

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 14, 2013

IRWIN CREEK RIPARIAN RESTORATION PROJECT

Project No. 12-062-01
Project Manager: Anna Schneider

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$91,000 to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation for removal of a cattle crossing and restoration of 5 acres of riparian vegetation at Irwin Creek, a tributary of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Irwin Creek, Santa Rosa, Sonoma County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Site Map](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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 the disbursement of an amount not to exceed ninety one thousand dollars (\$91,000) to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation (“the Foundation”) for removal of a cattle crossing and restoration of 5 acres of riparian vegetation at Irwin Creek in Sonoma County, subject to the following condition:

1. The project shall not commence and no Conservancy funds shall be disbursed for the project until the Executive Officer of the Conservancy has reviewed and approved in writing:
 - a. A project work program, budget, and schedule.
 - b. A sign plan that acknowledges funding from the Conservancy.
 - c. The names and qualifications of any contractors that the Foundation intends to retain to carry out the project.
 - d. Documentation that the Foundation has obtained all permits and approvals required for the Project under federal, state, and local law.

- e. A written agreement between the Foundation and the City of Santa Rosa, the owner of the property on which restoration project work will occur, permitting the work to be undertaken and the project to be monitored and maintained for a total period of at least 20 years.
- f. Evidence that the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, the holder of a conservation easement over the project site, agrees that the proposed project is permitted under the easement.”

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 authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the resource goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted on November 10, 2011.
3. The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation is a nonprofit organization existing under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Service, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends authorization to disburse up to \$91,000 in Conservancy funds to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation (“the Foundation”) to restore a portion of Irwin Creek on the historic Stone Farm in the City of Santa Rosa, Sonoma County (Exhibit 2). The project consists of restoration of approximately five acres of native riparian vegetation through removal of invasive plants and planting of native plants within 100-foot setbacks along 2,100 linear feet of Irwin Creek, the removal of a damaged and eroding cattle crossing, repair of the banks of the creek in the area of the crossing, and placement of wildlife-friendly, cattle fencing to protect the restored riparian area and creek. The vegetation restoration component of the project will be implemented primarily by Foundation staff, interns, and volunteers. Additionally, through the Foundation’s “Learning Laguna” environmental educational program students will participate in the project’s restoration activities while learning about the Laguna watershed.

Irwin Creek is a tributary of the Laguna de Santa Rosa and part of the Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed. The Laguna de Santa Rosa (the “Laguna”) consists of both a 16-mile long channel known as the Laguna de Santa Rosa and also the surrounding ecological system, which includes more than 30,000 acres of creeks, open water, perennial marshes, seasonal wetlands, riparian forests, oak woodland and grassland. The Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed is prioritized as of critical importance to species diversity, water quality, flood control and habitat by California Department of Fish and Wildlife and many other public and private agencies. In 2011 the Laguna de Santa Rosa was recognized as a wetland of international significance by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. The goal of this project is to promote the habitat quality of the central reach of the Laguna and establish habitat contiguity between the two best-preserved areas of riparian forest in the Laguna system. This project further advances the success of the Laguna

Foundation's Middle Reach Restoration Project by continuing to establish and connect a contiguous two-mile restoration assemblage. Specifically, restoration of riparian vegetation, the exclusion of cattle access from sensitive riparian areas, and control of noxious wildland weeds will collectively enhance water quality and reduce bank failures; promote the ability to manage invasive weeds by reducing nutrient and sediment inputs and increasing shade over the channel; and expand and restore habitat for birds, fish, other wildlife and native plants.

Initial restoration will begin with the removal of the deteriorating and eroded cattle crossing through Irwin Creek within the project area and restoration of the channel and creek banks damaged by the crossing. This is an important precursor to the restoration component in that it will alleviate a significant sediment source within the project area and restore the historical channel and creek bank morphology. The removal of this crossing and the restoration are designed to provide the desired ecological benefits while allowing maximum flexibility for continued agricultural uses on Stone Farm.

Foundation staff, volunteers, college interns, and students will implement the riparian restoration portion of the project, which will remove invasive plant species and increase native vegetation cover through planting of native grasses and trees. Students will participate through the Foundation's "Learning Laguna" environmental program, which provides students with the opportunity to join in restoration activities while learning about the Laguna watershed and good stewardship practices. The riparian restoration will encourage birds and wildlife to use the riparian corridor for traveling along the Laguna channel and increase the overall habitat value of the Laguna through reduced habitat fragmentation. Many riparian bird species require large contiguous stretches of forest and the restoration proposed here will substantially increase the viability of these populations.

