

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
March 17, 2011

**EAST-SLOPE SONOMA MOUNTAIN RIDGE TRAIL PLANNING**

File No. 11-008-01  
Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$55,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District to perform planning for the East-Slope Sonoma Mountain Ridge Trail in unincorporated Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** East Slope of Sonoma Mountain, approximately 7 miles northwest of the city of Sonoma, Sonoma County.

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

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**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)  
Exhibit 2: [Project Site Photos](#)  
Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed fifty five thousand dollars (\$55,000) to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District to perform planning for the East-Slope Sonoma Mountain Ridge Trail in unincorporated Sonoma County. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District shall accept the trail easement necessary for the project and submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, schedule and budget, and the names of any subcontractors that it intends to employ for this planning work.”

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 current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the improvement of public access to, within, and around the bay, coast, ridgetops and urban open spaces of the San Francisco Bay area.”
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### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize a grant up to \$55,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (“District”) for preparation of a trail plan and environmental documentation for approximately 6,800 linear feet of Bay Area Ridge Trail (“Ridge Trail”) on the east slope of Sonoma Mountain in Sonoma County.

The trail will extend from Jack London State Historic Park south, first across property owned in fee by the District, known as the Public Trail Parcel, and then through District-owned trail easements on two private properties. Sonoma County currently holds a trail easement on one of the private properties but has not yet accepted an offer to dedicate a trail easement on the other private property. The Public Trail Parcel has an existing trail that was constructed with District approval approximately 10 years ago. This portion of the trail is mostly unusable by the general public due to lack of maintenance as well as the presence of a steep gully. The two private properties do not have trails and a final trail alignment has not been determined for either property. Thus, the project involves planning how to improve the existing trail on the Public Trail Parcel, including potentially designing a bridge over the gully, and determining an alignment and design of the portion of the trail on the private properties. This portion of the Ridge Trail is intended to extend farther south in the future, when a trail corridor has been established with property and/or trail easement acquisition.

This planning project will achieve the following objectives for this Ridge Trail segment: 1) Plan and design a sustainable, low-cost/low-maintenance trail segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail that will connect District properties, private property and Jack London State Historic Park; 2) Conduct land owner outreach and coordination for final trail alignment on privately owned land; 3) Quantify greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions related to implementation and maintenance; and 4) Perform environmental assessments required for trail construction.

Since 1990, when Sonoma County voters approved the creation of the District and a sales tax funding source for acquisition, the District has preserved over 83,000 acres of land and was ranked by the Farmland Preservation Report as one of the top five farmland and open space preservation programs in the Nation. The District has been a leader in providing public access to Sonoma County open spaces, and is a major partner in the creation of the Bay Area Ridge Trail. This Conservancy grant will support the District in continuing its collaborative effort to plan and construct a trail segment through this area, working closely with several non-profit and agency partners, including LandPaths, State Parks and the Sonoma County Regional Parks Department.

**Site Description:** The trail site is located along the eastern ridge line of Sonoma Mountain approximately 7 miles northwest of the city of Sonoma, and will connect to an existing Ridge Trail segment Jack London State Historic Park to the north. Elevations range from 1,920 to 2,180 feet, offering views of the coast ranges, the San Francisco Bay and city skyline, and the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Sonoma Mountain is an island refuge for wildlife surrounded by human development and characterized by oak woodlands, grassland savannah, streams and redwood forests. Habitats on the subject properties are similar to much of the rest of Sonoma Mountain, which has been influenced by both coastal and

inland climates, a factor that has produced a rich and diverse assemblage of flora and fauna. Property and conservation easement acquisitions completed to date have served to consolidate this habitat for its resident species.

At least nine different species of oak are found on Sonoma Mountain. Due to the exceptionally high oak diversity, Sonoma Mountain supports a myriad of birds and other wildlife. The oak woodlands on the project properties also include examples of Pacific madrone, bigleaf maple and California laurel woodland. The properties also contain mixed evergreen forest, redwood forest, seasonal wetlands, as well as annual and perennial grasslands. The majority of the trail will pass through land owned in fee by the District; the rest of the trail will pass through trail easements on private lands. The properties currently have conservation easements held by the District.

