

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 28, 2017

BAY AREA RIDGE TRAIL: SUSCOL HEADWATERS PRESERVE ACQUISITION

File No. 17-021-01
Project Manager: Jessica Davenport

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$400,000 to the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District for acquisition of the final 298 acres of the 709-acre Suscol Headwaters Preserve, which will close a gap of more than five miles in the Bay Area Ridge Trail and protect steelhead spawning habitat in Suscol Creek.

LOCATION: Suscol Creek Headwaters, County of Napa

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Project Photographs](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Conservation Lands Network Report](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [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 four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000) to the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District (“the District”) for acquisition of the final 298 acres (“the property”) of the 709-acre property known as Suscol Headwaters Preserve (Assessor Parcel Numbers 045-360-016 (part) and 045-360-017(part)), as shown in Exhibit 1. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to disbursement of any funds for acquisition of the property, the District shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy: a) all relevant acquisition documents, including the appraisal, agreement of purchase and sale, escrow instructions, deeds, and documents of title; b) a baseline conditions report; c) a monitoring and reporting plan; and d) documentation that all other funds necessary for the acquisition have been obtained.

2. The District shall not pay more than fair market value for the property acquired pursuant to this authorization, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
3. The property shall be managed and operated for the purposes of watershed protection, habitat conservation, and public access. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property or in a nearby publicly-viewable area, the design and location of which are to be 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 authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections (31160 *et seq.*), regarding the Conservancy’s mandate to address the resource and recreational goals of the San Francisco Bay Area.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization will provide a \$400,000 grant to the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District (“the District”) to purchase the final 298 acres of the 709-acre Suscol Headwaters Preserve, which will close a gap of more than five miles in the Bay Area Ridge Trail and protect steelhead spawning habitat in Suscol Creek.

The property is located between the Cities of Napa and American Canyon and is part of a larger, more than 2,100-acre, private holding which has been permitted for hillside vineyard development. The purchase and preservation of this property would not only complete protection of more than 700 net acres of prime watershed habitat, it would also preclude the permitted conversion of hillside land from watershed to irrigated vineyard as well as the potential development of several hillside estate homes.

The District is a public agency in Napa County. The District has a strong track record of park planning, integrating regional trail initiatives such as the Bay Area Ridge and Bay Trails with maximizing accessibility to youth and the disabled, designing and constructing low impact and low maintenance trails that take advantage of natural landforms and minimize structural intervention, and monitoring and maintaining parks and trails to ensure continued functionality and long term sustainability. The District currently owns or operates more than ten open space parks and regional trails, including the Napa River and Bay Trail (American Canyon to City of Napa), the Napa River Ecological Reserve, the Oat Hill Mine Trail, the Berryessa Peak Trail, Moore Creek Park, the EcoCamp Berryessa youth outdoor education camp, the Bothe-Napa Valley State Park, and the Bale Grist Mill State Historic Park.

Site Description: The Suscol Headwaters Preserve, 709 acres of high quality wildlife habitat and ridgetop open space at the headwaters of Suscol Creek, is located in the mountainous southeastern corner of Napa County (see Exhibit 1 – Project Location and Site Map). The property includes prime steelhead habitat as well as potential habitat for 63 listed species, including red-legged frogs. It also has unparalleled views across the restored San Pablo Bay wetlands (see Exhibit 2 – Project Photographs).

The District negotiated a two-phase purchase of the Suscol Headwaters Preserve. The District completed the purchase of the 411-acre Phase I property in 2015 and has an option to purchase the remaining 298-acre Phase II property extending to October 31, 2017. The property to be acquired through this grant, which includes much of the valuable Suscol Creek riparian habitat on the larger Preserve, is considered highly suitable for conservation due to its ability to contribute to large, intact regions of high ecological integrity (see Exhibit 3 – Conservation Lands Network Report). It contains 152 acres of areas essential to the Conservation Lands Network conservation goals and 82 acres important to the conservation goals, which are the recommended areas for preserving biodiversity in the Bay Area. The vegetation types are primarily grasslands, but also include 57 acres of rare coast live oak forest. It contains suitable habitat for a range of species, including acorn woodpecker, northern harrier, California tiger salamander, bobcat, mountain lion, blue oak, and purple needlegrass.

