

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 2, 2004

LAUFFS RANCH ACQUISITION

File No. 04-084
Project Manager: Nadine Hitchcock/Carol Arnold

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,500,000 to the Wildlife Conservation Board for the acquisition of the 12,575 acre Lauffs Ranch in northeastern Napa County for the protection and restoration of natural resources and to provide public access.

LOCATION: Berryessa-Knoxville Road, north of Lake Berryessa, in northeastern Napa County and western Yolo County (Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map
 - Exhibit 2: Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area Brochure
 - Exhibit 3: Knoxville-Cedar Roughts Conservation Area Description
 - Exhibit 4: Letters of Support
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31164 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one million five hundred thousand dollars (\$1,500,000) to the Wildlife Conservation Board (“WCB”) for the purpose of acquiring Napa County Assessor Parcel Nos. 015-120-019 and 020; 015-130-009; 015-140-003, 013 and 014; 015-150-011, 012, 013, 014, 015 and 016; 015-160-017 and 018; 015-170-0010, 011, 012 and 013; 015-190-008, 009, 012 and 013; 015-240-005, 006, 007, 008, 009 and 010; and ,015-250-003, and 011, known as the Lauffs Ranch, consisting of approximately 12,475 acres, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the WCB shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“Executive Officer”):
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- a. All relevant acquisition documents, including, without limitation, the appraisal, purchase agreement, escrow instructions, environmental or hazardous materials assessment and title report.
 - b. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The WCB shall pay no more than fair market value for the Property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Department of General Services
 3. The WCB shall permanently dedicate the Property for habitat preservation, open space protection and public access, through an irrevocable offer to dedicate an interest in the property or other instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
 4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the Property, the design and location of which has been approved by the Executive Officer.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

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

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and objectives of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

This project will result in the acquisition of the 12,575 acre Lauffs Ranch (“Property”) by the Wildlife Conservation Board (“WCB”). Conservancy funds will be directed towards the purchase of the major portion (12,475 acres) of the Lauffs Ranch located in Napa County. The remaining 100 acres are located within Yolo County, the acquisition of which will use other funding sources.

The purpose of the acquisition is to protect, restore and manage this large landscape of grasslands, oak woodlands, serpentine chaparral, riparian and cliff habitats and watersheds, and to provide public access for hiking, mountain biking and hunting. The Property will be managed by the Department of Fish & Game (DFG).

Like much of Napa County, the Property is located at the convergence of three California ecoregions – the North Coast, Central Valley and Central Coast. As such, it contains a high degree of biological diversity, with many endemic species. The region is also highly threatened as the result of various human activities, including mining, off-road vehicle use, grazing, rural residential development and vineyard conversion.

The Lauffs Ranch has been used for cattle ranching for many years, but is currently not grazed. Owned by the Napa Ranch Associates, LLC, the Property is located within the core of the Blue

Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area (BRBNA), a regional geographic designation defined by a partnership of over 100 members, including private landowners, public land managers, universities, nonprofit organizations, area residents, and recreationists. (Exhibit 2: Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area Brochure). The partnership is dedicated to the conservation, preservation, and management of over 600,000 acres of this natural, wild, agricultural, and recreational landscape in northeastern Napa County and western Yolo County.

The BRBNA's diverse geology supports a unique assemblage of ecological communities, providing habitat for many birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, fish, and invertebrates. The area is sufficiently remote and large enough to support tule elk, mountain lions, bears, bald and golden eagles as well as a variety of hawks, osprey, harriers, falcons, owls, and other raptors. The serpentine soils of the region host a large number of indigenous plants, and the streams and lakes provide abundant riparian and fisheries habitat.

A substantial portion of the BRBNA is currently in public ownership under the management of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management ("BLM"), the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the U. C. Natural Reserve System, Department of Parks & Recreation, and the Department of Fish & Game ("DFG"). The BRBNA partners are preparing a Coordinated Resource Management Plan which will focus on preserving and restoring habitat on public lands and similar activities on private lands on a voluntary basis.

The Lauffs Ranch also lies within the "Knoxville-Cedar Roughs Conservation Area", one of nine biological regions targeted for conservation by The Nature Conservancy in Napa County (Exhibit 3: Description of Knoxville-Cedar Roughs Conservation Area). The DFG and the Nature Conservancy will lead an effort to prepare a management plan for the Lauffs Ranch, to define strategies and activities that will best preserve the Property's unusually diverse habitat, and to provide public access consistent with resource protection.

