

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 29, 2006

**ESTERO AMERICANO RANCH IMPLEMENTATION**

File No. 06-015

Project Manager: Richard Retecki

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$250,000 to the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District for the implementation of ranch resource restoration projects in the Estero Americano watershed in Sonoma County.

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

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

---

**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Project Location

Exhibit 2: Estero Americano watershed map

Exhibit 3: Watershed map - location of Ranch Restoration Projects

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

Exhibit 5: Best Management Practices

Exhibit 6: Department of Fish and Game 1602 Permit

---

**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 31220 and Sections 31251 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000) to the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (RCD) for the implementation of ranch resource restoration projects on agricultural properties in the Estero Americano watershed in Sonoma County, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds with respect to a particular project site:

1. The Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“the Executive Officer”) shall approve in writing a work plan, budget and project schedule, and any contractors and subcontractors to be employed in the project.
-

2. The RCD shall provide a signing plan for the projects, to include appropriate acknowledgement of the Conservancy.
3. The RCD shall enter into and record an agreement satisfactory to the Executive Officer with the landowner of the project site for the provision of access to the property and monitoring and maintenance of the project.
4. The RCD shall provide documentation that all permits and approvals necessary to completion of the project under federal, state and local laws have been obtained.”

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 Chapter 5.5 and Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31220 and 31251-31270).
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Guidelines and Selection Criteria adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The portions of the project located within the coastal zone have been identified in the Sonoma County Local Coastal Plan as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource problems.”

---

**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The proposed authorization would disburse up to \$250,000 to the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (RCD) for the implementation of ranch resource restoration projects in the Estero Americano watershed in Sonoma County. (See Exhibits 1 and 2). The proposed projects will lead to improved water quality and habitat restoration. The ranch restoration projects and monitoring procedures will impact three ranches that total roughly 750 acres (Exhibits 2 and 3). All of the project implementation work will take place on ranches where the RCD has been granted access by the landowner and the landowner agrees to maintain the improvements.

Pursuant to a Conservancy planning grant, authorized in March 2002, each ranch has been evaluated for natural features, environmental assessment of its land and operations, roads, and other facilities. The resulting ranch management plans recommend specific restoration measures and a monitoring approach for each ranch. Some of the management practices suggested throughout the watershed include: water quality and temperature measurements, water conservation practices, riparian corridor restoration, road design and grading, and, recommendations for the location of future roads and facilities. The RCD ranch-implementation planning process for the Estero Americano watershed addressed 13 ranches. Plans and restoration projects for eight of the ranches were implemented in Phase I of the implementation process. The proposed project comprises Phase II of the implementation and will provide for restoration activities on the remaining three ranches. The specific activities for each ranch are described below. (The ranch numbers below correlate with the numbers found on the map attached as Exhibit 3). The restoration activities will be in accordance with the “Best

Management Practices” adopted by the RCD in September 2004, a copy of which is attached as Exhibit 5.

*Ranch Restoration Project Descriptions*

**Ranch 13, 12528 Petaluma-Valley Ford Road, Valley Ford, CA 94972:** The project includes the following actions: **a.** Removal of “legacy” tires installed many years ago to control erosion in two seasonal gullies and stabilization of the area. **b.** Re-grading of a 1,300-foot stretch of an 1,800-foot gully to a 1% slope grassed waterway, intermittently interrupted by a 15% drop that will be 50 feet long with a 7.66 foot drop in elevation. The slope will be armored with a geotextile fabric. A hydraulic jump and scour will occur when the 15% slope changes to 1%. Thus, a rock riprap apron will be installed at the grade changes to prevent scour. The channel width dimensions will consist of a 6-foot bottom, with side slopes of 2:1 grade, and a depth of three feet. The grass channel will be seeded and mulched. Any disturbed areas outside the channel will be graded to a 2:1 slope and planted with willow sprigs. **c.** Installation of a 3,000 foot, five-strand barb-wire livestock exclusion fence will be installed surrounding the treatment areas.

**Ranch 14, 14250 Valley Ford Road, Valley Ford, CA 94972:** The projects consists of: **a.** Construction of loose rock grade control structures in a 175-foot gully by backfilling with compacted fill from the eroded banks to create swales between the structures. Construction of plunge pools will be at the downstream end of the rock structures for energy dissipation and wildlife habitat. **b.** Stabilization of the roots of a threatened pine tree with fill for the grass-lined swales. **c.** Removal of invasive species and planting the area with native grasses, shrubs, and trees to provide wildlife habitat and erosion control.

