

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 1, 2023

McCormick Ranch Acquisition

Project No. 23-002-01
Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,500,000 to Sonoma Land Trust to acquire the 654-acre McCormick Ranch Property for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources, including wildlife corridors and habitat, wetland and water resources, and landscape resilience related to climate change; and providing open space, public access, recreational use, and Tribal and indigenous cultural uses compatible with natural resource protection in the Mayacamas Mountains of Sonoma and Napa Counties.

LOCATION: 3770 Langtry Road, St. Helena, Sonoma and Napa Counties

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Maps](#)
Exhibit 2: [Photographs](#)
Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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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 one million five hundred thousand dollars (\$1,500,000) to Sonoma Land Trust (“the grantee”) to acquire the 654-acre “McCormick Ranch” property in the Mayacamas Mountains of Sonoma County (Assessor’s Parcel No. 030-010-011 and -012; 030-040-003, -008, -009, and -010; 051-010-090; and 030-050-019) and Napa County (Assessor’s Parcel No. 027-580-015, -016, -017, -018, and -019), depicted in Exhibit 1 to the accompanying staff recommendation, for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources, including wildlife corridors and habitat, wetland and water resources, and landscape resilience related to climate change; and providing open space, public access, recreational use, and Tribal and indigenous cultural uses compatible with natural resource protection.

This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer):
 - a. All relevant acquisition documents for the acquisition including, without limitation, the appraisal, purchase and sale agreement, deed and conservation easement, escrow instructions, environmental or hazardous materials assessment, and title report;
 - b. A baseline conditions report; and
 - c. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
3. The property acquired under this authorization shall be managed and operated for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources, including wildlife corridors and habitat, wetland and water resources, and landscape resilience related to climate change; and providing open space, public access, recreational use, and Tribal and indigenous cultural uses compatible with natural resource protection. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
4. If requested by the Conservancy, the grantee shall permit designation of a segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail on the McCormick Ranch Property.
5. The grantee shall submit any master plan for the property to the Conservancy for review for consistency with the acquisition purposes.
6. 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.

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 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding San Francisco Bay Area Program.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
 3. The Sonoma Land Trust is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
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STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy disburse up to \$1,500,000 to Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) to acquire the 654-acre McCormick Ranch property (the Property) for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources, including wildlife corridors and habitat, wetland and water resources, and landscape resilience related to climate change; and providing open space, public access, recreational use, and Tribal and indigenous cultural uses compatible with natural resource protection in the Mayacamas Mountains of Sonoma and Napa Counties (the project) (see Exhibit 1, Figure 1). The Property consists of a total of 253 acres over eight parcels in Sonoma County and 401 acres over five parcels in Napa County (see Exhibit 1, Figure 2).

The Property is located in the Mayacamas Mountains between the towns of Santa Rosa and St. Helena in Sonoma and Napa Counties. The Property is generally described as rural and undeveloped, consisting primarily of grasslands, oak woodlands, and coniferous forest. Currently no buildings exist on the Property--cabins that once stood on the Property were destroyed during the 2020 Glass Fire and not rebuilt. Three developed springs, natural ground water sources that have been physically altered for artificial withdrawal, that once supplied water to the cabin sites, survived the Glass Fire, but are no longer in use. The Property features elevations between 1,600 and 2,530 feet and is within the upper watershed lands of three river systems: the Napa River, Russian River, and Sonoma Creek (see details in the "Site Description" section below). Due to the diverse habitat types (Exhibit 2, Figures 1-4) and topographic range, the Property is well-suited to supporting a wide range of wildlife including special status species such as California Coastal Chinook salmon, Northern California Steelhead, oak titmouse, sharp-shinned hawk, and wrentit.

The Property is within a priority area identified in the Bay Area Critical Linkages Report (which identifies large wildlands areas that are vital to ensure the San Francisco Bay region is connected to larger landscapes to the north and south) because it helps connect the large landscape blocks of the Marin Coast/Point Reyes National Seashore and the Mendocino National Forest/Blue Ridge (Exhibit 1, Figure 3) as part of the 85-mile long Marin Coast-Blue Ridge Critical Linkage. Furthermore, the SLT's more detailed analysis shows that the Property is within the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor (Exhibit 1, Figure 4), a 10,000-acre east-west network of habitat that is part of the Critical Linkage corridor mentioned above and connects Sonoma Mountain to the Mayacamas Range. These corridors are essential for providing safe movement and migration for wildlife, including the special status species above. Preserving these natural resources will improve climate resilience by reducing the risks from future flooding, wildfire, or other climate change impacts.

