

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 18, 2025

**ALBANY-EL CERRITO WILDFIRE RESILIENCE DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

Project No 25-022-01  
Project Manager: Lilly Allen

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$850,000 to the City of Albany to carry out the Albany–El Cerrito Wildfire Resilience Demonstration Project in Albany and El Cerrito (Alameda and Contra Costa Counties), consisting of: (1) implementing fire fuel vegetation management and ecological restoration; (2) investing in continuing partnerships for workforce development; and (3) demonstrating for public benefit useful practices for milling, native species planting, and fire hazard management; and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

**LOCATION:** Alameda and Contra Costa Counties

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Project Letters](#)
- Exhibit 3: [September 22, 2022 Staff Report](#)
- Exhibit 4: [City of Albany CEQA Notice of Exemption](#)
- Exhibit 5: [City of El Cerrito Hillside Natural Area Fire Resilience and Forest Conservation Management Plan](#)

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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 eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars (\$850,000) to the City of Albany (“the grantee”) to carry out the Albany–El Cerrito Wildfire Resilience Demonstration Project in Albany and El Cerrito, consisting of: (1) implementing fire fuel vegetation management and ecological restoration; (2) investing in continuing partnerships for workforce development; (3) and demonstrating for

public benefit useful practices for milling, native species planting, and fire hazard management (“the project”).

1. 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:
  - a. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
  - b. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
  - c. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy.
  - d. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
  - e. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.
2. If the grantee uses the grant funds to purchase equipment costing \$5,000 or more, the grantee shall use such equipment for wildfire-related purposes for the duration of the useful life of the equipment.

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. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Hillside Natural Area Fire Resilience and Forest Conservation Management Plan Initial Study / Mitigated Negative Declaration Report (MND) adopted by the City of El Cerrito on June 3, 2025 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”). The Conservancy finds that the Hillside Natural Area Fire Resilience and Forest Conservation Management Plan 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 a \$850,000 grant to the City of Albany to carry out the Albany–El Cerrito Wildfire Resilience Demonstration Project in Albany and El Cerrito (“the project”), consisting of: (1) implementing fire fuel vegetation management and ecological

restoration; (2) investing in continuing partnerships for workforce development; (3) and demonstrating for public benefit useful practices for milling, native species planting, and fire hazard management (Exhibit 1).

The City of Albany will serve as project manager, including coordination with the City of El Cerrito to develop work plans, engage contractors, and disburse funds to the City of El Cerrito as needed.

- In the City of Albany, the project includes the removal of 25–50 dead or dying eucalyptus trees, stump treatment, and establishment of a pilot monarch habitat restoration planting zone in accordance with the Albany Hill Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan.
- In the City of El Cerrito, the project includes the removal of up to 190 unhealthy trees—including eucalyptus and invasive pine—from Quarry Hill, followed by invasive shrub removal and a native plant restoration program.

The Cities of Albany and El Cerrito (“the Cities”) will coordinate the timing of removals, erosion control, and planting to optimize site recovery and reduce environmental impacts. The Cities will employ contractors to perform the work as necessary, including Urban Tilth, a Richmond-based nonprofit focused on training and employing local youth while reconnecting them with the land. The City of Albany will continue the community partnership with Urban Tilth for vegetation management.

A key component of the project is to leverage necessary forest management activities to educate the community, and to provide materials for interested residents to replicate reuse opportunities where appropriate. The Cities will partner on a series of community workshops. First, in partnership with Bay Area Redwood, a local wood products company, the Cities will host milling demonstrations on-site. These workshops will consist of demonstrating the milling process for eucalyptus, educating attendees about sources and uses of milled wood and its ecological benefits, and showcasing projects in place that have previously utilized reclaimed wood for public amenities (i.e. retaining walls and trail steps). Wood that is of sufficient quality will be made available to residents at no cost for reuse in personal projects or to local public schools for garden beds. Eucalyptus is a fast growing, invasive species where appropriate uses have been difficult to find. This community milling project will educate the public on uses of eucalyptus, by finding other uses for the wood, such as building planter boxes, that would capture the carbon while helping create a market for eucalyptus wood.

