

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
April 23, 2026

COMMUNITY HARVEST AT WATSONVILLE SLOUGH FARM

Project No. 19-050-02
Project Manager: Erin Gravley

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$4,000,000 to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County to construct the Community Harvest at Watsonville Slough Farm Project Phase 1, which will establish a trailhead, approximately 5 miles of trails, U-pick gardens, and a variety of public access amenities at Watsonville Slough Farm in Watsonville, Santa Cruz County.

LOCATION: Watsonville Slough Farm, Watsonville, Santa Cruz County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Project Concept Renderings](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [April 17, 2025 Staff Recommendation](#)
 - Exhibit 5: [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 four million dollars (\$4,000,000) to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (“the grantee”) to construct the Community Harvest at Watsonville Slough Farm Project Phase 1, which will establish a trailhead, approximately 5 miles of trails, U-pick gardens, and a variety of public access amenities at Watsonville Slough Farm in Watsonville, Santa Cruz 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 4 as the source of that funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. A recorded agreement pursuant to Public Resources Code 31116(d) sufficient to protect the public interest in 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 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 Land Trust of Santa Cruz County is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of an amount not to exceed \$4,000,000 to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (LTSCC) to construct the Community Harvest at Watsonville Slough Farm Project Phase 1 (the “project”), which will establish a trailhead, approximately 5 miles of trails, U-pick gardens, and a variety of public access amenities at Watsonville Slough Farm (WSF; Exhibit 1) in Watsonville, Santa Cruz County.

The Conservancy has a long history with the proposed project. Beginning in 2008, the Conservancy awarded LTSCC several grants over a four-year period to fund acquisitions of the land that became the Watsonville Slough Farm. Then in 2020, the Conservancy awarded the first of two planning grants which resulted in the Community Harvest at Watsonville Slough Farm Project, or Community Harvest (in Spanish, Cosecha Comunitaria de Watsonville). The project was envisioned as a way to provide a free, safe, and inclusive outdoor space for partner organizations and community members, with a strong focus on serving the nearby area, much of which qualifies as a disadvantaged community or severely disadvantaged community. In addition, Watsonville city staff emphasized that there was an urgent need in the community for access to safe outdoor recreation and to connect with nature.

Hiking trails at the farm will allow the local community to access natural areas a short distance from home. The rolling hills of the site feature restored grasslands, oak woodlands, wetlands, and organic vegetable and berry fields. The farm’s landscape includes beautiful vistas

overlooking wetlands, Watsonville to the east, and nearby farmland, and is also an excellent area for bird-watching (Exhibit 2).

The Community Harvest at Watsonville Slough Farm Project (Community Harvest Project) will transform the LTSCC's Watsonville Slough Farm site into a hub for community involvement and outdoor education. The Community Harvest Project centers around the installation of a 10-acre "Community Harvest Gateway," designed to be a welcoming space open to the public year-round (Exhibit 3). The Gateway will feature a community learning garden and free U-pick orchards maintained by members of the University of California Master Gardeners program, volunteers, and nonprofit organizations. Public access facilities at the Gateway will include a trailhead, parking, bike parking, EV charging stations, potable water, picnic areas and accessible restrooms. As part of a separate project, the LTSCC is developing an all-weather community gathering, teaching, and meeting space that would also be located within the Gateway.

The Community Harvest Project includes a network of five miles of walking trails that, once constructed, will traverse Watsonville Slough's restored habitats and farm fields. The trails will begin at the Community Harvest Gateway and lead to wildlife viewing and fishing spots and designated U-pick areas. The Community Harvest Project includes planting vegetated buffers between the trails and agricultural fields. Native, edible plants such as Pacific blackberry and elderberry will be used in these buffers, creating additional pollinator habitat. These buffers, which will be designed not to block views of the agricultural areas, will serve the dual purpose of protecting crops from visitors and serving as U-pick areas along the trail. An 1,800-foot accessible trail will provide a 700-foot loop from the parking area to the facilities at the Community Harvest Gateway. From the Gateway, an additional 1,100 feet of accessible trail will route visitors around a pond on the property and lead to the first boardwalk connecting into the future network of trails. The Community Harvest Project trail system will also be connected to a bike-pedestrian path that links downtown Watsonville and Pajaro Valley High School to the Community Harvest Gateway and will connect to a future segment of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail.

The project is Phase 1 of the Community Harvest Project. The project consists of constructing the public access components of the Community Harvest Gateway, including parking, restrooms, seating, and drinking water; electrical and lighting elements for safety; and the trail network and wildlife viewing and fishing platforms, including planting of the vegetated buffers. The remaining phases of the Community Harvest Project, which will be completed separately, are several habitat restoration components. The project will result in the creation of approximately five miles of trails and boardwalks, U-pick orchards, learning gardens, and outdoor gathering spaces, which will help achieve the goal of the Community Harvest Project, which is to foster connections between the public and the natural and agricultural heritage of the region, with a focus on delivering public amenities within walk and bike distance of underserved communities in Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley.