Because Stone Farm is used for cattle grazing, fencing is necessary to protect the restored riparian vegetation and the creek. Permanent, 4-strand, barbed wire cattle fencing will be installed along the entire length of the restored vegetation. The fencing will be set back 100 feet from the creek banks. The fencing will be wildlife friendly, i.e., it will allow wild animals to easily move underneath the bottom strand. Individual T-posts will be hammered in the ground, and small holes will be dug for end braces only.

Additionally, the grantee intends to develop a pedestrian path leading to the restored riparian area. The path will be a mowed path which will extend from the nearby Laguna Learning Center to Irwin Creek and be maintained for supervised access to the project area. The grantee has not requested Conservancy funding for the pedestrian path and the path is not part of the project for purposes of this grant.

Each winter the annual floodplain within the project site is inundated for days and sometimes weeks at a time. Reestablishment of riparian forest will contribute to both filtration of overland flow and bank stabilization. Establishment of a dense riparian buffer will greatly reduce pollutant loads entering the Laguna over time, reduce bank-side erosion and provide animals with escape sites during flood events.

Much of the project area is threatened by expanding populations of invasive Himalayan blackberry, Harding grass, Reed canary grass, and Fall fescue which will render the area difficult and very expensive to restore if not curtailed in the near future. This project will enhance the resilience of the native plant community to species invasion, control current populations of

invasives, and will establish healthy native species in their stead. Without improving water quality and reducing invasive species, birds and wildlife will have less access to prey species from the channel.

Once completed, the total restored area of the entire Santa Rosa Farm Restoration Project will total 128 acres or 5.7 miles of riparian corridors. Access through supervised volunteer and environmental education programs will begin immediately and continue after the project is constructed. Without this work, wildlife habitat in the Laguna will remain fragmented, bird populations in the Laguna will remain at risk, water quality will continue to deteriorate, and the conditions will be maintained for invasive aquatic weed populations to continue to degrade existing habitat.

The Foundation was established in 1989 to preserve, restore and enhance the Laguna de Santa Rosa, and to provide opportunities to better understand and appreciate this wetland area. The Foundation has a well-established track record and demonstrated ability in reaching out to and engaging the local community, and in collaboration with local, county, and state agencies in the course of delivering its mission. The Irwin Creek project site is immediately adjacent to the Foundation's newly constructed Laguna Learning Center at Stone Farm that was constructed with prior support from the Coastal Conservancy (see "Project History," below).

Site Description: Irwin Creek flows westward through the City of Santa Rosa's Stone Farm and empties into the Laguna de Santa Rosa – the largest tributary to the Russian River. The Laguna de Santa Rosa is a critical provider of ecosystem services to the county's most densely populated watershed. The Laguna is 303(d) listed under the Clean Water Act as impaired for elevated nitrogen, phosphorous, temperature, sediment, and mercury, and for low levels of dissolved oxygen. Half of the main Laguna channel and its tributaries lack riparian vegetation and have experienced large losses of oak woodland. Numerous species in the Laguna have been listed as rare, threatened or endangered, including Sebastopol Meadowfoam, a local endemic historically present, but no longer found, at the project site. The Laguna is designated as critical habitat for Coho salmon and Steelhead trout, which depend on intact riparian forest to maintain cool water temperatures and provide important habitat structure during rearing and outmigration. Increasingly rare Western Pond turtles are found in the Laguna and depend upon a functional riparian system to provide cover, basking sites, and food production.

The project is a component of the larger City of Santa Rosa Farm Restoration Project to restore 100 ft. riparian buffers along both sides of all streams on City of Santa Rosa Farm properties. This will occur on the historically significant Stone Farm, the northern most of four properties purchased by the City for the purpose of distributing reclaimed wastewater. Diversified agricultural production activities continue on Stone Farm which makes it an ideal site for restoration and public education activities. Furthermore, Stone Farm and the area encompassing the Project are protected in perpetuity under conservation easements held by the District.

The project site is immediately upstream of the Laguna Wildlife Area which is the most heavily kayaked section of the Laguna. It is a well known site for observing river otter, bald eagle, osprey, kingfisher, herons, egrets, and other wildlife. In winter when the floodplain disappears under ten or more feet of water, the area is even more heavily traveled and becomes a haven for over-wintering waterfowl. Also the Laguna's most important publicly accessible duck hunting location, the Laguna Wildlife Area and other adjacent protected parcels are a vital link in a continuous seven mile habitat corridor that pieces together public and private ownerships.