Second, the Cities will each host 1-2 community workdays, inviting the public to join work parties and learn about native plant communities, the hazards of eucalyptus trees, and how to consider natural areas as holistic ecosystems. These efforts will increase community investment, build relationships between city staff and residents, and raise awareness about sustainable forestry and fire resilience practices. One of the barriers to addressing wildfire risk in eucalyptus forests has been the community’s positive sentiment towards the trees.

Educating the communities on the wildfire risks and ecological harm eucalyptus trees cause will create a better social environment for further action.

Lastly, the project includes several key activities which will build local capacity for ongoing ecological stewardship, for current and future benefit. City' staff plan to provide training for volunteers, who will learn invasive plant management and habitat management techniques for potential application in the project sites.

The project includes investment for the City of Albany to: (1) fund its Habitat Restoration Internship Program, and (2) maintain the partnership with Urban Tilth's Watershed Restoration Crew. These programs provide training, certifications (e.g., chainsaw safety), and paid work opportunities for local youth and community members, enhancing local capacity for long-term vegetation management and ecological stewardship.

This project builds on two previous grants to each of the Cities (Exhibit 3).

- The previous grant to the City of Albany implemented fuel reduction activities on City owned property and developed a plan for removal of dead and dying trees on Albany Hill. This project implements part of that plan, builds on developed relationships and demonstrates uses for milled for eucalyptus.
- The previous grant to the City of El Cerrito was to develop a comprehensive fire hazard reduction and vegetation management plan, which the City Council adopted June 3, 2025. This project implements part of that plan and demonstrates uses for milled eucalyptus.

This project will result in:

- 8.5 acres of wildfire-prone landscape improved;
- 25–50 eucalyptus trees removed in Albany;
- Up to 190 eucalyptus trees removed in El Cerrito;
- 24 field trial trees for Western Monarchs planted on Albany Hill;
- 2 public milling workshops (1 per city);
- 2+ community workdays (at least 1 per city);
- 4 Habitat Restoration Interns supported over 2 years;
- 6+ Urban Tilth crew members chainsaw certified;
- 4+ community organizations engaged; and
- 100+ community members engaged through events and volunteer activities.

**Site Description:** The project takes place across two ecologically and topographically significant sites in the East Bay Hills: 2-5 acres on Albany Hill and 2-5 acres within the El Cerrito Hillside Natural Area (specifically Quarry Hill). Both sites are urban-adjacent natural areas with steep terrain, recreational trails, and pervasive eucalyptus groves, which are interspersed with native shrubs and oak trees. Albany Hill is also a known overwintering site for Western Monarch

butterflies and holds cultural significance for the Lisjan Ohlone, with several grinding stone sites on the hill.

Current conditions at both sites include dense stands of non-native Blue Gum Eucalyptus trees, invasive understory plants such as broom and ivy, and significant wildfire risks exacerbated by drought and climate change. Public access exists via trails, with adjacent residential areas increasing the urgency for vegetation management. Both Quarry Hill and Albany Hill are heavily used by hikers and neighbors and include trails maintained by City staff and volunteers. Both sites are owned and managed by the city in which they are located.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The Cities of Albany and El Cerrito each have extensive experience administering grant funds and implementing complex ecological restoration, wildfire resilience, and community engagement projects. The City of Albany successfully managed a Conservancy grant for the Albany Hill Wildfire Resilience Project, including oversight of consultants and contractors, ongoing activities with habitat restoration partners, and hosting community engagement activities. The City of El Cerrito has similarly implemented wildfire planning work under a Conservancy Grant. The Cities maintain robust administrative infrastructure and interdepartmental collaboration, and have effectively partnered with local organizations, including Urban Tilth and Bay Area Redwood, to manage workforce development, vegetation removal, and public education initiatives.