In addition to natural resource preservation, staff recommends funding acquisition of the Property for public access compatible with natural resource protection. With its location adjacent to parks such as Sugarloaf Ridge State Park, the Property expands connectivity to 10,000 acres of open space and protected lands. It also opens up the opportunity to site a 2.4-mile segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail (Exhibit 1, Figure 5), expanding a 20+ mile multi-use (pedestrian, bicycling and equestrian) loop trail through a variety of habitats, providing

picturesque ridgetop views in the process. Other anticipated public uses consistent with resource protection include bird watching, outdoor education, nature study, and camping.

SLT is working on the acquisition in partnership with Sonoma County Regional Parks (SCRP), the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Sonoma Ag+OS), the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District (NCRPOSD), and the Land Trust of Napa County (LTNC). As one of the funders, Sonoma Ag+OS will hold a conservation easement on the Sonoma side of the property, which will be recorded concurrently with the transfer to SLT. The Property will ultimately transfer to SCRP and NCRPOSD, who will each take ownership of the portion of the Property in their respective counties. SCRP will then lease the Napa parcels from NCRPOSD and develop comprehensive management plans for both the Napa and Sonoma portions of the Property that will expand community engagement and include public access consistent with preserving natural resources. These plans will include natural resource enhancement and restoration, public access, educational programming, and Tribal uses. A second option for ownership of the Napa parcels may be necessary if the lease arrangement is found by Sonoma or Napa Counties to be infeasible. In that case, the LTNC will take ownership of the Napa parcels and work cooperatively with SCRP on the management plan.

SLT, SCRP, and NCRPOSD are in discussions with Tribes with historic and cultural connections to lands in the region, including the Property, in hopes of enhancing engagement and to explore opportunities for collaboration.

The risk of losing the opportunity to protect the abundant natural resources from vineyard and estate home construction is elevated if the Property is not acquired. The 2022 appraisal confirmed that existing zoning rules allow for eight home site entitlements as well as 92 acres of vineyards due to the soil quality, terrain, water resources, and tree coverage. Agricultural and residential development would compromise the Property's natural resources. The Property's habitats and rare species would be less resilient to the increasing pressures associated with climate change, such as drought and wildfires. Development would disrupt the functioning wildlife corridors and significantly increase demands on the area's limited water resources, affecting streamflow and groundwater recharge. The extensive development would lead to decreased carbon sequestration resulting from the widespread soil disturbance and removal of existing vegetation.

Site Description: The Property is located in the Mayacamas Mountains, a mountain range that extends across Mendocino, Lake, Sonoma, and Napa Counties. Parcels are situated in both Sonoma and Napa Counties (Exhibit 1, Figure 6). It is adjacent to 10,000 acres of parks and protected lands with Bureau of Land Management land and Sugarloaf Ridge State Park directly to the south and Hood Mountain Regional Park to the west. Elevations range between 1,600 and 2,530 feet and the lands that make up the Property are included in the Napa River, Russian River, and Sonoma Creek watersheds, which support California Coastal Chinook salmon and Northern California Steelhead. The Property is situated amidst the regionally significant Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor, which is a part of the Marin Coast-Blue Ridge Critical Linkage, which is a key corridor identified in the Bay Area Open Space Council's 2013 Critical Linkages report.

Habitats on the Property support a wide range of wildlife including three special status species: oak titmouse, sharp-shinned hawk, and wrentit.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: SLT has more than 40 years of experience protecting over 50,000 acres in Sonoma County and is well qualified to carry out the transaction and transfer to SCRCP and NCRPOSD. SLT has administered similar acquisitions, such as the Sonoma Mountain Vernal Pools acquisition, where the property was recently acquired and successfully transferred to SCRCP. Two other examples are the 163-acre Santa Rosa Creek Headwaters acquisition which SLT acquired and transferred to SCRCP for addition to Hood Mountain Regional Park; and the 54-acre Cooper Creek acquisition, transferred to SCRCP for addition to Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve.