Project History: The City of Santa Rosa and the Foundation have already completed restoration projects along Irwin Creek immediately adjacent to the proposed project site (see Exhibit 2). The riparian corridor was fenced off and replanted along the northwest and southwest reaches of Irwin Creek west of Sanford Road in 2011 and 2009, respectively. If approved, Conservancy funding would restore the northeast and southeast segments of Irwin Creek, providing for nearly 2,000 contiguous feet of restored riparian corridor immediately upstream of the ecologically significant and sensitive Laguna Wildlife Preserve.

The Irwin Creek Restoration project also complements the Conservancy-funded Laguna Learning Center. Completed in Spring 2012, the Learning Center will provide access to the project site for a wide spectrum of programmatic volunteer and environmental education programs. Prior Conservancy grant funds to the Foundation produced the restoration and management plan “Enhancing and Caring for the Laguna,” approved in 2003, and the Middle Reach Restoration Project, approved in 2005, which restored one mile of riparian corridor and ten acres of upland oak savannah.

The Conservancy also has a history of involvement with other local agencies and groups which support Laguna health and recreation, such as: in 2000, a grant to the Sonoma Land Trust, who partnered with the Laguna Foundation and developed “The Laguna de Santa Rosa Resource Atlas and Protection Plan” identifying key resources prioritized for protection, including the proposed project area, and which also included a public access and restoration segment which resulted in the Laguna Uplands trail located at the edge of Sebastopol; in 2001, a grant to the City of Sebastopol to construct a 4,000 foot loop trail and restoration project in the northeast corner of the Laguna; and in 2005 and 2007, a grant to the District for construction of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Trails Project.

PROJECT FINANCING

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| Coastal Conservancy | \$91,000 |
| Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation OSD | \$107,290 |
| City of Santa Rosa | <u>\$56,600</u> |
| Project Total | \$254,890 |

The anticipated source of the Conservancy’s \$91,000 in funds will be the fiscal year 2005-06 appropriation from the “Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Fund of 2002” (“Proposition 50”). See Water Code Section 79500, et. seq. Proposition 50 authorizes the use of these funds for purposes of San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program projects that protect coastal watersheds through restoration of land and water resources. Water Code Section 79570(b). The proposed project will restore a portion of a natural creek and riparian habitat along the creek within the Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed, which is a coastal watershed that drains into the Russian River, which drains into the Pacific Ocean. The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, i.e., the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, as discussed below in “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation.” Therefore, the proposed project is an appropriate use of Proposition 50 funds.

In addition, as required by Proposition 50 the proposed project is consistent with the applicable adopted local watershed management plan. “Enhancing and Caring for the Laguna de Santa Rosa” is the restoration and management plan for the Laguna watershed which was developed through collaboration between local and regional government and adopted by the County of Sonoma. This plan specifically identifies the proposed project area as a priority for habitat enhancement. The grantee will also obtain a permit from the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board to assure the project is consistent with the applicable regional water quality control plan (Water Code Section 79507).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165, which states that the Conservancy may award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area to help achieve the goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. These goals include to: “protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance.” Public Resources Code Section 31162(b). This project will restore and enhance riverine and riparian habitat in Irwin Creek, which is within a coastal watershed in Sonoma County. Thus, the proposed project will restore and enhance a natural habitat and watershed within a Bay Area County.

The proposed project satisfies the selection criteria for determining project priority under Section 31163(c) as follows:

1. the proposed Project is supported by adopted regional plans including: the Association of Bay Area Governments’ FOCUS “A Development and Conservation Strategy for the San Francisco Bay Area”, in which the Laguna de Santa Rosa is identified as a Priority Conservation Area (2008); the “Santa Rosa Citywide Creek Master Plan” (2007), which explicitly recommends the preservation of riparian forests; the “Sonoma County General Plan 2020” (2009), which recommends the protection and enhancement of Sonoma County’s natural habitats and diverse plant and animal communities; the “Laguna de Santa Rosa Resource Atlas and Protection Plan” (2003) funded by the State Coastal Conservancy and developed by the Laguna Foundation and the Sonoma Land Trust, which identifies key resources prioritized for protection including in the proposed project area; the “Laguna de Santa Rosa Park Master Plan” (1993) recommending re-vegetation and enhancement of riparian habitat in the central reach of the main channel; and the “North Coast Regional Water Management Plan” (2007) whose objectives include the protection and enhancement of salmonid habitat;
2. the proposed project serves a regional constituency by restoring and enhancing habitat in the Laguna de Santa Rosa Watershed, a resource of international significance, and by supporting the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation’s broad vision for the Laguna (“Enhancing and Caring for the Laguna de Santa Rosa,” 2006), adopted by pertinent local jurisdictions and supported editorially by the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, reflecting the breadth of its constituency;

3. the proposed project can be implemented in a timely manner;
4. delay in project implementation may result in expanding populations of invasives; and
5. the proposed project will include matching funds from the District and the City of Santa Rosa.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2013
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective 11F**, the project will restore riverine habitat through removal of a cattle crossing and will restore and enhance approximately 2,100 linear feet of riparian habitat for the benefit of wildlife and water quality within the San Francisco Bay Area.