The Property's acquisition will result in over 40,000 acres of contiguous protected land, offering opportunities to manage multiple species and their habitats on an ecosystem level, and provide public access to a semi-wilderness landscape less than two hours north of the San Francisco Bay Area. It will also be part of a linked wildlife corridor extending from Lake Berryessa north to Highway 20 in Lake and Colusa Counties.

The DFG believes that the Property is of sufficient size to allow the expansion of tule elk herds, a species that was historically present in large numbers. The Property will be accessible to the public for hiking and mountain biking from the Berryessa-Knoxville Road which transects the Property. Hunting will be allowed in accordance with state hunting regulations, primarily of deer and wild boar, and potentially tule elk.

Site Description: The subject Property is bordered on the north by the 8,078 acre Knoxville Ranch, acquired by the Wildlife Conservation Board in July of 2000. Adjacent to the Knoxville Ranch is the 5,800 acre McLaughlin Mine property which contains the McLaughlin Preserve, managed by the U.C. Davis Natural Reserve System. To the west, the property abuts BLM land. It is located approximately five miles north of Lake Berryessa. The Property adjoins the Berryessa-Knoxville Road for three miles. Portions of the property are within the Putah and Cache Creek watersheds, which drain into the Sacramento Valley.

The Property's topography varies from gentle to steep slopes, ranging in elevation from 600 to 2,400 feet above sea level. The Property contains many drainage systems, including most of the

Eticuera, Zim Zim, Nevada and Toll Canyon Creek watersheds, as well as Fern Spring and five additional unnamed secondary streams. The diverse assemblage of habitats includes valley foothill riparian, valley oak woodland, montane hardwood-conifer, closed cone pine cypress, perennial grassland, mixed chaparral, montane hardwood and riverine. With this diversity of habitats is a concomitant diversity of wildlife, with many songbirds, mammals, amphibians, reptile and fish. The area is large and remote, and supports deer, tule elk, bald and gold eagles, mountain lions and bear, as well as a variety of hawks, osprey, harriers, falcons, owls and other raptors.

Geologically, the Property and its surrounding area are underlain by a complex mosaic of serpentine rocks. The high diversity of serpentine endemics, i.e. species found only on soils derived from serpentine, gives the Property and its surrounding area statewide and worldwide significance from a habitat perspective. Serpentine soils are known throughout the world as hotspots for plant evolution. Together with Turkey, Cuba and New Caledonia, California is one of the four richest places in the world for serpentine endemic plants.

The Property and surrounding region contain an extraordinary 49 plant species that are endemic to serpentine, 31 of which have sensitive species status. The Property also supports an unusual and fragile habitat type known as “serpentine wet areas” which contain at least 26 habitat-specialist plant species. According to the U.C. Davis Natural Reserve System Director Susan Harrison, the Lauffs Ranch and adjacent properties represent a “geologically and botanically unique ecosystem, supporting more rare or unusual species restricted to serpentine soils than are known from any area of protected public land in California or in the U.S.”

Project History: This acquisition evolved out of a concerted effort on the part of resource agencies, environmental groups, recreationists, and private landowners to preserve, restore and manage the landscape of northeastern Napa County and western Yolo County to benefit wildlife and offer opportunities for public use. Over 100 entities and individuals formed the Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area, a conservation partnership dedicated to the preservation and restoration of over 600,000 acres of natural, wild, and recreational landscapes in this region.

A substantial portion of the BRBNA is currently in public ownership under the management of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the California Department of Fish and Game, the California Department of Parks and Recreation, and the University of California Natural Reserve System. Private landowners have indicated their interest in promoting this regional conservation effort, coupling the use of conservation easements and public acquisitions with State and Federal designations to assure permanent, locally promoted, financially secure, efficiently regulated, and enlightened stewardship of the area.

Conservation groups, including the Packard Foundation, the Wildlife Conservation Board, the Nature Conservancy, the American Land and Quail Ridge Wilderness Conservancies, the California Wilderness Coalition, Cache Creek Wild, and the Land Trusts of Napa, Lake, and Yolo Counties are actively pursuing land conservation projects in the area. Membership in the BRBNA partnership is voluntary; the group has and seeks no regulatory authority, and respecting private property rights is a key principle.