SLT has administered many Conservancy grant-funded projects and meets grant requirements in a timely fashion, manages complex community planning processes, produces high-caliber restoration plans, all of which demonstrate that SLT is a trustworthy partner. It is accredited by the national Land Trust Accreditation Commission, demonstrating excellence in fiscal responsibility.

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 to acquire the 654-acre McCormick Ranch property is a good investment of state resources because it will contribute to meeting the state's biodiversity and equitable outdoor access goals as outlined in the Strategic Land Acquisition section of the Pathways to 30 x 30 Report.

3. Project includes a 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.

SLT and the project partners have engaged with Tribes who are traditionally and culturally affiliated with the project area. The upcoming Master Plans will affirmatively provide for cultural uses compatible with the protection of the natural and scenic resources, including activities such as harvest or foraging, and holding group and individual ceremonies.

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

Acquisition of the Property will permanently protect the property from development, protecting a critical wildlife corridor connecting areas across Mendocino, Lake, Sonoma, and

Napa Counties and habitats for threatened and sensitive species, and preventing greenhouse gas emissions. The project will continue to deliver benefits, including carbon sequestration by preserving oak woodlands, and improving public access for the Bay Area region. The project will also provide refugia for species adapting to the impacts of climate change.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

Acquisition of the Property will deliver multiple benefits including: 1) permanently protecting the Property from development, thereby protecting a critical wildlife corridor in Sonoma and Napa Counties and habitats for threatened and sensitive species; 2) improving climate resilience with accessible microhabitats created by a variety of water resources and diverse topography; and 3) providing public access to a highly scenic, open-space resource of regional importance in the Bay Area, including a potential link in the regional Bay Area Ridge Trail.

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

SLT has engaged stakeholders as feasible during the development of this project. Property owners in the rural residential neighborhood were directly engaged in planning the acquisition, resulting in donations towards the purchase price. A local Tribe with links to the area was also directly engaged, enabling discussions towards mutual benefits. Lastly, SLT has worked with relevant local government agencies and political leaders to gain support.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$1,500,000
California Natural Resources Agency: Cultural, Community, and Natural Resources Program	\$729,000
California State Parks: Habitat Conservation Fund	\$250,000
Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation	\$2,000,000
Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District	\$3,500,000
Private donations/SLT-secured	\$2,896,000
Project Total	\$ 10,875,000

Conservancy funds are anticipated to come from an FY 2022/23 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of climate resilience (The Budget Act of 2022, SB 154). These funds are available as described in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the climate resilience funds, including project for the purpose of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it is within the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program established pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

Unless specifically identified as “Required Match,” the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above 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:

This project is being undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (section 31162). Section 31162 authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area to help achieve regional public access and resource goals.

The proposed authorization is consistent with Section 31162(a) because the proposed project is located within the nine-county Bay Area, and it will help achieve the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program goal of improving public access to and around the Bay, without having a significant adverse impact on agricultural operations and environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife, through the potential completion of a segment of a ridge trail system (i.e., the Bay Area Ridge Trail).

Consistent with 31162(b), the proposed authorization will protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors (i.e., Marin Coast-Blue Ridge Critical Linkage), watersheds (i.e., Sonoma Creek Watershed), and scenic areas.

Consistent with 31162(d), the proposed authorization will promote, assist, and enhance projects that will provide open space and natural areas (i.e., the Property), that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes through improved connectivity to existing state and county parks.

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

Consistent with **Goal 3.1 Conserve Land**, the proposed project will conserve 654 acres of resource lands identified in regionally led and scientifically based planning efforts to protect high quality resources and increase habitat.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project is categorically exempt from environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Reg. Section 15313, which exempts acquisitions of property for purposes of preserving fish and wildlife habitat as well as preservation of access to public lands where the purpose of the acquisition is to preserve the land in its natural condition; and Section 15325, which exempts acquisitions for purposes of preserving open space and the existing natural conditions of the property, including plant and animal habitats and including for park purposes. The proposed acquisition will allow public access and preserve the existing natural conditions and habitats of the property.

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