

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 18, 2025

**AMENDMENT OF OFFER TO DEDICATE TITLE IN FEE FOR THE CABRAL RANCH ACQUISITION**

Project No. 90-069-01  
Project Manager: Mark Kalnins

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to amend the Conservancy-required restrictions that limit use of the Napa Resource Conservation District's 21-acre Huichica Creek Vineyard property to agricultural purposes so that the property can be used for habitat restoration and enhancement, natural resource protection, and potential public access. The property is located in the Huichica Creek Watershed in Napa County and was purchased for agricultural purposes with a Conservancy grant in 1991, when the property was known as Cabral Ranch.

**LOCATION:** lower Huichica Creek, Napa County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Vicinity Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [December 7, 1990 Cabral Ranch Staff Recommendation](#)

Exhibit 3: [1991 Irrevocable Offer to Dedicate](#)

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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 amendment of the Irrevocable Offer To Dedicate Title in Fee recorded by the Napa Resource Conservation District in 1991 in the Official Records of Napa County (Vol 1823, Page 780) on the 21-acre property along Huichica Creek known then as Cabral Ranch, to expand the designated uses, which are limited to agricultural uses, to include habitat restoration and enhancement, natural resource protection and potential public access.

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 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the resource and recreation goals of the San Francisco Bay Area.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize the Executive Officer to amend the Irrevocable Offer To Dedicate Title in Fee (OTD) that Napa Resource Conservation District (Napa RCD) recorded in 1991 to comply with its Conservancy grant for acquisition of a roughly 19-acre property (determined later to be 21 acres) in the Huichica Creek Watershed, known then as Cabral Ranch and known now as the Huichica Creek Vineyard (the “property”). The amendment will expand the designated uses of the property to include, in addition to the currently designated use of agriculture and agricultural demonstration projects, including a demonstration vineyard: habitat restoration and enhancement, natural resource protection and potential public access.

Napa RCD still owns the Huichica Creek Vineyard. After operating a demonstration vineyard on the property for many years, Napa RCD seeks to include the property in a larger floodplain restoration project known as the Huichica Creek Riparian and Salt Marsh Restoration Project in Napa County (Exhibit 1). This project would restore habitat within 70 acres (including the property) of the Huichica Creek floodplain.

Napa RCD acquired the property in 1991 for purposes of agriculture and agricultural demonstration projects, in particular to establish a demonstration vineyard that would show how a vineyard could be operated in a manner consistent with natural resource protection (Exhibit 2). At that time, Napa County was experiencing significant conversion of natural lands to vineyards such that a demonstration vineyard was a high priority. As required by the Conservancy grant, Napa RCD recorded the OTD in favor of the Coastal Conservancy to protect the property for agriculture and agricultural demonstration projects in perpetuity (Exhibit 3). The 21-acre land acquisition occurred concurrently with acquisition of the remaining 65 acres of Cabral Ranch by the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB). The WCB-funded parcel was added to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife’s Napa-Sonoma Marshes Wildlife Area.

Napa RCD used the property as a demonstration vineyard for approximately 25 years and Napa RCD believes it was largely successful in demonstrating the viability of conservation agriculture in Napa County. Riparian vegetation was restored and preserved along the channel of Huichica Creek and an adjoining vineyard was established using viticultural methods that are both environmentally sensitive and economically viable. However, over the past few years, Napa RCD has observed that flooding of the vineyard and salt intrusion in the property’s groundwater well has made farming infeasible. In 2022, Napa RCD removed approximately 9.6 acres of unproductive vineyard and associated infrastructure, formally ending its vineyard operations on the property. Today, the only remaining agricultural use is about 1 acre of cider apple trees. Through a Board-mediated community visioning process, Napa RCD and the community

concluded that floodplain habitat restoration is a more viable, natural resource protective use of the property. Over the next two years, Napa RCD aims to develop a comprehensive plan, and obtain the necessary permits, for future habitat restoration, public access, and community engagement activities on the 70 acres of the Huichica Creek floodplain that include the property.

Although the purpose of the Conservancy grant was to protect agriculture and demonstrate how agriculture could be compatible with protection of natural resources, given that the property served that purpose for 25 years, and that agricultural uses are no longer feasible, staff recommends that the property be designated for habitat restoration and enhancement, natural resource protection, and potential public access. These uses are consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation, as described below. These uses have similarities to the original acquisition purposes of the property in that both agriculture and resource protection preserve the property as open space. Also, restoration and protection of natural resources is similar to the currently designated use for agricultural demonstration projects in that both entail a use that is protective of natural resources. The public access use will be optional in that it will be allowed but not required and whether it occurs will depend on the results of the planning process for the larger 70-acre area. The public access use is similar to the use for agricultural demonstration projects, which involved workshops and other on-site events to provide education regarding how agriculture can be compatible with resource protection.

No Conservancy funding is required to amend the OTD to allow the property to be designated for these additional uses. Napa RCD is seeking a grant from the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority for planning the comprehensive floodplain restoration project that would include the property.

**Site Description:** The project site is located in Napa County, just north of the San Pablo Bay shoreline, in a bayland-upland transition zone. Huichica Creek crosses the property and runs south before emptying into the sloughs of San Pablo Bay. The site is currently in transition to native habitat and is managed through periodic mowing to reduce wildfire risk for neighboring properties and suppress invasive species. The original Cabral Ranch that was acquired by Napa RCD and WCB contains approximately 86 acres. The 21-acre Napa RCD portion of the Cabral Ranch is located in the northern portion of the original Cabral Ranch. The WCB acquired portion is located immediately south of the property.