This is the second largest acquisition within the BRBNA by WCB. North of the subject Property is the 8,078 acre Knoxville Ranch which was acquired by WCB in July of 2000. Adjacent to the

Knoxville Ranch is the 6,800 acre McLaughlin Mine Property which is privately owned, but managed in conjunction with the Natural Reserve System of U.C. Davis. Mine tailings which once threatened a downstream lake have been cleaned up and the property is now used for habitat and scientific research. The acquisition of the Lauffs Ranch will add an additional 12,575 acres to this assemblage of biologically rich properties, greatly expanding the opportunities for habitat improvement, research, and public access.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$1,500,000
Wildlife Conservation Board	7,195,580
Resources Legacy	1,000,000
The Nature Conservancy	500,000
Land and Water Conservation Fund	<u>2,304,420</u>

Total Project Cost **\$12,500,000**

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to derive from the Conservancy’s FY 03/04 appropriation from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 50) which can be used to acquire and protect coastal land and water resources pursuant to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Pursuant to Section 31162(b) of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21, this project furthers the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program’s goal to protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164, to address resource and recreational goals in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The Lauffs Ranch is located in Napa County, one of the nine San Francisco Bay Area counties in which the Conservancy is authorized, under Sections 31160 and 31161 of the Public Resources Code, to undertake projects and award grants to address resource and recreational goals for the region.

Under Section 31162(b), the Conservancy may act to protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional significance. The proposed project will protect 12,757 acres of riparian, woodland, grassland and rare plant habitat, and will provide a wildlife corridor linked with adjacent public lands.

In addition, consistent with Section 31162(d), the project will provide open space and a natural area that is accessible to the urban population of the San Francisco Bay Area for recreational and education purposes.

Finally, the Lauffs Ranch acquisition satisfies all of the criteria for determining project priority under 31163 (d), as follows: (1) is supported by adopted regional plans (2) serves a regional constituency, in that the project will help preserve habitat and provide public access for the benefit of the population for the San Francisco Bay Area, (3) can be implemented immediately, (4) provides benefits that would be lost if the project is not quickly implement, and (5) includes significant matching funds.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 10 Objective A**, the proposed project will result in the acquisition of over 12,000 acres of upland habitat, including most of the watersheds of four creek and their adjacent riparian corridors. Also consistent with this goal, the project leverages \$1,500,000 of Conservancy funding for a \$12,500,000 acquisition.

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective A**, the proposed project will result in a significant increase in land that will be accessible to the public for recreational purposes.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project has widespread public support, including that of Assemblywoman Patricia Wiggins, Senator Wesley Chesbro, the partners of the Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area, the Napa County Land Trust, and the Nature Conservancy. Letters of Support are attached as Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The portion of the Lauffs Ranch for which Conservancy funds will be used is located within Napa County, and within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy. Conservancy funds will not be used to acquire the 100 acres of the property located within Yolo County.
5. **Need:** The opportunity to secure the Lauffs Ranch could be lost without Conservancy support. The Wildlife Conservation Board has committed all the funds it can to this project at this time, and has secured other funds to the limits of those contributing entities.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Lauffs Ranch is part of the Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area, a 600,000 acre area in northeastern Napa County targeted by resource agencies and others for conservation, either through acquisition or voluntary agreements with landowners. Serpentine soils and related rare plants on the property are considered among the best examples of this type of habitat in California, and even in the world. The property's

remoteness and semi-wilderness condition offers a unique public access experience for visitors from the entire San Francisco Bay region.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The property could be subdivided into 75 parcels of 160 acres each by filing a parcel map and proceeding with that process. These parcels could be sold separately. If that were to occur, habitat on the property would be significantly diminished and could no longer support the numerous and diverse species currently found. The property is for sale at this time, and if not purchased for conservation purposes, would likely be sold for rural residential development.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will offer opportunities to protect and restore riparian and upland habitat resources, and provide for research and education on rare plant and animal species. Acquisition of the property will eliminate threats of development, and will allow for public access.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
10. **Conflict resolution:** The project will resolve conflicts between habitat needs, recreational uses, and development. Public access and hunting would be managed to avoid any significant impacts on plant and wildlife species. Acquisition by WCB and management by DFG would assure a more active presence to control any illegal uses of the property, such as off season hunting and off-road vehicles.
11. **Readiness:** An appraisal of the property has been approved by the Department of General Services, and WCB has negotiated a transaction that is acceptable to the landowners. All funding has been identified and the project is ready to move ahead.
12. **Cooperation:** The Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area is a cooperative effort of over 100 partners to conserve over 600,000 acres of habitat in northeastern Napa County and western Yolo County. The Lauffs Ranch is within the core of the natural area. Funding partners have jointly agreed to move ahead with the project, and a management plan for the property will be prepared as a cooperative effort between resource agencies and private conservation groups.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA: Acquisition of the Lauffs Ranch is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in that it involves the acquisition of land for open space and wildlife habitat purposes and to preserve existing natural conditions (14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15325). Staff will file a CEQA Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.