COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 15, 2024

LAKE SOLANO PARK HABITAT RESTORATION AND PUBLIC ACCESS PROJECT

Project No. 23-090-01
Project Manager: Laura Cholodenko

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to $1,143,500 to the Solano Resource Conservation District to restore 19 acres of upland habitat and install a half-acre demonstration garden, 670-foot long trail, outdoor education area, two kiosks, and interpretive signs at Lake Solano Park in Solano County; and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Lake Solano Park, Solano County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: Site Photographs and Project Design

Exhibit 3: Project Letters

Exhibit 4: Final Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Lake Solano Habitat Restoration and Public Access Improvement Project

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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 one hundred forty-three thousand and five hundred dollars ($1,143,500) to the Solano Resource Conservation District ("the grantee") to restore 19 acres of upland habitat and install a half-acre demonstration garden, 670-foot long trail, outdoor education area, two kiosks, and interpretive signs at Lake Solano Park in Solano County.

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.
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 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Conservancy's mandate to address the resources and recreational goals of the San Francisco Bay area.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the "Final Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Lake Solano Habitat Restoration and Public Access Improvement Project" adopted by the Solano Resource Conservation District on June 21, 2023 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4. The Conservancy finds that the Lake Solano Habitat Restoration and Public Access Improvement 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 that the project will have a significant effect on the environment.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to $1,143,500 to the Solano Resource Conservation District (Solano RCD) to restore 19 acres of upland habitat and install a half-acre demonstration garden, 670-foot long loop trail, outdoor education area, two kiosks, and interpretive signs at Lake Solano Park (Exhibits 1 and 2). The project will restore habitat for native wildlife that was affected by recent wildfires and improve park amenities. The project will be undertaken by the Solano RCD with volunteers, the California Conservation Corps, the Putah Creek Council, and members of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation. The Lake-Napa Unit (LNU) wildfire in 2020 destroyed almost all of the mature native trees in the upland area of Lake Solano Park, including stands of blue oak, interior live oak, gray pine, and buckeyes. Currently, only a few trees remain, and the area has become dominated by highly flammable non-native grasses and dense patches of yellow starthistle and black mustard. In addition to being a fire

hazard, these plants offer little habitat value to wildlife. The project will replant the uplands with 85 species of native trees, shrubs, forbs, wildflowers, and grasses to create a diverse and more wildfire-resilient native plant community. A specific focus of the planting will be the creation of monarch butterfly habitat. Monarchs migrate through the area in early spring and fall and the project will install 10 densely planted "butterfly pod" areas that contain three species of milkweed, the only plant on which monarch butterflies lay their eggs and on which the caterpillars feed, and other nectar producing plants that will support monarch butterflies as well as other insects and birds.

Compared to other parts of the park, relatively few visitors access the upland portion of the park due to the impacts of the LNU fire and an overall lack of interpretive materials, wayfinding signs, and other amenities. To make the area more inviting and to offer educational opportunities, the project will install a half-acre native plant demonstration garden and outdoor education area, an entrance kiosk, picnic tables at an overlook point, and 15 plant identification signs. The signs will provide information on cultural uses of the plants by the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation (YDWN) and will also educate visitors about ways they can incorporate wildlife-friendly native plants into their own residential landscaping. The garden will also include a 650-foot loop trail that is compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), giving visitors with mobility issues better access to the demonstration garden. Fifteen interpretive panels and wayfinding signs will be installed alongside trails in the upland area and adjacent day use area. The signs will address a variety of topics including monarch butterflies, a land acknowledgement of the YDWN's homeland, impacts of the LNU fire, and fire management in a changing climate.

The project includes extensive volunteer participation and will create opportunities for future community participation and education in the Park. Volunteers and the California Conservation Corps will install the plantings during 24 restoration events, providing opportunities to learn about and participate in post-fire recovery of upland habitat. The project includes two years of monitoring the restoration effort by Restoration Ecology students from UC Davis who will use the site as a living laboratory to learn how to plan, analyze, and monitor these types of restoration efforts. After the demonstration garden is built, the Putah Creek Council will lead guided events in the garden area and will initiate a presentation series on the history, culture, and landscape of the Putah Creek bioregion, with a focus on the YDWN's perspective. Discussion regarding coordination and input on the project by the YDWN is described in Section 3 below.

