

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 22, 2011

**SAN GERONIMO RIDGE ACQUISITION**

Project No. 11-043-01  
Project Manager: Joel Gerwein

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$450,000 to the County of Marin for acquisition of an approximately 20-acre open space property in the town of Forest Knolls, Marin County.

**LOCATION:** Forest Knolls, Marin County

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

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Site Photographs](#)

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, et seq. of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to four hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$450,000) to the County of Marin (“the County”) for acquisition of approximately 20 acres of forested land in the town of Forest Knolls (Marin County Assessor Parcel No. 169-331-15) for the purposes of protecting plant and wildlife habitat, preserving open space, providing public access, and protecting and enhancing water quality and salmonid habitat. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of Conservancy funds for acquisition, the County shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“the Executive Officer”):
  - a. All relevant acquisition documents, including but not limited to an appraisal, environmental assessments, agreement of purchase and sale, easements, escrow instructions, and documents related to title.
  - b. Evidence that the County has obtained all funds necessary to complete the acquisition.

2. The County shall pay no more than fair market value for the property as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
3. The County shall permanently dedicate the property in a manner acceptable to the Executive Officer for the purposes of protecting plant and wildlife habitat, preserving open space, providing public access, and protecting and enhancing water quality and salmonid habitat.
4. The County shall acknowledge Conservancy funding by erecting and maintaining on the property a sign that has been reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer.”

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 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.”

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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The proposed authorization would help the County of Marin acquire from Mr. Mark Morrison approximately 20 acres on the San Geronimo Ridge in the town of Forest Knolls (see Exhibits 1-3), for the purposes of providing public access, preventing fragmentation of forestlands, preserving open space, and protecting and enhancing water quality and salmonid habitat. The property would be managed by the Marin County Open Space District (OSD) as a part of the Gary Giacomini Open Space Preserve (Preserve). The Morrison property sits high on a ridge above the San Geronimo Valley. It is bounded on three sides by the Preserve with expansive views of the San Geronimo Valley and the Mount Tamalpais watershed, and is bisected by the Manzanita Fire Road (FR). The Manzanita FR has provided access to the Preserve for many years for San Geronimo Valley residents and visitors. It also provides a connection from the towns of San Geronimo and Forest Knolls to the Bay Area Ridge Trail. However, formal public access to the Preserve across Manzanita FR is limited and available only by a temporary easement agreement that expired on July 6, 2011. Thus, acquisition of this property is critical to maintain public access to the Preserve, as well as adding to land protected within the Preserve.

The Morrison property has been the subject of multiple development proposals and repeated attempts to block public recreational access and is a desirable property for development of at least one residential unit. The property is zoned Residential, Single-Family Planned District SF3, which allows a maximum density of one unit per 1-5 acres. A Conditional Certificate of Compliance was recorded on the property in 1997 allowing up to three residential lots, contingent on approval by the Marin County Development Agency. One residential unit on the property is allowed without any further approvals other than design review. Mr. Morrison’s willingness to sell provides a window of opportunity to protect this property and the public access and wildlife habitat it provides.

The property consists of serpentine chaparral and Douglas fir-redwood forest, and provides valuable wildlife habitat. Northern spotted owl, which is federally and state-listed as threatened, is present in the immediate vicinity and has been documented nesting on the property in recent years. The serpentine chaparral on the property supports two species of manzanita that are endemic to the area and listed as rare by the California Native Plant Society (CNPS): Mt. Tamalpais manzanita (*Arctostaphylos montana* ssp. *montana*) and Bolinas manzanita (*A. virgata*). Mt. Tamalpais manzanita is known from fewer than twenty populations, and Bolinas manzanita is known from only 23 populations and is ranked by the CNPS as fairly endangered in California. The property drains to Candelero and Sylvestris Creeks, which are both tributaries of San Geronimo Creek. San Geronimo Creek provides important habitat for federally endangered coho salmon and federally threatened steelhead trout, and Chinook salmon, which are federally threatened, have also been documented in the creek in recent years. Coho and steelhead have been documented in Candelero Creek. Protecting the property would allow for the enhancement of salmonid habitat by preventing and reducing fine sediment influx into Candelero, Sylvestris and San Geronimo Creeks. The Manzanita FR is in need of repair and contributes significant amounts of fine sediment to Candelero Creek (Exhibit 2). The County has completed several projects to reduce fine sediment erosion from fire roads and trails with funding from the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) and anticipates repairing the Manzanita FR with similar funding. Preventing residential development on the property will also prevent the accompanying erosion and fine sediment influx.

