are exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15303 new construction of minor facilities (fencing); and Section 15330 minimization of the release of hazardous substances (sediment).

Staff believes that the project is exempt under Section 15301(i) maintenance of stream-flows and stream channels; Section 15303 (new construction); and Section 15304 minor alterations to the condition of land.

**Ranch 9, Sonoma County APN 027-180-023, 12065 Valley Ford Road, Petaluma:** This ranch has two projects: **a.** Creation of a riparian pasture along Americano Creek to include fencing. The fence will be placed approximately 50 feet from each bank and will follow the meander of the creek. **b.** Plantings of native trees and shrubs within the riparian zone.

The RCD determined that these projects are exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15303 new construction of minor facilities (fencing); and, Section 15304 minor alteration of land and vegetation (gardening and landscaping). Staff concurs.

**Ranch 10, Marin County APN 100-010-003, 1256 Estero Road, Valley Ford:** This project has four activities: **a.** Stabilization of two actively eroding gullies using rock and biotechnical techniques. For Gully A, a 200' long, rock-armored swale will deliver lateral hillside runoff from the county road culvert to an approximately 650' long, uniformly sloped, rock lined channel. Fabric-lined vee-side swales and fiber rolls will also be installed approximately perpendicular to the 650' channel across the parallel swales. Grading will result in balanced cut and fills of about 1,000 cubic yards over 1.5 acre area. Gully B is an area of heavy, active erosion below the county road culvert under Estero Road. A uniformly sloped 440' long, rock lined channel will be installed, and local willow sprigs will be installed on the acre work area. **b.** Installation of new stock exclusion fencing along the gully. **c.** Installation of three new stock control gates. **d.** Permanent erosion control measures including rock armor and permanent cover cropping on the embankments within other disturbed areas.

The RCD determined the project to be exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15303 new construction of minor facilities (fencing and gates, etc.); Section 15304 minor alteration of land and vegetation (re-vegetation); and Section 15330, minimization of release of hazardous substances (sediment).

Staff believes that the project is exempt under Section 15303 new construction; Section 15304 minor alterations to the condition of land; and Section 15333, habitat-restoration projects not exceeding five acres.

**Ranch 11, Sonoma County APN 026-010-070-000, 14280 Valley Ford Road, Valley Ford:** Improvements to this property include the following: **a.** Placement of rock armoring in an upland pasture that is subject to intermittent gully erosion. Total length will be 350 feet in two sections, one 230' and the other 120 feet. No grading is proposed. Project review and on-site biological evaluation did not reveal the presence of any special status plant and animal species. **b.**

Permanent erosion control measures to include a storm drain management system and permanent cover crops on the embankments and within the developed hillsides. c. Exclusionary fencing will be installed to protect the gullies and riparian areas.

The RCD determined that the proposed projects are exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15303 new construction of minor facilities (fencing); and, Section 15330 minimization of release of hazardous substances (sediment).

Staff believes that the projects are exempt under Section 15301(i) maintenance of stream-flows and stream channels; Section 15303 new construction of minor facilities; Section 15304 minor alteration of land, water, and vegetation; and, Section 15333, habitat-restoration projects not exceeding five acres.

Cumulative Impacts: staff has also assessed the environmental effects of the various projects and found no substantial evidence of a fair argument that the projects when taken together, along with past and probable future activities, will have a significant affect on the environment.

Following the Conservancy's action, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the projects.

Letters of Support

Exhibit 4



