

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 17, 2025

**WATSONVILLE SLOUGH FARM PUBLIC ACCESS PLANNING – FINAL DESIGNS**

Project No. 19-050-01

Project Manager: Erin Gravley

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$460,000 to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County to complete final planning and permitting tasks for the Community Harvest at Watsonville Slough Farm Project which will establish trails, a trailhead, gardens, and gathering facilities at Watsonville Slough Farm in Watsonville, Santa Cruz County; and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

**LOCATION:** Watsonville Slough Farm, Watsonville, Santa Cruz County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [February 6, 2020 Staff Recommendation](#)

Exhibit 3: [Site Design](#)

Exhibit 4: [Watsonville Slough Farm Community Harvest Project Initial Study](#) and [Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program](#)

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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 four hundred sixty thousand dollars (\$460,000) to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (“the grantee”) to complete final planning and permitting tasks for the Community Harvest at Watsonville Slough Farm Project which will establish trails, a trailhead, gardens, and gathering facilities at Watsonville Slough Farm in Watsonville, 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.
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2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out 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 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 Land Trust of Santa Cruz County is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
4. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Watsonville Slough Community Harvest Project Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND) adopted by Santa Cruz County on February 21, 2025 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4. The Conservancy finds that the Watsonville Slough Community Harvest 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 based on the record as a whole that the Project will have a significant effect on the environment.

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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of \$460,000 to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (LTSCC) to complete the final planning and permitting tasks for the Community Harvest at Watsonville Slough Farm Project which will establish trails, a trailhead, gardens, and gathering facilities in Watsonville, Santa Cruz County.

On February 6, 2020, the Conservancy authorized a \$300,000 grant to LTSCC to plan and prepare designs, environmental review documents, and permit applications for creating 5 miles of public trails and a trail staging area at their Watsonville Slough Farms property. With that grant LTSCC conducted extensive outreach and planning and has designed the Community Harvest at Watsonville Slough Farm Project (Community Harvest project). The Community Harvest project will transform the LTSCC's Watsonville Slough Farm site into a hub for community involvement and outdoor education through the creation of five miles of trails and boardwalks, U-pick orchards, learning gardens, and indoor and outdoor gathering spaces. The goal is to foster connections between the public and the natural and agricultural heritage of the region, with a focus on delivering public amenities within walk and bike distance of underserved communities in Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley.

The Community Harvest project centers around the installation of a 10-acre "Community Harvest Gateway," designed to be a welcoming space open to the public year-round (Exhibit 3). The Gateway includes a restored barn repurposed to serve as an all-weather community

gathering, teaching, and meeting space, as well as the hub for public access maintenance, facilities, and tool storage. Surrounding the barn, the Gateway will feature a community learning garden and free U-pick orchards maintained by members from the University of California Master Gardeners program, volunteers, and nonprofit organizations. Public access facilities at the Gateway will include a trailhead, parking, bike parking, EV charging stations, potable water, and accessible restrooms.

The Community Harvest Gateway will be the starting point for a network of five miles of walking trails that, once constructed, will traverse Watsonville Slough's restored habitats and farm fields. Trails will lead to wildlife viewing spots and designated U-pick areas, and will include vegetated buffers along agricultural fields. Native, edible plants such as Pacific blackberry and elderberry will be used in these buffers, creating additional pollinator habitat. These buffers serve the dual purpose of protecting crops from visitors and serving as U-pick areas along the trail. An 1,800-foot accessible ADA loop trail will start from accessible facilities at the Community Harvest Gateway. The trail system will also be connected to a bike-pedestrian path that links downtown Watsonville and Pajaro Valley High School to the Community Harvest Gateway.

The prior Conservancy grant (Exhibit 2) supported community engagement, preparation of 30-60% designs and permit applications, and the completion of an environmental review document in compliance with CEQA. With the recommended grant for final planning and permitting tasks, LTSCC will complete the 95% and 100% final design plans, secure all necessary permits, and produce a construction bid package, so that the Community Harvest project is "shovel-ready" for implementation.

**Site Description:** The LTSCC's 490-acre Watsonville Slough Farm is located on the coastal plain in the Pajaro Valley adjacent to the City of Watsonville and two miles from Monterey Bay in unincorporated Santa Cruz County. It contains the 46-acre Hanson Slough, which is one of six interconnected Watsonville Sloughs. The slough system is the remnant of a wetland system largely drained and channelized for agriculture. This freshwater wetland system is fed by the Pajaro River watershed. The property is largely surrounded by commercial farms. Pajaro Valley High School abuts the northeast corner of the property and the City of Watsonville is just across Highway 1. Watsonville Slough Farm has been owned and managed by LTSCC since 2010, when the property was acquired to avert a golf course and luxury condominium development. Management of the property is guided by an existing management plan revolving around four conservation values: agricultural lands, habitat and biodiversity, public access, and water quality and quantity. Public access elements of the management plan will be updated to address the additional demands of the project's new amenities. Leases on the site's farmland generate significant revenue and will be used to fund operations and maintenance of the constructed Community Harvest project.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** See Exhibit 2.

