

## COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 19, 2026

### REGIONAL FOREST AND FIRE CAPACITY PROGRAM AUGMENTATION

Project No. 19-010-02

Project Manager: Rachel Couch

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,075,014 of grant funds from the California Department of Conservation’s Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program to augment the total grant amount authorized on November 20, 2025 for grants to five public agencies to improve forest health and wildfire resiliency, facilitate greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and increase carbon sequestration in forests in Alameda, Santa Clara, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara Counties. These additional funds will be granted to the Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council and the Native Coast Action Network to carry out planning, wildfire steward training, and workforce development projects in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties.

**LOCATION:** Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties.

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#### EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [November 20, 2025 Staff Recommendation](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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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: 1) the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one million seventy-five thousand and fourteen dollars (\$1,075,014) of grant funds from the California Department of Conservation’s Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program to augment the total grant amount authorized by the Conservancy on November 20, 2025 for grants to five public agencies to improve forest health and wildfire resiliency, facilitate greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and increase carbon sequestration in forests in Alameda, Santa Clara, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara Counties; and 2) disbursement of the additional funds to two nonprofit organizations, the Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council and the Native

Coast Action Network, to carry out planning, wildfire steward training, and workforce development projects in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties; for a total authorized amount of two million seven hundred forty thousand and fourteen dollars (\$2,740,014) for grants to five public agencies and two nonprofit organizations. The two new projects are as follows:

1. **Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council:** Nine hundred thirty-five thousand two hundred dollars (\$935,200) to prepare plans and environmental review documents and to conduct studies and surveys to advance wildfire resilience in Santa Barbara County.
2. **Native Coast Action Network:** One hundred thirty-nine thousand eight hundred fourteen dollars (\$139,814) for wildfire steward training, capacity building, and workforce development for California Native American tribal individuals in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties.

The Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council and the Native Coast Action Network are each a “grantee.” Prior to commencement of each project, the grantee for the specific project 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 to the extent applicable, acknowledgement of California Department of Conservation’s funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Climate Ready Program.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Santa Barbara County Fires Safe Council and the Native Coast Action Network are nonprofit organizations organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of \$1,075,014 of grant funds from the California Department of Conservation's Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFC Program) to augment the authorization by the Conservancy on November 20, 2025 for grants to five public agencies to carry out planning and implementation projects to improve forest health and wildfire resiliency, facilitate greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and increase carbon sequestration in forests in Alameda, Santa Clara, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara Counties. This augment will be granted to the Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council and the Native Coast Action Network to carry out planning, wildfire steward training, and workforce development projects in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. These additional projects will improve forest health, reduce fire threat, facilitate greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and increase carbon sequestration in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. The two additional proposed projects are described in detail below.

**SANTA BARBARA COUNTY FIRE SAFE COUNCIL (SBCFSC) \$935,200**

**Santa Barbara Wildfire Resilience Environmental Review Project (SBCFSC project) 25-055-01**

The SBCFSC project has 4 components and will advance planning, including environmental compliance:

1. Los Padres Goldspotted Oak Borer Environmental Compliance

California's oak woodlands are now at risk of widespread mortality from the northern spread of the Goldspotted Oak Borer (GSOB). The GSOB kills and transforms fire resilient oak trees into dangerous dead fuel loads. Preventative action is necessary to avoid GSOB from causing a large mortality of oak woodlands in Santa Barbara County. However, before any preventative measures can be taken, environmental review must be complete.

This SBCFSC project component will develop a GSOB management plan for priority oak woodland habitats within the Los Padres National Forest in Santa Barbara County and conduct technical studies (biological and cultural surveys), focusing on accessible oak woodland areas within the forest boundary, particularly those showing signs of oak decline, bark damage, or canopy dieback. The GSOB management plan and technical studies will serve as the basis upon which National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) environmental review will be conducted through the first round of public comment pursuant to that process. This area represents a high-priority landscape for early detection and management of GSOB infestations, given the ecological, recreational, and cultural importance of oak woodlands across Santa Barbara County and their critical role in supporting both biodiversity and wildfire resilience.