#### **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 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 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.**

Between 2022 and 2024, the City of Albany worked closely with the Confederated Villages of Lisjan and the Sogorea Te' Land Trust ("the Tribes") throughout the development of the Albany Hill Forest Management and Habitat Restoration Plan. Tribal representative Deja Gould, an Ohlone Culture and Language Keeper, met with city staff multiple times to identify culturally significant areas, discuss seed collection, prioritize native plant species, and guide Plan development. The Tribes participated in community meetings and shared a private archaeological report to inform planning while protecting sacred sites.

Though the Plan Project Area did not contain documented archaeological sites, nearby areas on the northeast and west sides of Albany Hill are of known cultural importance. The City of Albany integrated tribal feedback into the plan, including restoration priorities and species selection. Additional consultation and partnership opportunities are built into the proposed work program to continue this relationship and ensure tribal values are honored throughout project implementation. The City of El Cerrito staff also met with the tribal representatives at the onset of the Plan development and will continue engaging with them as the City of Albany implements projects.

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

The project promotes long-term sustainability by addressing fuel load reduction in fire-prone eucalyptus groves while simultaneously restoring climate-adapted native habitats. By implementing strategic vegetation removal and native planting, the project supports ecological resilience, improves habitat connectivity, and enhances the landscape's ability to withstand and recover from climate impacts.

A particularly sustainable and innovative element of the project is the on-site milling and reuse of eucalyptus logs. Rather than transporting all felled trees to landfill or biomass facilities, some of the wood will be milled locally and as quality permits, be repurposed for long-term community benefit. This model not only reduces waste and emissions but creates a visible, tangible legacy that fosters public support and enhances urban infrastructure in meaningful ways.

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

The project delivers multiple, interlinked benefits across ecological, social, and economic domains. Key benefits include:

- **Wildfire risk reduction** through removal of 25–50 eucalyptus trees in Albany and up to 190 in El Cerrito.
- **Habitat restoration**, including Western Monarch butterfly overwintering zones and native plant communities.
- **Community education** through public milling workshops and site-based educational events.
- **Workforce development** via tools, training, and support for local interns and restoration crews.
- **Reuse of natural materials**, promoting sustainability through on-site milling of eucalyptus for future use such as trail treads and railings, rustic log benches, habitat features, erosion control, etc.

These outcomes align with regional resilience goals, support environmental justice through community capacity-building, and contribute lasting improvements to urban open spaces.

## PROJECT FINANCING

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$850,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$850,000</b>

The anticipated source of funding for the proposed project is a block grant to the 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 RFFCP seeks to increase regional capacity to prioritize, develop, and implement projects that improve forest health and fire resiliency (PRC 4208.1). The Conservancy’s block grant covers projects from Marin County south to Ventura County. The project is consistent with the funding source because the project will: 1) reduce wildfire risk and improve health and resiliency of the forests on Albany Hill and Quarry Hills, 2) demonstrate restoration techniques, including removal of invasive vegetation such as eucalyptus, and 3) provide technical assistance to local agencies and organizations for wood-utilization and workforce development.

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 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 project will restore the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, and 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 1.4, Incorporate Workforce Development in Our Projects**, the project increases workforce development by providing tools, training, and support for local interns and restoration crews.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the project restores Western Monarch overwintering habitat and increases native plant communities.

Consistent with **Goal 4.2 Wildfire Resilience Projects**, the project reduces wildfire risk by removing 165-240 invasive blue gum eucalyptus tree.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

**El Cerrito – Mitigated Negative Declaration.**

The City of El Cerrito has determined that although the project could have potential environmental impacts, there will not be a significant effect because of agreed upon mitigation measures (MMs). The portion of the project that will take place on properties owned by the City of El Cerrito is within the scope of the "Hillside Natural Area (HNA) Fire Resilience and Forest Conservation Management Plan" (Hillside Management Plan). The Hillside Management Plan proposed to reduce fire hazards and manage vegetation within the HNA through: 1) identification and protection of critical resource areas, 2) guidance for fire fuel reduction, native forest conservation, and maintenance activities, and 3) evaluation of fire roads and trail network access. The City of El Cerrito adopted the Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND) for the Hillside Management Plan on June 3, 2025. The Hillside Management Plan and MND are attached as Exhibit 5.



