

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 16, 2005

**ESTERO AMERICANO NATURE PRESERVE ENHANCEMENT PROJECT**

File No. 05-017  
Project Manager: Richard Retecki

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$40,000 to the Sonoma Land Trust for resource enhancement plan preparation and implementation for the 127 acre Estero Americano Nature Preserve, in southwestern Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** Estero Americano, Sonoma County (see Exhibits 1 & 2)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Coastal & Marine Resources Protection

---

**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: Project Location
  - Exhibit 2: Area Map
  - Exhibit 3: Site Map
  - Exhibit 4: Road Management and Erosion Control Plan
  - Exhibit 5: Letters of Support
- 

**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31220 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed forty thousand dollars (\$40,000) to the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) for the preparation of a resource management plan and implementation of erosion control projects for the Estero Americano Nature Preserve (the Preserve) in southwestern Sonoma County.

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 Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code (Section 31220) regarding the provision of watershed restoration.
-

2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
  3. The Sonoma Land Trust is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501 (c) 3 of the Internal Revenue Service Code, whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
- 

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The proposed authorization would provide up to \$40,000 to the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) for the preparation of a resource management plan, and on-the-ground implementation projects for the Estero Americano Nature Preserve, in southwestern Sonoma County.

The 127-acre Preserve was formed over several years by a partnership between the Conservancy, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (SCAPOS), and the Sonoma Land Trust. The initial 87-acres were acquired in 1997 with SCAPOS and Conservancy funding. A second 40-acre parcel was purchased in 2001 also with funds from SCAPOS and the Conservancy. The Open Space District holds and monitors conservation easements over the Preserve and the SLT owns the underlying fee interest and manages the property. The Preserve provides limited public access for recreational and educational purposes to the property and the Estero. The Preserve also provides one of the few downstream places in the watershed to access the Estero for kayaking and canoeing.

The Estero and the Preserve are under pressure from surrounding land uses, past and present agricultural operations, road conditions and erosion, which have led to the degradation of water quality. In order to continue using the Preserve for limited public access and to restore its natural resources, substantial work is needed to address erosion, sedimentation, water quality, and invasive species problems.

The proposed project has two components: preparation of a resource management plan, and implementation of erosion control projects already identified through the SLT’s Road Management and Erosion Control Plan (contained in Exhibit 4) for the Preserve. These components are discussed in detail below.

Resource Management Plan: While working with its partners, the SLT will prepare a plan that includes a vegetation management plan, invasive plant mapping and eradication procedures, restoration opportunities, and protection measures for aquatic and terrestrial environments. The plan will also include a public access component that will help the SLT define the appropriate level and type of public access. It is possible that public access may be expanded from current levels, with appropriate facilities to minimize impacts to preserve’s sensitive resources. The SLT will establish monitoring procedures related to invasive species vegetation, road stabilization, avian population and type, and, the Preserve’s grassland environment.

Erosion Control: The SLT has already prepared a road management and erosion control plan for the Preserve. Implementation of the erosion control plan will install six ditch relief culverts to replace existing failing culverts, remove a road berm to prevent erosion of the road bed, out-slope 1,500 feet of road to redirect water drainage, and install 20 “rolling dips,” or water bars to

prevent erosion of the roadbed. Also, other implementation projects will stabilize several small gullies, plant riparian vegetation, and correct the flow of water off Estero Road.

The SLT has been a partner in numerous Conservancy projects. The partnership has included collaboration in acquisitions, coastal parcel analyses, public access projects, watershed plans and implementation, resource management projects, and educational and interpretive information endeavors. The SLT has a history of success in a broad range environmentally oriented projects throughout Sonoma County.

**Site Description:** The Estero Americano Nature Preserve was established in 2002 after two acquisitions totaling 127 acres formed the Preserve. The Preserve rises from sea level to an elevation of 350 feet at Estero Lane, and incorporates riparian corridors, wetland areas, coastal prairie, and upland brush vegetation. Spectacular views of the Estero and across to the hills of Marin County are seen from the Preserve.

A steep ravine is found within the Preserve and a seasonal, intermittent stream flows through the western portion of the property, while a spring is located near the Preserve's eastern boundary. Both drain down slope to the Estero. There are a diverse number of species found in and along the Estero and its surrounding environment. Surrounding land uses include agriculture and rural residential development. A private, unpaved road leads from Estero Lane through the property and down to the Estero.

The Estero Americano is a diverse and valuable natural area. The Estero is a coastal estuary that flows to the ocean from seven miles inland, and has been identified as a critical coastal area by the Coastal Commission. It makes up the western portion of the boundary between Marin and Sonoma Counties. The rolling but steep hills are surrounded by agricultural operations on both sides of the stream. The Estero consists of open water, freshwater marsh, brackish marsh, mud flats, coastal grasslands, and a narrow coastal strand. The Estero is a drowned river valley that exhibits fjord-like qualities. The Preserve is about one mile inland from the Pacific Ocean.

**Project History:** In May 1996, the Conservancy authorized two projects that led to the creation of the Preserve. First, the Conservancy authorized the disbursement of Proposition 70 funds for acquisition of the 87-acre Hepper parcels by SCAPOSD and the SLT. Secondly, in 2001, the Conservancy's Coastal Parcel Analysis (conducted by the SLT), recommended acquisition of the 40-acre Dewar Parcel that adjoined the Hepper parcels. Successful completion of the Dewar acquisition with SCC funding led to the establishment of the 127-acre Preserve.