**Ranch 15, 17400 Highway 1, Bodega, CA:** Project work includes: **a.** Stabilizing an eroding gully approximately 100-feet long, 15-feet wide, and 7-feet deep. The unstable banks will be graded and erosion control blankets and rock energy dissipators will be installed. **b.** Re-vegetation of the area with native species to include native riparian species, upland coastal scrub, and native grasses and trees for the grassland areas. **c.** Installation of a five-strand barb-wire livestock exclusion fence surrounding the project area.

The RCD will meet with individual landowners to devise a schedule for ranch implementation activities. Once that schedule is established, contractors will be retained for the construction work. The landowner will share the cost of the project implementation and be responsible for the maintenance of the completed projects.

The RCD has worked with landowners on a voluntary basis through educational and outreach processes to prepare ranch resource restoration plans and specific resource restoration projects throughout the watershed. In December 2004, the Conservancy approved funding for restoration projects on eight ranches in the Estero watershed. The RCD is now requesting funding for a total of nine resource restoration projects on three additional ranches. The implementation recommendations are tailored to the individual situations found on each ranch. They have been refined and include final design and engineering for specific implementation projects, a budget and timeline, permitting, and necessary monitoring activities.

**Site Description:** The Estero Americano, a coastal estuary that flows to the Pacific Ocean from seven miles inland, is a very diverse and valuable natural area. The Estero consists of open water, freshwater marsh, brackish marsh, mud flats, coastal grasslands, and a narrow coastal

strand. The adjacent rolling but steep hills are surrounded by agricultural operations on both sides of the stream.

The Estero Americano is one of the most naturally diverse areas on the Northern California coast. It is an area rich in wildlife, migratory waterfowl, and wetland habitats. The waterway and environs are part of the Gulf of Farallones National Marine Sanctuary and lie within the United Nations Central Coast International Biosphere Reserve. There are indications of use of the Estero by coho salmon and steelhead trout.

The land within the watershed is comprised of the Merced Formation, characterized by shallow soils and easily eroded landforms. The terrain of gently rolling hills is dotted with ranches, small communities, rural residential development, and eucalyptus windrows. The nature of the terrain makes the watershed a wind-gap area for the passage of wind from the coast to the inner Bay area.

The Sonoma County Coastal Wetlands Enhancement Plan (1987), adopted by the Conservancy, identifies the Estero Americano as degraded and states that bank erosion, gully erosion, loss of riparian habitat, and sedimentation are common in the watershed. The plan also notes that several reaches of the Estero and some tributaries will continue to provide higher rates of sediment that would naturally occur. Increased sediment will continue to degrade open water and marsh areas and will impact aquatic habitat. The current authorization will help to address these problems. All of the restoration projects will occur on private land, with access being granted by way of a signed agreement with the landowner. The Estero has also been identified by The Nature Conservancy as one of its "Portfolio Conservation Areas" due to the importance to its coastal wetland system.

**Project History:** Through Conservancy and other grant programs funded by public agencies the RCD has conducted water quality, riparian corridor, and sediment control project implementation in the Estero watershed for a number of years. The project-by-project implementation is singularly effective but does not provide a comprehensive approach for the watershed. It became apparent to the RCD that a comprehensive approach was essential to solve the watershed's problems.

Through a grant from the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, and with its assistance, the ranch planning process was begun in 1999 as part of the Marin Coastal Watershed Enhancement Project. In 2002, Conservancy funds were authorized for additional ranch plans to provide a comprehensive approach for watershed restoration. The ranch planning process included an educational/seminar process, identification of restoration techniques, landowner outreach, and the recommendation of specific implementation projects for the ranches that are involved.

The end result of the planning process was an evaluation of each ranch's current condition and a ranch plan to implement corrective measures. Also, potential environmental impacts were evaluated, and monitoring programs are recommended to track improvements in the ranch environment. The ranch plans include a description of livestock and ranch operations and current management practices, a facilities inventory, and evaluation of the condition of facilities and resources, and a section of maps.

The Estero Americano Ranch Enhancement Design, authorized by the Conservancy in March 2002, addressed the implementation process, its cost, funding, and the timing to complete the seasonal work. In December 2004, the Conservancy approved ranch implementation funding for eight ranches within the watershed totaling 5,100 acres. Most of those implementation projects have been completed or will be constructed in the summer of 2006. The proposed Phase II authorization would now provide for on-the-ground improvements to benefit sensitive natural resources for three additional ranches. The eleven ranches receiving ranch implementation projects in the Estero Americano watershed total approximately 5,850 acres, or roughly 9.2 square miles.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$250,000
State Water Resources Control Board	\$175,000
USDA – EQIP Program	\$ 75,000
Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District	<u>\$ 15,000</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$515,000</b>

The sources of other funds for Estero watershed projects have included the following:

State Water Resources Control Board	\$175,000
Landowners through USDA-NRCS EQIP Funds	\$ 75,000
RCD	<u>\$ 15,000</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$265,000</b>

