

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 15, 2024

**NORTH COAST RAIL TRAIL - MONTEREY BAY SANCTUARY SCENIC TRAIL
SEGMENT 5 CONSTRUCTION**

Project No. 09-004-03

Project Manager: Lexi Caruthers

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$600,000 to Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission for the North Coast Rail Trail – Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail Segment 5 project, consisting of construction of 7.5 miles of dedicated bicycle and pedestrian trail and associated amenities between Wilder Ranch State Park and Davenport in the north coast of Santa Cruz County, and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Wilder Ranch State Park to Davenport, Santa Cruz County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

Exhibit 4: North Coast Rail Trail Final Certified Environmental Impact Report: <https://sccrtc.org/projects/multi-modal/monterey-bay-sanctuary-scenic-trail/north-coast-rail-trail/>

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 six hundred thousand dollars (\$600,000) to Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (“the grantee”) for the North Coast Rail Trail – Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail Segment 5 project, consisting of construction of 7.5 miles of dedicated bicycle and pedestrian

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trail and associated amenities between Wilder Ranch State Park and Davenport on the north coast of Santa Cruz 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.

In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's "Coastal Access Project Standards".

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 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding a system of public accessways.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the North Coast Rail Trail Final Certified Environmental Impact Report adopted by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission on March 7, 2019, pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4. The Conservancy finds, as described further in the accompanying staff recommendation, that:
 - a. The proposed project will have potentially significant environmental effects in the areas of aesthetics, agricultural resources, biological resources, cultural resources, geology/soils, greenhouse gas emissions/climate change, hazards and hazardous materials, hydrology and water quality, noise, transportation/circulation, and tribal cultural resources. The Conservancy finds that the mitigation measures identified in EIR will avoid, reduce, or mitigate these possible significant environmental effects to less-than-significant levels and that these mitigation measures have been required or incorporated into the project.
 - b. The Conservancy further finds that the Project will result in significant and unavoidable cumulative traffic impacts, but environmental and other benefits of the Project as described in the accompanying staff recommendation outweigh or render acceptable these unavoidable adverse environmental effects to achieve the objectives of the Project.

- c. The Conservancy adopts the Findings regarding Significant Effects and Statement of Overriding Considerations set forth in the accompanying staff recommendation.
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STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$600,000 grant to the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission for the implementation of North Coast Rail Trail – Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail Segment 5 (“the Project” or “the proposed project”), which consists of construction of 7.5 miles of multiuse and ADA accessible trail and associated amenities between Wilder Ranch State Park and Davenport on the north coast of Santa Cruz County. The proposed project is a part of the 50-mile Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail (MBSST) network, which is a cooperative effort to provide a non-motorized coastal path along the Monterey Bay, which serves as a portion of the California Coastal Trail.

There are no formal pedestrian trails on this stretch of scenic coastline that connects Wilder Ranch State Park to Davenport, and access is limited primarily to informal trails. In addition, Highway 1, which runs parallel to the proposed project, is a popular bicycling route for local residents and tourists but is dangerous due to high traffic speeds, narrow shoulders, and limited sight distances. The proposed project will fill this gap in the California Coastal Trail on the north coast of Santa Cruz County by constructing 7.5 miles of multi-use trail for pedestrians and bicyclists that traverse the beautiful coastal terrace in one continuous alignment from the community of Davenport south to the popular Wilder Ranch State Park. The trail will provide outstanding views of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and will provide access to many recreational opportunities in the area including several popular pocket beaches, spur trails owned by State Parks, and future connections to Cotoni-Coast Dairies National Monument.

The North Coast Rail Trail will be constructed entirely along the Santa Cruz Branch Rail right-of-way, which currently is not open to the public. The multi-use trail will be constructed adjacent to the existing railroad track and consist of a 12-foot-wide asphalt surface paved for bicyclists and pedestrians, with striping to separate northbound and southbound traffic. The entire trail will be ADA-accessible, significantly increasing accessibility to this stretch of coast for people with physical disabilities.

