

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 23, 2026

**NATURAL BRIDGES FARM ACQUISITION**

Project No. 26-003-01

Project Manager: Lexi Morrison

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,000,000 to the Homeless Garden Project to undertake the Natural Bridges Farm Acquisition, consisting of the acquisition of approximately 4 acres of agricultural land in Santa Cruz County to be permanently dedicated for protection and preservation of sustainable agricultural use and open space.

**LOCATION:** Natural Bridges area, City of Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)

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 a grant of an amount not to exceed one million dollars (\$1,000,000) to the Homeless Garden Project (the “grantee”) to undertake the Natural Bridges Farm Acquisition, consisting of the acquisition of approximately 4 acres of working agricultural land in Santa Cruz County (Assessor’s Parcel Number 003-061-09) to be permanently dedicated for protection and preservation of sustainable agriculture use and open space, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer):
  - a. All relevant acquisition documents for the acquisition including, without limitation, the appraisal, purchase and sale agreement, deed, escrow instructions, environmental or hazardous materials assessment, and title report;

## NATURAL BRIDGES FARM ACQUISITION

- b. A baseline conditions report; and
  - c. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
  3. The property acquired under this authorization shall be managed and operated for protection and preservation of sustainable agricultural use and open space. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
  4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property or in a nearby publicly-viewable area, the design and location of which must be approved by the Executive Officer.

### 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 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding preservation of agricultural land.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Homeless Garden Project is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

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## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$1,000,000 grant to the Homeless Garden Project (HGP) for the acquisition of approximately 4 acres of the privately-owned, 11-acre Natural Bridges Farm in the City of Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz County (the “project”) (see Exhibit 1 for project location). The acquisition will secure the long-term protection and preservation of working agricultural land and open space. The project will dedicate the property to public benefit purposes by establishing a permanent home for the organization’s transitional employment program serving individuals experiencing homelessness.

For more than 30 years, HGP has operated its certified organic farm and workforce development program on the 4-acre project site through a lease with the private owner. The organization provides paid job training, case management, and supportive services to program participants while producing organic crops for sale through community-supported agriculture subscriptions, farmers markets, and wholesale channels. In addition to serving program participants, the farm functions as a community hub, with approximately 1,500 volunteers contributing their time each year through weekly workdays, educational programs, and special events. This sustained volunteer involvement reflects broad community investment in the farm and strengthens its role as a shared public resource. Despite substantial investment in soil

## NATURAL BRIDGES FARM ACQUISITION

health, irrigation systems, farm infrastructure, and community programming, HGP has lacked permanent site control. This instability has constrained long-term planning, limited capital investment, and left a successful community-serving agricultural enterprise vulnerable to displacement. Agricultural land within the City of Santa Cruz is increasingly scarce, and the property lies within a highly valued coastal landscape adjacent to Antonelli Pond and other publicly accessible open space.

Acquisition of the 4-acre parcel will permanently protect the existing working farm while stabilizing a long-standing community institution. Securing fee title will allow HGP to consolidate its farm operations, value-added production, and administrative functions on one site, improving operational efficiency and long-term program sustainability. The property will remain in active organic production using regenerative practices that enhance soil health, support biodiversity, improve water retention, and contribute to the ecological integrity of the surrounding coastal environment. By preserving the land in community agricultural use, the project advances coastal resource protection, working lands preservation, climate resilience, and social equity objectives. Keeping the property in active organic agriculture prevents conversion to more intensive development, supports soil carbon sequestration through regenerative farming practices, and maintains permeable land that can better absorb stormwater and adapt to changing climate conditions.

The project is located in the westside Santa Cruz neighborhood and engages a broad community that includes local residents, volunteers, program participants, and visitors to nearby coastal open spaces. HGP has maintained ongoing communication with neighbors through public meetings, volunteer programs, community-supported agriculture memberships, and City Council discussions regarding its long-term plans. HGP reports broad local recognition and support developed over three decades of operation at the site.

The project will acquire approximately 4 acres at Natural Bridges Farm, which will be permanently dedicated to public benefit purposes, including the protection of working agricultural land and open space. The acquisition is the first step in securing a permanent home for HGP's farm and transitional employment program and allowing for thoughtful, long term site planning. Following acquisition, HGP intends to plan for development of essential program facilities, including a barn with space for processing farm products and a certified kitchen, an office with an attached farm stand, two greenhouses, and restroom facilities to support trainees, staff, and visitors. The project includes only acquisition of the approximately 4 acres Natural Bridges Farm and does not include any of the planning activities or potential future development.

**Site Description:** The project site consists of approximately 4 acres within the 11-acre Natural Bridges Farm property on Shaffer Road in the City of Santa Cruz. The land is currently privately owned, and HGP holds a purchase agreement to acquire the 4-acre portion it has farmed for nearly 30 years.