The expected source of Conservancy funds is a Fiscal Year 2002/2003 appropriation to the Conservancy from the “California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Fund” (Proposition 40). The Proposition 40 funds were appropriated to the Conservancy under the Watershed, Clean Beaches and Water Quality Act (“AB 2534”). AB 2534 added Chapter 5.5 to the Conservancy’s enabling legislation (Public Resources Code § 31220) and appropriated funds from Proposition 40 to the Conservancy to carry out projects that are described under Section 31220. Projects described under Section 31220 include those that, like the proposed project, serve to reduce unnatural erosion and sedimentation of coastal watersheds or contributes to the reestablishment of natural erosion and sediment cycles. Proposition 40 also requires the Conservancy to give priority to grant projects with matching funds (Public Resources Code Section 5096.651). The proposed project is supported by a commitment of substantial matching funds.

The United States Department of Agriculture has provided funds for public meetings and landowner outreach through the Environmental Quality Improvement Program. The Gold Ridge RCD will be providing funds for project administration. Funding for the project is also being provided by the State Water Resources Control Board for erosion control and sediment reduction projects.

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

The project is consistent with Chapter 5.5 and Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the enhancement of coastal resources:

Section 31251 of the Public Resources Code authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of human-induced events have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. The proposed projects will enhance coastal riparian resources that have been degraded by human-caused erosion and siltation through the construction of a series of individual site improvements that protect riparian corridors, and minimize erosion and sedimentation.

Section 31251.2(a) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources, including watershed resources that lie partially outside of the coastal zone. The Estero Americano watershed lies partly inside and partly outside of the coastal zone. The proposed project will enhance habitat both inside and outside the coastal zone, and, by decreasing erosion and sedimentation, will improve a sensitive coastal resource, the Estero Americano.

Consistent with Section 31252, the Sonoma County Local Coastal Program (LCP) identifies the need for public action and assistance to resolve existing problems in special resource areas, such as the Estero Americano. See "Consistency with Local Coastal Program" section below.

Section 31253 enables the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of any enhancement project. The Conservancy's contribution to this project is matched by funds from the RCD for project administration and in-kind services. As mentioned above, the State Water Resources Control Board and the United States Department of Agriculture, through its EQIP process, are also providing funds for these Phase II watershed projects.

This project is also consistent with Chapter 5.5 (Section 31220) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection.

Consistent with § 31220(a), staff has consulted with State Water Resources Control Board 3 in the development of the project to ensure consistency with Chapter 3 (commencing with § 30915) [Clean Beaches Program] of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code [Watershed, Clean Beaches, and Water Quality Act].

Consistent with § 31220(b)(4), the project will reduce unnatural erosion and sedimentation of coastal watersheds, through the implementation of riparian restoration measures on ranches with the Estero Americano watershed.

Consistent with § 31220(c), the project includes a monitoring component for three years following construction to evaluate project effectiveness.

Finally, as required by § 31220(c), the project is recommended in or consistent with local watershed management plans. See discussion under “CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN(S)” section, below.

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

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objectives A and B**, the proposed ranch restoration and enhancement projects will restore and enhance the biological diversity of the Estero Americano.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objectives A and B**, the proposed projects will assist with the restoration of a coastal watershed and improve its water quality.

Consistent with **Goal 7, Objective B**, the proposed Estero Americano watershed projects will assist farmers and ranchers with their efforts to reduce impacts of agricultural operations on wildlife habitat and water quality.

**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 “Project Financing” section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The proposed authorization has support from landowners, public agencies, environmental organizations, community groups, including State Senator Wes Chesbro, the Valley Ford Citizens Coalition, and the Department of Fish and Game. See Exhibit 4..
4. **Location:** The Estero Americano watershed is partly within and partly outside the coastal zone, and is a coastal watershed with diverse and valuable resources and habitat. The watershed falls within both Marin and Sonoma Counties. The proposed implementation projects, located on ranches in Sonoma County will benefit the watershed, as well as inland and coastal resources.
5. **Need:** The RCD has tapped a variety of available funding sources and is itself contributing to the project, but, nonetheless, cannot carry out the full scope of needed restoration work with the additional Conservancy funding.
6. **Greater-than-local-interest:** The ranch restoration within the Estero watershed and its habitat will insure its place as one of the most diverse areas on California's north coast. The Estero is recognized nationally for its unique mix of coastal and inland resources. The

restoration implementation will address on-going situations that have degraded the waterways and environment within the Estero.

