

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 2, 2023

PALOS VERDES NATURE PRESERVE FUEL REDUCTION PROJECT

Project No. 22-069-01
Project Manager: Dario Bobeda-Padilla

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$275,000 to the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy for the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve Fuel Load Reduction Project consisting of enhancement of 46.8 acres of habitat within the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve in the City of Rancho Palos Verdes through removal of invasive plants and planting of native plants to increase wildfire resilience and benefit federally protected butterflies and other native species.

LOCATION: City of Rancho Palos Verdes, Los Angeles County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Support Letters](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [CEQA Documents](#)
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed two hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars (\$275,000) to the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy (“the grantee”) to carry out the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve Fuel Load Reduction Project consisting of enhancement of 46.8 acres of habitat within the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve in the City of Rancho Palos Verdes through removal of invasive plants and planting of native plants to increase wildfire resilience and benefit federally protected butterflies and other native species.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

Findings:

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

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Climate Ready Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
4. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the two Environmental Impact Reports listed below that were certified by the City of Rancho Palos Verdes pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") and are attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4. The Conservancy finds that the proposed project as designed and mitigated avoids, reduces, or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a less-than-significant level, and that there is no substantial evidence based on the record that the project may have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15382.

The two applicable CEQA documents are:

- a. Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) for the Rancho Palos Verdes Natural Communities Conservation Planning Subarea Plan (Project No. /SCH No. 2003071008). Certified July 2004.
- b. FEIR Addendum for the Rancho Palos Verdes Natural Community Conservation Plan and Habitat Conservation Plan (SCH No. 2003071008). Certified March 2018.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$275,000 grant to the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy (PVPLC) for the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve Fuel Load Reduction Project

consisting of enhancement of 46.8 acres of habitat within the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve (Preserve) in the City of Rancho Palos Verdes (City) through removal of invasive plants and planting of native plants to increase wildfire resilience and benefit federally protected butterflies and other native species. The project will take place on property owned by the City (Exhibit 1).

The City lies within a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone (<https://egis.fire.ca.gov/FHSZ/>) and the entirety of the Preserve lies within that zone. Three sites within the Preserve contain high fire risk invasive species as well as multiple special status species including the federally endangered Palos Verdes blue butterfly (PVBB). The highly flammable invasive species Cyclops Acacia (*Acacia cyclops*) is a main target of the project as well as other high fire risk non-native brush. These invasive species have invaded large areas of the Preserve and are often also adjacent to buildings and heavily trafficked roads.

The proposed project focuses on reduction of wildfire fuel while also enhancing sensitive habitat to multiple special status species including the federally endangered Palos Verdes blue butterfly (PVBB), the federally endangered El Segundo blue butterfly, the federally threatened Coastal California Gnatcatcher and the Cactus Wren, a state species of concern. The removal of invasive plants and replacement with beneficial plants will reduce the threat of wildfire and provide rare habitat needed for the sensitive wildlife species to thrive.

The local community has donated over \$40 million to pilot projects aimed at removing fuel load and restoring habitat. PVPLC is part of various regional and statewide groups focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice and strives to include Black, Indigenous, and People of Color perspectives and engagement in this project. The project areas are in highly visible areas and educational components are built into this project that provide space for the community to learn about a resilient and sustainable approach to minimizing fire risk while creating a resilient wildlife habitat. Engagement with policymakers and regional leadership will be key in demonstrating these long-term benefits.

Project activities include removal of non-native perennial shrubs and annual brush and the seeding of those areas with native special status species butterfly host plants. Removal of invasive vegetation will occur through various methods including goat grazing, weed whacking, and mowing. Cleared fuel break areas will be broadcast seeded with evergreen low growing host plant species for special species of concern. The approach of remove and replace will reduce erosion and increase biodiversity benefits. PVPLC will maintain the site in perpetuity with the intent of continued enhancement of the special status species habitat per the agreement with the City. Educational components include an interpretive and educational component at the beginning of every volunteer event that will provide a well-rounded and positive learning experience to volunteers. PVPLC has a nature walk program that will use these project sites as educational opportunities for the hundreds of community members that attend. Project details and educational components will be shared through local news, newsletters, and email. The long-term maintenance, management, and monitoring will include non-native species monitoring and removal, covered species monitoring and adaptive management based on biologist recommendations as well as continued pursuit of funding for adjacent areas to continue to create wildlife corridors.

