

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 4, 2008

SONOMA MOUNTAIN RANCH ACQUISITION

File No. 08-137-1
Project Manager: Maxene Spellman/Carol Arnold

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,500,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, toward the acquisition of the 283-acre Sonoma Mountain Ranch, for the protection of open space, natural resources and for public access consistent with those purposes.

LOCATION: Sonoma Mountain, unincorporated Sonoma 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: [Linkage with other Properties](#)

Exhibit 3: [Photographs](#)

Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)

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 authorizes the disbursement of up to one million five hundred thousand dollars (\$1,500,000) to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (District), for the purpose of acquiring Sonoma County Assessor Parcel Nos. 136-190-003, 008, 015, and 016, consisting of 283 acres and known as the Sonoma Mountain Ranch Property, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the District shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“Executive Officer”):

- 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 District shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
 3. The District shall permanently dedicate the property for habitat preservation, open space and public access consistent with the protection of natural resources, through an appropriate 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 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 Program.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends authorization to provide up to \$1,500,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (District) toward the estimated \$9,950,000 cost of acquiring the 283-acre Sonoma Mountain Ranch (Property) in southern Sonoma County. The District is working closely with the Sonoma Land Trust (Land Trust). The District would purchase fee title to the Property, while the Land Trust is managing the negotiations and due diligence. The District would manage the Property for resource protection and public access.

Sonoma Mountain Ranch occupies the very top of Sonoma Mountain, one of the most prominent geologic features in the north San Francisco Bay area. Centrally located between five of Sonoma County’s nine cities and encircled by three major highways, the 2,463-foot mountain is home to a rich assemblage of plants and wildlife, several of which are state or federally listed as threatened or endangered. Located on the eastern edge of the coastal fog belt, the Mountain’s climate is transitional between cool, moist conditions and the more extreme conditions of the inland valleys, producing a unique ecosystem supporting great diversity (Exhibit 3: Photographs).

The Property represents an important piece of the puzzle in efforts to conserve the outstanding natural, scenic and recreational resources of Sonoma Mountain. Once purchased, the Property will link the adjacent Jack London State Historic Park (Jack London SHP) to hundreds of acres of land already protected (Exhibit 2: Linkages with other Properties). These linkages will assure

the continuing viability of oak woodlands, grasslands, redwood and fir forests, and stream corridors, while providing opportunities for increased public access.

Like Mount Tamalpais, Mount Diablo and Mount Saint Helena, Sonoma Mountain is one of the defining landscapes of the Bay Area, but unlike those peaks, its resources are extremely threatened. With its sweeping views and close proximity to five growing cities, Sonoma Mountain is highly desirable real estate for low-density residential development and vineyards, both of which are a leading cause of habitat fragmentation in Sonoma County. Compounding this development pressure, the mountain is easily accessible from major roads and only 50 miles from downtown San Francisco.

This project would add another important parcel to the assemblage of already protected lands on Sonoma Mountain, bringing the District and the Land Trust one step closer to their goal of preserving in perpetuity the region's unique natural, scenic and recreational resources.

Site Description: Sonoma Mountain is one of the most prominent landforms in the north San Francisco Bay region. It lies approximately 50 miles due north of San Francisco and roughly equidistant from the cities of Santa Rosa (to the north), Rohnert Park and Cotati (to the northwest), Petaluma (to the southwest) and Sonoma (to the east). The 2,463-foot summit of the mountain is located on the Property, which lies immediately west of Jack London SHP. Visitors are greeted with outstanding views from the mountaintop, extending all the way to the Pacific Ocean, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, San Francisco Bay and the coast range.

Surrounded on most sides by human development and characterized by oak woodlands, grassland savannah, streams and redwood forests, Sonoma Mountain is an island refuge for wildlife. Habitats on the subject Property are similar to much of the rest of Sonoma Mountain which has been influenced by both coastal and inland climates, a factor that has produced a rich and diverse assemblage of flora and fauna.

At least nine different species of oak are found on Sonoma Mountain; four have been identified so far on the Property. Pacific madrone, bigleaf maple and California laurel are also found in abundance in the Mountain's oak woodlands. Due to the exceptionally high oak diversity, Sonoma Mountain supports a myriad of birds and other wildlife. Field studies document over 300 plant species and more than 80 bird species. Animals commonly observed include black-tailed deer, gray squirrel, raccoon, skunk and opossum. Less frequently, visitors have reported glimpses of the elusive bobcat and mountain lion.

