

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 18, 2025

ESTERO AMERICANO PUBLIC ACCESS INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Project No. 15-005-02
Project Manager: Joel Gerwein

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$240,200 to The Wildlands Conservancy to prepare plans for and implement the Estero Americano Public Access Infrastructure Improvements Project, consisting of installation of directional and interpretive signage, installation of 5 miles of trails, and renovation of a dilapidated house to provide caretaker housing at the Estero Americano Coast Preserve in Bodega Bay, Sonoma County; and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Bodega Bay, Sonoma County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Site photographs](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Coastal Development Permit for the Estero Americano Coast Preserve Public Access Infrastructure Improvements Project](#)
- Exhibit 4: [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 forty thousand two hundred dollars (\$240,200) to The Wildlands Conservancy (“the grantee”) to prepare plans for and implement the Estero Americano Public Access Infrastructure Improvements Project, consisting of installation of directional and interpretive signage, installation of 5 miles of trails, and renovation of a dilapidated house to provide caretaker housing at the Estero Americano Coast Preserve in Bodega Bay, Sonoma 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. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding and Proposition 68 as the source of that funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Prior to commencing the project, the grantee shall enter into and record an agreement pursuant to Public Resources Code 31116(d) sufficient to protect the public interest in the improvements.

In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Coastal Access Project Standards'.

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 Wildlands Conservancy 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 Coastal Development Permit (CDP) and accompanying staff recommendation approved by the California Coastal Commission on November 14, 2024, pursuant to the California Coastal Act and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 3. The Conservancy finds that the conditions in California Code of Regulations Title 14, Section 15253 under which it can act as a responsible agency to approve the project under CEQA using a coastal development permit in the place of an environmental impact report or negative declaration have been met. Based on its review of the CDP, the Conservancy finds that the proposed 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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$240,200 to The Wildlands Conservancy (TWC) to prepare plans for and implement the Estero Americano Public Access Infrastructure Improvements Project, consisting of installation of directional and interpretive signage, installation of 5 miles of trails, and renovation of a dilapidated house to provide caretaker housing at the Estero Americano Coast Preserve in Bodega Bay, Sonoma County(the “project”). See Exhibit 1 for project location.

The project will make daily public access possible on the Preserve, which was acquired for that purpose ten years ago with partial funding from the Conservancy. Prior to July 2025, there was no formalized public access to any part of the Preserve, which includes the coast from the beach terminus of the Shorttail Gulch Trail just north of the Preserve to Dillon Beach to the south, a stretch of some 4.5 miles. The Estero Americano itself is a rare undeveloped coastal estuary with a broad beach that is home to significant coastal wildlife species, and the area is considered one of the most biologically dynamic along this stretch of coast. The upland areas surrounding the Estero are a prime location for coastal hiking opportunities, replete with breathtaking views of coastal prairies, bluffs, the estero, and the ocean. Improving public access and providing coastal recreation on the Preserve will provide tremendous public benefit.

Public access to the property was severely limited since the land acquisition until summer of 2025 due to litigation with neighboring landowners. This litigation has been settled, and public access to the Preserve is now possible through an existing public access easement through the neighboring Bodega Harbour residential area to the Shorttail Gulch Trail, which leads to the Preserve. . The Preserve is currently open to the public Friday-Sunday from 8 AM to 5 PM. The public can access the Preserve and Estero Beach via the Shorttail Gulch trail. The Shorttail Gulch trail connects to existing ranch roads, which allow the public to access the Preserve and Estero Beach.. Starting in November 2025, the Preserve will be open daily from an hour before dawn to an hour after sunset.