Importantly, the Phase II property includes the key corridor required to legally connect the property to Skyline Wilderness Park, Tuteur Ranch, and their trail systems to the north. While the planned Ridge Trail associated with the Suscol Headwaters Preserve is located almost entirely in the Phase I property, a short segment of trail, or “trail strip,” is located on the Phase II property. The proposed Phase II acquisition therefore would open up more than five miles of new Ridge Trail that would connect to the existing bicycle lane and pedestrian/bicycle undercrossing on Highway 12 in Jameson Canyon through to Skyline Park. It also would improve access to the Skyline Park-Suscol Mountain ridgeline from the cities of American Canyon and Napa, where more than 80 percent of Napa County’s population resides.

Project History: The vision for the Bay Area Ridge Trail is a 500-mile multi-use (serving hikers, mountain bicyclists and equestrians), continuous trail that rings San Francisco Bay high on the ridgeline. Under the leadership of the Conservancy and the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council (BARTC), and supported by a diverse group of project participants, the Ridge Trail creates an interconnected system of open space and trails that provides recreational opportunities and scenic views to the public. Begun almost 20 years ago, over 360 miles of trail are now dedicated and/or open to the public in all nine Bay Area counties. This authorization will further the Conservancy's statutory and strategic goals of improving access around San Francisco Bay, and is consistent with previous Conservancy authorizations to negotiate and acquire trail easements, prepare trail construction plans and designs, and construct and open trail segments to the public.

Suscol Headwaters Preserve was historically part of a large cattle ranch owned and operated by the Kirkland Cattle Company. In 2008, approximately 2,100 acres of the ranch was sold to an agricultural investment group. The LLC controlling the property is now known as Suscol Mountain Vineyards. Suscol Mountain Vineyards applied for and received a Napa County erosion control permit, allowing them to plant irrigated hillside vineyards on much of their property. The purchase and preservation of this property would not only protect more than 700 net acres of prime watershed habitat, it would also preclude the permitted conversion of hillside land from watershed to irrigated vineyard, as well as the potential development of several

hillside estate homes, with the attendant roads, power lines, septic systems, wells, and other infrastructure that come along with rural residential development.

As described above, the District negotiated a two-phase purchase of the Suscol Headwaters Preserve. For the Phase II acquisition, the California Department of Transportation has committed \$1.7 million to the acquisition out of monies budgeted in FY 2017-2018 for red-legged frog mitigation associated with the Highway 12–Jameson Canyon widening project. The County of Napa and the Napa Valley Transportation Agency have partnered to commit a further \$300,000 and the District has \$200,000 of its own funds budgeted for the acquisition.

On August 2, 2017, the Executive Committee of BARTC (acting on behalf of the full Board of Directors) voted unanimously to endorse the District’s grant request to the Conservancy to fund the proposed acquisition. Additionally, the Executive Committee also voted to approve a “refinement” in the planned Ridge Trail alignment, extending south from the Napa Solano Ridge Trail (Tuteur Loop Trail). The formal change brings what was previously a conceptual route between Skyline Wilderness Park and Jameson Canyon Road, and makes it consistent with the trail alignment now shown in Napa Open Space District maps related to the Suscol Headwaters Preserve (see Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map).

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$400,000
California Department of Transportation	\$1,700,000
County of Napa	\$300,000
Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District	<u>\$200,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$2,600,000

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to come from an 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 bond funds for protection of coastal watersheds, projects to protect the natural habitat values of coastal watersheds, and projects that promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state. The proposed acquisition will protect 298 acres of open space from development, protect steelhead spawning habitat in Suscol Creek, and improve public access by closing a 5-mile gap in the Ridge Trail.