**Project History:** In 1990, Sonoma County voters created the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District to preserve and protect the cherished ranches, farms, natural areas and open spaces that give Sonoma County its distinctive character. In the twenty years since its inception, the District has protected lands in an effort to create a connected network of great open spaces: agricultural lands, greenbelts, natural areas, multi-use trails, streams, parks and preserves where people can enjoy scenic rural areas and local agricultural products. The region-wide Bay Area Ridge Trail provides a focus for providing public access to Sonoma's great open spaces.

Conservationists have long focused on projects that would preserve the important scenic, natural and recreational resources of Sonoma Mountain. Land protection has involved no fewer than ten different organizations, agencies, and private landowners working together on greater than twenty separate real estate transactions to assemble a range of preserved lands totaling over 5,500 acres. These lands include state and regional parks, conservation easements over private ranch land, a university preserve, and a city-owned preserve.

In an effort to provide trail connectivity between existing protected lands on and in the vicinity of Sonoma Mountain, the District has recently been acquiring properties and conservation easements south of Jack London State Historic Park along the east-slope ridge. The District's efforts to protect the Ridge Trail corridor and develop initial planning for the trail in this area has been supported by planning work by the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, also funded in part by the Conservancy.

In 2010, the District acquired the 22-acre Public Trail Parcel along the east-slope ridge immediately south of Jack London State Historic Park. The property had been part of the Maria Hansen Trust property, over which the District holds a conservation easement. A county settlement with the Maria Hansen Trust resulted in the District's acquisition of the uppermost 22 acres in fee, and 11.5 acres of the lowest portion of the property being removed from the easement.

Immediately south of the Public Trail Parcel are the 203 acre Freiburg/Henshaw properties, now collectively known as Arbit. The District acquired a conservation easement over Arbit in 1995 and the County of Sonoma possesses a trail easement on the property.

Just south of the Arbit property is the Eliot property. In 2004, the owners of the Eliot property donated a conservation easement to the District. The owners also recorded an irrevocable offer to dedicate a trail easement. The Eliot property provides an opportunity for a loop termination for this section of the trail until future trail continuity to the south can be established. The Eliots are long-time proponents of the project and are directly involved with the planning and outreach components of the project.

The Conservancy has previously participated in conservation efforts with the District in the greater Sonoma Mountain area through acquisition (a \$1.5 million grant toward fee title purchase of the 292-acre Sonoma Mountain Ranch property, a \$200,000 grant administered through Bay Area Ridge Trail for acquisition of fee title to the 47-acre Skiles property), trail planning and construction (grants of \$110,000 and \$575,000 for the North Slope Sonoma Mountain trail).

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Conservancy	\$55,000
Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District	<u>\$35,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$90,000</b>

The anticipated source of funds will be the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (“Proposition 84”). Public Resources Code § 75001, et seq. This funding source may be used for San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program projects that promote access to and enjoyment of coastal resources. The proposed project is consistent with this allowed use in that it would result in planning for the construction of a segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail. Funds may be used for projects in accordance with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Public Resources Code Section 75060). Funding the proposed project is consistent with Division 21, as described in the next section.

The Bay Area Ridge Trail Council and LandPaths will contribute to this project by facilitating meetings and organizing field tours and other related events (a contribution of approximately \$1,500). Additional assistance in the coordination of stakeholders, fundraising, and outreach strategy development will be provided by involved property owners (\$1,000). The trail corridor easements for the properties are valued at approximately \$13,000.

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

Funding of the project is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165, which addresses resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The East-Slope Sonoma Ridge Trail Planning project is located in Sonoma County, one of the nine San Francisco Bay Area counties in which the Conservancy is authorized, under Sections 31160 and 31162 of the Public Resources Code, to undertake projects and award grants to address resource and recreational goals for the region.

Under Section 31162(a), the Conservancy may provide grants to improve public access to, within, and around the bay, coast, ridgetops, and urban open spaces without having a significant adverse impact on agricultural operations and environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife. The proposed project would provide planning for a segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail. The segment is not located in or near any agricultural operations and will be designed to avoid significant adverse impacts to environmentally sensitive areas.