The grantee will create a network of approximately five miles of public access trails across the Estero Americano Coast Preserve with access to the Estero Americano (Exhibit 1). The improved trails will run primarily along existing former agricultural roads and cattle paths but will include some new trail segments created by mowing simple single-track trails through grasslands. One trail will run roughly up the higher bluff on the parcel, with dramatic views over the property, the Estero, and the ocean. Another trail will run through the former farmstead area of the property, past an existing pond, and then along the coastal bluff to the ocean and the mouth of the Estero. In the winter, when the Estero waters breach through to the Pacific Ocean, the beach naturally shrinks in size and there will only be access to a small portion of it. However, for most of the year the public can access a broad beach, surrounded by undeveloped lands, wildlife, and the waters of the Estero and the ocean. The project includes additional amenities including an access gate and entrance at Shorttail Gulch, and directional and informational signage. The trail network was largely put in place in Summer 2025, but some improvements to the ranch roads remain to be completed. Additional improvements anticipated to be

constructed by the end of 2027 include a kayak landing, restroom facilities, and improved access to the beach.

A key component of the project consists of renovating an existing 1,200 square foot dilapidated house on the Preserve so that it can serve as caretaker housing. The existing residence on the property is currently uninhabitable and requires substantial renovation to support full-time occupancy. Adjacent land uses include private ranchlands and the Bodega Harbour residential community, which borders the Preserve's southern boundary. Given the Preserve's ecological sensitivity, remote location, and proximity to private property, the presence of on-site staff is essential for daily management, visitor safety, and maintaining positive relationships with neighbors as the Preserve transitions to seven-day-a-week public access in November 2025. Neighbors have frequently reported incidents ranging from late-night parties on the Preserve's beaches to illegal entry onto Preserve lands. Without staff presence on site, these activities go unchecked and pose serious risks to natural resources, wildlife, and the visitor experience. The presence of resident staff will deter these activities, ensuring that the Preserve remains a safe, well-managed, and respected space within the community.

Onsite staff is essential to meet the monitoring and stewardship standards required by the Coastal Development Permit (CDP) and other regulatory agreements. Staff housing was identified in TWC's Project Description to the California Coastal Commission as a key condition for opening the Preserve to the public. The Coastal Commission, Sonoma County, and neighboring landowners have consistently acknowledged that the long-term success of public access at the Preserve depends upon the permanent presence of staff.

Onsite staff is also critical to ensuring public safety, as it allows for immediate response to unforeseen emergencies. Accidents, whether medical incidents involving visitors or natural hazards such as wildfire, can arise suddenly and demand urgent attention. In the event of wildfire, for example, resident staff are the first line of defense for both the Preserve and surrounding private and public lands. Their ability to act swiftly can prevent small incidents from escalating into catastrophic events. Temporary medical care by onsite staff can be critical, as vehicle access to the Preserve is via Estero Lane, a poorly maintained one lane road with multiple locked gates. Emergency response can easily take 30 minutes or more, even from local departments. The project will begin permitting existing designs for the renovation through Permit Sonoma. Construction activities will include demolition of a deteriorated porch, asbestos testing and disposal, and structural repairs including subflooring replacement and porch reconstruction. New windows and exterior doors will be installed, and the kitchen will be upgraded with new cabinets and countertops. Damaged siding will be repaired, and a three-zone mini-split HVAC system will replace the outdated unit. Electrical improvements will include a new main panel, sub-panel, and wiring upgrades. Interior improvements will include new flooring, two full bathroom renovations, bathroom and kitchen tile installation, interior and exterior painting including fireproofing coatings, and installation of modern, energy-efficient kitchen and laundry appliances. Plumbing will be updated with new fixtures and a new water heater. These activities will result in a safe, code-compliant, and durable residence for full-time staff occupancy.

TWC will be responsible for long-term management, maintenance, and monitoring of the residence, trails, and the Preserve. Ongoing stewardship will be carried out by on-site Preserve staff, supported by the Sonoma Coast Region management team. Maintenance of the renovated residence will be integrated into the Preserve's overall operations plan. Funding for long-term upkeep will come from a mix of private revenue sources, including lease income, individual donor contributions, and private foundation grants. This model has sustained TWC's successful operation of 23 preserves across California and will ensure the continued protection and public benefit of this site.

