

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
April 18, 2024

North Coast Wildfire Resilience Planning and Implementation Grant Program

Project No. 24-015-01
Project Manager: Lilly Allen

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$6,000,000 to Humboldt County Resource Conservation District to undertake the North Coast Wildfire Resilience Planning and Implementation Grant Program, which will provide grants to public entities and nonprofit organizations for planning, community outreach, environmental review, permitting, and implementation of projects that will increase wildfire resilience through improved management of natural lands and open space, increased collaboration among land managers, and capacity building in northern California’s coastal watershed counties.

LOCATION: Within the jurisdiction of North Coast Resource Conservation District (RCD) Collaborative (Del Norte RCD, Gold Ridge RCD, Humboldt County RCD, Lake County RCD, Marin RCD, Mendocino County RCD, Napa County RCD, Shasta Valley RCD, Siskiyou RCD, Sonoma RCD, and Trinity County RCD).

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

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 hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed six million dollars (\$6,000,000) to Humboldt County Resource Conservation District (“HCRCD”) to undertake the North Coast Wildfire Resilience Planning and Implementation Grant Program (Program), which will provide grants to public entities and nonprofit organizations for planning, community outreach, permitting, environmental review and implementation of projects that will increase wildfire resilience through improved management of natural lands and open

space, increased collaboration among land managers, and capacity building in northern California coastal and coastal watershed counties.

1. Prior to commencement of the Program, HCRCD shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:
 - a. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
 - b. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the Program.
 - c. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
2. Prior to HCRCD's disbursement of Conservancy funds to a project grantee, HCRCD shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer a work program, schedule, budget, sign plan for the project, and, if the project grantee does not own the land underlying the project site, evidence that the project grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement the project.
3. HCRCD shall not disburse Conservancy funds for any project unless the Conservancy has authorized HCRCD to fund the project, which authorization may be by the Executive Officer if the Executive Officer determines that the project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).
4. In selecting projects for funding under the Program, the HCRCD shall prioritize projects that:
 - a. Address high wildfire risk areas identified in Community Wildfire Protection Plan or other wildfire resilience/prevention plans.
 - b. Are outlined in the California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan.
 - c. Provide significant public benefit.
 - d. Benefit disadvantaged or underserved communities.
 - e. Lead to longer term resilience or more sustainable benefits.
 - f. Benefit public or protected lands.
 - g. Leverage resources through coordination across jurisdictions.

If the HCRCD determines, in coordination with the members of the North Coast Resource Conservation District Collaborative, that an HCRCD project should be selected for funding under the Program, and the Executive Officer or Conservancy board authorizes a Program grant for that project, the Program may fund the HCRCD project provided that the HCRCD enters into a grant agreement with the Conservancy for that project, which grant agreement may be an amendment to the grant agreement for the Program. The amount granted for the Program will be reduced by the amount of the grant to the HCRCD.

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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$6,000,000 to the Humboldt County Resource Conservation District (HCRCD) to undertake the North Coast Wildfire Resilience Planning and Implementation Grant Program (the program), which will provide grants to public entities including California Native American tribes, and nonprofit organizations for planning, community outreach, permitting, environmental review and implementation of projects that will increase wildfire resilience through improved management of natural lands and open space, increased collaboration among land managers, and capacity building in northern California coastal and coastal watershed counties.

Global climate change, 100 years of fire suppression, suppression of tribal burning, and development in wildland urban interface continue to increase wildfire hazard throughout the region. There is an urgent need to increase the pace of wildfire resilience work in response to the ongoing wildfire crisis. The Conservancy's Wildfire Resilience Program supports local partners to develop and implement projects to increase wildfire resilience through improved management of natural lands and open space, increased collaboration among land managers, and capacity building. Conservancy grants support a wide range of activities to accelerate future project implementation, including planning, compliance, and capacity building. An overarching goal of the Wildfire Resilience Program is to build organizational capacity at the local and regional level to implement vegetation management and fire risk reduction projects. Healthy natural lands are less likely to burn and projects that increase fire breaks or clear ladder fuels help prevent isolated fires from becoming catastrophic wildfires.

The proposed program is a grant program proposed for funding under the Conservancy's Wildfire Resilience Program that is a significant opportunity to improve wildfire resilience in the North Coast.