Wetlands are also found on Sonoma Mountain. The Property contains three ponds fringed with tules and other wetland vegetation, and numerous springs, providing habitat for at least two species of special concern including the foothill yellow legged frog and the Western pond turtle. Multiple creeks have their headwaters near the Property, including Graham and Matanzas Creeks. A tributary to Sonoma Creek which drains into San Francisco Bay, Graham Creek has historically been home to significant runs of spawning steelhead. Surveys conducted in the mid-80's found anadromous fish populations to be in decline, but the stream is an excellent candidate for restoration.

Jack London SHP lies to the east of the subject Property. Other conservation properties adjoin the west, north and south boundaries. Access is via Sonoma Mountain Road and a road easement.

The Property formerly was used for grazing, although is no longer. A ranch compound comprised of a residence and associated outbuildings is located in the southwest corner of the Property. It is in severe disrepair and not habitable. A telecommunications facility located near the center of the Property is occupied by Sonoma County which hosts multiple emergency services providers, as well as PG&E and AT&T. Finally, PG&E owns an easement that will not impact any of the property's natural resources because it passes through annual grasslands, passing from an existing access road northeasterly to the adjacent Jack London SHP.

Project History: Sonoma Mountain was part of the ancestral homeland of the Coast Miwok people, and figured prominently in their creation story, which describes the handiwork of the Miwok deity, Coyote-man. According to the story, Coyote-man sits perched on the top of Oon'-nah-pi (Sonoma Mountain) while he fashions the plants and animals so characteristic of the region before creating the Miwok people. Surveys have located at least one archaeological site on the Property, although considering the importance of the summit to the Miwok, other sites are likely.

With the arrival of Europeans in the early 1800s, southern Sonoma County became the farthest outpost of the Spanish Empire, facing the Russian settlements along the Sonoma Coast. After Mexico gained independence, Sonoma Mountain was at the center of the vast landholdings of General Mariano Vallejo. Historic buildings of that period have been preserved at the Petaluma Adobe and Sonoma Barracks, now both located within historic parks.

The late 1840s brought California's brief independence, then annexation to the United States, followed by the Gold Rush, which lured thousands of newcomers to Northern California. Homesteaders and ranchers settled on or near Sonoma Mountain. Mining for coal and other minerals also occurred during that period.

In the early 1900s, writer Jack London purchased a large ranch on northeastern Sonoma Mountain. His ranch is preserved as Jack London State Historic Park. Historians are aware that London frequented other parts of Sonoma Mountain, including Graham Creek which is located on the Property. Then known as Wild Water Creek, the stream served as an inspiration for some of London's writings.

For many years, relatively large cattle ranches helped maintain sizeable areas of open space and natural habitat on Sonoma Mountain. However, pressure to subdivide these ranches and sell the resulting lots continues to this day. The Property is located within the prestigious Sonoma Mountain appellation with some of the finest grape growing land in California. Switching agricultural operations to higher yield, more intensive use is an appealing option for ranchers on the Mountain. Vineyard and home development threaten to further fragment habitat and degrade natural resources.

Other disturbances threaten the viability of Sonoma Mountain's ecosystem. The spread of non-

native, invasive plants, such as thistles and aquatic weeds, introduced and inadvertently aided by human activity, out-compete native vegetation, lowering the ecological integrity of the natural system. Incompatible grazing practices in sensitive riparian zones further degrade water quality by decreasing the amount of native vegetation cover. Sudden Oak Death is also taking a toll on the Mountain's oak and tanoak populations. Acquisition of the property would allow many of these problems to be addressed.

Conservationists have long focused on projects that would preserve the important scenic, natural and recreational resources of Sonoma Mountain. Land protection has involved no fewer than ten different organizations, agencies, and private landowners working together on twenty-one separate real estate transactions to assemble a range of preserved lands totaling over 5,500 acres. These lands include state and regional parks, conservation easements over private ranch land, a university preserve, and a city-owned preserve.

The Property lies in the center of this complex of protected lands. On its western boundary is the 410-acre Fairfield Osborne Preserve. Originally a project of The Nature Conservancy, it is now owned and managed by Sonoma State University, which uses it for research and environmental education. In 2004, 190 adjacent acres were added to the preserve. Both parcels are managed under conservation easements owned by The Nature Conservancy and the District.

Between 1999 and 2005, four properties on the Property's northern boundary, comprising about 455 acres, were preserved. Together, they create a chain of protected land. Jacob's Ranch contains a vast mosaic of diverse plant communities with open grasslands rising to 1,500 feet. Cooper's Grove protects one of the last and largest remaining redwood groves in the area. The Skiles and Wilroth properties are large parcels protected by District easements but portions have been donated or acquired to achieve a long-awaited public trail that will traverse the mountain. The Conservancy awarded grants to the District for planning (May 18, 2005) and construction (April 24, 2008) of the North Slope Sonoma Mountain Ridge Trail that will traverse all these properties and connect to Jack London SHP. The North Slope trail will also include the construction of a spur trail leading to the subject Property's northern boundary. From this point where the two properties adjoin, it's approximately one half mile to the top of Sonoma Mountain on the Sonoma Mountain Ranch Property. It's expected that once the Property is acquired, development of a trail to the mountain top should be feasible.