**Grantee Qualifications:** Napa RCD was established in 1945 as a special district under Division 9 of the California Public Resources Code and has the authority to conduct conservation work in Napa County. Napa RCD has promoted natural resource conservation through community involvement, education, technical expertise, and scientific research. As a non-regulatory public agency, it operates voluntary programs and is trusted by local, state, and federal agencies, environmental organizations, the agricultural sector, and the community.

#### **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.**

Even though the Conservancy funded acquisition of the property to protect agriculture, protecting the property for habitat restoration, resource protection and public access remains a good investment of state resources because it will enable planning for and future implementation of habitat restoration and natural resources protection while also meeting goals for agricultural land preservation pursuant to Chapter 4 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code by enhancing the climate resilience of nearby farms, serving as a research and demonstration site for landowners interested in integrating native habitat and process-based restoration practices into working lands, and offering opportunities for diversified agricultural uses in a region otherwise dominated by wine grapes. Climate resilience benefits would primarily come from reducing the impacts of flooding and sea level rise on adjacent farmland and improving the potential for groundwater recharge in an area that relies almost entirely on groundwater for agricultural irrigation. While the property's research and demonstration value to farm operators will be maintained, its focus will evolve from topics such as irrigation efficiency and soil health to areas including habitat enhancement, flood mitigation, and groundwater recharge. In the future, Napa RCD may also explore agricultural uses aligned with ecological and cultural values, such as growing culturally significant native plants in partnership with Tribes. Public access possibilities for the property include interpretive signs, trails, parking, outdoor bathrooms, and an outdoor classroom, making natural areas more accessible for recreational and educational programs. Whether the property is used for public access will be determined in the planning process. Regardless of whether public access improvements are constructed, Napa RCD anticipates engaging the community on the property through site tours, workshops, and the Wild Napa Youth environmental education program, which will enable Napa RCD to use the property to foster a sense of stewardship and responsibility for local open spaces.

Over the past 200 years, Huichica Creek has been channelized and incised, and the stream’s floodplain and salt marsh interface have been converted to vineyards, farm buildings, infrastructure, residences, and a railroad. These alterations have degraded habitat quality, increased flooding risk, and reduced groundwater recharge. Restoring the project site will significantly benefit wildlife habitat and water quality while enhancing resiliency to sea level rise and flooding. Lastly, integrated into the proposed future restoration project are opportunities for employment, workforce development, tribal co-management, and environmental career skills building. While the proposed project focuses on restoration planning and permitting, Napa RCD has long used its Huichica Creek property for education and workforce development, viewing this as a key ongoing goal.

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

The proposed OTD amendment will allow habitat uses on the property that are more resilient than agricultural uses given the property's unique bayside setting and infeasibility of continuing traditional agricultural uses in the future as sea levels rise and flood risks increase due to climate change.

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

The local community has been deeply engaged with the property since its purchase in 1990. Local farmers financed establishment of a research and demonstration vineyard, and over the years Napa RCD has invested in numerous research, demonstration, and education programs in partnership with farmers, schools, resource agencies, university researchers, and others. In 2021, Napa RCD sought community input on the future uses of the property through interviews and surveys. This process culminated in the publication of a Request for Ideas to solicit proposals for new programming and partnerships. The favored direction was the removal of vineyards, restoration of the property into native habitat, and education and workforce development programming focused on native ecology and habitat restoration practices. Since then, Napa RCD has received strong support for the proposed project from elected officials and public agency staff, conservation nonprofits, tribal organizations, agricultural industry groups and local landowners.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The Conservancy authorized a grant for acquisition of the property pursuant to Chapter 4 of Division 21, which authorizes grants to acquire land to prevent the loss of agricultural land in the coastal zone. (Pub. Res. Code Section 31156.) The goal of protecting agriculture in the coastal zone was achieved for approximately 25 years. Allowing the property to be used for habitat restoration and natural resource protection is also consistent with Division 21, particularly Chapter 4.5, which authorizes grants that help achieve the goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, which include the goals of protecting, restoring and enhancing natural habitats in the San Francisco Bay Area and promoting projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes. (Pub. Res. Code Sections 31162(b) & (d).) Using the property for agriculture is no longer feasible therefore it is appropriate to allow the property to be used for related alternative uses that are consistent with goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.

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

Consistent with **Goal 3.1 Conserve Land**, the proposed OTD amendment would allow the continued protection of resource lands and support inland migration of habitat with sea level rise.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

Amendment of the OTD to allow habitat restoration and enhancement, protection of natural resources, and potential public access does not require review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because such review would be premature at this time. CEQA review will occur when Napa RCD prepares a plan for the property. Further, the amendment can be considered statutorily exempt from CEQA pursuant to Pub. Res. Code Section 21080.28 to the extent the OTD amendment in effect transfers an interest in the property. Section 21080.28 exempts transfers of interest in land for purposes of restoration of natural conditions and preservation of land for park purposes, and confirms that such transfers are exempt even if physical changes in the land are a reasonably foreseeable consequence of the transfer provided that environmental review occurs before any physical changes to the property. Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.