

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 17, 2025

YTT GOOD FIRE PROMOTION PROGRAM

Project No. 25-005-01

Project Manager: Kostoula Vallianos

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$400,900 to ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit to initiate the Good Fire Promotion Program, consisting of preparing a cultural burn management plan, training yak tityu tityu yak tihini Northern Chumash Tribal members, purchasing equipment and supplies for cultural burns, and conducting a series of cultural burns totaling 8-30 acres on Johnson Ranch Open Space in San Luis Obispo County.

LOCATION: San Luis Obispo County

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 four hundred thousand nine hundred dollars (\$400,900) to ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit (“the grantee”) to initiate the Good Fire Promotion Program, consisting of preparing a cultural burn management plan, training yak tityu tityu yak tihini Northern Chumash Tribal members, purchasing equipment and supplies for cultural burns, and conducting a series of cultural burns totaling 8-30 acres on Johnson Ranch Open Space in San Luis Obispo County (“the project”).

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.

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. ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit 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 \$400,900 grant to ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit to initiate the Good Fire Promotion Program, consisting of preparing a cultural burn management plan, training yak tityu tityu yak tihini Northern Chumash Tribal members, purchasing equipment and supplies for cultural burns, and conducting a series of cultural burns totaling 8-30 acres on Johnson Ranch Open Space in San Luis Obispo County (“the project”).

Fire is an essential part of many of California’s landscapes and has been used by California Native Americans to manage healthy ecosystems for thousands of years. In the 1900’s federal and state agencies prohibited the use of prescribed fire and cultural burning severing Native Americans from an important cultural practice, while also causing ecological harm. More than a century of aggressive fire suppression and increasing impacts of climate change have fueled California’s wildfire crisis. Returning beneficial fire to the landscape is a key strategy in addressing this challenge.

Present-day San Luis Obispo County is the ancestral homeland of yak tit^yu tit^yu yak tihini Northern Chumash Tribe (ytt Tribe). In 2024, after nearly 200 years without cultural burns, ytt Tribal members participated in burn trainings and led three cultural burns with San Luis Obispo County partners. Cultural burns are used by tribes for important purposes such as to help cultivate native plants of significance, manage invasive weeds, or support their medicine and ceremony. Cultural burns, also known as a form of good or beneficial fire, can improve ecosystem health, enhance biodiversity, replenish soils, and reduce disease, as well as encourage growth of culturally important species. Having access to traditional materials for activities is incredibly important to Californian Native American communities. Cultural burns are an important tool for cultivating the necessary plant materials for these activities.

The proposed project will be implemented by ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit, which is the legal entity and fiscal agent for ytt Tribe. The proposed project includes preparing a 10 year cultural burn management plan within ytt Tribal homelands (Exhibit 1). In preparing the cultural burn management plan, planning will include identifying cultural burn locations,

developing agreements with partner organizations, and drafting approximately 60 cultural burn plans that will identify an estimated 1,000 acres of public and private lands to culturally burn in San Luis Obispo County in partnership with land owners interested in this type of land management. The cultural burn management plan will also identify strategies that ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit and their land management partners will use to educate the public on good fire before and after burns.

Over the course of the proposed project, approximately 8 ytt Tribal members will be trained in cultural fire practices through this project. ytt Tribe will gather and develop traditional tools for cultural burns and train tribal members to pass on tribal ecological knowledge. Personal protective equipment and supplies will be purchased for use when conducting cultural burns (e.g., helmets, boots, packs, and drip torches).

The proposed project also includes the land preparation and cultural burning of 8-30 acres in Johnson Ranch Open Space located in San Luis Obispo County and owned by the City of San Luis Obispo. A cultural burn plan for Johnson Ranch Open Space has been completed. Prior to the burns, burn control lines will be mowed on either side of the perimeter of the burn boundary, and wet with water. After the cultural burn, ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit will periodically monitor the land through site visits to informally assess the burn impact on culturally important plants and the land in general.