**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.**

Watsonville Slough Farm is a demonstration site for how agriculture can operate sustainably alongside wetlands preservation, restoration, and public access. The Community Harvest project will facilitate greater community and public access to the Watsonville Slough for the nearby underserved community. The project builds on past Conservancy investments for the acquisition and restoration of Watsonville Slough Farm, and will establish greater public access to Watsonville Slough Farms. The Watsonville Sloughs system is an area of significant natural resources and includes a state designed state wildlife area.

**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.**

LTSCC provides regular access to its properties, including those otherwise closed to the public, to Amah Mutsun Tribal Band members for cultural activities, events, ceremonies, and youth education. Several Community Harvest project elements were developed in collaboration with the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and the Amah Mutsun Land Trust. This includes providing space for the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band in the proposed renovated barn for an ethnobotany lab and/or workspace, as well as designating a plot of land near the Community Harvest Gateway for Amah Mutsun stewardship and ceremonies.

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

The Community Harvest project plans for trail boardwalks to have approximately five feet of clearance to accommodate Watsonville Slough water levels rising above its current levels. The infrastructure improvements planned as part of the project are limited and with minimal impact to the landscape, and are not expected to make future climate adaptation strategies more difficult. In addition, the creation of an indoor education and community space with storage for public access facilities in a renovated barn with the same footprint will ensure that the project will durably serve the community for many years to come.

**5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

The Community Harvest project is planned as a publicly-accessible space for outdoor recreation, education, gathering, restoration, and agriculture near the underserved communities in Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley. The project plans to connect the public to organic farmland and restored habitats onsite and demonstrate how these land uses can thrive side-by-side. There is a gap in public access in this farming region, particularly closer to the

coast where farms are generally closed to the public. Further, the project will address a community need for affordable access to healthy produce.

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

The planned public access amenities directly reflect the ideas and desires gathered from an extensive public engagement process during the preliminary planning phase funded by the prior Conservancy grant, which centered the bilingual and underserved community. This robust engagement focused on nearby neighborhoods and included fifteen tours of the property, seven webinars, and bilingual surveys. Community Harvest project partners include the Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County, City of Watsonville, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and local community organizations such as the Watsonville Wetlands Watch, Life Lab, and Esperanza Community Farms.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$460,000</b>
Land Trust of Santa Cruz County	\$100,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$560,000</b>

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for this recommended grant is an appropriation from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006, Public Resources Code Section 75001 et seq. (Proposition 84). Proposition 84 authorizes the use of bond funds for projects that promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state and are consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Section 31000 et seq. (Public Resources Code Section 75060(b)).

Public Resources Code Section 75060(e) allocates funds to the Conservancy for the protection of Monterey Bay and its watersheds. “Protection,” as defined in Public Resources Code Section 75005(m), includes “actions necessary to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources and includes acquisition, development, restoration, preservation and interpretation.” Public Resources Code Section 75005(i) defines “interpretation” to include “a visitor serving amenity that educates and communicates the significance and value of natural, historical, and cultural resources in a way that increases the understanding and enjoyment of these resources and that may utilize the expertise of a naturalist or other specialist skilled at educational interpretation.” Consistent with these provisions, the Community Harvest project will provide visitor-serving amenities that will enable access to natural resources and that will increase the understanding and enjoyment of the natural resources at Watsonville Slough Farms in the Pajaro River watershed, a watershed of Monterey Bay. The Community Harvest project is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, as discussed in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s enabling legislation” section below. The proposed project is thus consistent with the funding requirements of Proposition 84.

LTSCC’s funds are expected to go towards staff time for planning and permitting tasks. 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 remains consistent with the Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation as described in the February 6, 2020 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Benefit Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will plan for facilities serving systemically excluded communities in Watsonville.

Consistent with **Goal 2.3, Expand Accessibility**, the project includes an 1,800 foot loop trail and staging area that are accessible to people with disabilities.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project will plan for improved public access and facilities such as parking, restrooms, and educational facilities at Watsonville Slough Farms.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

On February 21, 2025 the County of Santa Cruz adopted the Watsonville Slough Community Harvest Project Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND) and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP) and approved the Community Harvest project. The recommended grant will be used to complete final designs and permitting for the Community Harvest project, which is analyzed in the MND. Staff concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the Community Harvest project will have a significant effect on the environment.

The IS/MND identified potentially significant environmental effects to Biological Resources. With the project’s incorporated mitigation measures, summarized below, these environment effects will be less than significant.

**Biological Resources**

Construction activities, including vegetation removal in or around the sloughs and the construction of the boardwalks across the sloughs, could have significant temporary impacts on several special status species such as California Red-Legged Frog (CRLF), Western Pond Turtle (WPT), San Francisco dusky-footed woodrat, and Western red bat, as well as nesting birds. These temporary impacts include potential harm and reduction of habitat. The project site is located in an area of biotic concern, as it contains sensitive habitat such as wetlands, as well as several habitats that support sensitive species which could be impacted by construction activities, such as loss of habitat. Additionally, once constructed, the project would introduce an

increase in pedestrian use and other human presence which could have impacts on these habitats and species as well.

