

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 24, 2008

**WILDLAKE RANCH, DUFF RANCH, AND ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON STATE
PARK INTERIM MANAGEMENT PLAN**

File No. 08-014

Project Manager: Michelle Jespersen

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$250,000 to the Land Trust of Napa County to prepare an Interim Management Plan for the stewardship and management of the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties, Robert Louis Stevenson State Park, and other public and private lands in the vicinity and modification of conditions of prior Conservancy authorization of grant to the Land Trust of Napa County for acquisition of the Wildlake Ranch.

LOCATION: Northeast of Calistoga and northwest of Angwin in Napa County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Planning Area Map](#)

Exhibit 3: [Photographs of Planning Area Properties](#)

Exhibit 4: [April 27, 2006 Staff Recommendation](#)

Exhibit 5: [Letters of Support](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby:

1. Authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred and fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000) to the Land Trust of Napa County (Land Trust) to prepare an Interim Management Plan for the stewardship and management of the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties, Robert Louis Stevenson State Park, and other public and private lands in the vicinity. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:
 - a. Prior to disbursement of funds, the Land Trust shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer a detailed work plan and budget by task, a schedule, and a list of any contractors or consultants to be employed in this project.

- b. The Land Trust shall contribute matching funds of at least \$41,915 and any additional amount, beyond the matching funds and the Conservancy grant, needed to complete the Interim Management Plan.
2. Modifies its April 27, 2006 authorization for the disbursement of up to \$2,000,000 to the Land Trust for acquisition of the Wildlake Ranch by amending condition 3 of that authorization so that it reads as follows (added language in italics):

The Land Trust shall manage and maintain the property in accordance with a the Wildlake Ranch Stewardship Plan reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer, *until such time that an 'Interim Management Plan' for the Wildlake Ranch and other adjacent public and private properties has been prepared, with additional Conservancy funding under separate Conservancy authorization and conditions, and has been reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer, after which the Land Trust shall manage and maintain the property in accordance with the Interim Management Plan.*”

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 Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy.
3. The Land Trust is a private nonprofit organization existing under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff requests authorization to disburse up to \$250,000 to the Land Trust of Napa County (Land Trust) to prepare an Interim Management Plan (IMP) for the stewardship and management of the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties, Robert Louis Stevenson (RLS) State Park, and other public and private lands in the vicinity. The Conservancy provided \$2,000,000 to the Land Trust to acquire the 3,045-acre Wildlake Ranch property in April 2006. Through a separate staff recommendation at the April 2008 Conservancy meeting, staff is also requesting authorization to disburse up to \$1,000,000 to the Land Trust to assist in acquiring the 1,000-acre Duff Ranch property (See Project History section below). As a result of these acquisitions, a contiguous stretch of land will be set aside for conservation purposes that encompasses the Duff ranch, the Wildlake Ranch, RLS State Park, and the State School lands (which are properties held in trust by the State for the benefit of public schools and managed by the State Lands Commission). In addition, the California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) has identified a limited area of private property in the immediate vicinity as a future, strategic addition to RLS State Park (Exhibit 2). In total, conservation of all of these lands would create over 12,000 acres of open space in northeast Napa County. A planning grant to the Land Trust for the IMP will support the

vision of the Land Trust and State Parks to integrate management of public and privately-owned lands in an area of high biodiversity, extensive natural resource values, and key regional trail connections.

The purpose of the IMP is to provide recommendations to the Land Trust and State Parks for integrated management of the properties that address alternatives for resource management, public access, and financing of operations. The completed plan will include detailed information on vegetative management for native and non-native species, roads and trails, watershed and aquatic habitat protection and enhancement, and recreational uses. The plan will also present background information on the history and long-term vision for the lands, the purpose of the IMP, a map, and descriptive information about the location and setting. Existing resource data will be combined with additional information that will be collected on geology, history, flora and fauna, invasive species, watershed, terrestrial habitats, watershed and aquatic habitat, current uses, adjacent property owners, and public access. The plan will include a geospatial data analysis component; the Land Trust intends to develop a geospatial database using the existing and new data collected as described above.

The plan is considered interim because it is envisioned that State Parks or some other public land management entity will eventually manage the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties along with RLS State Park. As such, the IMP will provide recommendations for interim public uses that would be consistent with transferring lands owned by the Land Trust to an appropriate public land management entity and will provide baseline information and alternatives for management. The IMP will also include a discussion of funding sources for securing and managing these properties and the potential impacts and cost-benefit to the various possible managing entities.