Following construction of the project, ongoing maintenance and management will be implemented by LTSCC's dedicated land management staff along with nonprofit partners of the Community Harvest Project. Some of these partners include the University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners, Esperanza Community Farms, and Watsonville

Wetlands Watch, all of which are expected to have a regular and significant presence on the property. These partners will help facilitate and oversee volunteers with leadership roles, volunteer crews, and the care of specific elements onsite such as the community learning garden and the U-pick sites along the trails.

Site Description: The LTSCC-owned 490-acre Watsonville Slough Farm is located on the coastal plain in the Pajaro Valley adjacent to the City of Watsonville. It is two miles from Monterey Bay in the Coastal Zone of unincorporated Santa Cruz County. It contains the 46-acre Hanson Slough, which is one of six interconnected Watsonville Sloughs. The slough system is the remnant of a wetland system largely drained and channelized for agriculture. This freshwater wetland system is fed by the Pajaro River watershed. The property is largely surrounded by commercial farms. Of the Watsonville Slough Farm's 490 acres, approximately 240 acres are dedicated to organic farming, with a mix of farm infrastructure and developed land. The other approximately 240 acres are restored habitat and feature the open water of the sloughs, freshwater wetlands, riparian area, and grassland in stages of restored coastal prairie. The property also has a small amount of coast live oak woodland.

Pajaro Valley High School abuts the northeast corner of the property and the City of Watsonville is just across Highway 1 to the east. Watsonville Slough Farm has been owned and managed by LTSCC since 2010, when the property was acquired to avert a golf course and luxury condominium development. To guide its management of the property, LTSCC prepared a management plan that revolves around four conservation values: agricultural lands, habitat and biodiversity, public access, and water quality and quantity. LTSCC plans to update the public access elements of the management plan to address the expected additional public use of the property due to the project's new amenities. Leases on the site's farmland generate significant revenue and will be used to fund operations and maintenance of the constructed project.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Land Trust of Santa Cruz County is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit accredited by the national Land Trust Alliance. As a conservation organization operating in Santa Cruz County since 1978, LTSCC has developed significant acquisition and land management expertise while cultivating strong relationships in the communities where they work. LTSCC built and currently manages over 30 miles of trails across six properties with an annual visitation of over 250,000 people. Additionally, LTSCC is the public access manager at San Vicente Redwoods, a Conservancy-funded project that opened more than seven miles of trails on a working forest in 2022. The San Vicente Redwoods project balanced working forest operations with a community-driven public access plan, providing LTSCC field staff with experience that will be directly applicable to implementation of the project. At Watsonville Slough Farm, LTSCC has completed numerous ecological restoration projects including the retirement of several farm blocks for restoration of wetlands and grasslands, creation of stormwater retention basins, and implementation of water conservation projects that save an estimated one hundred million gallons of water each year. Many of these efforts were funded in part by Conservancy grants.

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 will facilitate greater community and public access to the Watsonville Slough for the nearby underserved community. The project builds on past Conservancy investments for the acquisition and restoration of Watsonville Slough Farm as well as the earlier planning grant that led to the proposed project. Construction of the project is also funded by the Wildlife Conservation Board and the California Natural Resources Agency, showing it to be a priority project for the State. In addition, LTSCC will provide \$1,453,835 for the project as well as in-kind staff time contributions. As part of a separate project, and through private fundraising efforts, LTSCC aims to transform an existing barn on the property into a community gathering facility, at an estimated cost of \$7,000,000.

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.

LTSCC provides regular access to its properties, including those otherwise closed to the public, to Amah Mutsun Tribal Band members for cultural activities, events, ceremonies, and youth education. Several project elements were developed in collaboration with the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and the Amah Mutsun Land Trust. This includes designating a plot of land near the Community Harvest Gateway for Amah Mutsun stewardship and ceremonies.

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

The project’s trail boardwalks will be constructed to have approximately five feet of clearance to accommodate Watsonville Slough. The planned infrastructure is designed to have minimal impact on the landscape. As such, they are not expected to make future climate adaptation strategies more difficult.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will be a publicly-accessible space for outdoor recreation, education, gathering, restoration, and food harvesting near the underserved communities in Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley. It will promote health by providing a space for exercise, outdoor relaxation, and access to healthy produce. The project connects the public to organic farmland and restored habitats onsite and will serve as an important demonstration of how these land uses can thrive side-by-side. LTSCC anticipates that once the project is complete, programming will also be provided by partners such as Watsonville Wetlands Watch and the Santa Cruz County Parks Department, which will provide additional opportunities for inclusive, participatory environmental stewardship for residents and community groups.