In carrying out the proposed program, HCRCD will work with other members of the North Coast Resource Conservation District Collaborative (Collaborative), a group of 11 Resource Conservation Districts (RCD's) who entered into the "Memorandum of Understanding for the Joint Exercise of Powers" (MOU) on July 1, 2019. The MOU, which does not establish a separate legal entity, focuses on increasing coordination and collaboration among member RCDs to improve work quality, efficiency, expand program impacts, and better support regional dialogue and information exchange in the North Coast Region. The member RCD's are Del Norte RCD, Gold Ridge RCD, Humboldt County RCD, Lake County RCD, Marin County RCD, Mendocino County RCD, Napa County RCD, Shasta Valley RCD, Siskiyou RCD, Sonoma RCD, and Trinity County RCD. This Collaborative has a long history of working together on regional planning and conservation projects and has collectively achieved several notable programs including the

North Coast Soil Hub, the North Bay Forest Improvement Program, and the Statewide RCD Project Tracker. The Collaborative has shared technical staff, program templates and joint funding agreements from private, state and federal funding which have included a seven-county USDA Resource Conservation Partnership Program to address fuel reduction and fire resiliency, the North Coast Resource Partnership has a Technical Assistance agreement with the Collaborative to provide technical assistance for project development, several CALFIRE block grants for the North Bay Forest Improvement Program, several more grants to support climate resiliency and carbon farm planning in the North Coast Soil Hub, and a Department of Conservation grant for a regional Watershed Coordinator.

This program will be a collaboration between these 11 RCD's to address areas of high wildfire risk; implement actions identified in state, regional, and local wildfire resilience plans; provide public benefit; benefit disadvantaged or underserved communities and public lands; lead to longer term resilience or more sustainable benefits; and leverage resources through coordination across jurisdictions. This program can fund members of the Collaborative for administrative work associated with project development, selection, and management.

The proposed program will address the wildfire crisis in the North Coast by:

- Building local wildfire resiliency capacity.
- Building expertise in wildfire resiliency for project development, planning, community outreach, permitting, environmental review, and implementation.
- Catalyzing additional stewardship and restoration in each region.

The proposed program will grant funds for projects that meet criteria prepared by the Collaborative members within the Conservancy's jurisdiction. This criteria may include projects that:

- Address high wildfire risk area, such as those identified in the CalFire Fire Hazard Severity Zones or the FRAP Priority Landscape Maps.
- Implement the California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan.
- Provide significant public benefit.
- Benefit disadvantaged or underserved community.
- Lead to longer term resilience or more sustainable benefits.
- Are identified in a Community Wildfire Protection Plan or other wildfire resilience/prevention plan.
- Benefit public or protected lands.
- Leverage resources through coordination across jurisdictions.

This proposed program will increase the pace and scale of wildfire resilience projects in the North Coast while developing capacity at local RCD's. The HCRCDC will work with the North Coast Resource Conservation District Collaborative members to select projects. The Collaborative will propose a transparent, collaborative decision making and prioritization process on how projects will be selected. Once projects are selected, depending on the project, HCRCDC might grant the funds to the entity undertaking the project or it might grant the funds to a member of the Collaborative which will then grant the funds to the entity undertaking the project. The Conservancy will approve all proposed grants to be made under the program. Grants for CEQA exempt projects may be approved by Conservancy staff. Grants for projects that are not CEQA exempt must be approved by the Conservancy's Board.

Site Description: Projects may be located within coastal watersheds and Sonoma, Marin, and Napa Counties where they overlap with the North Coast RCD Collaborative's jurisdiction. The North Coast RCD Collaborative's jurisdiction consists of the management areas of the Del Norte RCD, Gold Ridge RCD, Humboldt County RCD, Lake County RCD, Marin RCD, Mendocino County RCD, Napa County RCD, Shasta Valley RCD, Siskiyou RCD, Sonoma RCD, and Trinity County RCD.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The HCRCDC has successfully managed over \$25 million in state and federal contracts for similar projects within the last 10 years. During this same period, the HCRCDC has successfully managed eight Conservancy grants, including two grants obtained in partnership with the USFWS and two wildfire resiliency projects. Current RCD staff have successfully managed and completed the required environmental compliance documentation. HCRCDC has successfully managed a regional grant on behalf of the collaborative.

