

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 21, 2024

ASCOT HILLS FIRE RESILIENCE PROJECT

Project No. 24-045-01
Project Manager: Dario Bobeda-Padilla

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,131,700 to North East Trees, Inc. to implement the Ascot Hills Resilience Project, which consists of enhancement of at least 33 acres of habitat through the removal of invasive plants and planting of native plants to increase wildfire resilience, within Ascot Hills Park in the City of Los Angeles.

LOCATION: Ascot Hills Park, City of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Maps](#)
Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)
Exhibit 3: [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 one million one hundred thirty-one thousand and nine hundred dollars (\$1,131,700) to North East Trees, Inc. (“the grantee”) to implement the Ascot Hills Resilience Project, which consists of enhancement of at least 33 acres of habitat through the removal of invasive plants and planting of native plants to increase wildfire resilience (the “project”), within Ascot Hills Park in the City of Los Angeles.

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 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. North East Trees, Inc. is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$1,131,700 grant to North East Trees, Inc. (NET) to implement the Ascot Hills Fire Resilience Project, which consists of enhancement of at least 33 acres of habitat within Ascot Hills Park (the Park) in the City of Los Angeles (City). The project will remove invasive plants and plant native plants to increase wildfire resilience and improve habitat. The project will take place on property owned by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and leased to and managed by the City's Department of Recreation and Parks (RAP) (Exhibit 1).

Ascot Hills Park is one of the few remaining contiguous open spaces in the heart of urban Los Angeles. It connects to a web of other nearby open spaces, including Ernest E Debs Park, Elephant Hill, and Flat Top. According to CALFIRE's Fire and Resource Assessment Program Map, which prioritizes lands where communities are at risk from wildfire, Ascot Hills is ranked at the highest level of risk for wildfire (Exhibit 1). The Park also serves as an important corridor for many raptors, songbirds, and mammals, including special status species like the Least Bell's Vireo, a federally endangered species, and the Bobcat, a keystone species.

NET will implement the proposed project through a multi-benefit approach that prioritizes wildfire resilience, local workforce development, and local plant propagation. The project will utilize a crew of locally hired youth that are trained by NET, who will perform sustained fuel reduction and invasive species management, consisting of the removal of invasive plant species and planting of native plants, on at least 33 acres of open space at the Park. NET's crew will prepare the soil for native seeding through repeated, strategic clearing of nonnative plants. The crew will then plant 400-500 native trees and plant 1,250-1,500 native fire-adapted plants, grasses and flowers that they will propagate at the native plant nursery on site. Using the on-

site nursery will build further resilience to wildfire as these local plants are adapted to dry conditions and fires and will reduce Greenhouse Gas emissions by reducing vehicles miles traveled.

The project also consists of ten to twelve community engagement events aimed to collaborate, educate and engage community members through community outreach meetings, educational flier distribution, social media postings, and community planting events. Focus will be on outreach events and activities that mobilize residents and students from local schools to work alongside the youth in NET's crews.

Site Description: Ascot Hills Park is a relatively new park that was established in 2006, but officially opened to the public in 2011 with help of NET. Due to its size and location in a highly polluted and densely populated community, Ascot Hills Park serves as a refuge from the noise, congestion, and pollution that residents often experience. The park is bounded by four major freeways, railway lines, a major intermodal rail yard, and heavily used freight transportation corridors which would benefit from a reduction in wildfire risk.

The park is home to Los Angeles' largest climate adapted micro forest, planted by NET in 2023, and is home to many native plants. The park is in the Los Angeles River Watershed and is geographically defined by a stream that bifurcates two large slopes on the east and west side. The total acreage of the project is up to 33 acres, roughly one-third of the whole park. The park is owned by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) who has a long-term lease with the RAP, who operate and maintain the park for public use. NET will sign Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or other agreement with RAP to enable NET to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: NET has managed over 85 State funded grants including several from the Conservancy. Being LA's oldest design-build non-profit, NET has extensive experience in deploying its staff to projects of similar scope and budget as the proposed project. NET has a diverse staff that includes experts in urban forestry, landscape architecture, geographic information systems, habitat restoration, community engagement, and project management. RAP is responsible for the long-term maintenance of the project, and NET will have a presence on site through the native plant nursery throughout the project. NET has an agreement with RAP to operate at the native plant nursery in the park. NET and RAP will include a long-term maintenance agreement in the MOU or agreement that they enter.

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 or regional problem. 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.

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

The proposed project 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 and a growing populace. Both the 2020 and 2021 fire seasons broke numerous records.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will help increase fire resiliency in response to climate change, which has multiple benefits. 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. Enhanced wildfire resilience will have multiple benefits, including reducing loss of life, economic loss, and impacts on public health from wildfires; protecting fish and wildlife habitat; and preventing the loss of sequestered carbon.

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

NET has been an integral part of Ascot Hills Park's history, and this project is the product of over 20 years of work with the community to support the park. NET advocated for the park's creation and helped the park officially open in 2006. NET's deep involvement continues today with ongoing fundraising and stewardship activities to support the park. NET works actively with the community to conceptualize and implement future projects within the park through community outreach events and plantings. NET will host up to twelve community engagement events aimed to collaborate, educate and engage community members through community outreach meetings, educational flier distribution, social media postings, and community

planting events. Focus will be on outreach events and activities that mobilize residents and students from local schools to work alongside the youth in NET’s crews on this project.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$1,131,700
Project Total	\$1,131,700

The anticipated source of funding for this project is the Fiscal Year 2023/24 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of wildfire resilience (The Budget Act of 2023, Chapter 12, Statutes of 2023 (SB 101) as amended by Chapter 38, Statutes of 2023 (AB 102)). The proposed project is consistent with this fund source because it will help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

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 recommended project will 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 nonprofit organizations and public agencies to undertake projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, 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, the proposed project will address the impacts of climate change by restoring the health and resilience of California’s natural lands and reducing 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. In addition, use of an on-site nursery to propagate and plant native plants will also reduce greenhouse gas emissions by limiting the amount of truck mileage for a wildfire enhancement project.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.4 Incorporate Workforce Development in Our Projects**, the proposed project includes workforce development in a disadvantaged community through the hiring and training of local youth.

Consistent with **Goal 4.2 Wildfire Resilience**, a local partner will implement the proposed project to improve the ecological health of natural lands and reduce the risk of catastrophic fire in areas where people live by enhancing up to 33 acres of natural lands by removing highly flammable non-native vegetation within a high fire risk area and enhancing native habitat. The project will help California's natural lands to be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires.

Consistent with **Goal 4.3 Multi-benefit Nature-Based Climate Adaptation**, the proposed project will implement nature-based climate adaptation by removing highly-flammable invasive species and planting native plants, which will increase resiliency to wildfire by reducing ignition risks and will address extreme heat in an urban setting.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15304 (Minor Alterations to Land) because it involves minor alterations to land without the removal of healthy, scenic, or mature trees. In particular, the project involves replacement of non-native vegetation with fire resistant landscaping.

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