The Land Trust plans to hire a consulting firm with experience developing land management plans that address resource protection and public use. The consultants will work with Land Trust staff to compile and analyze information on natural resources, access, recreational use, and fire management. Support and guidance for the IMP will come primarily from an advisory group composed of ten to twelve technical specialists and representatives from the primary stakeholders, including the Land Trust, Napa County Regional Parks and Open Space District, State Parks, the Conservancy, other state and local resource agencies, academic institutions, conservation groups, and private landowners. During development of the IMP, the Land Trust will also solicit public input from target groups to introduce the vision of an expanded park and provide opportunity for public participation. The timeline for this project is two years.

Formed in 1976, the Land Trust is a privately supported nonprofit organization with over 1,600 members dedicated to protecting the County's most important open space and agricultural lands. Its small staff has participated in permanently protecting nearly 50,000 acres, of which over 20,000 are covered by conservation easements. The staff and volunteers monitor the conditions on their properties, conduct frequent public hikes, and provide environmental education for local schoolchildren; however, the Land Trust does not currently have the capacity to manage large tracts of land over the long term. The IMP will facilitate the Land Trust's longer term vision of transferring the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties to State Parks or another appropriate public land management entity.

Site Description:

RLS State Park, the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties, and State School lands are located near the junction of Sonoma, Napa, and Lake Counties and form the westernmost territory within the Blue Ridge-Berryessa Conservation Partnership (Exhibit 2). This regional partnership within Napa, Lake, Solano and Yolo Counties provides for the conservation and protection of one of the most important remaining intact natural areas in the State. The planning area also represents one of the largest tracts of protected open space in the northern San Francisco Bay Area. From the area's high points, including Mt. St. Helena which at 4,343 feet is the tallest peak in the San Francisco Bay area, visitors can view active geysers in the hills of Sonoma and Lake Counties, the picturesque Lassen, Shasta and Sierra Nevada mountains to the north and east, as well as Mt. Tamalpais and Mt. Diablo to the south. The area includes undisturbed hills and peaks within the 5,270-acre RLS State Park, 3,045-acre Wildlake Ranch and 1,000-acre Duff Ranch. Hiking paths of the existing state park and jeep roads of the former hunting ranches form a circuitous network of trails with excellent potential for multiple recreational uses and stunning views from and of the rugged hills. (See Photos, Exhibit 3).

The planning area contains a variety of unique geologic features, water resources, biological habitats, and abundant wildlife. Geologically, the landscape of the planning area sits atop bedrock of volcanic origins; rocky outcrops and massive stones are prevalent, especially in the upper elevations. Five year-round springs supply three creeks of which two are sources for Bell Creek, a year-round stream that flows into Bell Canyon Reservoir and serves as the municipal watershed for the City of St. Helena. The Wildlake Ranch property alone has over five miles of perennial streams that straddle the Napa River Watershed and Putah Creek/Cache Creek Watershed, both of which encompass the entire planning area. The Napa River Watershed is home to most of the residents and developed areas in the county. It is estimated that 95 percent or more of the entire population of Napa County live in the Napa River Watershed. Reservoirs in the watershed include Lake Hennessey, Lake Milliken, and Bell Canyon Reservoir.

Multiple significant habitat types can be found within the planning area, including but not limited to mixed conifer forests, mixed oak woodlands, pine oak woodlands, and savannah. The lands also host locally rare and special status species such as the narrow-anthered California brodiaea (*Brodiaea californica*) and Cobb Mountain Lupine (*Lubinus sericatus*). Botanical surveys have also confirmed the presence of non-native plant species, including two that are considered to have severe ecological impacts on native environments: yellow star thistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*) and Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus ameniacus*). While data on fauna are somewhat lacking, historical accounts and bird surveys reveal the presence of megafauna typical for the area such as black-tail deer, coyote, fox, mountain lion, black bear, golden eagles and a variety of bird species including pygmy owls, great horned owls, and Mountain Quail. Finally, the area is also rich in cultural resources as the Wildlake Ranch vicinity was once home to Native Americans. Obsidian flakes, grinding stones, and other artifacts of Native American use have been found on the property.