Site Description:

The project is located at the Preserve located just downcoast of Bodega Bay in unincorporated Sonoma County, on the coastal bluffs west of Highway 1, between the Highway and the Pacific Ocean, partially within and just south of the town of Bodega Bay. It is bordered to the east by private ranchlands, and to the north by the Bodega Harbour residential community. The 547-acre Preserve is owned by TWC. It is located along the northern bank of the Estero Americano, which is a long tidal estuary fed by freshwater from Estero Creek and reaching some nine miles inland, defining the border between Marin and Sonoma Counties. The Preserve borders the coastline for three-quarters of a mile and includes a one-mile stretch along the mouth of the Estero Americano. The Preserve includes coastal bluffs, riparian areas, inland coastal hills, a pocket beach area, and direct access to the Estero and a large beach at the mouth of the Estero. Much of the year, the beach is accessible and extensive, but in winter when the Estero waters breach, the main areas of the beach are generally cut off from access.

The Estero Americano area is almost entirely undeveloped other than agricultural operations, surrounded by former or currently used agricultural areas that are mostly dedicated to cattle grazing. In fact, the 547-acre Preserve site was historically used as a cattle ranch, and portions of the site are currently grazed today. The Preserve contains multiple older farm buildings, including the dilapidated house to be renovated. The site also includes an old aquaculture facility that is currently used for small scale abalone farming under a pre-existing lease.

Grant Applicant Qualifications:

TWC manages 23 preserves across California and has extensive experience administering public grants and completing capital improvement projects that support public access and land stewardship. TWC has successfully managed funding from the Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Board, California Natural Resources Agency, and numerous private partners and funders. Relevant to this proposal, TWC has completed similar staff housing renovation projects at Jenner Headlands Preserve and Whitewater Preserve in Riverside County, including structural repairs, utility upgrades, permitting, and coordination with regulatory agencies. The project will be overseen by TWC's Director of Preserve Planning and Design in collaboration with the Sonoma Coast Region management team. TWC maintains strong internal controls, clear project management protocols, and a track record of delivering projects on time and in compliance with all grant requirements.

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 project involves a modest investment of state resources which will facilitate public access to an important part of the coast. This investment will leverage other public and private funding. The project budget is reasonable, and the project is highly feasible. The project will further the state's Outdoors for All Initiative by facilitating free access to a coastal preserve within a couple hours' drive of large population centers in the San Francisco Bay Area. The project was developed in collaboration with local stakeholders and state and local agencies.

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 Preserve lies within the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria's (FIGR's) ancestral lands. TWC engaged with FIGR early in project planning, meeting with Tribal representatives to introduce the project and discuss opportunities for collaboration. FIGR expressed support for the project and asked to be kept informed of implementation progress and public access timing. TWC will provide regular updates throughout the life of the project. TWC is also committed to working with FIGR to develop a Tribal Consultation and Use Plan that will provide for the long-term involvement of the Tribe in planning, stewardship, and interpretation of the Preserve. This plan will include consideration of tribal access, cultural resource protection, and incorporation of indigenous knowledge in future public programming.

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

The project will enable sustainable public access, ongoing stewardship, and visitor safety at the Preserve for decades to come. TWC will be responsible for long-term maintenance, with funding provided through a mix of lease income, private donations, and foundation grants. The future caretaker housing is located outside of areas vulnerable to near- and mid-term sea level rise, and the site has been evaluated in consultation with the California Coastal Commission as part of the Coastal Development Permit process. The project does not involve construction within the floodplain or other dynamic coastal zones and will not hinder future adaptation efforts. The building upgrades will increase energy efficiency and climate resilience, including fire-safe upgrades and HVAC system replacement, supporting the long-term function of the facility in a changing climate.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project delivers multiple long-term benefits by enabling safe, free public access to the 547-acre Estero Americano Coast Preserve—one of the most ecologically and scenically significant stretches of the Sonoma Coast. Renovating the staff residence, improving trails and installing signage will allow TWC to expand access from limited weekend hours to seven days a week. On-site staff presence will provide daily management, enhance visitor safety, and protect sensitive habitats from misuse or degradation.