The East-Slope Sonoma Ridge Trail Planning project satisfies all of the criteria for determining project priority under 31163(c), since the project: 1) is supported by adopted regional plans including; the District's Acquisition and Strategic Plans, Bay Area Ridge Trail Council trails plan, the Sonoma County Outdoor Recreation Plan (pending), the California Climate Adaptation Strategy, Sonoma Creek

watershed plans, Association of Bay Area Governments "Focus Our Vision" (which designates the project area as a Priority Conservation Area), and is consistent with the following plans: Sonoma County General Plan, the Sonoma County Oak Woodland Management Plan (in prep), the Bay Area Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, the Sonoma County Climate Action Plan, and the Sonoma Creek watershed Total Maximum Daily Load; 2) serves a regional constituency by creating additional trail length for the Bay Area Ridge Trail; 3) can be implemented in a timely manner; 4) provides access that may be lost if the project is not quickly implemented; and 5) will include significant matching funds from the District.

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

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective F**, the proposed project will plan for a portion of the Bay Area Ridge Trail that when implemented will add 6,800 feet to the Bay Area Ridge Trail. The trail site is located along the eastern ridge line of Sonoma Mountain, and will connect to an existing trail on Jack London State Historic Park to the north.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted June 4, 2009, 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 the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project has received significant public support for the early concept and design phases. Supporters include the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, State Department of Parks and Recreation ("State Parks"), Sonoma County Regional Parks, LandPaths, Sonoma Land Trust, Sonoma Ecology Center, Assembly member Jared Huffman, Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, and numerous private landowners. See letters of support in Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The project is located on Sonoma Mountain northwest of the city of Sonoma in Sonoma County, within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
5. **Need:** Without Conservancy funds, this project may not go forward. Delay could result in the project losing a potentially finite window of opportunity. The Conservancy is ideally suited to provide funding in a timely manner to ensure continuation of the project.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project is regionally significant for recreation in that it will provide planning for further construction of the Ridge Trail - connecting Jack London State Historic Park with current and future District fee and easement lands on Sonoma Mountain. It is intended that the Ridge Trail will continue to the south as a trail corridor is established through the future acquisition of properties and/or easements. Jack London State Historic Park attracts approximately 70,000 visitors daily, drawing from the entire Bay Area as well as internationally.

From a natural resources perspective, the lands traversed by the trail showcase diverse habitats for a variety of native species. Additionally, the viewsheds to and from the project location reflect the historic working landscapes and natural areas of Sonoma County.

7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project is not vulnerable to potential future sea level rise as it is located at the headwaters of a coastal watershed two thousand feet above sea level and not located close to a shoreline.

#### **Additional Criteria**

8. **Urgency:** A unique opportunity presented by this project is the involvement of the current landowners in the project planning and in fundraising for implementation. If the project were to be delayed, it is possible that land ownership may change, or that the current level of support may not remain available. These willing and supportive landowners have been positively and constructively engaged in this effort with the District, the Ridge Trail Council and LandPaths for over ten years.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
10. **Readiness:** The project is scheduled to begin planning in spring of 2011 provided the necessary funding can be obtained.
11. **Cooperation:** The planning process for the East-Slope Sonoma Mountain Ridge Trail project will be executed with significant input from a variety of stakeholders, including the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, State Parks and Landpaths.
12. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** Because of its climatic, topographic and geomorphic diversity, as well as the level of contiguous open space and connected habitats, the east slope of Sonoma Mountain is an important geographic area in allowing species dispersal as an adaptive response to climate change. The habitats and species found on Sonoma Mountain may shift in response to climate change, and various abiotic and biotic factors may change in and around the trail corridor. The District intends to minimize interference with these expected adaptation processes (e.g., dispersal, population shifts), and hopes to contribute to habitat and population resiliency.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The District intends to design the trail so as to minimize green house gas (“GHG”) emissions resulting from trail construction, operation and maintenance. In addition, the environmental documentation will quantify GHG emissions from trail construction and operation and identify additional minimization measures if necessary.

#### **COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

Pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, the proposed planning project is statutorily exempt from the CEQA requirement to prepare an environmental impact report or a negative declaration because it involves only planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted or funded, and environmental factors have been considered. The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District will be undertaking environmental review as part of the planning process for any future phase of construction. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the East-Slope Sonoma Ridge Trail Planning Project upon Conservancy approval.