

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 2, 2023

Santa Lucia Preserve Wildfire Resilience

Project No.: 22-085-01

Project Manager: Tom Gandesbery

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$752,510 to the Santa Lucia Conservancy to develop and implement a wildfire mitigation training program that will train a wildfire workforce and reduce fuels on 675 acres of coastal habitat and to plan four prescribed burn projects, on the Santa Lucia Preserve in Monterey County.

LOCATION: Santa Lucia Preserve, Monterey County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

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

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy (Conservancy) hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed seven hundred fifty two thousand five hundred ten dollars (\$752,510) to the Santa Lucia Conservancy ("the grantee") to develop and implement a wildfire mitigation training program that will train a wildfire workforce and reduce fuels on approximately 675 acres of coastal habitat and to plan four prescribed burn projects (the "project").

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) 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.
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4. Evidence that all permits, and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Any other applicable agreements determined necessary for the project by the Conservancy's Executive Officer.

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 and Guidelines.
3. The Santa Lucia Conservancy is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the State Coastal Conservancy (Conservancy) authorize a grant of up to \$752,510 to the Santa Lucia Conservancy (SLC) to develop and implement a wildfire mitigation training program that will train a regional wildfire workforce while reducing fuels on 675 acres of coastal habitat and to plan four prescribed burn projects on approximately 350 additional acres on the Santa Lucia Preserve (the "project").

The Santa Lucia Preserve (Preserve) is located south of the unincorporated community of Carmel Valley in Monterey County and runs parallel to Carmel Valley starting approximately two miles from the coast and extending inland as far as to Carmel Valley Village (Exhibit 1). Due to its location, the proposed reduction of fuels on the Preserve would reduce the intensity and spread of catastrophic fire to neighboring Carmel Valley (from the mouth at Carmel-by-the-Sea to Carmel Valley Village) and Carmel Highlands, an unincorporated community along Highway 1 west of the Preserve. These communities were classified as Very High Risk and High Risk by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) and have been identified as priority areas in CAL FIRE's 2020 San Benito-Monterey Unit Specific Fire Plan. Due to geography, weather patterns, and past fire behavior, the Preserve functions as a wildfire buffer between the undeveloped lands of Big Sur to the south and these wildland urban interface communities to the west and north. The proposed project is also needed because the lack of a trained regional wildfire workforce to carry out prescribed burns and highly technical fuels reduction projects hampers the ability of regional conservation organizations to mitigate risks associated with longer fire seasons and the potential spread of high severity fires that could cause catastrophic loss.

The proposed project will also plan four prescribed burns on approximately 350 acres of the Preserve that will promote opportunities for forest regeneration of valley oak, blue oak, and coast redwood in areas that have not been disturbed by fire in over a century. Promoting natural regeneration through fire is an important mechanism to create a mixed age forest stand, which builds resilience in forest systems to future disturbance. In addition, certain species, such as the California Spotted Owl, rely on complex forest structure in old-growth forest systems like those on the Preserve that can be created using prescribed fire. The project also has the benefit of reducing greenhouse gas emissions through activities that will reduce wildfire ignition and spread.

The project will develop and implement a fuels reduction workforce training program on the Santa Lucia Preserve in conjunction with the California Conservation Corps (CCC). Vegetation treatments will consist of vegetation thinning and removal of invasive plants across approximately 675 acres of mixed conifer, grassland, and shrublands. Over the course of 8 eight-day trainings (64 training days total), between 60-90 CCC members will receive hands-on training to effectively identify and remove highly flammable invasive plants and manage understory to create fire resilient coastal prairie and mixed forest habitats. Using chainsaws, other power tools, and hand tools, CCC crews will thin vegetation and remove ladder fuels, dead and dying trees and shrubs, and flammable and invasive species that increase fire severity. The sites for vegetation fuel management work are identified as priorities in the SLC's Resource Management Plan and Fuel Management Plan.

In addition, the project includes development of plans and permit applications for four prescribed burn projects on up to 350 acres of the Preserve. SLC has identified a number of potential prescribed burn sites on the Preserve. Selection of the exact prescribed burn sites will be determined by SLC staff, the Central Coast Prescribed Burn Association, and local fire agencies after a close review of fuel monitoring data from adjacent fuel reduction treatment areas. One goal of the fuel management work is to create landscape heterogeneity.

Site Description: SLC conducts environmental stewardship of the 18,000 acres of the protected lands within the Preserve located on the southern portion of the Carmel Valley and the northern extent of the Santa Lucia Mountain range (Exhibit 1). Almost all of the Preserve is classified very high wildfire risk by CAL FIRE. Habitats on the Preserve include grasslands and coastal prairie, oak woodland, coast redwood, and coastal shrub/chaparral. The Preserve is home to many protected plant and animal species, including the central coast steelhead, tricolored blackbird, Smith's blue butterfly, California red legged frog, and California tiger salamander.

Throughout the approximately 675 acres where CCC members will conduct fuel reduction training and treatments, invasive species pose a considerable threat to ecosystem and fire resilience. Forested treatment areas have a significant buildup of ladder fuels due to the spread of invasive French broom. In addition, other invasive species such as *Vinca major* outcompete native trees and understory species for water, resulting in mortality and fuel loading. Coastal scrub and other brush communities within treatment areas face invasion and competition from

French broom which creates dense monotypic stands that are more susceptible to fire and less resilient than native scrub assemblages. Mixed grassland and coastal prairie treatment areas also face competition from French broom which encroaches and converts the grasslands to shrubs, resulting in higher intensity and severity of fires.