In addition to providing public access, protecting and enhancing wildlife habitat, and preventing fragmentation of forestlands, acquisition and management of the property as an open space preserve by the County will be consistent with existing planning efforts, discussed below in “Consistency with Other Planning Efforts”:

- DFG’s Recovery Strategy for California Coho Salmon (February 2004).
- DFG’s Steelhead Restoration and Management Plan for California (February 1996).
- The County’s San Geronimo Valley Salmon Enhancement Plan (2009)
- The County OSD’s Land Conservation Plan
- The County General Plan (2007)

The County has extensive experience protecting and managing open space; the County OSD currently owns and manages over 15,500 acres. The County OSD has completed several projects in recent years aimed at reducing erosion from fire roads in the neighboring Giacomini Preserve. The Conservancy has worked successfully with the County on previous conservation projects, most notably salmonid habitat enhancement planning and fish passage improvement in the San Geronimo Valley and open space protection and habitat enhancement elsewhere in the County (See “Project History” below.)

**Site Description:** The property consists of approximately 18.5 acres of coniferous forest (16 acres of redwood-Douglas fir forest and 2.5 acres of Douglas fir forest), and 1.5 acres of serpentine chaparral. The serpentine chaparral is dominated by Eastwood manzanita and chamise, with coyotebrush, buckbrush, blueblossom ceanothus, wavyleaf ceanothus, Mt. Tamalpais and Bolinas manzanitas, and numerous forbs also present. The coniferous forest is dominated by coast redwood and Douglas-fir, with wavyleaf Ceanothus, blue elderberry, Sonoma rose, California coffeeberry, flowering currant, and sword fern in the understory.

The majority of the property is moderately to steeply sloping. Runoff from the property drains to Tomales Bay via Candelero and Sylvestris Creeks, which drain to San Geronimo Creek, which drains to Lagunitas Creek.

**Project History:**

The Conservancy has invested in the County’s planning and outreach for salmonid habitat enhancement and has funded fish passage improvement projects in San Geronimo Valley. In 2008, the Conservancy granted the County \$100,000 to prepare a Salmonid Habitat Enhancement Plan for San Geronimo Valley, which was completed in December 2009. In 2010, the Conservancy granted an additional \$98,335 to the County to provide technical advice and planning for salmon protection and restoration on a parcel specific basis and for groups of parcels in the San Geronimo Valley. In 2008, the Conservancy granted the County \$185,000 to improve fish passage on Woodacre Creek, a tributary to San Geronimo Creek, by replacing a double-barreled, undersized culvert with an arched culvert. The Conservancy has also made grants to the County for open space acquisition and other habitat enhancement projects, including a grant of \$600,000 in 1999 to acquire the 94 acre Keig Property near Marin City and a grant of \$36,100 in 2007 to enhance wildlife habitat at Bothin Marsh.

County staff submitted an application for a grant to acquire the Morrison Property in January 2011, and the Conservancy has been working with the County on the project since that time.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

Coastal Conservancy	\$450,000
County of Marin	100,000
Anticipated private foundation and community contribution	<u>50,000</u>
<b>Total Project Costs</b>	<b>\$600,000</b>

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project is the FY 10/11 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84). Proposition 84 authorizes the use of funds for projects that prevent degradation of watersheds, that promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state and that are undertaken pursuant to the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. As discussed above, the project will result in reduced sedimentation to the watershed that drains to San Geronimo Creek and will provide public access to coastal watershed lands. In addition, as discussed below, the project is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21.

Proposition 84 also requires that for acquisition projects that protect natural resources, the Conservancy assess whether the project meets criteria specified in Public Resources Code Section 75071. The proposed acquisition satisfies three of the five specified criteria:

- 1) The property links to existing protected areas with other large blocks of protected habitat. The linkage serves to connect existing protected areas, facilitate wildlife movement and botanical transfer, and results in sustainable combined acreage.
- 2) The project will contribute to the long-term protection of and improvement to the water and biological quality of Candelero Creek and San Geronimo Creek.

- 3) There are significant non-state funds expected to contribute toward the acquisition and stewardship of this property. Matching funds for the acquisition consist of \$100,000 from the County.

As required by Section 75701, Conservancy staff has submitted to the Resources Agency and posted on the Conservancy's website an explanation as to how the proposed acquisition meets the criteria of Section 75071.

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

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165, to address resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area. Consistent with Section 31162, the project is located in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area.

Under Section 31162(a), the Conservancy may award grants that will "improve public access to, within, and around the bay, coast, ridgetops, and urban open spaces...through completion...of regional bay, coast, water and ridge trail systems..." The proposed addition of the Morrison property to the Gary Giacomini Open Space Preserve will protect public access to the Preserve, which is located along the ridgetop, and to the Bay Area Ridge Trail from the San Geronimo Valley.

Under Section 31162(b), the Conservancy may act to "protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas and other open-space resources of regional importance." Acquisition of the Morrison property will protect sensitive plant and wildlife habitat, and will allow for salmonid habitat enhancement through repairs to the Manzanita FR.

Furthermore, under Section 31162(d), the Conservancy may "promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes." This property is easily accessed by San Francisco Bay area residents.