The MND indicates that the project incorporates mitigation measures that will avoid or reduce these impacts:

- Mitigation Bio-1 calls for pre-construction surveys by a qualified biologist prior to any vegetation removal to identify the presence of any special-status species.
- Mitigation Bio-2a-2c calls for pre-construction surveying by a qualified biologist to establish areas to be protected with exclusionary fencing during construction. In addition, areas requiring biologist monitoring will be surveyed for and identified.
- Mitigation Bio-3 calls for the installation of exclusion fencing in those areas determined in Mitigation Bio-2 along the work area boundaries. Fencing will be installed 6 inches below grade and 3.0 feet above grade, with wooden stakes at intervals of not more than 12 feet, and will allow for wildlife passage at designated intervals across the worksite area. The fencing will be maintained for the duration of the construction and the biologist will inspect the fence daily and report any maintenance needs.
- Mitigation Bio-4a-4c calls for providing a training led by a US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)-approved biologist for every individual working on the project prior to commencement of construction to cover the location and identification of sensitive habitats and special-status species as well as the importance and best management practices to avoid impacts to special-status species and their habitat.
- Mitigation Bio-5a1-5a3 calls for a USFWS-approved biologist to remain on site to monitor all initial clearing and grubbing and ground-disturbing. In addition, a biologist or a designated monitor, will be responsible for daily monitoring tasks including: 1) checking under all equipment for wildlife before use; 2) inspecting all trenches, pipes, culverts for animals prior to burying, capping, or filling; and 3) ensuring at the end of each workday, all excavations are secured with a cover, or that a ramp is installed to prevent wildlife entrapment.
- Mitigation Bio-6 calls for construction activities in and adjacent to the slough to occur during the dry season if feasible, especially vegetation removal. It calls for avoiding working at night or during rain events when special-status amphibians and mammals are generally more active.
- Mitigation Bio-7 calls for mitigation measures to reduce impacts to CRLF and WPT, including relocation of CRLF and WPT by a qualified biologist as needed during vegetation removal in or adjacent to the sloughs, checking under equipment prior to use and relocating special-species wildlife as needed, and other measures identified in Bio-5.
- Mitigation Bio-8 and Mitigation Bio-9 calls for further measures to reduce impacts to CRLF by reducing the frequency that CRLF will need to be relocated by restricting mowing and pruning to the dry season; and minimizing the frequency of vehicle strikes to CRLF by restricting parking to daytime hours if feasible.

- Mitigation Bio-10 calls for measures to reduce impacts to San Francisco Dusky-Footed Woodrat by conducting a preconstruction survey and installing fencing to create an exclusionary zone around any found woodrat houses. If avoidance of woodrat houses is not possible, a qualified biologist will develop and implement a relocation plan.
- Mitigation Bio-12 will reduce impacts to roosting bats by conducting tree limbing and removal between September 15-November 1 to avoid maternity roosts and winter hibernacula.
- Mitigation Bio-13 and Mitigation Bio-14 will use best practices to protect nesting and sensitive bird species. This includes performing vegetation removal outside of the avian breeding season when feasible. For construction work conducted during the breeding season, surveys will be conducted by a qualified biologist within 7 days prior to beginning of construction. If activity is observed, either vegetation removal activities will be postponed until young have fledged or buffers will be established, depending on the activity and species impacted. In the case that burrowing owls are detected, visible markers will be placed near occupied burrows and suitable habitat will be fenced off. Workers will avoid direct destruction of burrows. Burrowing owls will be included in the personnel training mentioned in Mitigation Bio-4a-4c.
- Mitigation Bio-15 calls for avoiding the installation of any non-essential artificial lighting and/or limiting use of essential artificial lighting during the hours of dusk and dawn in order to reduce potential impacts of artificial lighting to sensitive habitats and special-status species. All essential outdoor lighting will be limited by use of timers and/or motion sensors and will be shielded or otherwise directed downwards to reduce light pollution.
- Mitigation Bio-16 calls for ceasing work immediately at any time prior to or during construction if any individual special-status species is found in a place where work activities could injure or kill the individual. It will be allowed to move out of harm's way on its own or a qualified biologist with authorization of the USFWS and CDFW will relocate it to the nearest suitable habitat outside of the project impact area.
- Mitigation Bio-17 calls for measures if a western pond turtle egg clutch is discovered during pre-construction surveys or any time during construction. Work in the vicinity of the egg clutch will be halted immediately and high visibility fencing surrounding the clutch will be installed under the direction of a qualified biologist.
- Mitigation Bio-18a-c in combination with Mitigation Measures Bio-2 and Bio-3 above will mitigate impacts to sensitive habitats such as Coastal Scrub, Coast Live Oak Woodland, Mixed Willow Riparian, Season Wetlands, Freshwater Marsh, and Aquatic Habitat. Measure Bio-18a-c calls for restoring all areas temporarily disturbed by the project to pre-project contours as much as possible and revegetating with appropriate native plant species. All sensitive habitats permanently impacted as a result of the project will be compensated for at a minimum 2:1 ratio through restoration or establishment of in-kind habitat at designated restoration areas on site.



With implementation of the project's mitigation measures, environmental effects to biological resources will be less than significant. Staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the Community Harvest 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.