Prescribed fire plans will be developed for approximately 350 acres, which include grasslands (187 acres), shrublands (10 acres), and mixed hardwood forests and conifers (153 acres). Mixed hardwood and conifer forest communities in these areas include a medium and heavy fuel component and ladder fuels as the result of tree fall, fire exclusion, and sudden oak death-induced tree mortality that could considerably increase the severity of future fire events. Potential grassland areas are covered heavily in dense thatch and are primarily dominated by non-native annual grasses. These grassy fuels are a considerable risk to rapid fire spread in fire events. Potential shrubland communities that have not burned for over a century have amassed dry ladder fuels as they have aged.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: SLC is an independent non-profit land trust responsible for the permanent protection of 18,000 acres of lands in the Preserve through a combination of land owned in fee and conservation easements. SLC has managed numerous grants related to habitat restoration and was recently awarded a \$1.2 million forest health and wildfire mitigation grant by CAL FIRE for work on an existing fuel-break system in areas adjacent to the Preserve. SLC has completed seven prescribed burns, has a conservation grazing program and restoration program that reduce fuels on 2,600 acres annually, utilizes seasonal vegetation management crews, and is currently completing a 280-acre shaded fuel break project in partnership with the Resource Conservation District of Monterey County and CAL FIRE. Since the organization's conception, SLC has been awarded or administered 14 grants exceeding one million dollars from a variety of sources, including the Natural Resource Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, 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. It is feasible, has a reasonable budget, and addresses a demonstrated need or regional problem. The proposed project is consistent with the following state plans:

- **California’s Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan** (Governor’s Forest Management Task Force, January 2021), which calls for activities such as fuels reduction, forest thinning, vegetation management, prescribed fire, shaded fuel breaks, defensible space, and enhancement of fire-prone habitats to reduce fire risk.
- **The California Forest Carbon Plan** (CNRA, 2018), which calls for restoration of natural fire regime and forest composition through a multitude of approaches including thinning, prescribed burns, invasive vegetation management, and shaded fuel breaks.
- **The Community Wildfire Prevention & Mitigation Report** (CAL FIRE, 2019), which urges state and local agencies to implement the goals of the Carbon Forest Plan and lays out recommendations to agencies to increase the scale and pace of management and mitigation actions to improve forest health and resiliency.

The State’s Action Plan (referenced above), as well as the Forest Carbon Plan, encourage the use of prescribed fire to mitigate fire risk and minimize carbon emissions from catastrophic wildfire.

3. Project includes serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.

SLC has an on-going program of tribal engagement for its programs and are in the process of developing tribal engagement goals and strategies. In the last year SLC provided information to interested local tribes regarding prescribed burn opportunities and anticipates tribal participation in future prescribed burn trainings that will result from the proposed plans.

4. 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. Both the 2020 and 2021 fire seasons broke numerous records. The proposed project will reduce fuel loads which could slow or lower the intensity of future wildfires. In turn, this change would result in less carbon emissions resulting from fires. Project monitoring will be implemented by California State University Monterey Bay.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

Project increases community-preparedness to catastrophic wildfire and resilience, increases carbon sequestration, and protects existing sequestration on natural lands. The project also provides benefits to underserved communities in that it will provide job training and workforce development for members of the CCC. The project will reduce wildfire risk in the Carmel Highlands and Carmel Valley.

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

The proposed project was developed in collaboration with the Monterey County Resource Conservation District, the Monterey Peninsula Regional Park District, CAL FIRE and the

Monterey County Regional Fire District. There is broad public support in the Carmel Valley for wildfire mitigation projects such as the proposed project. This project has the support of the following groups and individuals: County Supervisor Mary Adams; State Senator John Laird; the Santa Lucia Preserve Community Services District; CAL FIRE; Cachagua Fire Protection District; and the Monterey County Regional Fire Department. (Exhibit 2).

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$752,510
Santa Lucia Conservancy	\$23,690
Project Total	\$776,200

The anticipated source of funding for this grant is a block grant to the Coastal Conservancy from the Department of Conservation’s (DOC) Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP). The Conservancy is one of nine recipients of RFFCP block grants. The goal of the RFFCP is to increase regional capacity to prioritize, develop, and implement projects that improve forest health and fire resiliency, facilitate greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and increase carbon sequestration in forests throughout California.

Unless specifically identified as “Required Match,” the other sources of funding described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders. Typical grant conditions require Grantees to provide any funds needed to complete the 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 include reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and addressing 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.

Consistent with these sections, the proposed project will restore the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, or natural lands and reduce fire risk to communities. In addition, 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.

In addition, pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, the proposed project addresses resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction by improving forests, grasslands, or natural lands and reducing the risks of wildfire that would adversely impact water quality and habitat in a coastal watershed.

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

Consistent with **Goal 4.2** of the Conservancy's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will implement a project to restore the health and resilience of approximately 675 acres of California forests, grasslands, and natural lands in a manner that reduces fire risk to communities and will plan for wildfire resilience projects on an additional 350 acres.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The planning components of the proposed project are statutorily exempt from review under CEQA pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations Section 15262 which applies to planning and feasibility studies for possible future actions that have not been approved, adopted, or funded. The proposed project includes planning for the fuel reduction vegetation management work and preparation of prescribed burn plans and permit applications for up to four prescribed burns.

The vegetation fuel reduction work of the proposed project is categorically exempt from review under CEQA pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations Section 15304 which exempts projects that involve minor alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation without the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. Consistent with Section 15304, the proposed fuel management activities will not change the nature of the land or alter the basic character of the vegetation and habitat at the project sites and will not remove healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry or agricultural purposes.

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