For acquisition projects that protect natural resources, Proposition 84 also requires that the Conservancy give priority to projects that meet at least one of the criteria specified in Public Resources Code Section 75071(a)-(e). The proposed acquisition satisfies three of the specified criteria:

- (a) *Landscape/Habitat Linkages: properties that link to, or contribute to linking, existing protected areas with other large blocks of protected habitat. Linkages must serve to connect existing protected areas, facilitate wildlife movement or botanical transfer, and result in sustainable combined acreage.* The proposed Suscol Headwaters Preserve would be the lynchpin to preserving and protecting the *Southern Mountains - Skyline Park to Newell*

*Preserve Priority Conservation Area*¹. The proposed Suscol Headwaters Preserve constitutes more than 10% of the total land area of the approximately 7,800-acre priority conservation area. When combined with Skyline Wilderness Park, it would result in a landscape-scale preserve of nearly 1,560 acres. When adjacent private lands protected as forever wild by a conservation easement held by the Land Trust of Napa County, and adjacent City of Vallejo “Vallejo Lakes” watershed lands in Solano County are included, the protected landscape would be well over 3,000 acres.

(b) Watershed Protection: projects that contribute to long-term protection of and improvement to the water and biological quality of the streams, aquifers, and terrestrial resources of priority watersheds of the major biological regions of the state as identified by the Resources Agency. The property is located in the Suscol Creek Watershed, which drains directly into the Napa River. The Napa River has been identified by the Center for Ecosystem Management and Restoration as one of eight “anchor watersheds” with the highest restoration potential for steelhead trout in the San Francisco Bay Area in the report *San Francisco Estuary Watershed Evaluation: Identifying Promising Locations for Steelhead Restoration in Tributaries of the San Francisco Estuary* (CEMAR, 2007). In addition, Suscol Creek is identified as a Priority 2 stream by the Conservation Lands Network, which means it is considered be of high conservation value (see Exhibit 3). The State Department of Fish and Wildlife determined that the headwaters and much of the upper watershed of Suscol Creek has high habitat quantity, quality, and existing steelhead population density in their 2009 Southern Napa River Watershed Plan.

(c) Properties for which there is a non-state matching contribution toward the acquisition, restoration, stewardship or management costs. Matching contributions can be either monetary or in the form of services, including volunteer services. The County of Napa and the District are providing \$500,000 in local match funding for the acquisition.

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

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Pursuant to Section 31162(a) of the Public Resources Code, the Conservancy may award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area that will help to improve public access to, within, and around the ridgetops, consistent with the rights of private property owners, and without having a significant adverse impact on agricultural operations and environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife. Consistent with Section 31162(a), the proposed project will improve public access by closing a 5-mile gap in the Ridge Trail. Consistent with 31162(b), the project will protect natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of

¹ Priority Conservation Areas, along with their companion Priority Development Areas, are key components in a groundbreaking program adopted by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission working in partnership with the Association of Bay Area Governments, other public agencies, and community groups. The goal of the program is to link transportation investment with broader conservation and development goals. The County of Napa and its five municipalities have put considerable effort into designating those areas where development is desirable (PDAs) and those areas where conservation including habitat, farming and other open space uses should take priority (PCAs).

regional importance, as discussed in the Site Description above. Consistent with 31126(d), the project will provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes by improving access to the Skyline Park-Suscol Mountain ridgeline from the cities of American Canyon and Napa, where more than 80 percent of Napa County's population resides.

Consistent with Section 31163(a), the Conservancy cooperates with nonprofit land trusts and other organizations in identifying and adopting long-term resource and outdoor recreational goals for the San Francisco Bay Area. Completion of the Ridge Trail is identified in (1) *The San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program Regional Needs Briefing Book (Bay Area Open Space Council, July 1999)* and (2) *400 Miles and Beyond: A Strategic Plan for Completing the Bay Area Ridge Trail (BARTC, Draft 2006)*.