The Land Trust originally identified Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch as high priority areas for acquisition from the findings of two natural resource studies in which it was an active participant: (1) The Nature Conservancy's January 2003 "Conserving the Landscapes of Napa County" that evaluated the biological and physical resources of the area, along with the existing array of protected, undeveloped, and developing properties, and (2) Napa County's November 2005 "Baseline Data Report," that identified a mosaic of sensitive biotic communities in the mountains rising east of the Napa Valley. Most of the planning area, therefore, is categorized by

The Nature Conservancy as high priority core habitat; the remainder is categorized as priority buffer habitat. Its value is enhanced due to the fact that it seamlessly connects to RLS State Park and extensive conservation lands in the North Coast Range in Sonoma County. The project area overlays one of the southern reaches on the east side of the Napa Valley, an area referred to as the “Napa Range.” It is of sufficient scale to serve the habitat needs of many terrestrial animal species and recreational needs of local residents and area visitors.

The State School lands, which are contiguous with RLS and Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties could serve as a link with the state park to the north and provide additional habitat. As stated above, the School lands are properties held in trust by the State for the benefit of public schools and managed by the State Lands Commission. Finally, State Parks has identified an additional area currently under private ownership as a strategic addition to RLS State Park. This property is proposed to be included in the IMP planning area for this reason only.

Project History:

On April 27, 2006, the Conservancy approved a \$2,000,000 grant to the Land Trust for the acquisition of the Wildlake Ranch property because of its high habitat values, water resources, and proximity to RLS State Park and other public lands. This acquisition was completed and escrow closed in July 2006. As required by the April 2006 Conservancy authorization of funding for the Wildlake Ranch acquisition, the Land Trust prepared a “Wildlake Ranch Stewardship Plan” that described the actions that the Land Trust would take annually to monitor and maintain existing Wildlake Ranch natural resources and to describe any natural resource-compatible public access proposed for the property. The April 2006 authorization also required that the Land Trust manage and maintain the property in compliance with that stewardship plan. (See April 27, 2006 staff recommendation, Exhibit 4).

The Wildlake Ranch Stewardship Plan is limited in scope to the Wildlake Ranch property and does not take into account the surrounding natural resources or public access opportunities. It was not prepared on a regional scale or with the regional perspective that is proposed for the IMP. Once prepared, the IMP will provide a detailed plan that covers a much broader area including stewardship of the Wildlake Ranch property. Accordingly, the current proposed Conservancy resolution serves to modify the prior Wildlake Ranch Conservancy authorization to allow for the Land Trust to manage and maintain the property in compliance with the IMP, once the IMP has been completed by the Land Trust and approved by the Conservancy under this proposed authorization.

Through a separate staff recommendation at the April 2008 Conservancy meeting, staff is also requesting Conservancy authorization to disburse up to \$1,000,000 to the Land Trust to purchase the Duff Ranch property. As stated above and explained in further detail in the Duff Ranch acquisition staff recommendation, the Duff Ranch acquisition is another critical piece for habitat conservation, watershed protection, and regional connectivity.

The Land Trust is working with State Parks on the potential addition of both Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch to RLS State Park. State Parks staff identified both properties as among its highest priority for park expansion in the Bay Area, though current budget limitations preclude the transfer. In order to complete planning that State Parks would like to have in place prior to any land transfer, the Land Trust intends to prepare an “Interim Management Plan” to meet State Parks’s standards.

The Land Trust has already helped acquire key additions to RLS State Park. These additions include Stevenson’s “Honeymoon Cottage” site, as well as the dramatic Palisades Trail and major portions of the Oathill Mine Trail that are now used by hikers and nature enthusiasts. The Land Trust’s additions comprise over 2,000 acres to date and have nearly doubled the size of the park. The addition of Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch would again double the size of the existing RLS State Park.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$250,000
The Land Trust of Napa County	<u>\$41,915</u>
Total Project Cost	\$291,915

Conservancy funding is expected to come from appropriations to the Conservancy in fiscal years 2004/05 and 2005/06 from the “California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002” (Proposition 40) for the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. Proposition 40 funds may be used for the deployment, protection, and development of land resources in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project provides for the planning needed in connection with the acquisitions of the Wildlake Ranch and the Duff Ranch to ensure the appropriate use, management, and protection of the natural resources associated with those properties and with the adjacent conservation properties. As discussed below, the project is also consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21. Finally, Proposition 40 also requires the Conservancy to give priority to grant projects with matching funds. The Land Trust will contribute almost \$42,000 to the proposed project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with the provisions of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31160-31165, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area to help achieve stated goals.

The proposed project will carry out the goals identified by Section 31162. It will facilitate public access to, within, and around the bay and ridgetops, in an environmentally sensitive manner (subsection (a)), and it will aid in the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural habitats, connecting corridors, watershed, scenic areas and other open space resources of regional importance (subsection (b)). In particular, the proposed IMP will provide policy recommendations to the Land Trust and State Parks on how best to manage the natural habitats, the watershed, and open space resources while providing for eventual public access and Ridge Trail connections, and improving regional trail connections from the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties, to RLS State Park, and other public lands in the vicinity.