The MND assessed the Hillside Management Plan's potential environmental impacts in the areas discussed below, and determined that implementation of MMs will reduce potentially significant environmental effects to less than significant levels. Conservancy staff has independently reviewed the MND, and concurs that there is no substantial evidence that implementation of the Hillside Management Plan will have a significant effect on the environment. Conservancy staff therefore recommends that the Conservancy find that the Hillside Management Plan, as mitigated, avoids, reduces or mitigates the possible significant environmental effects to a level of less-than-significant and that there is no substantial evidence that implementation of the Hillside Management Plan will have a significant effect on the environment as that term is defined by 14 CCR Section 15382.

#### Biological Resources

Impact BIO-1: Substantially Affect Special-Status Plant Species Either Directly or Through Habitat Modifications. Special-status plant species could be directly or indirectly impacted during the project's maintenance activities. MM Bio-1 reduces potential impacts to special-status plant species to less than significant by requiring that protocol-level plant surveys be conducted where suitable habitat is present and adequate buffer areas be established if special-status plant species are identified.

Impact Bio-2: Substantially Affect Special-Status Wildlife Species Either Directly or Through Habitat Modifications. Ongoing maintenance activities associated with the project could directly and indirectly impact special-status wildlife species. To protect the monarch butterfly within the project area, MM Bio-2a requires a qualified biologist to conduct milkweed field surveys prior to fuel treatment activities. MM Bio-2b further protects the monarch butterfly by restricting vegetation control practices and requiring project activities to be conducted outside of sensitive periods (during breeding season, March 15-November 30). Impacts are less than significant with implementation of MMs Bio-2a and Bio2b. MM Bio-3 requires pre-activity surveys prior to ground disturbing activities to identify Crotch's and Western Bumble Bees, and if observed, development of a protection plan to reduce impacts on bumble bees to less than significant. MM Bio-4a requires a qualified biologist to conduct nesting bird surveys prior to fuel reduction activities. In the event that active nests are identified, a biologist must establish a reduction free buffer around each nest with clear markers. Potential impacts to nesting birds will be less than significant with MMs Bio-4a and Bio4b incorporated. MM Bio-5a reduces potential impacts to bat species during fuel reduction activities by requiring pre-activity tree habitat assessment to be conducted by a biologist. Bio-5b requires a two-step tree removal process to cause bats to emerge and not return to the tree. Potential impacts to bats are less than significant with implementation of MM Bio-5a and MM Bio-5b. MM Bio-6 requires a biologist to conduct a pre-activity survey for San Francisco dusky-footed woodrat nests. In the event that a woodrat nest is identified, MM Bio-6 requires a plan to minimize potential impacts. With implementation of MM Bio-6, the potential impacts to the woodrat will be less than significant.

Impact Bio-7: Substantially Affect Riparian Habitat or Other Sensitive Natural Community Through Direct Loss or Degradation That Leads to Loss of Habitat Function. MM Bio-7a requires riparian delineation to minimize disturbance to riparian habitat adjacent to the fuel reduction

area. MM Bio-7b requires efforts to minimize/avoid impacts to purple needlegrass and other sensitive or native grasslands. Impacts on riparian habitat and sensitive communities are less than significant with MMs.

Impact Bio-8: Substantially Affect State or Federally Protected Wetlands. MM Bio-8 requires that onsite streams/drainages (and seasonal wetlands/seeps) be avoided during fuel reduction activities, when possible. Additionally, MM Bio-8 requires permits and mitigation prior to the placement of any fill within riparian features.