The project promotes equity and environmental justice by removing financial barriers to outdoor recreation and expanding opportunities for underserved communities to experience and connect with the coast. The Sonoma coast in particular serves lower income groups and environmental justice communities from Sonoma County and the broader Bay Area. According to the 2024 Sonoma County Environmental Justice Technical Report, census tracts near the project area are considered low-income communities. The free coastal access provided by the project will become increasingly important as climate change continues to result in hotter temperatures in inland areas, causing more people to visit the coast to find relief from the heat. The Preserve will also provide a site for volunteer stewardship opportunities and educational programs that build environmental awareness, civic connection, and a stronger sense of belonging for all who visit.

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

TWC worked closely with local stakeholders to ensure the transition to daily public access reflects community needs and priorities. TWC collaborated with members of the Bodega Harbour Homeowners Association Board to form a working group of key stakeholders, including the California Coastal Commission, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, Sonoma County Regional Parks, Sonoma County Fire Department, Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, Sonoma County Roads Department, California Highway Patrol, and the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. These meetings have created a platform for transparent communication, relationship-building, and problem-solving to ensure that the public access rollout is safe, effective, and responsive to community concerns.

Through this process, TWC has addressed potential impacts related to traffic, emergency access, and visitor management—demonstrating TWC's commitment to long-term partnership and mutual trust with neighboring residents and agencies. The project enjoys broad support from participating stakeholders and aligns with the public access goals outlined in the conservation easement and recreational covenant held by Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$240,200
The Wildlands Conservancy	\$78,000

Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District \$282,100

Project Total

\$600,300

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to come from an appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoors Access for All Act of 2018 (Proposition 68), codified at Public Resources Code Sections 80000-80173. Chapter 9 of Proposition 68 allocates funds to the Conservancy for the protection of beaches, bays, wetlands, and coastal watershed resources pursuant to Division 21 (Section 80120(c)). This includes projects to complete the California Coastal Trail, pursuant to Section 31408 (Section 80120(c)). Based on the definition of “protection,” this includes actions to improve access to public open-space areas and to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources (Section 80002(l)).

Consistent with the purposes of this funding source, the Estero Americano Public Access Infrastructure Improvements Project consists of improving access to and continuing use of the coast, providing housing for Preserve staff that will manage public access, and adding 0.75 miles of the California Coastal Trail and an additional 4.25 miles of trail that will link to the Coastal Trail. This project will be carried out in accordance with Chapter 9 of Division 21 regarding public accessways (see “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section). The project is consistent with the funding guidelines for expenditure of Proposition 68 adopted by the Conservancy on December 6, 2018, as described in various sections of the staff recommendation. TWC will also provide \$78,000 for the project, as well as staff time to implement the Project.

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District will provide \$282,100 for 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 would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 (Sections 31400-31410) of the Public Resources Code, as follows:

It is the intent of the Legislature for the Conservancy to have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public coastal accessways (Section 31400). To carry out this mandate, the Conservancy is authorized to provide grants to nonprofit organizations to develop, operate, or manage lands for public access to and along the coast; and to provide up to the total cost of initial development of public accessways by any nonprofit organization, as provided in Section 31400.1 (Sections 31400.1 and 31400.2). Pursuant to Section 31400.3, the Conservancy may provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of this division.

Consistent with Section 31400.1, the proposed project provides funds to TWC, a nonprofit, to improve public access infrastructure, including trails, signage, and renovation of caretaker housing, which will facilitate improved public access at the Estero Americano Coast Preserve.