2. Los Padres Highway Ignition Reduction Environmental Compliance

Transportation corridors are a leading source of human-caused wildfire ignitions, posing a direct threat to nearby communities. In Santa Barbara County, there are remote communities with hundreds of residents located in the national forest adjacent to Highway 154, Highway 166, and Highway 101. These highways are critical evacuation and response routes that have

historically experienced multiple roadside ignitions caused by vehicles, equipment, and powerline activity. The narrow shoulders, steep gradients, and limited access for firefighting resources can make suppression difficult once a fire is established. Conducting fuels reduction treatments, including targeted thinning, removal of ladder fuels, and maintenance of defensible space along the roadways will reduce ignition likelihood and improve access to a wildfire front for firefighters.

This SBCFSC project component will provide NEPA and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) environmental review documents for a suite of roadside fuel reduction treatments along segments of Highway 154, Highway 166, and Highway 101 through the first round of public comment. Scoping, technical analysis, and agency coordination necessary to identify potential environmental effects and develop mitigation measures will be performed by the Los Padres National Forest in coordination with state agencies (primarily, Department of Transportation and Department of Parks and Recreation). Multiple treatment options will be analyzed.

### 3. Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREX) Environmental Compliance

This SBCFSC project component will support the planning phase of a regional Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREX) on the Sedgewick Reserve, part of the University of California Natural Reserve System. TREX brings together fire professionals, land managers, and community partners to conduct controlled burns that reduce wildfire risk, restore ecosystems, and build local prescribed fire capacity. This SBCFSC project component will prepare key planning documents: a Smoke Management Plan, CEQA compliance studies (e.g., biological assessments and cultural resource surveys), and a site-specific Burn Plan.

While implementation costs are often absorbed by partner agencies, there is a critical gap in funding for the advance planning work required to make TREX events possible. Much of the work described above is currently completed by agency partners or volunteer professionals without compensation. This reliance on unpaid support limits TREX projects to the time and resources that external partners can offer. This SBCFSC project component will close this gap by allowing TREX to hire qualified private-sector specialists, distribute planning responsibilities more equitably, and increase its capacity to organize and implement projects more efficiently and effectively. The controlled burns conducted through TREX not only provide training and workforce development opportunities for prescribed fire practices, but also provide valuable opportunities for wildfire professionals, academics, and researchers to collect field data, while reducing regional wildfire risk.

### 4. Santa Barbara Vegetation Buffer Planning

This SBCFSC project component will develop plans and potential designs for two multi-benefit community fuel buffers in Santa Barbara located at San Marcos Foothills Preserve and Elings Park, both in very high and high fire hazard severity zones. In the plans and designs, the fuel buffers will be strategically located within county and privately owned parklands adjacent to wildlands to reduce hazardous fuels next to neighborhoods, creating defensible zones that provide a protective barrier between homes and surrounding wildland areas. Each fuel buffer design will integrate wildfire risk reduction and ecological restoration. Planning and design

parameters include prioritizing removal of non-native and invasive vegetation that contributes to high fire intensity and planting of fire-resistant, drought-tolerant native plant communities to maintain effective fuel breaks over the long term. Restoration planning will prioritize the re-establishment of coast live oak habitat, a fire-resilient native species that supports both wildfire mitigation and ecological integrity. This SBCFSC project component will result in plans for shovel-ready, ecologically grounded fuel buffer projects that will enhance community protection, improve habitat quality, and strengthen landscape-scale wildfire resilience across the south County.

**Site Description:** All four components will take place across Santa Barbara County on both public and private lands.

1. The first component, concerning GSOB, will be conducted throughout oak woodland habitats within the Los Padres National Forest in Santa Barbara County. The forest spans a wide range of elevations and microclimates, from coastal foothills to interior mountain slopes, encompassing diverse oak communities that occur primarily along canyons, riparian corridors, and foothill slopes. These areas are in direct and frequent contact with human activity and include campgrounds, recreation residences, administrative sites, and other recreation areas where oaks provide significant aesthetic and ecological value.

2. The second component, concerning highway ignition reduction, will be located along segments of Highway 154, Highway 166, and the Gaviota Canyon section of Highway 101 in Santa Barbara County. Highway 154 traverses the steep, fire-prone slopes of the San Marcos Pass, connecting the Santa Ynez Valley to the South Coast, with terrain dominated by chaparral, oak woodland, and mixed shrub vegetation. Highway 166 passes through the northern San Rafael wilderness where roadside vegetation includes grasses, chaparral, and oak savannah, and slopes can be steep and densely vegetated. The Gaviota Canyon section of Highway 101 runs along a narrow canyon corridor with chaparral-covered hillsides, riparian areas, and scattered oak woodlands, providing a critical but high-risk evacuation and transportation route. Across all segments, the direct roadside is frequently dominated by invasive grasses and shrubs, forming light and highly ignitable fuels that contribute to rapid fire spread during dry and windy conditions.