Site Description:

Lake Solano Park is located in the foothills of the Inner Coast Range. The Park's northern boundary lies along the banks of Lake Solano, a portion of Putah Creek that is impounded by the Putah Creek Diversion Dam. The Park supports riparian forest along Putah Creek and blue oak-gray pine woodlands on the upland terraces that overlook expansive hillsides. The LNU Complex fire in August 2020 burned the entire upland area of the Park where most of the project will occur. Although some of the shrubs have recovered from the fire, most of the native trees were killed and have recently been cut down to prevent hazardous conditions for Park visitors. Grasses and invasive plants now dominate the site (Exhibit 2).

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation owns Lake Solano Park. A managing partner agreement authorizes Solano County to operate and maintain the park and for other organizations such as Solano RCD, Putah Creek Council, and the YDWN to conduct habitat restoration and public engagement activities.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Solano RCD staff has extensive experience working with landowners and agencies to plan, permit, and implement habitat restoration projects, develop interpretive materials, and conduct education programs. Solano RCD is currently managing over 40 restoration, water quality, and environmental education projects in Solano County. Many of these projects receive state grant funding. Solano County Parks Division conducts long-term management of the park and will be responsible for maintenance of the project improvements.

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:

1. **Selection Criteria 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.**

More than 85,000 people visit the Lake Solano Park campground and day use areas each year, with many choosing to boat and fish from the creek banks. The project will encourage this substantial visitor base to explore the currently underutilized upland area of the park. By enhancing habitat and offering opportunities to learn about California Native American culture, fire ecology, and native plants and wildlife, people will be attracted to explore more of the Park.

The project will be implemented with a significant amount of volunteer, college student, and Conservation Corps involvement, reducing implementation costs while providing important job training and educational opportunities.

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.**

The YDWN was a partner in the planning phase of the project and will be a partner during implementation (See Project Letters, Exhibit 3). YDWN worked with U.S. Bureau of Reclamation archaeologists to conduct a comprehensive site survey for cultural resources as part of the environmental review process and worked with Solano RCD to develop appropriate cultural resource protection measures for the project (See CEQA Compliance section, below). As part of the CEQA process, Solano RCD sent notification of the proposed project to five Native American tribal representatives that are registered with the Native American Heritage Commission; YDWN was the only tribe to respond.

During project implementation, YDWN staff will provide cultural resource training to all work crews and will monitor any ground disturbing activities. YDWN will participate in the design of

content for interpretive signs that will focus on the history of Patwin people. YDWN members will also participate in the development of plant identification signs that will provide information on the Native American cultural significance of plants in the demonstration garden and the Patwin name of the plants. YDWN members will have the opportunity to use the garden to tend to plants or for gatherings.

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

The project will be resilient to the effects of climate change, especially increases in wildfire risk, temperature, and drought. The demonstration garden will feature native plants that are resilient to drought so that less water is necessary for maintenance of the project and the plants are better able to withstand higher temperatures. Grasses and forbs planted in the uplands will produce less fuel load than what has colonized the area post-wildfire thereby reducing fire risk. The species of trees and other shrubs that will be planted within the uplands will be able to recover after low-intensity fire, helping build wildfire resilience in the Park.

Solano RCD and the Solano Couty Office of Emergency Services are working together under a grant from Cal Fire to establish a county-wide Fire Safe Council throughout the LNU burn area. The Solano County Fire Safe Council will be focused on efforts such as establishing fuel breaks, improving emergency services, and coordinating fire mitigation efforts across the region. These regional efforts also support resilience of the project area.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

Revegetating 19 acres of the park with a variety of native species will enhance wildlife habitat, increase biodiversity in the park and help recover threatened and endangered species, such as the monarch butterfly. The new plants installed will sequester an estimated 700 metric tons of carbon and provide shade on the upland trails, attracting people to hike and exercise, which has public health benefits. The plantings and interpretive signs will also encourage visitors to consider incorporating drought-tolerant plants in their own landscaping; thereby encouraging water conservation practices within surrounding communities.

The project includes seven workdays with the California Conservation Corps. Solano RCD staff will start each of the workdays with presentations on upland ecology, special status species, and habitat restoration practices and will then work alongside the crew, engaging them and providing hands-on job training and workforce development. Students from UC Davis will monitor the uplands which will provide additional workforce development in restoration ecology.