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective G**, the project includes eradication of non-native invasive plant species that threaten important habitats in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**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 November 10, 2011, 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 Laguna Foundation has a well-established track record and demonstrated ability in reaching out to and engaging the local community in the course of delivering its mission. The Foundation has an extensive volunteer program including the highly successful Laguna Keepers program, Tree-a-Thon events, specialized intern groups, and intern support through SSU and SRJC collaborative intern programs. This support is particularly valuable for project implementation as well as providing work experience for aspiring resource management professionals.

The project has strong support from the City of Santa Rosa and Sonoma County, as well as pertinent local jurisdictions. In addition, Exhibit 3 includes support letters from Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, Congressman Mike Thompson, State Senator Noreen Evans, Assemblymembers Wesley Chesbro and Michael Allen, Sonoma County Supervisor Efren Carrillo, and the Sonoma Land Trust.

4. **Location:** The project is located within the Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed in Sonoma County, within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy.
5. **Need:** Without the requested grant funds, the Foundation will be unable to implement restoration in a timely manner. At best, the project would be delayed and then completed

over a much longer period, resulting in further deterioration of water quality and wildlife habitat.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Laguna de Santa Rosa is the heart of a 250 square-mile watershed and serves as a gateway to experiencing and learning about the flora, fauna and the dynamic nature of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, a designated Wetland of International Importance. It is quickly becoming an important community gathering place and a destination for visitors from far and near, with environmental learning opportunities for all ages. Restoring the health of Irwin Creek supports the health of the Laguna, which drains to the Russian River which ultimately empties into the Pacific Ocean.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project is located inland and is not vulnerable to rising sea levels.

Additional Criteria

8. **Urgency:** Failure to implement the project will result in continued habitat fragmentation, deteriorating water quality and increased invasive populations.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
13. **Readiness:** The project is scheduled and the Foundation is ready to proceed with restoration activities if awarded the proposed Conservancy grant.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
16. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The Foundation has committed to responsibly sourcing and deploying native plant genetic material that prevents genetic degradation and is adapted to the environmental conditions of the project area. Additionally, management of dry matter fuel loads from invasive weeds will be managed through a designed riparian exclusionary fencing system providing maximum flexibility for riparian corridor management in the future. This system will incorporate neighboring agricultural activities and allow for efficient flash grazing of the riparian corridor once it becomes appropriately established, all allowing for future adaptive management of the area as climate changes.
18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** In implementing the project, the Foundation will: utilize environmentally friendly project materials from local sources to the extent possible; recycle and reuse project materials; use reclaimed water for watering native plants; and use best management and maintenance strategies that limit the use of gas powered equipment. Long-term sequestration of carbon will be accomplished by ongoing management and maintenance of the restored riparian corridor as well as planned understory revegetation once the riparian canopy is well established.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/ STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

See above section “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation.”

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA: The proposed project is categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to California Code of Regulations (“CCR”) Title 14, Sections 15300 and 15333, which provide an exemption for projects at or under 5 acres in size that enhance and restore habitat for fish, plants or wildlife as long as: 1) there will not be a significant adverse impact on endangered, rare or threatened species or their habitats, 2) there are no hazardous materials at or around the project site that may be disturbed or removed and 3) the project will not result in cumulative adverse impacts. The proposed project is five acres in size, and it will restore habitat for fish, plants and wildlife by removing a cattle crossing in the creek, restoring the creek banks and channel, removing invasive plants and restoring native riparian vegetation along the creek banks. The project involves propagation of native plants and site work by hand involving the removal of non-native plants and revegetation and stabilization of the Irwin Creek bank with native plants and locally appropriate native trees. The project includes installation of wildlife-friendly, barbed wire cattle fencing to protect the restored riparian vegetation from cattle while enabling wildlife to pass through the area. There are no known endangered, rare or threatened species at the site and no known hazardous substances at the site. Nor will the project have any cumulative adverse impacts. Thus, the project falls within this exemption from CEQA.

Upon project approval, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.