3. The third component, concerning TREX, will occur on the 5,896-acre Sedgewick Preserve in the Santa Ynez Valley. The reserve is a University of California Natural Reserve System property managed by UC Santa Barbara, spanning two full watersheds on the southern slopes of the San Rafael Mountains in the Santa Ynez Valley. The reserve is composed of oak woodland and savannah, native and restored grasslands, chaparral and coastal scrub, riparian corridors, serpentine outcrops, and vernal pools.

4. The fourth component, concerning community fuel buffer plans, will be developed for the San Marcos Foothills Preserve and Elings Park. The San Marcos Foothills Preserve encompasses approximately 301 acres of open space in the foothills between Santa Barbara and Goleta, just east of Highway 154 and north of Foothill Road. The landscape includes rolling grasslands, coast live oak stands, and watersheds with oak savannah and woodland stands interspersed among native and non-native vegetation. The Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council currently operates a grazing program on the preserve. Elings Park is a privately owned 230-acre

community park. The park encompasses invasive grasslands, coastal sage scrub, and scattered oak woodlands. Portions of the park border residential neighborhoods and serve as a transition area between urban development and wildlands.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council has a strong track record of successfully acquiring and administering more than a dozen grants worth over a cumulative \$12 million in recent years, supporting projects that range from Community Wildfire Protection Plans, prescribed grazing, community chipping programs, Firewise USA development, defensible space assistance, and home hardening initiatives. Several of these efforts have required full CEQA reviews, giving the Fire Safe Council extensive experience navigating the process from initial project planning and environmental compliance through to on-the-ground implementation. With an established history of managing diverse funding sources, delivering measurable wildfire risk reduction outcomes, and as the designated County Coordinator for the County of Santa Barbara's wildfire coordination efforts, the Fire Safe Council is well-positioned to administer this grant and ensure successful project completion.

**Strategic Plan:** The Santa Barbara Wildfire Resilience Environmental Review project will further the following strategic objective:

- **Goal 4.2 Wildfire Resilience Projects:** The proposed SBCFSC project will facilitate four wildfire resilience components in Santa Barbara County.

**CEQA:** The SBCFSC project is statutorily exempt from review under the CEQA, pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations (CCR), Section 15262 (Feasibility and Planning Studies), which exempts feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions that have not been approved, adopted, or funded but does require consideration of environmental factors. The project is consistent with this Section because the project will prepare plans and potential designs, conduct studies, and consider environmental factors.

The SBCFSC project is also categorically exempt from review under CEQA, pursuant to Title 14 of the CCR, Section 15306 (Information Collection), which exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. The project is consistent with this Section because the project includes resource evaluation activities, including review of existing resource management plans to inform environmental review for the GSOB survey and management actions in SBCFSC's first component.

## **NATIVE COAST ACTION NETWORK (NCAN)**

**\$139,814**

### **Indigenous Fire Steward Capacity Enhancement Project (NCAN project) 25-056-01**

The NCAN project involves wildfire steward training, capacity building, and workforce development for California Native American tribal individuals in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties.

The NCAN project will conduct wildfire steward training, which will consist of professional skills development in wildland fire management, safety, and ecological stewardship (plant tending,

seed collection, invasive plant management, erosion control, and prescribed burn planning, preparation and implementation), cross-sector partnership and leadership building, use of wildland fire tools and equipment, and participant certification in Wildland Firefighting, First Aid/CPR, and chainsaw safety. In addition, the NCAN project will provide workforce development for California Native American tribal stewards in traditional land stewardship and both western and tribal culturally informed fire practices to strengthen resilience in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. Indigenous trainees will complete a blended curriculum of both western and traditional fire practices instruction. Field trainings will be co-led by Indigenous knowledge holders and fire management professionals. Collaborative partnerships with local land managers will secure access to training sites and potentially facilitate pathways to seasonal and long-term steward employment. The NCAN project will ensure participant readiness for jobs in ecological restoration and prescribed fire. Ongoing evaluation and community-led guidance will measure ecological outcomes, cultural integrity, and assist with potential job placement to inform program scaling and sustainability.