Site Description: The project area comprises three reserves in the Preserve located in the City, the Alta Vicente Reserve, Filiorum Reserve and the San Ramon Reserve (Exhibit 1). Total acreage of the project area is 46.8 acres. Vegetation is currently overrun by Cyclops Acacia as well as other high fire risk non-native brush. The project sites are home to several special status species, including the federally endangered PVBB, whose habitats are threatened by the invasive plant species. The reserves are in the Palos Verdes Peninsula Watershed, which is within the Santa Monica Bay Watershed Management Area. Some of the reserves are bounded by private roads and properties which would benefit from a reduction in wildfire risk.

The Preserve is owned by the City, which was established by the Rancho Palos Verdes Natural Community Conservation Plan. This plan also establishes PVPLC as “Habitat Manager.” PVPLC and the City have a Forrestral Management Agreement which establishes PVPLC’s management responsibilities as the preserve habitat manager for all conserved land in the Preserve.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: PVPLC and the City have partnered on projects to acquire reserve lands and restore and protect habitat within the Preserve for nearly 20 years. PVPLC has successfully implemented over 150 acres of habitat restoration through dozens of grant-funded projects to support covered species such as the PVBB in coordination with multiple stakeholders and community groups. PVPLC has experience managing grants from various state agencies, including multiple grants from the Conservancy to restore habitat within the Preserve. PVPLC’s adaptive management approach along with close management of the land ensures the lasting success of restoration projects within the Preserve.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

Selection Criteria

1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.

See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Strategic Plan” section below.

2. Project is a good investment of state resources.

The proposed project is a good investment of state funding. This project is feasible, has a reasonable budget, and addresses a demonstrated need for wildfire resilience. PVPLC continues to build on previous wildfire resiliency pilot projects that have proven to be successful with methods being the most efficient, practical, and beneficial to all stakeholders in the region, including federal and state agencies that partner with us on natural resource management. The locations were chosen based on feasibility and practicalities around maintaining a conservative budget. Funding this project will leverage over \$124,000 of in-kind services by the PVPLC, which will engage volunteers, students, interns, and conservation corps in job training and educational opportunities promoting community engagement and sense of ownership.

This project will remove the threat of Los Angeles County Fire listed high fire hazard plants, which will have long term impacts by reducing the need to direct firefighting resources as well as reducing invasive species impacts within the Preserve. The project implements many statewide wildfire and forest resiliency goals. It is in line with the Pathways to 30x30 Report and it implements the California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan, and a regional U.S. Fish & Wildlife Services Recovery Plan for PVBB. PVPLC uses the best available science, using an adaptive management approach based on yearly monitoring of flora, fauna and resources on the peninsula while creating a sustainable vegetation management program throughout the preserve.

3. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.

The proposed project will help increase fire resiliency in the context of anticipated climate change. Fire resilience is a critical issue due to increased average temperatures, reduced marine fog and longer and more severe droughts. California is facing unprecedented fire risk due to climate change, a growing populace and an increasing number of people living in high fire risk areas, including areas adjacent to wildlands. Both the 2020 and 2021 fire seasons broke numerous records. Projects like the proposed project implement sustainable land management techniques to make our natural landscapes more resilient.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The proposed project will deliver multiple benefits including habitat enhancement, sensitive species protection, and wildfire resilience. The proposed project focuses on reduction of wildfire fuel through invasive plant species removal and follows up with reseeded of native host plants to enhance sensitive habitat for multiple special status species including the federally endangered Palos Verdes blue butterfly (PVBB), the federally endangered El Segundo blue butterfly, the federally threatened Coastal California Gnatcatcher and the Cactus Wren, a state species of concern. The proposed project will reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire impacts to communities and have significant positive impact on sensitive wildlife species.

5. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.