Consistent with Section 31163(c), the proposed project is a priority for funding because it: (1) is supported by adopted local or regional plans, including 2008 Napa County Regional Park and Open Space Master Plan (amended 2012) and *Plan Bay Area* (adopted in 2013), the Association of Bay Area Governments' Sustainable Communities Strategy, and this alignment has been adopted by the BARTC; (2) is multijurisdictional/serves a regional constituency by improving access to the Skyline Park—Suscol Mountain ridgeline from the cities of American Canyon and Napa, where more than 80 percent of Napa County's population resides; (3) can be implemented in a timely way; (4) provides opportunities for benefits that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented because the option to purchase the property will expire on October 31, 2017; and (5) includes matching funds, including \$1.7 million from the California Department of Transportation and \$500,000 in county and District matching funds.

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

Consistent with **Objective 12C** of the Conservancy's June 25, 2015 Strategic Plan Update, the proposed project will add to the Conservancy goal of completing acquisition projects that increase the amount of land accessible to the public or provide corridors for trails. It will also contribute to achieving **Objective 11B** of the Strategic Plan by protecting wildlife habitat, connecting corridors, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional significance.

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 October 4, 2014, 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. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:** By funding the acquisition of the Suscol Headwaters Preserve, the proposed project will implement the following plans:

400 miles and Beyond: A Strategic Plan for Completing the Bay Area Ridge Trail. This report released by the Bay Area Ridge Trail in 2006 lays out priorities for the completion of the 500-plus mile multi-use trail encircling the ridgetops of the San Francisco Bay Area.

California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report (Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, Draft 2013): Goal 2, “Build Sustainable Regions that Support Healthy, Livable Communities,” specific strategy to “support and invest in active transportation projects, such as walking and biking infrastructure.”

California Recreational Trails Plan (California State Parks, Phase I, June 2002): The Bay Area Ridge Trail is identified in the plan as a state trail corridor and meets the goal to “promote adequate design, construction, relocation, and maintenance of trails in order to optimize public access and resource conservation.”
4. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by State Senator Bill Dodd, State Assemblywoman Cecilia Aguiar-Curry, Napa County Board of Supervisors Chair Belia Ramos, City of American Canyon Mayor Leon Garcia, Napa Valley Transportation Authority, Friends of the Napa River, Land Trust of Napa County, the Tuteur Family Trust, and the BARTC. (See project letters in Exhibit 4.)
5. **Location:** The project is located in the County of Napa, which lies entirely within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy.
6. **Need:** Although the District is contributing matching funds, it does not have sufficient resources to complete the acquisition needed for this trail segment. This project will not occur without Conservancy support.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The project will close a gap of more than five miles in the Bay Area Ridge Trail, which is a recreational resource for the greater Bay Area.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** Suscol Headwaters Preserve ranges upward from elevations of 500 feet above mean sea level and thus is not vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** The purchase and preservation of this property is urgently needed to preclude the permitted conversion of hillside land from watershed to irrigated vineyard as well as the potential development of several hillside estate homes, with the attendant roads, power lines, septic systems, wells, and other infrastructure that come along with rural residential development. The District option on the property expires on October 31, 2017.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will address the needs to close a five-mile gap in the Ridge Trail and protect steelhead spawning habitat in Suscol Creek, as well as potential habitat for 63 listed species, by precluding development.
11. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
14. **Readiness:** The grantee and other funders are prepared to complete the acquisition by the expiration date of the District’s option on the property.

15. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
16. **Cooperation:** This project can move forward because of the cooperative relationship that exists at the present time between the BARTC, Caltrans, the District and the County of Napa.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The project consists of the purchase of land in order to preserve fish and wildlife habitat and provide access to public lands and waters where the purpose of the acquisition is to preserve the land in its natural condition. Such purchases are exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under State CEQA Guidelines, Class 13 (Acquisition of Lands for Wildlife Conservation Purposes), 14 Cal. Code Regs. § 15313. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval.