

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 6, 2024

SAN LUIS OBISPO LAND CONSERVANCY WILDFIRE RESILIENCE PROJECT

Project No. 24-004-01
Project Manager: Kostoula Vallianos

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$278,300 to The Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County to undertake the San Luis Obispo Land Conservancy Wildfire Resilience Project, consisting of purchasing equipment for annual wildfire fuel reduction and road maintenance within three Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County preserves in San Luis Obispo County.

LOCATION: Various locations in San Luis Obispo County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

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

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed two hundred seventy-eight thousand three hundred dollars (\$278,300) to The Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County (“the grantee”) to purchase equipment for annual wildfire fuel reduction and road maintenance work within three grantee-owned preserves in San Luis Obispo 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. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.

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.
3. The Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of up to \$278,300 to The Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County (Land Conservancy) to purchase equipment for annual wildfire fuel reduction and road maintenance work within three of its preserves in San Luis Obispo County.

Annual wildfire fuel reduction and road work using the grant funded equipment will occur along 28 miles of dirt roads in Santa Rita Ranch, Pismo Preserve, and Lower San Luis Obispo Creek Floodplain Preserve. An additional five acres of hazardous fuels will be mowed annually including four acres in Pismo Preserve which is to provide a safe place to gather in an emergency or land a helicopter if necessary. The dirt roads on these preserves serve as the main pathways for traversing the properties and require annual maintenance to function. The Santa Rita Ranch is adjacent to State Route 46 West Highway and the Santa Rita Ranch Housing community. The Lower San Luis Obispo Creek Floodplain Preserve contains an emergency escape route for the Baron Canyon neighborhood. Two miles of road on the Pismo Preserve serves as an emergency escape route for the densely populated Pismo Heights neighborhood.

These three Land Conservancy preserves are in high fire severity zones as defined by CAL FIRE's Fire and Resource Assessment Program and are located in wildland urban interfaces. Maintaining vegetation clearance and drainage structures on Land Conservancy preserve roads is critical for the safety of the surrounding communities. Public access, in addition to the proximity to urban and high traffic areas increases the risk of fire ignition on all three preserves. Access is critical for first responders and if roads are not passable, CAL FIRE may create new ones in response to a wildfire, which can cause significant environmental damage itself. Owning the equipment will improve the Land Conservancy's ability to be prepared for the next wildfire and reduce the impact emergency responders have on the preserves while fighting a fire.

Equipment purchased through this funding may include personal protective equipment, professional grade chainsaws, heavy duty mowers, an equipment trailer, a truck, and larger equipment to move brush piles and debris such as trees off of dirt roads. The Land Conservancy manages its preserves based on stewardship management plans. The annual use of the

equipment on the preserves will occur in accordance with these management plans and be adapted over time as conditions change.

Site Description: The three preserves are owned and managed by the Land Conservancy. Santa Rita Ranch is a 1,715-acre cattle ranch and includes rolling oak savannah, the confluence of Santa Rita and Cienega Creek, and steep forested oak and bay laurel forest. Neighboring land uses for Santa Rita Ranch include the State Route 46 West Highway corridor, vineyards, cattle ranches, and the Santa Rita Ranchos housing community. The Lower San Luis Obispo Creek Floodplain Preserve is 160 acres of floodplain along San Luis Obispo Creek and contains 50 acres of organic apple orchards. Neighboring land uses for the Lower San Luis Obispo Creek Floodplain Preserve include Highway 101, vineyards, equestrian facilities, a wedding venue, and rural residential housing. The Pismo Preserve is 880 acres and is open to the public for passive recreation in the form of hiking, biking, and horseback riding. The Pismo Preserve is located next to the Pismo Heights neighborhood and serves as the backdrop for the City of Pismo Beach. Together, all three preserves comprise 2,740 acres within high fire severity zones and wildland urban interfaces (see Exhibit 1). Each preserve has some form of public access. However, the Pismo Preserve is specifically managed for public access and receives over 181,000 visitors a year.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Land Conservancy has over 35 years of experience successfully implementing grant funded conservation projects on the Central Coast of California. This includes the acquisition of the Pismo Preserve in 2014 followed by the construction of visitor serving amenities and over 11 miles of single-track trails. The Pismo Preserve involved multiple funding sources, permitting, construction management, community engagement, and tribal consultation before it was opened to the public in 2020. In 2017, the Land Conservancy partnered with the County of San Luis Obispo to complete the Argano Floodplain Enhancement Project on the Lower San Luis Obispo Creek Floodplain Preserve. This project improved wetland habitat on the preserve and involved coordinating with local government and regulatory agencies. In 2022, the Land Conservancy was awarded an Environmental Quality Incentives Program grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service and constructed over 7,000 feet of wildlife friendly riparian fencing at the Santa Rita Ranch along with 6,000 feet of water line and three cattle troughs. The grant involved working with wildlife and cattle experts to design a fence that managed livestock but did not negatively impact wildlife on the ranch. Land Conservancy staff have experience in equipment operation and maintenance and have been implementing hazardous fuels reduction projects on Land Conservancy preserves since 2014. The Land Conservancy is fully equipped to implement this project and provide the necessary project management, financial administration, and environmental permit compliance.