The trail will be constructed on the coastal side of the existing railroad tracks, except for a short portion on the south end of the alignment at Wilder Ranch State Park where the trail would utilize existing sidetracks and a maintenance road. The railroad tracks along the trail alignment will remain in place and will not be improved. Although there is not regular use of the rail line, a tourist excursion train may be feasible in the future, dependent on factors including if a railroad operator is interested in providing that service. As part of the proposed project, fencing will be installed on the inland side of the trail to separate trail users and the railroad.

The coastal terraces which the trail corridor traverses through are largely in agricultural production, primarily owned by State Parks land and leased to agricultural operators. The trail

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alignment runs adjacent to agricultural land for approximately 4.7 miles of the 7.5 mile length of trail. Fencing will be installed as part of the proposed project between the trail and agricultural lands in areas where natural or geographic barriers do not exist, in order to discourage trail users from impacting adjacent agricultural lands.

The proposed project will also construct facilities to support users of the North Coast Rail Trail, including parking area improvements at Davenport Beach, Bonny Doon Beach, and Panther/Yellowbank Beach and two new restrooms, located at Davenport Beach and Panther/Yellowbank Beach parking lots. Other associated trail amenities that will be installed as part of the proposed project include trailheads, trash and recycling receptacles, bicycle racks, benches, coastal viewpoints, and interpretive signage.

Site Description: The project site is located in unincorporated north Santa Cruz County, west of Highway 1 along the Pacific Ocean coastline. The project site extends 7.5-miles along the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line right-of-way corridor, which is owned by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission. The project's southern terminus is Wilder Ranch State Park, and the northern terminus is the unincorporated community of Davenport, which has a population of approximately 400. The project corridor traverses Wilder Ranch State Park and Coast Dairies State Park, connects to spur trails and popular pocket beaches, and has potential future connections to Cotoni-Coast Dairies National Monument. The project is surrounded by coastal bluffs, undeveloped open space, and agricultural operations. Farming occurs primarily on State Parks land under leases with agricultural operators. Crops produced along the alignment include pumpkins, berries, kiwis, artichokes, broccoli, cauliflower, peas, Brussels sprouts, celery, beets, leeks, citrus, radicchio, herbs and edible flowers. The project also crosses several riparian areas that are home to special status species.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (SCCRTC) has demonstrated experience with administering grant funds, including previously awarded funds from the Conservancy for Coastal Rail Trail projects. SCCRTC, in coordination with partner agencies, has constructed or is advancing pre-construction activities for over 18 miles of Coastal Rail Trail, including the proposed project. SCCRTC will be responsible for trail maintenance and operations for the proposed project, which includes monthly trail inspections and trail maintenance 2-5 times per week, depending on the time of year. SCCRTC has entered into an agreement with Santa Cruz County Parks to conduct maintenance on behalf of SCCRTC. Santa Cruz County Parks maintains other coastal facilities on the north coast of Santa Cruz County, including Davenport Landing Beach and Scott Creek Beach.

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 meets the State’s objective to complete the California Coastal Trail system, as the project will build 7.5 miles of Coastal Trail on the north coast of Santa Cruz. The project will provide multiple benefits for the public, including improved coastal access, active transportation, and public safety. The project significantly leverages non-state funding (see Project Financing section).

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

The project will be sustainable and resilient over its lifespan, which is expected to be a minimum of 25-30 years. Due to the project’s location on top of coastal bluffs, the proposed project is not anticipated to be inundated by sea level rise during its lifespan. Short segments of the trail may be exposed to coastal erosion where the bluffs edge retreats inland at pocket beaches and will receive regular inspection and maintenance. The proposed project will also include slope stabilization at the existing eroding bluff near Davenport Beach to lengthen the trail longevity in that stretch. The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission is the trail owner and will be responsible for maintenance of the trail.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The North Coast Rail Trail will be a world-class community asset and will deliver numerous benefits over its lifespan, including a place for families, seniors, and youth to bike, walk, and be physically active; improved safety for bicyclists by offering an alternative to biking on Highway 1; and interpretive content that will increase public awareness of the natural, agricultural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources along the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

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

This project is part of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail (MBSST), a community-driven vision to transform transportation and coastal access throughout Santa Cruz County. The framework for this project was defined through a three-year public and stakeholder engagement process, which resulted in the award-winning MBSST Master Plan (2013), which the Conservancy funded. Stakeholder interviews and a series of public workshops with over 500 people in attendance were held during development of the Plan to seek public input on the plan, trail segment proposals, and gather community priorities and preferences regarding sequence of segment implementation. Outreach and public engagement have continued for the MBSST as a whole and for individual trail segments for over a decade. There is a long history of an active and interested public for this project. In November 2016, Santa Cruz County voters approved Measure D – which commits 17% of new sales tax revenues for trail construction, maintenance, and management.