The proposed project also satisfies each of the five criteria for determining project priority under Section 31163(c) in the following respects: (1) the acquisition is consistent with the District's 2008 Land Conservation Plan and the open space element of the 2007 Marin County General Plan, as discussed below; (2) it will serve a regional constituency as part of the County's park and open-space system, which attracts visitors from the entire Bay Area; (3) the County and the seller are ready to complete the transaction; (4) not purchasing this property could result in development of the property and the loss of a significant conservation and public recreational opportunity; and (5) the proposal includes a commitment of funds from the County as described under the "Project Financing" section above.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007  
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective D** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will protect 20 acres of uplands wildlife habitat, connection corridors, and scenic areas of regional significance in one of the Bay Area's nine counties.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on 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 enjoys broad community support, including the Marin Conservation League, the Salmon Protection and Watershed Network, the San Geronimo Valley Planning Group, and many others (See Exhibit 3).
4. **Location:** The Morrison property is located in Marin County and is within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. This acquisition is contiguous with the Gary Giacomini Open Space Preserve and would provide additional protection of natural resources and public access to the Preserve (Exhibit 1).
5. **Need:** Conservancy support is crucial to the completion of this project. No other funding source can provide the needed funding within the time frame required to close on the property. If funding is not provided in the near future, public access will be lost and the landowner has indicated that he will explore a sale of the property to private developers.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The County's preserves serve a regional constituency and draw visitors from all over the Bay Area. In addition, the project is a short distance from Highway 101 and easily accessible. The property contains important plant and wildlife habitat, and provides the opportunity to protect and enhance salmonid habitat.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The lowest elevation on the property is approximately 640 feet above sea level. The property is therefore not vulnerable to sea level rise impacts.

**Additional Criteria**

8. **Urgency:** If the property is not protected, it could be developed for residential use with one to three homes. The property owner has indicated a strong desire to sell the property in the near future. In addition, the County's temporary public access easement over the Manzanita Fire Road has expired, and the road's condition has deteriorated. County ownership of the

road is desirable in the near future to allow continued public access and to allow for repair of the road.

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project protects public access opportunities in a coastal watershed, protects water quality and fish habitat, and prevents forest fragmentation.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Readiness:** The acquisition is expected to be completed by January 2012.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
13. **Return to Conservancy:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
14. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The property may experience increased erosion due to an increased severity and frequency of storms. The County plans to repair the existing fire road to reduce erosion. The property may experience increased probability of wildfire due to temperature increases. The County will manage the property to reduce the risk to public safety from wildfire in accordance with the OSD’s Vegetation Management Plan. The property features great topographical variation and is likely to preserve a variety of habitat types even in the face of climate change.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH OTHER PLANNING EFFORTS:**

The proposed acquisition is consistent with the following specific plans and recommendations:

- The California Department of Fish and Game’s (DFG’s) *Recovery Strategy for California Coho Salmon (February 2004)* identifies the Lagunitas Creek Hydrologic Subarea, which contains Candelero and Sylvestris Creeks, as a “refugia” watershed for coho because it has consistent coho presence (10-50%), as a watershed in which risk of coho extinction is “high,” as a watershed with “high” restoration potential, and as watershed that is a top priority for restoration. The plan recommends in its range-wide land use recommendations, Section 7.15, acquiring land in fee title from willing landowners to protect coho salmon (recommendation RW-XXV-C-01). The plan recommends in its watershed recommendations, Section 8.1.10, continuing ongoing efforts and support of stewardship in the basin to include riparian enhancement and protection and sediment source reduction to benefit coho salmon.
- DFG’s Steelhead Restoration and Management Plan for California (February 1996) recommends that watershed restoration efforts on Lagunitas Creek and its tributaries should be accelerated (pg. 156). The proposed acquisition will make it possible to repair the Manzanita FR, consistent with this recommendation.
- The County’s San Geronimo Valley Salmon Enhancement Plan (2009) includes the following recommendation for the entire watershed and specifically for Candelero Creek: “Reduce fine sediment delivery from roads and upland erosion” (Recommendation 15).
- The County OSD’s Land Conservation Plan (2008) prioritizes protection of sensitive habitats in the San Geronimo Ridgeland area, which includes the Morrison Property.
- Goal OS-2 of the County General Plan (2007) Open Space Element, Preservation of Open Space for the Benefit of the Environment and Marin Residents, states that the County will “close the gaps in the pattern of protected public open space and private lands where land

acquisition or other methods of preservation would create or enhance community separators, wildlife corridors, watershed and baylands protection, riparian corridors, sensitive habitat, or trail connections.” The proposed acquisition is consistent with this recommendation.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The acquisition of the property is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15325, which exempts transfer of ownership of interests in land in order to preserve open space and lands for park purposes or to preserve the existing natural conditions, including plant or animal habitats. Upon Conservancy approval of the proposed authorization, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.