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 is a good investment of state funding. The project is feasible, has a reasonable budget, and addresses a demonstrated need. The project implements many statewide wildfire and forest resiliency goals. The proposed project 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 (California Natural Resources Agency, 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.

In addition, Pismo Preserve was acquired in 2014 through state investment including \$4 million in funds from the Coastal Conservancy. Implementation of this project will increase wildfire resiliency on this property and protect this state investment.

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

Purchasing equipment will increase the Land Conservancy’s capacity to actively manage its preserves. The equipment can be utilized for many different purposes and will last many years. Climate change has resulted in extreme seasonal variability in weather and owning equipment allows for the Land Conservancy to have the flexibility to adapt management prescriptions each season. All the equipment being purchased is serviceable and will be stored in the shop garage at The Santa Rita Ranch to ensure longevity. The Land Conservancy’s preserve system has grown significantly since the organization was established in 1984 and owning the equipment identified in this grant will be extremely useful for the stewardship of current and future land holdings. Using staff to implement projects instead of contractors will develop staff skills and result in a higher quality outcome.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project delivers multiple benefits by enhancing the Land Conservancy’s capabilities to perform fuel reduction projects and maintain road systems on the preserves. Maintained

roads and increased vegetation buffers will improve response time for emergency personnel by allowing them to travel more quickly through the preserves. Increased vegetation buffers also create safer working conditions for emergency responders and reduced rate of wildfire spread within the preserves. The Land Conservancy’s preserves are part of the wildland urban interface, so increased wildfire preparedness will have a direct benefit to the neighboring communities. Wildfires that are extinguished sooner with fewer resources from first responders produce less greenhouse gases and have less of an economic impact overall.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$278,300
Project Total	\$278,300

The anticipated source of funding for the proposed project is a block grant to the Coastal Conservancy from the Department of Conservation’s Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP). The Conservancy is one of nine recipients of RFFCP block grants. The goal of the RFFCP is to increase regional capacity to prioritize, develop, and implement projects that improve forest health and fire resiliency. The Conservancy’s block grant covers projects from Marin County south to Ventura County. The proposed project is consistent with the funding source because it consists of the purchase of equipment that will increase the capacity of the Land Conservancy to conduct wildfire resilience work on their preserves.

The Land Conservancy is funding staff time for the fuels reduction and road maintenance work. The in-kind contribution for work on three preserves over two years is approximately \$16,600.

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:

Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code 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) and 31113(c), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to undertake projects that include reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and addressing extreme weather events, sea level rise, flooding, and other coastal hazards that threaten coastal communities, infrastructure, and natural resources.

Pursuant to Section 31113(c), the Conservancy must prioritize grants for projects that maximize public benefits and have one of several purposes, including reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Consistent with these sections, the proposed project addresses resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction by enabling the improvement of forests, grasslands, or natural lands and reducing the risks of wildfire that would adversely impact water quality and habitat in a coastal watershed (Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code).

The proposed project will enable the restoration of the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, or natural lands and reduce fire risk to communities. The project will help California's natural lands to be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires which may ultimately reduce greenhouse gas emissions released from increased wildfires due to climate change.

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

Consistent with **Goal 4.2, Wildfire Resilience**, the proposed project includes annual implementation of wildfire resilience treatment of 28 miles along preserve roads and 5 acres annually across multiple Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County preserves.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15304 (Minor Alterations to Land) because it consists of equipment purchases to enable minor alterations to the condition of vegetation without the removal of healthy, mature, or scenic trees. The proposed project is also exempt under CCR Section 15301 (Existing Facilities), because it consists of equipment purchases to enable the maintenance of existing landscaping and native growth and existing roads, and does not involve any expansion of use of those facilities.

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