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PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$600,000
Federal Highway Administration Federal Lands Access Program	\$25,150,000
Land Trust of Santa Cruz County	\$2,705,000
Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission	\$2,200,000
Project Total	\$30,655,000

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2023/24 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of “urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based solutions or other strategies.” (Budget Act 2023, SB 101). The coastal resilience 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 coastal resilience funds, including non-motorized trails of statewide significance. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will construct a section of the California Coastal Trail, which is a non-motorized trail of statewide significance.

The project will leverage significant funding from the Federal Highway Administration’s Federal Lands Access Program, as well as local match funding from the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County and funds from Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission’s voter-approved Measure D.

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:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 et seq.) related to public accessways. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies to develop lands for public access purposes to and along the coast. Through the proposed project, 7.5 miles of scenic California Coastal Trail will be constructed on the north coast of Santa Cruz County, thereby improving access to and enjoyment of coastal resources along the Central California Coast.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will improve coastal access and off-highway non-motorized transportation to a disadvantaged community located at the northern terminus of the trail.

Consistent with **Goal 2.3 Expand Accessibility**, the proposed project will reduce barriers to coastal access for people with disabilities and maximize barrier-free access to the coast by providing 7.5 miles of ADA-accessible trail.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed project will build a new 7.5-mile-long trail that will increase access for both recreation and active transportation purposes. The trail will serve as part of the California Coastal Trail, which is one of five flagship trails identified in the Conservancy's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities & Amenities**, the proposed project includes facilities that will enhance recreational opportunities, including parking lots, restrooms, and interpretive signage.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

On March 7, 2019, Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission certified the North Coast Rail Trail Environmental Impact Report (Final EIR) (Exhibit 4) and adopted a Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program. On March 5, 2020, an addendum to the Final EIR was adopted. The project analyzed in the Final EIR is the same as the Project discussed in this staff recommendation. . For the following resources, the Final EIR and Addendum indicate that the Project may have potentially significant environmental effects, however changes or alterations have been required in, or incorporated into, the Project that mitigate each of the potential impacts to a less than significant level: aesthetics, agricultural resources, biological resources, cultural resources, geology/soils, greenhouse gas emissions/climate change, hazards and hazardous materials, hydrology and water quality, noise, transportation/circulation, and tribal cultural resources. The Final EIR indicated that the Project will have a significant cumulative traffic impact that although minimized or reduced by mitigation measures will not be less than significant level, either because no mitigations measures are available or mitigation measures were considered but identified as infeasible due to specific economic, legal, social, technological, or other considerations. These impacts will remain significant and unavoidable. A Statement of Overriding Considerations (see below) is being adopted to address these significant and unmitigated impacts.

1. Findings for Potentially Significant Effects that can be Mitigated to Less-Than-Significant Levels

Aesthetics – Public use of the proposed trail and parking lots could result in litter as well as possible defacement of trail amenities. Additionally, at the eroding bluff near Davenport, slope stabilization would be visible from the coastal bluff trail that crosses the corridor from Highway 1 to Davenport Beach and from the beach itself and could have an adverse effect on the visual

character. Mitigation measures require that the trail manager be responsible for regular collection of waste from the trash/recycling receptacles and litter along the trail. Routine maintenance will also involve graffiti removal, as well as the repair and replacement of signage. Additionally, the design of the coastal armoring will prioritize minimizing its artificial appearance. Through these mitigation measures, the anticipated impacts will be less than significant.