PVPLC was started by local volunteers and has long had support for the acquisition and restoration of the land on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. The community has donated over \$40 million over time in addition to significant funding from partner cities to pilot projects aimed at removing fuel load and restoring habitat. PVPLC is part of various regional and statewide groups focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice and strives to include perspectives and engagement of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in all its work.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$275,000
Project Total	\$275,000

The anticipated sources of funding for this project are the Fiscal Year 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 appropriations from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of wildfire risk reduction. (The Budget Act of 2021, AB 128, as amended by SB 170 and Budget Act of 2022, SB

154 as amended by AB 178). The proposed project is consistent with these fund sources because it will help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

The grantee is also providing in-kind contributions for services that would engage volunteers, students, interns, and conservation corps in the amount of \$124,200. In-kind contributions are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The recommended project would be undertaken pursuant to Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which authorizes the Conservancy to address the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction (Section 31113(a)).

Pursuant to Section 31113(b), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to undertake projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address extreme weather events, sea level rise, flooding, and other coastal hazards that threaten coastal communities, infrastructure, and natural resources.

Pursuant to Section 31113(c), the Conservancy must prioritize grants for projects that maximize public benefits and have one of several purposes, including reducing emissions of greenhouse gases and preserving natural lands.

Consistent with these sections, the proposed project will restore the health and resilience of California's natural lands and reduce fire risk to communities. The project will help California's natural lands to be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires which may ultimately reduce greenhouse gas emissions released from increased wildfires due to climate change.

The proposed project addresses the impacts of climate change on natural resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction because it will improve natural lands and reduce the risk of wildfire that would adversely impact water quality and habitat in coastal watersheds (Chapter 5.5).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 3.2**, the proposed project will restore or enhance important wildlife habitat. The project will enhance wildlife habitat and corridors for various special species of concern, including the federally endangered PVBB.

Consistent with **Goal 4.2**, a local partner will implement the proposed project to improve the ecological health of natural lands and reduce the risk of catastrophic fire in areas where people live by removing 46.8 acres of highly flammable non-native vegetation within a very high fire hazard severity zone in proximity to residences, enhancing native habitat and creating much needed fuel break. The project will help California's natural lands to be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The City, as the lead CEQA agency, has entered a contract with PVPLC to manage all conserved land in the Preserve and has determined that the project activities are addressed in two environmental impact reports. Staff has independently evaluated the two applicable CEQA documents:

- a. Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) for the Rancho Palos Verdes Natural Communities Conservation Planning (NCCP) Subarea Plan (Project No./SCH No. 2003071008), certified in July 2004 (NCCP FEIR).
- b. FEIR Addendum for the Rancho Palos Verdes Natural Community Conservation Plan and Habitat Conservation Plan (SCH No. 2003071008), certified in March 2018 (FEIR Addendum).

The project's vegetation treatment activities are analyzed in the NCCP FEIR as part of a discussion of preserve management. The FEIR identifies potential significant adverse impacts to sensitive plant and animal species and sensitive vegetation communities and habitats (Habitat Restoration Plan 3.4.5.3.1 and Targeted Exotic Plant Removal Plan 3.4.5.3.2; page 3-14 to 3-15 of the FEIR). The FEIR finds that these impacts are mitigated to a less than significant level by implementation of the NCCP/HCP and management by PVPLC. For the City of Rancho Palos Verdes subarea plan, mitigation measures include:

- Preservation of core or major populations of covered species occurring within the City.
- Design, configuration, and management of the portion of the Preserve within the City, outlined in the NCCP/HCP.
- Monitoring and reporting measures included in the annual Monitoring Report on Habitat Restoration Areas as detailed in the Habitat Restoration Plan.

All project areas are within the NCCP/HCP Preserve. Consistent with the City's NCCP Subarea Plan, the project is intended to benefit sensitive vegetation and wildlife communities and will carry out habitat restoration activities such as: removal of invasive, non-native vegetation and reseeding with native habitat for special species.

The project activities are also consistent with the FEIR Addendum. The grantee will perform all project activities in accordance with the City's NCCP/HCP plan which outlines Preserve Management as a Covered Activity. Specific management Covered Activities include:

- Monitoring of Covered Species
- Vehicular access
- Habitat restoration
- Invasive species control
- Predator control
- Reintroduction of Covered Species
- Photo documentation
- Installation of signage
- Trail maintenance
- Maintenance of fire/fuel buffers

- Field research and studies designed to contribute to the long-term protection of habitats and species and other basic research of habitats and species included in the Preserve.

Thus, implementation of the Project is not anticipated to result in new or more severe significant impacts over and above those disclosed in the previously certified FEIR Addendum.

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