Site Description: ytt Tribe's ancestral homeland is roughly present-day San Luis Obispo County. ytt Tribe's ancestral homeland extends north to Ragged Point, east to the Carrizo Plains land, south to the Santa Maria River and west beyond the coastline. This area hosts a number of different plant communities, including chaparral ecosystems, coastal sage scrub, and expansive grasslands, oak woodlands, and rangelands. Scattered pockets of pine forests are found in the northern coastal highlands with more fertile plains at lower elevations and coastal prairie and dune systems along the coast. The region is also characterized by seasonal wetlands, estuaries and riparian corridors and experiences a characteristic mediterranean climate.

The proposed project also includes a series of cultural burns totaling 8-30 acres on Johnson Ranch Open Space located south of the City of San Luis Obispo. Johnson Ranch Open Space is a 242 acre open space property owned by the City of San Luis Obispo. Dry Creek, a seasonal creek, bisects the property and steelhead trout use this as a migratory corridor. The property is primarily grassland with characteristic chaparral and oak woodland plants, shrubs and trees throughout. Forbes Pond, previously a small quarry, is also located on the property along with a few wetland sites.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: ytt Tribe through its fiscal agent, ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit, has been the recipient of multiple public and private grants to support land stewardship and cultural practices revitalization work. Specifically, ytt Tribe has received a \$500,000 Tribal Nature-Based Solution grant from the California Ocean Protection Council and was awarded \$206,917 in capacity building grant funds from the California Strategic Growth Council's Tribal Capacity Building Pilot Program. Additionally, ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit is a subgrantee on three grants awarded to their partners in San Luis Obispo County, including a Wildlife Conservation Board grant awarded to the City of San Luis Obispo and California Council of Land Trusts grants awarded to Sequoia Riverlands Trust. They have conducted cultural burns

on land owned by City of San Luis Obispo and Sequoia Riverlands Trust, and plan to conduct more in the future. In addition, they are exploring opportunities to partner with other land owners in San Luis Obispo County including Pacific Gas and Electric with the goal of conducting cultural burns at Diablo Canyon.

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.
- California's Strategic Plan for Expanding the Use of Beneficial Fire (Governor's Forest Management Task Force, March 2022), which builds on the Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan and lays out goals and actions to increase beneficial fire including prescribed fire and cultural burning.
- 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 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 proposed project is led by ytt Northern Chumash Tribal members and administered by the Tribe's nonprofit, ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit which acts as a fiscal entity and is

staffed by ytt Tribal members. From the project inception to its implementation, the proposed project is and will be led by ytt Northern Chumash Tribal members. In addition, the proposed project will bring back a traditional practice of cultural burning to San Luis Obispo County and increase ytt Tribe's capacity to conduct more cultural burns in the future.

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

Implementation of cultural burns are an important tool in addressing California's wildfire crisis. The proposed project includes the funding of a series of small scale cultural burns and will lay the ground work for future cultural burns in San Luis Obispo County, which will help increase the county's fire resilience 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.

The proposed project includes a series of small cultural burns in Johnson Ranch Open Space, which will improve ecosystem health, enhance biodiversity, replenish soils, and reduce disease, as well as encourage growth of culturally important species.

The proposed project will also lay the groundwork for ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit to implement a cultural burn program. After centuries of being unable to connect with their homeland in this way, the return of cultural burning will allow ytt Tribal members to reconnect with their traditional practices and stewardship of their ancestral land.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$400,900
San Luis Obispo Fire Safe Council	\$10,000
Project Total	\$410,900

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 is increasing the organizational capacity of ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit to conduct cultural burns. The San Luis Obispo County Fire Safe Council provided a \$10,000 grant to ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit for the purchase of personal protective equipment for use during cultural burns.

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 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) 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 restore the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, or natural lands. 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 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will benefit ytt Tribe by bringing back a traditional practice of cultural burning to San Luis Obispo County and increase ytt Tribe’s capacity to conduct more cultural burns in the future.

Consistent with **Goal 4.2 Wildfire Resilience Projects**, the proposed project includes preparing a cultural burn management plan which will implement approximately 1000 acres of cultural burning across San Luis Obispo County, and also includes conducting a series of cultural burns totaling 8-30 acres in San Luis Obispo County.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt under Title 14 California Code of Regulations (14 CCR) Section 15262 because it involves planning for possible future actions that have not yet

been approved or funded. Consistent with Section 15262, the projects will consider environmental factors.

The proposed project is categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15304 because the project involves minor alterations in the condition of vegetation without the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. The proposed project is also categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15306 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.