#### Archaeological, Historical, and Tribal Cultural Resources

Impact CUL-1: Cause a Substantial Adverse Change in the Significance of Unique Archaeological Resources or Subsurface Historical Resources. Intensive field surveys were performed as part of the Cultural Resources Assessment suggested a low level of sensitivity for containing traces of early Native American occupation. Additionally, tribal contacts did not express concerns about the project site. Nevertheless, MM CUL-1 requires work stoppage in the event of an unanticipated archaeological discovery. If any previously unidentified discovery is found to be significant, the City of El Cerrito will fund and implement appropriate mitigation measures. Impacts are less significant with MMs.

#### Geology and Soils

Impact GEO-1. Result in On- or Off-Site Landslide, Lateral Spreading, Subsidence, Liquefaction, or Collapse. MM GEO-1 requires geotechnical analysis prior to implementation of any project activities. The geotechnical analysis would include recommendations to reduce potential slope instability, reducing potential impacts related to unstable slopes to less than significant.

Impact GEO-2. Destroy a Unique Paleontological Resource or Site or Unique Geologic Feature. In the event that paleontological resources are accidentally discovered during the project, MM GEO-2 requires work stoppage within 25 feet, assessment by a paleontologist, and consultation with agencies as appropriate. If the paleontological resources are found to be significant, implementation measure shall ensure that the project does not cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of the paleontological resource. Implementation of MM GEO-2 would reduce the potential impact to less than significant.

#### Hydrology and Water Quality

Impact HYD-1: Violate Any Water Quality Standards or Waste Discharge Requirements or Otherwise Substantially Degrade Surface or Groundwater Quality. Vegetation removal activities during the project expose soils and increase the potential for soil erosion and sedimentation compared to existing conditions. As discussed above, MM BIO-7a requires riparian areas to be separated and protected from the work area through erosion controls, such as silt fencing and amphibian/reptile-friendly fiber rolls. Additionally, herbicide usage and Erosion control Best Management Practices (as identified by the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board) would be implemented to control erosion during and after vegetation removal. Impacts are less than significant with MMs.

**Albany – Categorical Exemption.** The portion of the project that will take place on properties owned by the City of Albany is categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15304 (Minor Alterations to Land) and 14 CCR Section 15301 (Existing Facilities). On March 3, 2025, the Albany City Council adopted the Albany Hill Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan (Hill Forest Management Plan), which determined that the project is exempt, and filed a notice of exemption (Exhibit 4).

**14 CCR Section 15304 (Minor Alterations to Land).** This exemption applies to projects that involve minor alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation without the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. Projects that qualify for this exemption include management of existing native vegetation through the removal of dead, dying, and immature trees, thinning, reduction of ladder fuels, grazing, and other similar activities. Arborist reports from July 2021 and March 2022 (Exhibit 4) show that most of the Eucalyptus trees in the project area are experiencing internal decay, pathogen attack, and very low soil moisture. Additionally, many trees in the project area are hazardous due to erosion and landslides that have resulted in exposed root balls and structural instability (Exhibit 4). These trees are at risk of becoming uprooted and falling, likely onto public streets, utility lines, or residences. The project's tree removal activities will be limited to those trees that are dead or in poor health, hazardous, and/or unstable. Further, the project's tree removal activities will be environmentally protective (e.g., will exclude the Critical Monarch Zone), and will not change the nature of the land or alter the basic character of the vegetation and habitat at the project sites.

**14 CCR Section 15301 (Existing Facilities).** This section exempts projects that consist of operation, repair, maintenance, or minor alterations of existing structures, facilities, or topographical features, involving negligible expansion of existing or former use of a site. Such projects include, but are not limited to, management of existing landscaping, native growth, and roads. The project will not expand Albany Hill, which is a public open-space facility. Nor will the project construct new structures, significantly disturb the ground, or make changes to city right-of-way, parking, or existing public trails. Thus, any expansion of public use is expected to be negligible. Additionally, the project's activities, including: workforce development, removal of hazardous and unhealthy trees, and demonstration activities are considered routine best practices for public agencies and are expected to be environmentally protective consistent with long term stewardship of open space.

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