

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 17, 2025

CITY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO VEGETATION MANAGEMENT PLAN

Project No. 24-059-01

Project Manager: Kostoula Vallianos

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the City of San Luis Obispo to prepare a City of San Luis Obispo vegetation management plan focused on reducing fire fuels and the threat of wildfire on City-owned open space and creek properties and to develop a related website.

LOCATION: San Luis Obispo County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Pictures](#)

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 two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to the City of San Luis Obispo (“the grantee”) to prepare a vegetation management plan focused on reducing fire fuels and the threat of wildfire on City-owned open space and creek properties and to develop a related website.

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.

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 a grant of an amount not to exceed \$200,000 to the City of San Luis Obispo (the “City”) to prepare a vegetation management plan (VMP) focused on reducing fire fuels and the threat of wildfire on City-owned open space and creek properties and to develop a related website (the “project”).

The City owns over 4,000 acres of open space mostly located in the greenbelt around the City (Exhibit 1). This greenbelt abuts the urban environment creating the wildland urban interface (WUI). Managing vegetation in the City-owned WUI parcels in the greenbelt and throughout the riparian zones interwoven throughout the City achieves multiple benefits including fire risk reduction, increasing open space vegetation resilience, and enhancing habitats. In this way the VMP is crucial to ecological, community, and economic resiliency of the City.

A 5-year Invasive Species Management Plan was developed in 2015 in collaboration with the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County. The Invasive Species Management Plan has been used to reduce invasive weeds in City-owned areas. With a changing climate and proliferation of non-native species, a more proactive long-term management and maintenance plan is needed to ensure resilience of these open space and creek properties, which is the primary goal of the VMP.

The project includes preparing the VMP, which will update the 2015 Invasive Species Management Plan and guide the City’s future vegetation treatments. An initial step in preparing the VMP is an update and completion of botanical surveys of the City-owned open space and riparian parcels that will help identify areas to avoid or buffer due to rare plants or sensitive habitat. The VMP will also identify site specific fuel reduction treatments such as vegetation thinning, chipping, grazing, and prescribed and cultural fire. Once the VMP is completed and adopted, the City will use a wildfire behavior and risk model to prioritize treatments.

The project will also include development of a dedicated project website and public facing dashboard to enable easy access for the community to see the plan, its goals, and treated areas. Future treatment areas will be listed on the website and disclosed in annual meetings near where work is to be completed to solicit input from community members about the VMP and the treatment priorities. This community engagement will also serve as an opportunity to

educate the public about the ecological restoration occurring and how the vegetation management activities achieve multiple ecological and community benefits.

The City's Vegetation Management team will manage the preparation of the VMP. The team is comprised of senior staff representatives from a variety of City departments including the Office of Sustainability & Natural Resources, the Fire Department, and Ranger Service. This team will work with a consultant on the botanical surveys and prepare the VMP.

Site Description: The City owns and manages over 4,000 acres of open space across ten major properties comprising many different habitat types all within the San Luis Obispo Creek watershed (Exhibit 1). Oak woodland, chaparral, native grassland, serpentine outcrops, and nonnative invasive species are found in City-owned open spaces. San Luis Obispo has a long list of endangered, sensitive, rare, and serpentine endemic plants present in its open space areas. All City-owned open space properties have public access trails.

The City also owns several creek parcels. Willow riparian forest is the dominant habitat type found along the San Luis Obispo Creek system with oak woodland communities found in the upper watershed. Typical riparian scrub species exist in the corridor, but several prominent weed species have established extensive populations and need to be controlled. The San Luis Obispo Creek watershed is designated as critical habitat for, and home to, federally threatened South-central California Coast Steelhead trout.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The City has managed many different grant-funded projects over the years, including planning, land conservation acquisitions, and habitat restoration projects. The City successfully worked with the Conservancy on the acquisition of a portion of the Bishop Peak Natural Reserve, which is one of the properties where specific fuel reduction treatments would be identified through preparation of the VMP. The City has adopted policies and procedures for financial management of grant funds and is accustomed to providing timely and complete invoices and reports.

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.

The proposed project will support the recommendations in the City's recently adopted Climate Adaptation and Safety Element of the General Plan. The botanical surveys that will be completed as part of the VMP development will also be used in other regional efforts funded by the Conservancy. The City will provide the on-the-ground botanical surveys to the Coastal San Luis Resource Conservation District to help validate wildland fire and hazard mapping data developed through the Central Coast Lidar Wildfire Mapping Project. The botanical survey data will also be used by the San Luis Obispo County Fire Safe Council in beta testing of the FIRESHED modeling program which is part of the San Luis Obispo Wildfire Resilience Regional Priority Plan Project.

In addition, the City's current Community Wildfire Protection Plan was adopted in 2019. An update to the Community Wildfire Protection Plan will occur in 2025 providing an opportunity to integrate the findings and strategies from the proposed VMP.

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.

yak tit^yu tit^yu yak tithini Northern Chumash Tribe (ytt Tribe) ancestral homelands include the properties and parcels owned by the City. The City has been collaborating and is expanding its relationship with ytt Tribe. In June 2024, ytt Tribe led a cultural burn at the City's Johnson Ranch Open Space property. The City and ytt Tribe are actively planning subsequent cultural burns. The VMP will include cultural burning as one of the vegetation treatments. Its adoption by the City will be helpful in the planning of future cultural burns on City-owned lands. ytt Tribe is supportive of the proposed project as illustrated by its support letter found in Exhibit 3.

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

The proposed project will provide a roadmap for future fuel reduction treatments that will increase fire resiliency in the City of San Luis Obispo and surrounding areas 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. The 2020, 2021 and 2024 fire seasons broke numerous records. The January 2025 catastrophic wildfires in southern California make this year the second most destructive fire year in California history.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

In addition to reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire, the implementation of the proposed VMP will improve ecological health of the City-owned properties protecting creek and aquatic resources as well as life and property. Added benefits of this project include public education, and development of data that will contribute to regional planning efforts and other Conservancy funded projects.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$200,000
Project Total	\$200,000

The anticipated source of funding for this grant 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 several 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, facilitate greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and increase carbon sequestration in forests throughout California. The proposed project is consistent with the funding because the VMP will identify and prioritize vegetation treatments and implementation of the VMP will improve ecological health and fire resilience in and around the City of San Luis Obispo. The City of San Luis Obispo will contribute \$35,000 of in-kind staff time to the project.

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 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) and 31113(c), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to undertake projects within its jurisdiction 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, to the extent allowed, for projects that maximize public benefits and that accomplish one of several purposes, including reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Consistent with this section, the proposed project will develop a vegetation management plan to reduce wildfire risk on City-owned open space and creek side properties. The project will help California's natural lands 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 Projects**, the proposed project will develop a vegetation management plan to reduce wildfire risk on and around City of San Luis Obispo owned lands.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt under Title 14 California Code of Regulations (14 CCR) Section 15262 (Feasibility and Planning Studies) because it involves planning for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded. Consistent with Section 15262, the project will consider environmental factors. The proposed project is also categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15306 (Information Collection) because it involves data collection and research activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.

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