Agricultural Resources – Potential conflicts between trail users and agricultural operations could arise, such as trespassing by trail users or exposure to pesticides for trail users near agricultural areas. The proposed project may temporarily disrupt utilities during construction and necessitate the permanent relocation of certain farm-related infrastructure. Mitigation efforts involve implementing strategies to minimize construction-related conflicts with agricultural operations, installing no trespassing signs prior to operation, regular trail maintenance to remove litter, posting notices of ongoing agricultural activities, installing agricultural interpretive exhibits along the trail, and establishing pesticide spray notification procedures for trail users. Additionally, mitigation measures include relocating farm utilities impacted by trail construction and designing and maintaining trail crossings to accommodate farm equipment while restricting access. With these mitigation measures, impacts will be less than significant.

Biological Resources – The project may result in adverse effects to listed or sensitive species and their habitat including California red-legged frog, Santa Cruz black salamander, western pond turtle, San Francisco Dusky-footed rat, sensitive nesting bird and bat species, and sensitive fish species (including tidewater goby, coho salmon, and steelhead). The project may interfere with wildlife movement or result in adverse effects to sensitive natural communities, including Coastal Act Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas, palustrine emergent wetlands and aquatic/riverine habitats. Mitigation efforts involve minimizing work in sensitive habitats, conducting biological monitoring for the California red-legged frog and other sensitive wildlife, pre-construction breeding bird surveys, establishing protective buffers, safeguarding roosting bats and dusky-footed woodrats during construction, creating a comprehensive Biological Resources Mitigation and Management Plan, formulating a wetland mitigation and monitoring plan, and employing best management practices throughout construction. With these mitigation measures, impacts will be less than significant.

Cultural Resources – The proposed project may adversely affect historic resources including the Town of Davenport and the Davenport Branch Rail Line. The introduction of a trail and fencing near the rail line would bring in a new modern visual element in the predominantly undeveloped rural landscape. Additionally, ground disturbance during construction has the risk of damaging paleontological, historical, or archaeological resources, as well as human remains. Mitigation measures include installing interpretive exhibits before trail use, implementing archaeological capping at prehistoric sites prior to construction, conducting archaeological monitoring during construction, and stopping work if human remains are discovered. These measures would minimize the impacts to a level that is less than significant.

Geology/Soils – Construction of the proposed project poses a potential increase in public exposure to liquefaction or landslide hazards, along with the risk of significant soil erosion or

topsoil loss. Mitigation measures include having a civil or geotechnical engineer complete a design-level geotechnical investigation and implementing their recommendations, conducting a design-level drainage analysis before construction, adopting measures to minimize runoff during both construction and operation phases, and developing a comprehensive stormwater control plan and an operation and maintenance plan prior to project construction. These mitigation measures would reduce the impacts to a less than significant level.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions/Climate Change – The proposed project has the potential to create GHG emissions, both during construction and operation. The deployment of heavy construction machinery as well as truck and vehicle trips during project construction would lead to a temporary rise in GHG emissions. Additionally, the overall increase in vehicle trips to and from the trail, water usage at the Davenport Beach parking restroom, and solid waste disposal would contribute to GHG emissions. Mitigation consists of the installation of electric vehicle infrastructure in parking lots. By implementing this mitigation measure, the impacts would be reduced to a less than significant level.

Hazards and Hazardous Materials – The construction of the proposed project could disrupt contaminated soil or utilities, posing a risk of exposing the public and the environment to hazardous materials. Furthermore, regular agricultural activities near the project corridor could expose trail users to pesticides and other harmful chemicals. Mitigation strategies involve installing "no trespassing" signs before operation, incorporating agricultural interpretive exhibits prior to installation, implementing procedures for pesticide spray notifications, placing temporary warning signs along the trail, amending agricultural leases to impose limitations on pesticide spraying, confirming the locations of utility infrastructure, conducting soil sampling, and executing necessary remediation. Additionally, a comprehensive soils management plan will be prepared. With these mitigation measures, the impacts would be reduced to a less than significant level.