**Site Description:** Training sessions for participants will take place at locations throughout Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. Field trainings will take place on protected lands in Santa Barbara County, including Sedgewick Preserve, Jack and Laura Dangermond Preserve, and The White Buffalo Foundation's Jalama Canyon Ranch; and in Ventura County, including Taft Gardens and Nature Preserve and Quail Springs Center. NCAN develops partnerships with landowners to enable cultural burning.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** Since 2019, NCAN has demonstrated strong leadership in advancing Indigenous stewardship and climate resilience through effective grant management. With over \$400,000 in successfully managed funding, NCAN has built trusted collaborations that strengthen both fire capacity and coastal resiliency across California. Through support from the U.S. Geological Survey in partnership with the Southwest Climate Adaptation Science Center, NCAN has expanded Indigenous fire stewardship training and workforce development, ensuring that traditional knowledge informs modern climate strategies. In collaboration with San Diego State University and the University of California Climate Resiliency Program, NCAN has advanced coastal resilience initiatives that protect communities and ecosystems along the shoreline. Additional funding from the Climate Science Alliance has further bolstered efforts along the Central Coast, weaving together Indigenous knowledge, scientific research, and community partnerships. Together, these investments highlight NCAN's ability to steward resources responsibly, foster meaningful collaborations, and deliver measurable impact.

**Strategic Plan:** The NCAN project will further the following strategic objectives:

- **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities and Goal 1.4 Workforce Development:** The proposed NCAN project will provide training and workforce development for California Native Americans in the Central Coast.
- **Goal 4.2 Wildfire Resilience Projects:** The proposed NCAN project will build the workforce capacity for good fire projects within the Central Coast.

**CEQA:** The NCAN project is categorically exempt from review under CEQA, pursuant Title 14 of the CCR, Section 15304 (Minor Alterations to Land), which exempts minor public or private

alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation without removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry or agricultural purposes. The project is consistent with this Section because field training consists of plant tending, seed collection, invasive plant removal, erosion control, and prescribed burning that will only minimally alter vegetation, will not remove healthy mature scenic trees as these treatments are designed to result in improved ecosystem health and resilience.

The project is also categorically exempt from review under CEQA, pursuant Title 14 of the CCR, Section 15301 (Existing Facilities), which exempts operation, repair, maintenance, or minor alteration of existing public or private structures, facilities, mechanical equipment, or topographical features, involving negligible or no expansion of existing or former use. The project is consistent with this Section because field trainings, capacity building, and workforce development involve operation of existing facilities or topographical features involving negligible or no expansion of existing or former use.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:**

The previously authorized projects remain consistent, and the two proposed projects are consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, as described in the November 20, 2025 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2); however, the projects are updated in the following respects:

#### **3. Projects include 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.**

Both projects will include a serious effort to engage tribes. The Fire Safe Council project will conduct tailored outreach to local Chumash tribal bands early and continuously throughout each component. The NCAN project is focused on developing a tribal workforce around climate adaptation, specifically culturally relevant wildfire resilience practices.

#### **5. Projects deliver multiple benefits and significant positive impact**

The NCAN project will deliver multiple benefits and significant positive impact in that it will increase equity and environmental justice by benefitting California Native American tribal members through offering integrated cultural and western wildland fire management job training, job creation, workforce development, and training programs structured toward long-term careers and not limited to entry-level skill building.

#### **PROJECT FINANCING**

**Department of Conservation (via a grant to the Conservancy) \$1,075,014**

*(this authorization)*

Department of Conservation (via a grant to the Conservancy) \$1,655,000

*(previous authorization)*



Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority  
*(included in previous authorization)*

\$33,900

**Project Total**

**\$2,763,914**

The anticipated source of funding comes from a \$20 million block grant to the Coastal Conservancy from the California Department of Conservation under its Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP). 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 can fund projects from Marin County south to Ventura County. The proposed projects are consistent with the RFFCP block grant because it includes training, staff costs, planning, coordination, and data gathering activities to support future fuel management projects; and support for local entities in the environmental review and permitting process. Approximately \$155,000 of in-kind services is provided by the US Forest Service.

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 previously authorized projects remain consistent and the two proposed projects, regarding Chapter 3, are consistent the Conservancy's Enabling Legislation as described in the November 20, 2025 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

Conservancy staff reviewed the two proposed projects for compliance with CEQA (Public Resources Code Section 21000 - 21189.91) and its implementing regulations (California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Sections 15000-15387). Both proposed projects are exempt from review under CEQA. Please see the "Project Summary" section above, for more information on each proposed project and its compliance with CEQA.

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