The project will also serve to achieve the goal stated in subsection (c) of Section 31162 because it will assist in the implementation of policies and programs of adopted plans of local governments. The Napa County General Plan identifies lands within the proposed IMP planning

area for agricultural and open space with the principal goal of conserving and improving wildlife and fishery habitat in cooperation with governmental agencies, private associations, and individuals in Napa County. The Napa County Regional Parks and Open Space District in cooperation with the Association of Bay Area Governments has also identified lands within the IMP planning area as a priority conservation area. The development of the IMP, in consultation with an advisory group of local stakeholders, will help realize these goals.

Consistent with Section 31163(a), through this grant, the Conservancy will cooperate with a nonprofit land trust and other interested parties in identifying and adopting long-term resource and outdoor recreation goals for the San Francisco Bay Area, specific to Napa County.

Finally, this project is appropriate for prioritization under the selection criteria set forth in Section 31163(c) in that: (1) it is supported by adopted local or regional plans, such as the Napa County General Plan; (2) it includes multi-jurisdictional participation from state and county agencies, local conservation organizations, and special districts, and serves a regional constituency from multiple counties in the northern San Francisco Bay area and beyond; (3) it can be implemented in a timely way because of the strong support from all jurisdictions and the readiness of the grantee; and (4) it includes matching funds from the Land Trust as described under "Project Financing" above.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop a plan for the restoration and enhancement of approximately 12,000 acres of upland habitat in Napa County.

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective J** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop a plan to prevent, control, or eradicate non-native invasive species that threaten important habitat in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective H** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop a plan for future regionally significant public access trails and community connectors, including links between regional trails and urban communities.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 20, 2007, 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 is supported by State Senator Pat Wiggins, State Assembly member Noreen Evans, State Parks, Napa County Regional Parks and Open Space

District, Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, the International Mountain Bicycling Association and local chapters of Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, and California Native Plant Society (See Exhibit 5).

4. **Location:** The project area consists of over 12,000 acres in Napa County, one of the nine Bay Area counties.
5. **Need:** With a planning area of approximately 12,000 acres, the scope of this project is significant. There is little to no funding for conservation planning currently available from State Parks. The Conservancy has the legal authority, financial resources, and a track record for providing valuable technical assistance in natural resource conservation and public access planning for large-scale projects such as this one.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The land within the planning area for the IMP has been identified by state agencies, The Nature Conservancy, and other regional conservation organizations including the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council as a high priority for conservation and recreation. Thousands of visitors from throughout the Bay Area already enjoy use of the trails at RLS State Park; the IMP process will result in the potential for thousands of visitors and hikers to also enjoy the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch lands in a network of regional trails.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** State Parks identified the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties as high priority acquisitions because of their habitat and recreation values and proximity to the existing RLS State Park. The IMP will produce key recommendations and management conclusions that will facilitate a timely transfer of these lands to State Parks or other appropriate public entity and allow for public access to the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties more quickly.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed authorization will guide stewardship and management of lands for natural resource protection, restoration and enhancement, water quality and watershed protection, public access, and recreational opportunities.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
10. **Innovation:** The proposed project is innovative because: (1) the magnitude of the planning area (12,000 acres), (2) the potential to assemble a unique coalition of nonprofit conservation organizations, public entities, and private landowners to create a plan for protection and appropriate public use of this area and involve the public in this process, and (3) the proposal for the IMP to assess financial strategies for long-term ownership and management that may lead to unprecedented land management partnerships.
11. **Readiness:** The Land Trust is eager to realize its eventual goal of transferring the Wildlake Ranch and Duff Ranch properties to an appropriate land management entity. To that end, the Land Trust is poised to begin the planning process in order to facilitate this transition.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
14. **Cooperation:** The process for developing the IMP will include an advisory group made up of technical specialists and representatives from the Land Trust, Napa County Regional Parks and Open Space District, State Parks, the Conservancy, other state and local resource

agencies, academic institutions, conservation groups, and private landowners. The Land Trust will also solicit input from the public during development of the IMP.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the following sections of 14 Cal. Code of Regulations: (1) Section 15262 in that it involves only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted or funded; and (2) Section 15306 in that it involves basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities which will not result in any disturbance to an environmental resource, and which will be undertaken as part of a study leading to an action which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. Staff will file a “Notice of Exemption” upon approval of the project.