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

As part of the planning and design process for the Community Harvest Project, the LTSCC implemented a robust year-long community engagement process, including fifteen tours of the property, seven webinars, and bilingual surveys. This effort culminated in the creation of a report in 2022, concluding that the Watsonville community demonstrated strong support for free, low-impact public access at Watsonville Slough Farm. The community prioritized walking trails, nature appreciation activities, birding, and environmental education, while consistently emphasizing the importance of protecting wildlife habitat, maintaining working agricultural lands, and keeping natural elements of the property intact. Additionally, in 2025, the Land Trust partnered with County Park Friends, the local nonprofit partner of the Santa Cruz County Parks Department, to lead a highly participatory, bilingual engagement process involving 740 community members across six public events. Through this process, community members identified barriers to visiting Watsonville Slough Farm, expressed priorities for Community Harvest programming, selected Cosecha Comunitaria de Watsonville as a Spanish-language park name, and helped shape park design elements such as gate styles, plantings, and color palettes to ensure the space reflects community identity. The results of both engagement efforts directly informed the project.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$4,000,000
Wildlife Conservation Board	\$4,880,000
California Natural Resources Agency	\$1,160,000
Land Trust of Santa Cruz County	\$1,453,835
Project Total	\$11,493,835

Conservancy funding is expected to come from four sources. The first two are a Fiscal Year 2022/23 appropriation (The Budget Act of 2022, SB 154, as amended by the Budget Act of 2023, SB 101) and a Fiscal Year 2023/24 appropriation (The Budget Act of 2023, Chapter 38, Statutes of 2023 (AB 102)) from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of “urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs”. The coastal resilience funds are available as described in Section 52 of Chapter 528 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the coastal resilience funds. These purposes include projects for nonmotorized trails of statewide significance. The proposed project is consistent with these funding sources because it will fund construction of trails, and related amenities, that will connect to a future segment of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail, which is part of the California Coastal Trail.

The third is an appropriation from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006, Public Resources Code Section 75001 - 75130 (Proposition 84). Section 75060(b) authorizes the use of Proposition 84 bond funds for projects that promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state and are consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources

Code. Section 75060(e) allocates funds to the Conservancy for the protection of Monterey Bay and its watersheds. “Protection,” as defined in Public Resources Code Section 75005(m), includes “actions necessary to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources and includes acquisition, development, restoration, preservation and interpretation.” Consistent with these provisions, the project will provide visitor-serving amenities that will enable public access to natural resources and that will increase the understanding and enjoyment of the natural resources at Watsonville Slough Farm in the Pajaro River watershed, a watershed of Monterey Bay. The project is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, as discussed in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section below. The proposed project is thus consistent with the funding requirements of Proposition 84.

The fourth funding source is an appropriation to the Conservancy for the purpose of coastal resilience from the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (2024 Climate Bond or Proposition 4), codified at Public Resource Code Sections 90000-95015. These funds are available as described in Section 92010, which describes the purposes of Proposition 4 coastal resilience funds, including grants to protect beaches, bays, coastal dunes, wetlands, coastal forests, watersheds, trails and public access facilities. “Protection” is defined as “those actions necessary to prevent harm or damage to persons, property, or natural, cultural, and historic resources, actions to improve access to public open-space areas, or actions to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural, cultural, and historic resources” (Section 90100(h)). The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will construct trails, restrooms, picnic tables, and other visitor-serving amenities at a publicly-accessible preserve within a coastal watershed, thereby improving access to and supporting the continued enjoyment of the wetlands and watershed resources of Watsonville Slough Farm.

Other support for the project comes from grants from the Wildlife Conservation Board, the California Natural Resources Agency, and funds privately raised by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County for this project. These funds are expected to go towards construction and construction management for the same elements as Conservancy funding.

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 consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31410), regarding public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline, and Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations to develop, operate, or manage lands

for public access purposes to and along the coast. The proposed project will construct public access amenities within the coastal zone with trails sited to and along the coastline of the Watsonville Sloughs. Consistent with Section 31400.2, the following factors were considered in determining the amount of Conservancy funding for this project: the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, the urgency of the project, and the Conservancy's project selection criteria, as described in the "Consistency With Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria" section above.

Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail (CCT). The Community Harvest Project will be a stop on the Lee Road Trail, which will connect into a future segment of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail, which is a part of the CCT. Thus, the project will establish an inland trail system that will be linked to the CCT.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Benefit Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will construct facilities to serve systemically excluded communities in Watsonville.

Consistent with **Goal 2.3 Expand Accessibility**, the project includes an 1,800 foot loop trail and staging area that will be accessible to people with disabilities.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the project will construct approximately 4.25 miles of new trails.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project will construct facilities for improved public access, such as parking, restrooms, and picnic areas, at Watsonville Slough Farm.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

In its April 17, 2025 authorization to grant funds for final planning and permitting of the project, the Conservancy adopted findings pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for this project (Exhibit 4). The project has not changed since the April 17, 2025 authorization, and there have been no changed circumstances or new information that triggers the requirement for additional documentation under CEQA. Therefore, no further review pursuant to CEQA is required.