Consistent with Section 31400.3, the Conservancy's proposed contribution would assist TWC in providing safe public access to the Preserve and its public coastal accessways.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the Estero Americano Public Access Infrastructure Improvements Project will develop up to five miles of new trails, including 0.75 miles of California Coastal trail, at the Estero American Coast Preserve in Sonoma County.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities & Amenities**, the proposed project will renovate caretaker housing and install informational signage and other amenities to support free coastal access.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

On November 14, 2024, the California Coastal Commission issued a Coastal Development Permit (CDP) for the Estero Americano Public Access Infrastructure Improvement Project. Staff concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment. The Conservancy finds that the conditions in 14 CCR § 15253 under which it can act as a responsible agency to approve the Project under CEQA using a CDP in the place of an EIR or negative declaration have been met. Pursuant to 14 CCR § 15253(b)(1) the Coastal Commission was the first agency to grant a discretionary approval for the project. Pursuant to 14 CCR § 15253(b)(2) and (4) the Coastal Commission consulted with the Conservancy by issuing a notice that it was considering TWC's application for a CDP, providing an opportunity for the Conservancy to provide input. Pursuant to 14 CCR § 15253(b)(3), the CDP identifies the significant environmental effects within the Conservancy's expertise and identifies mitigation measures to avoid or reduce the severity of the significant environmental effects. Pursuant to 14 CCR § 15253(b)(5) the Coastal Commission established a consultation period with the Conservancy that was at least as long as the period allowed for public review of the CDP. Pursuant to 14 CCR § 15253(b)(6), the Coastal Commission exercised the powers of a lead agency by considering all the significant environmental effects of the project and making a finding under Section 15091 for each significant effect.

The CDP identified potentially significant environmental effects in the areas of Archaeological and Tribal Cultural Resources and Biological Resources. With the project's incorporated mitigation measures, summarized below, these environmental effects will be less than significant.

Archaeological and Tribal Cultural Resources

The project may result in disturbance to archaeological and tribal cultural resources. To mitigate these impacts to less than significant, TWC shall provide for tribal monitoring of ground disturbing activities. If any tribal cultural deposits are discovered during the course of the project, all construction within 200 feet of such deposits shall stop until a qualified cultural resource specialist, in consultation with the relevant tribes, analyzes the significance of the find

and, if deemed significant, prepares a supplementary archaeological plan that evaluates and provides suggested measures related to the discovery. Should human remains be discovered on-site during the project, immediately after such discovery, the on-site archaeologist and/or tribal monitor shall notify the Sonoma County Coroner, and all construction activities shall be temporarily halted until the remains can be identified. If the County Coroner determines that the human remains are those of a Native American, the Coroner shall contact the Native American Heritage Commission, who will identify the most likely descendant to discuss and confer with the descendants all reasonable options regarding the descendants' preference for treatment. In addition, TWC shall prepare a Tribal Consultation and Use Plan, which will provide for a program of Tribal access and use of the site, including for traditional Tribal ceremonies. The plan shall also include provisions to ensure that public access and recreation minimize impacts to cultural resources on the site to the greatest extent feasible.

Biological Resources

The project may impact special status species, coastal terrace prairie and wetland by constructing trails through these sensitive natural communities. To minimize and mitigate these impacts, TWC will conduct plant and wildlife surveys prior to construction. TWC will avoid impacts to mapped special status plant populations and implement best management practices to minimize the spread of invasive plants. TWC will avoid impacts to American badger dens, western burrowing owl burrows, active bird nests, and California red-legged frog. TWC will also minimize disturbance involved in trail construction. Trails through the grassland and wetland will be created and maintained by mowing and will be kept narrow. In addition, TWC will mitigate these impacts by removing existing dilapidated and unused farm infrastructure and replanting these areas with native vegetation. A portion of these replanting areas will be restored wetland habitat.

With implementation of the project's mitigation measures, environmental effects to Archaeological and Tribal Cultural Resources and Biological Resources will be less than significant. Staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the 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.

The CDP mentions the establishment of the caretaker residence on site to manage the access but does not describe the renovations. The renovations to the caretaker housing are categorically exempt from CEQA under PRC Section 15301, which exempts the operation, repair, maintenance, or minor alteration of existing public or private structures, involving negligible or no expansion of existing or former use. Consistent with this exemption, the project will renovate an existing house to provide caretaker housing at the Preserve.

Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption with respect to the caretaker renovations.