The site is in active organic agricultural production and includes row crops, orchards, irrigation infrastructure, greenhouses, a farmstand, and small agricultural support structures. It is bordered by open space, including Antonelli Pond to the east, University of California lands to

## NATURAL BRIDGES FARM ACQUISITION

the west, and residential neighborhoods to the north and south. HGP has legal site control through its purchase agreement and is completing due diligence to finalize the acquisition.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** HGP is well qualified to carry out the proposed acquisition and long-term stewardship of the site. HGP has successfully operated its organic farm and transitional employment program at Natural Bridges Farm for nearly 30 years and has demonstrated strong organizational and financial management capacity, including administration of state and private grant funds. HGP works with experienced staff, professional consultants, and legal advisors to complete due diligence, secure entitlements, and manage real estate transactions. The organization has a clear plan for long-term management of the property, continuing its established regenerative farming practices, maintaining infrastructure, and operating workforce development and community programs that have consistently served Santa Cruz residents for decades.

### **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.**

This project represents a good investment of state funds because it permanently protects working agricultural land within the coastal zone while supporting a long-standing workforce development program that serves some of Santa Cruz County's most vulnerable residents. The acquisition is feasible, builds on nearly 30 years of successful operation at the site, and relies on a clear purchase agreement and defined due diligence process. The budget reflects typical pre-acquisition and closing costs and leverages substantial non-state funding, including private philanthropy and other public funds already secured. By preserving productive farmland, supporting regenerative agricultural practices, and maintaining open space adjacent to protected lands, the project advances statewide climate resilience, land conservation, and community benefit goals, while serving as a model for integrating land stewardship with social impact.

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

This project will provide lasting benefits by permanently protecting four acres of working farmland and securing a stable home for a program that has operated successfully for nearly 30 years. By keeping the land in active organic production rather than allowing future development, the project maintains open space and supports long term agricultural use within the coastal zone. The farm's ongoing soil building and regenerative practices improve water retention, soil health, and biodiversity, helping the site withstand drought and other climate pressures. With permanent ownership, HGP will continue managing the land responsibly and delivering environmental and community benefits well into the future.

NATURAL BRIDGES FARM ACQUISITION

**4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

This project delivers environmental, social, and economic benefits in one integrated effort. It permanently protects urban agricultural land in the coastal zone while sustaining a workforce development program that serves individuals experiencing homelessness, including people in recovery and those rebuilding their lives after incarceration or foster care. The farm provides paid job training, hands-on skill building, and pathways to long-term employment, while also donating a significant portion of its organic produce to community members facing food insecurity. By maintaining green open space within the City of Santa Cruz, the project supports soil health, carbon sequestration, and climate resilience, and offers meaningful volunteer and educational opportunities that strengthen community connection and civic engagement.

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

HGP has been part of the westside Santa Cruz community for nearly three decades, and its plans to secure Natural Bridges Farm as a permanent home have grown out of ongoing conversations with neighbors, volunteers, program participants, and local leaders. HGP regularly engages the community through volunteer days, community events, CSA memberships, and public meetings, and has discussed its long-term plans in open City Council settings. Each year, approximately 1,500 volunteers contribute their time on the farm, reflecting strong and sustained community involvement. Trainees and staff, many of whom have lived experience with homelessness, play an active role in shaping program operations and site needs. Through these sustained relationships and transparent communication, the project reflects community priorities and has earned broad local support for preserving the farm and keeping it in service to the community.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$1,000,000</b>
California Department of Food and Agriculture	\$500,000
Quentin Hancock Fund	\$90,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$1,586,305</b>

The anticipated source of funding is an appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for “urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience” (Budget Act of 2023, Chapter 12, Statutes of 2023 (SB 101) as amended by Chapter 38, Statutes of 2023 (AB 102)). The coastal resilience funds are available for the purposes set forth in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the coastal resilience funds, including projects that protect coastal resources and build resilience for coastal communities. The proposed acquisition will permanently protect open space and agricultural resources within the coastal zone, support ongoing organic farming practices that enhance soil health and carbon sequestration, and strengthen community resilience by securing a long-standing workforce development program that provides local food production, job training, and social services to vulnerable populations.

## NATURAL BRIDGES FARM ACQUISITION

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 is authorized pursuant to Chapter 4 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31150–31156), which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the purpose of preserving agricultural lands within the coastal zone, including through acquisition of fee title and through development necessary to meet the purposes of preserving agriculture.

Consistent with Section 31156, the Conservancy proposes to award a grant to HGP, a nonprofit organization, to acquire fee title to approximately four acres of working agricultural land in the coastal zone in the City of Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz County. The acquisition will preserve the property in long-term agricultural use and prevent its conversion to non-agricultural uses. The land is designated for agricultural use in the City’s certified Local Coastal Program, consistent with the requirements of Chapter 4. HGP’s potential plans to construct a barn, office space, restrooms and agriculture-related facilities are consistent with this section because they are development necessary to enable HGP to continue farming the property.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed acquisition will support programming that benefits people experiencing homelessness, including people in recovery and those rebuilding their lives after incarceration or foster care.

Consistent with **Goal 3.1 Conserve Land and Goal 3.3 Working Lands**, the proposed acquisition will secure long-term site control to support continued agricultural use and sustainable stewardship of a four acre property.

### **CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed acquisition of approximately 4 acres of the Natural Bridges Farm property is categorically exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations Section 15325, which exempts acquisitions of lands to preserve open space, habitat or historical resources. Section 15325 sets forth examples that include exemptions for acquisitions to allow continued agricultural use. Consistent with these provisions, this project will provide grant funds for the acquisition of land to preserve open space and enable continued agricultural use.

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