Hydrology and Water Quality – The proposed project could potentially increase pollutant discharges into state waters. It would also modify drainage patterns in the rail corridor by introducing new impervious surfaces and placing structures such as trail and stormwater culverts within a 100-year flood hazard area. Mitigation efforts include developing an accidental spill control plan, conducting environmental training before construction to ensure quick and safe cleanup of spills and proper contaminant disposal, maintaining vehicles and equipment during construction, conducting a design-level drainage analysis before construction, implementing identified measures to minimize runoff during construction, and preparing a stormwater control plan with corresponding measures before construction begins. Through these mitigation measures, the impacts would be reduced to a less than significant level.

Noise – The use of heavy construction equipment may lead to a temporary rise in noise levels, potentially affecting rural residences along the alignment with ground-borne vibration and noise. Mitigation measures include issuing a minimum of three weeks' notice to all residential units within 50 feet of the construction area generating vibration, restricting construction to daytime hours, and employing noise-reducing techniques for equipment within 150 feet of residences. Through the implementation of these measures, the impacts would be reduced to a less than significant level.

Transportation/Circulation – The proposed project is expected to introduce approximately 300 daily vehicle trips and 150 peak-hour trips on weekends, particularly during the peak summer season. These additional trips are likely to exacerbate current traffic delays at intersections where Highway 1 meets entrances to Davenport Beach, Bonny Doon Beach, and Panther/Yellowbank Beach parking lots. Additionally, the project could lead to potential safety hazards at trail crossings on public roadways and potential conflicts between vehicles and trail users. Mitigation efforts will include targeted public outreach to promote walking and bicycling between the City of Santa Cruz, the publication of informational materials explaining how pedestrians and bicyclists can access the trail from within the city, the design of roadway crossings with a focus on minimizing safety risks, the installation of warning signs for agricultural vehicles and trail users, and the placement of pedestrian signage at Davenport Lot to discourage jaywalking. Through these measures, the project's impacts will be minimized to a level below significance.

Tribal Cultural Resources – The proposed project involves ground disturbance during construction, posing a potential risk to previously undiscovered tribal cultural resources. Mitigation efforts to minimize this impact involve mandating ongoing consultation with local Native Americans in the event of unearthing potential tribal cultural resources during construction. This measure would ensure that the impacts remain less than significant.

2. Findings for Potentially Significant and Unavoidable Effects

Although the Project would not result in any significant and unavoidable project impacts, the Project may result in a significant and unavoidable cumulative impact to traffic. Cumulative projects would have a significant and unavoidable cumulative impact on traffic conditions on Highway 1 at the intersections with Davenport Beach, Bonny Doon Beach, and Panther/Yellowbank Beach parking lots. Cumulative traffic impacts caused by the Project are significant and unavoidable because they cannot be avoided by the adoption of feasible mitigation measures, as it would be infeasible to prevent the addition of any vehicle trips to Highway 1.

3. Statement of Overriding Considerations

In the event a project has unavoidable significant environmental effects, the CEQA Guidelines require the decision-making agency to balance, as applicable, the economic, legal, social, technological, or other benefits, including region-wide or statewide environmental benefits, of a proposed project against its unavoidable environmental risks when determining whether to approve the project (Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15093). If the specific project benefits outweigh the unavoidable significant environmental effects of the project, a Statement of Overriding Considerations may be adopted and the project approved, despite its significant environmental effects. The overall environmental benefits of the Project, as detailed in the Project Summary section of this staff recommendation, warrant the Conservancy's decision to approve the Project. The Project's public benefits that justify proceeding with the Project despite the environmental cost of the unavoidable significant environmental effects include:

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- The project would provide 7.5 miles of public trail connecting Wilder Ranch State Park and Davenport on the north coast of Santa Cruz County, including scenic coastal views of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary
- The project's trail would be entirely ADA-accessible
- The project would increase active transportation and recreation facilities
- The project would not preclude future rail transportation along the corridor

For these reasons, Conservancy staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the Project, as mitigated, avoids or reduces to less than significant all potentially significant environmental effects, except for the unavoidable significant cumulative traffic impact. With respect to this unavoidable significant environmental effect, Conservancy staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the economic, social, and environmental benefits of the project outweigh the unavoidable significant environmental effects, thereby warranting its approval.

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