The Collaborative is a successful collaboration of RCD's with a track record of collaborative decision making and its members are qualified to work together on a regional, multi-organizational grant. In 2015, the RCD's of the Collaborative developed their first strategic plan, which is currently under revision, anticipated mid-2024. In 2018, the HCRCDC was awarded funding on behalf of the Collaborative through the Department of Conservation Forest Health Watershed Coordinator Program. While officially housed at the Humboldt County Resource Conservation District, the Forest Health Watershed Coordinator worked across the North Coast region and operated on the following two levels: (1) to support the unique forest health work of individual North Coast RCDs within their respective districts; and (2) to support the forest health work of North Coast RCDs as a regional collaborative. As a result of this grant, the Forest Health Watershed Coordinator developed a North Coast Forest Health Watershed Improvement Plan for the region, finalized in 2022.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed program 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 program is a good investment of state funding. The program is feasible and addresses demonstrated needs. The program will implement many statewide wildfire and forest resiliency goals. The program is consistent with several state plans, and specifically with the following:

- 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.

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 Conservancy will undertake additional tribal consultations for ground-disturbing projects funded through this program. Ground-disturbing projects will include archaeological and cultural resource surveys to avoid and minimize impacts to tribal cultural resources. The HCRCD will continue its practice of working with Tribes and tribal entities to select and implement wildfire resilience projects. The HCRCD and other RCDs in the North Coast RCD Collaborative are currently partnering with multiple Tribes and tribal entities on wildfire resilience projects. For example, the HCRCD’s Wildfire Resiliency Planning for Mail Ridge project includes Tribal partners and activities such as securing funding for Tribal organizations to create an Indigenous-led fuels reduction and cultural fire crew.

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

This program will help increase the pace and scale of wildfire resilient project development, which will ultimately reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire impacts to communities. Projects will be selected for funding because they are multi-benefit projects that will reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire impacts to communities. Added benefits of these projects will include:

native habitat restoration, workforce training, public education, and development of data and plans to support future vegetation management.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The proposed program 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. While 2022 and 2023 had a relatively mild wildfire season, both the 2020 and 2021 fire seasons broke numerous records. Enhanced wildfire resilience will have multiple benefits, including reducing the loss of life and economic losses, reducing public health impacts from wildfire, protecting fish and wildlife habitat, and preventing the loss of sequestered carbon.

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

The HCRC and the North Coast RCD Collaborative members have always worked closely with community groups and residents in implementing projects, a practice they will continue in selecting and managing wildfire resilience projects funded under this program. Many of the projects to be funded through this authorization will implement Community Wildfire Prevention Plans. The HCRC and other members of the North Coast RCD Collaborative are currently partnering with multiple community groups on wildfire resilience projects. Local fire safe councils and volunteer fire departments will be important partners, and many projects will include landowner outreach and community engagement.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$6,000,000
Project Total	\$6,000,000

The anticipated source of funding is the Fiscal Year 2023-24 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of wildfire risk reduction (The Budget Act of 2023, SB 101 (2023)). The proposed program is consistent with this funding source because it will help increase the pace and scale of wildfire resilience projects and ultimately reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. It is anticipated the project grants through this program will leverage additional funding and in-kind support.

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 program 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 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, this program will restore the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, and/or natural lands and reduce fire risk to communities. The program 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 program addresses the impacts of climate change on natural resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction because it will fund wildfire resilience projects in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area (Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code) and/or will improve forests, grasslands, and other 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](#):

Consistent with Goal 4.2 Wildfire Resilience, the proposed program will fund multiple wildfire resilience planning and implementation projects.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed program will select and award grants for planning and implementation projects that will enhance wildfire resilience in the project area. As described above, the parties to the North Coast Resource Conservation District Collaborative will work to identify projects for potential funding and will carry out CEQA review before authorizing funding of any project. In light of this process, at the time of this authorization, the Conservancy does not know which projects will be recommended for funding, no particular projects are authorized for funding, and there is not sufficient information to provide meaningful environmental review of projects. Further, the proposed authorization does not foreclose alternatives or mitigation measures for any particular project. Therefore, considering the balancing described in the CEQA Guidelines at California Code of Regulations, title 14, section 15004, it is appropriate to undertake CEQA compliance at the time projects are selected rather than at the time of this authorization. All

proposed grants under this program must be approved by the Conservancy, which will comply with CEQA prior to deciding whether to approve a proposed grant for any specific project.