In the past few years, the SLT has been managing and maintaining the property, but has recognized the need to evaluate and correct negative environmental and road conditions to improve the natural resources and environment of the Preserve. Also, the SLT has been conducting public access events and bird watching at the site. In addition, LandPaths (a Sonoma County nonprofit) has been leading public hikes and kayaks trips on the Estero, and also leads special volunteer days to remove invasive plants and install small erosion control projects.

Though the SLT and others have undertaken initial work on the Preserve, much more work is needed to plan and implement management actions that will improve and protect the Preserve's natural resources.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$40,000
Sonoma Land Trust and partners (in kind)	<u>25,900</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$65,900</b>

The expected source of Conservancy funds is Proposition 40, which provides funds for water quality projects, and restoration and enhancement of natural resources projects.

The Sonoma Land Trust will partner with several public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and volunteers to implement this project. The Gold Ridge RCD will assist with road and other on-site erosion issues; the Natural Resource Conservation Service will provide EQIP funds plus expertise on vegetation and range management; Ocean Song will help with native and invasive plant concerns; and, volunteer work crews will focus on erosion control, fencing, and invasive plant projects. All of these efforts represent a total of \$25,900 of in-kind services for project implementation.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The project is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the restoration of coastal watersheds:

Section 31220 (b), of the Public Resource Code authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies or nonprofit organizations to reduce contamination, protect fish and wildlife habitat, reduce erosion and sedimentation, and, protect and restore coastal wetlands and other lands within coastal watersheds. The proposed project will correct road drainage problems and plant riparian vegetation. Also, gully erosion will be reduced by bank stabilization and planning of native species. These actions will reduce sedimentation and improve the water quality of the Estero. As also required by Section 31220 (5) (c), the project is consistent with state and regional watershed planning as described below under "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/ State Water Quality Control Plan."

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

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objectives A & B**, the proposed Estero Americano Nature Preserve Enhancement project will implement projects to improve water quality, reduce sedimentation and help to restore a valuable coastal watershed.

**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:** This project has the support of State Senator Wes Chesbro, Assemblywoman Patti Berg, Sonoma County Supervisor Mike Kearns, the Gold Ridge Conservation District, the Sonoma Land Trust, and members of the public. (Exhibit 5)
4. **Location:** The entire Estero Americano Nature Preserve lies within the coastal zone. Enhancement of the Preserve will improve water quality and reduce erosion within a coastal watershed.
5. **Need:** The project will rectify and improve the terrestrial and stream environments found in the Preserve. Past land uses and years of neglect have established a need for resource enhancement.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Preserve is part of the Estero Americano that is a diverse aquatic area of national significance. It is an area rich in wildlife, migratory waterfowl, and wetland habitats. The Estero Americano lies within the Gulf of Farallones National Marine Sanctuary and is also within the United Nations Central Coast International Biosphere Reserve.
7. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
8. **Readiness:** The SLT is ready to begin the planning for resource enhancement projects immediately. Upon completion of the planning, the SLT will begin water quality projects, invasive species removal, and the planting of native species in the Preserve.
9. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** Restoration of lands within the Estero Americano was discussed in the Sonoma County Coastal Wetlands Enhancement Plan (1987). Resource enhancement of the Preserve would enable implementation of a number of projects that will not only improve the Preserve, but also complement similar efforts on ranches and farms within the watershed.
10. **Cooperation:** The Preserve project is a cooperative effort among the Conservancy, the Sonoma Land Trust, the Gold Ridge Conservation District, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, Ocean Song, and volunteers associated with and managed by the SLT.

**CONSISTENCY WITH THE COASTAL ACT:** The proposed authorization is consistent with Section 30231 of the Coastal Act which states that “the biological productivity of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries and lakes...shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:** The proposed authorization is consistent with the Sonoma County Local Coastal Program certified in 1981 and revised on August 3, 2001, in the following respects:

**III. Environmental Resources: Valley Ford: Estero Americano**

Marsh, riparian, and upland areas of the Estero Americano from the mouth to Valley Ford are critical resource areas and are designated for resource enhancement and protection. Also, the

grasslands found northward of the Estero, from the coast to Estero Lane, are areas slated for enhancement and removal of invasive species.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN:** The Estero Americano Nature Preserve Enhancement project is consistent with recommendations for the Estero that were set forth in the Conservancy's Sonoma County Coastal Wetland Enhancement Plan adopted by the Conservancy in May 1987. The California Unified Watershed Assessment has identified the Bodega Bay Watershed, which includes the Estero Americano, as a Category 1 priority watershed. The Estero Americano is included in the Clean Water Act Section 303 (d) list due to high sedimentation and nutrient loading. The North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board Watershed Management Initiative state that high chemical levels and low dissolved oxygen are the major issues in the Estero Americano watershed. This authorization will address and reduce these problems.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:** The Estero Americano Nature Preserve Enhancement Project is exempt from review of environmental impacts under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in that the construction of minor facilities which includes fencing (14 California Code of Regulations Section 15303); enhancement activities, road erosion control and alteration, and the removal of invasive species will only involve minor alterations to land (14 California Code of Regulations Section 15304); and, the collection of baseline environmental information for future monitoring of the site (14 California Code of Regulations 15306). Preparation of the resource enhancement plan is exempt under 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15306, in that it involves only planning and feasibility studies. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon project approval.