**Additional Criteria**

6. **Readiness:** The RCD is ready to begin the ranch restoration implementation projects immediately.
7. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The ranch restoration implementation was discussed in the Sonoma County Coastal Wetlands Enhancement Plan (1987). The proposed authorization would enable implementation of a number of projects recommended through the previously Conservancy funded ranch restoration planning project.
8. **Cooperation:** The ranch restoration implementation project is a cooperative effort among the Conservancy, the Gold Ridge Conservation District, and private landowners within the watershed. In addition, the Sonoma County Water Agency, the State Department of Fish and Game, and the Department of Agriculture have contributed to this project or to recent related projects within the watershed.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

**Sonoma County**

The proposed authorization is consistent with the Sonoma County Local Coastal program, certified in 1981 and revised on August 3, 1999, in the following respects:

**IV. Resources: Agriculture**

**Land Management:** Implementation of ranch restoration projects may be conducted for the purposes of improving agricultural viability and watershed conservation. The implementation measures will correct detrimental land use and operational practices. Hopefully, once the restoration is completed, agricultural viability will be improved as will the overall health of the watershed.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN(S):**

Projects undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of Public Resources Code Division 21 (Section 31220) must be consistent with local watershed management plans, if available, and with water quality control plans, adopted by the state and regional water boards.

The proposed project is consistent with the Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coastal Basin adopted by the Regional Water Quality Control Board because the project will promote management practices that protect water quality; continue coordination with local agencies/groups in support of non-regulatory, cooperative efforts for erosion/sedimentation controls; continue the assessment and monitoring of water quality conditions for the Estero Americano; and, establish water quality monitoring and water quality assessment problems in the Estero and other coastal watersheds.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

Staff has reviewed the project activities and has concluded that all of the restoration activities at each project site are categorically exempt from environmental review, as discussed in detail, by ranch, below. In reaching this conclusion, staff has also considered the determination by the Department of Fish and Game, based on a inspection of the project sites by its District Field Biologist , that none of the projects has the potential to cause an adverse impact on the waters of the State or on any other sensitive biotic resource. (See Exhibit 6, Fish and Game 1602 permit).

**Ranch 13, 12528 Petaluma-Valley Ford Road, Valley Ford, CA 94972**

The project consists of removing vehicle tires installed years ago as erosion control devices in two seasonal gullies, stabilizing the gullies and surrounding environs and fencing.

The tire removal and stream corridor stabilization work is exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations, Section 15301(i), maintenance of stream channels and stream flows), and restoration of two severely eroded and incised gullies that drain to the Estero Americano. The tire removal effort is also exempt under Section 15330, minimization of hazardous substances, in that the removal of tires consists of the removal of potentially detrimental substances that may be releasing hazardous materials into the gullies.

The installation of fencing is exempt under Section 15303(e), construction of small facilities and structures, because the fencing will protect the plantings of native vegetation is incident to the overall project, is small in scale and will have no lasting environmental impact on the project area.. The re-vegetation is exempt pursuant to Section 15304, minor alteration of land, since it consists only of the planting of native vegetation that will stabilize the gullies to prevent further erosion and create a riparian corridor along these seasonal waterways.

**Ranch 14, 14250 Valley Ford Road, Valley Ford, CA 94972**

The project consists of the construction of grade control structures and the planting of native vegetation in a seasonal gully all of which will reduce erosion, decrease sediment flow, and create a riparian corridor to stabilize the project area.

The stream corridor work is exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations, Section 15301(i), maintenance of stream flows, since it create structures and pools to decrease the speed and intensity of stream flow which will reduce erosion of the gully and diminish the amount of sediment reaching the Estero. The replanting activity is exempt under Section 15304(d), because the planting of native species is limited in scope and will the positive environmental effect of assisting with stabilization of the construction area and provide riparian habitat.

**Ranch 15, 17400 Highway 1, Bodega, CA 94922**

The project consists of stabilizing stream banks, the installation of erosion control blankets, the planting of native species for three habitat areas, and the construction of fencing for the restoration areas.

The stream work is exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations, Section 15301(i), maintenance of stream channels and stream flows because bank stabilization, the installation of erosion blankets and rock energy dissipators will allow the gully to repair itself, reach equilibrium, and reduce the amount of sediment reaching the Estero. The fencing is exempt under Section 15303(e),

construction of small facilities and structures, since the fencing is not extensive and fencing will allow for the areas planted with native vegetation to reach maturity while protecting these areas from grazing animals. The replanting is exempt under Section 15304, minor alteration of land, since the planting of native vegetation for three different natural areas is small in scale and will address the plant needs of those three areas, assist with the stabilization of the project areas, and will replace non-native species.

### **Cumulative Impacts**

Cumulative Impacts: staff has also assessed the environmental effects of the various projects and found no substantial evidence of a fair argument that the projects when taken together, along with past and probable future activities, will have a significant affect on the environment, other than a positive benefit to the environment.

Based on the foregoing, staff believes the project exempt from CEQA review. Following the Conservancy's action, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.