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

The Wildlife Conservation Board provided planning funds for the project and the implementation phase is happening through a partnership of local, federal, and non-profit organizations as well as a tribe. The Solano RCD and non-profit Putah Creek Council have extensive experience engaging community members in habitat restoration and environmental conservation activities. Solano RCD regularly invites people to become volunteers at environmental events and through school education programs in the nearby cities of Vallejo, Fairfield, Vacaville, and Dixon. Together, Solano RCD and the Putah Creek Council will host the volunteer planting events and support two quarters of UC Davis Restoration Ecology student

labs, providing opportunities for hundreds of community members and students to participate in the project.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	**$1,143,500**
Solano County Parks	$227,000
Putah Creek Council	$26,900
Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation	$8,000
UC Davis, Restoration Ecology Program	$41,600
Project Total	**$1,525,000**

It is anticipated that the Conservancy's funding will come from an FY22/23 appropriation of General Funds to the Conservancy for "urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based strategies and other solutions" (Budget Act 2022, SB 154 as amended by the Budget Act of 2023, SB 101). The coastal resilience funds are available for the purposes set forth in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the coastal resilience funds and includes projects for the purposes of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program established pursuant to Chapter 4.5 (commencing with Section 31160) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it is located within the geographic boundary and supports the goals of San Francisco Bay Program (see Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation section, below).

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 will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31162, to address resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Pursuant to Section 31162(b), the Conservancy may award grants for projects in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area that restore and enhance natural habitats and watersheds. Lake Solano Park is located within the nine-county Bay Area. Restoring uplands in the Park will enhance habitat for a diversity of native species, helping the area to recover after a catastrophic wildfire.

Pursuant to Section 31162 (d), the Conservancy may act to promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for

recreational and educational purposes. The project will improve a widely visited north bay park and provide diverse habitats for public observation and enjoyment. After the project is constructed, the Putah Creek Council will bring people to the site on guided nature hikes and during youth day camps.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN:

Consistent with **Goal 2.3, Expand Access**, the project will create an ADA-accessible loop trail at the demonstration garden, allowing people with mobility issues to enjoy this area of the park and learn about native plants and their cultural uses.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5, Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the project will create a demonstration garden and outdoor education area and install interpretive signs.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2., Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the project will enhance 19 acres of upland habitat making that area more wildfire resilient and improving wildlife habitat.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

To comply with the California Environmental Quality Act, Solano RCD prepared the "Final Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Lake Solano Habitat Restoration and Public Access Improvement Project," which evaluates the potential environmental impacts of the project (the project is the same as the Lake Solano Park Habitat Restoration and Public Access Improvement Project). The Solano RCD filed a Notice of Determination with the County Clerk and State Clearinghouse on June 23, 2023 certifying that the project will not have a significant effect on the environment and adopting a mitigation reporting and monitoring plan.

Potentially significant impacts of the project that are reduced to less than significant levels with mitigation are as follows.

- Biological Resources – Construction and mowing has the potential to disturb plants and wildlife, including special status species. A qualified biologist will conduct wildlife surveys 24–48 hours prior to construction and mowing to control weeds. If construction or mowing for weed control occurs during the bird nesting season, a biologist will also conduct a specific survey for nesting birds. Protocol level surveys will be conducted for the state-threatened Swainson's hawk within ¼ mile of the project area footprint. If Swainson's hawk nests or nests of other birds are located, impacts will be minimized by establishing appropriate non-disturbance buffers. If project activities are observed to disturb nesting behaviors, work causing the disturbance will be suspended until nesting is complete.

  If any fully protected or listed animal is encountered while performing work, activities will be suspended until the animal has left the work area. Elderberry shrubs–host plant for the federally threatened Valley elderberry longhorn beetle–will be flagged and avoided to minimize any impact to the beetle.

Special status plants were not identified on site during four comprehensive surveys conducted of the project area. A second targeted set of plant surveys will be conducted prior to the commencement of project activities and if any special status species are found, conservation measures including a redesign of the project and or establishment of buffer zones will be implemented to avoid impacts.

- Cultural Resources – A cultural sensitivity training will be conducted for all workers by the YDWN cultural resources team prior to the commencement of project activities. In the event that suspected human remains are discovered during the project, the discovery will be addressed under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and implementing regulations 43 CFR Park 10. All activities in the immediate area will cease, and appropriate precautions will be taken to protect the remains and any associated cultural items from further disturbance.

With implementation of the project's mitigation measures, environmental effects to biological and cultural resources will be less than significant. Staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the project as mitigated avoids, reduces or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a level of less-than-significant and that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment.

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