Jack London SHP lies on the Property's eastern boundary. This 800 acre park was first created in 1959, when a small portion of Jack London's 1,400-acre Beauty Ranch was acquired by the state. Additional acreage has been added over the years, including many of the ranch buildings and the cottage where London wrote much of his later work.

On the Property's southern boundary, a 630-acre ranch property is protected by a conservation easement held by The Nature Conservancy. The property owner has agreed to donate a trail easement if a connection can be made to Jack London SHP. This would be feasible once the Property is acquired.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 1,500,000
Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District	8,450,000
Total Project Cost	\$9,950,000

The anticipated source of funds is the fiscal year 08/09 appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84). These funds may be used for the acquisition of fee interest in property in accordance with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project is acquisition of fee title of property for the purpose of natural resource and open space protection. As discussed below, the project is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of the Division 21. Proposition 84 requires that for acquisition projects that protect natural resources, priority be given to projects that meet specified criteria. The proposed acquisition satisfies four of the five specified criteria:

1. **Landscape/habitat linkages:** The Property links with several other protected properties all of which contain important oak woodland, wetland and grassland habitat.
2. **Watershed protection:** Headwaters of several Sonoma Mountain creeks are located on or near this Property. The protection of the upper watershed is necessary to assure the sustainability of downstream resources.
3. **Properties that support relatively large areas of under-protected major habitat types:** The Property exhibits outstanding natural resources, including grasslands, oak woodlands and wetlands, all of which are major habitat types suffering significant losses.
4. **Properties for which there is a non-state matching contribution toward the acquisition costs:** The District will have contributed well over three fourths of the project’s costs.

Finally, as required by Proposition 84, Conservancy staff has submitted to the Resources Agency and has posted on the Conservancy’s website an explanation as to how the proposed acquisition meets the criteria of that section.

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 states that the Conservancy may award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area to help to achieve stated goals. This project is located entirely within Sonoma County, one of the designated nine counties of the San Francisco Bay Area.

Consistent with Section 31162(a), the project would improve public access around the ridgetops by offering opportunities for the completion of a regional ridge trail system. Consistent with Section 31162(b), the proposed project will help “to protect...natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance” by serving as an important link in efforts to preserve Sonoma Mountain’s diverse and abundant plants and wildlife. Consistent with Section 31162(c), the project will assist in the

implementation of the District's adopted "Connecting Communities and Lands, A Long Range Acquisition Plan." Finally, consistent with Section 31162(d), the project will "provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational... purposes." Sonoma Mountain Ranch is equidistant from five growing Sonoma County cities, and only 50 miles from San Francisco.

The project satisfies four of the criteria for determining project priority under Section 31163(c), as follows: it is supported by adopted local or regional plans as mentioned above; it serves a regional constituency in that acquisition of the Property will provide opportunities for the construction of trail links that could be utilized by visitors from the entire San Francisco Bay region; it can be completed within several months; it provides the opportunity to protect natural and scenic resources that would otherwise be compromised if the property were sold as one or more rural estates or for vineyard use; and, it includes matching funds.

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

Consistent with Goal 10, Objective D of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would result in the acquisition of 287 acres of upland wildlife habitat and open space.

Consistent with Goal 11, Objective C, the project would increase lands available for public access and provide corridors for trails.

**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:

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:** Protection of Sonoma Mountain, including this Property, has widespread public support, including that of Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, Assemblyman Jared Huffman, Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, Sonoma Mountain Preservation, Sonoma Ecology Center, Valley of the Moon Natural Historic Association, Landpaths, the County of Sonoma, and Bill Kortum (Exhibit 4: Project Letters).
4. **Location:** The project is located on the summit of Sonoma Mountain in southern Sonoma County and is within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Program Conservancy.
5. **Need:** The District is in need of participants to help implement its plan entitled "Connecting Communities and Lands, A Long Range Acquisition Plan." This project is an important component of the District's efforts to protect the abundant natural, scenic and recreational resources of Sonoma Mountain.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Protecting habitat for state and federally listed threatened or

endangered species is essential to the animals' recovery. Sonoma Mountain Ranch is known to support several of these species, including the foothill yellow-legged frog, California steelhead, and the Western pond turtle. Additionally, this project will provide opportunities for the development of public access trails that will link with the Bay Area Ridge Trail and Jack London SHP, both enjoyed by visitors from all over the Bay Area and beyond.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** This project must move forward now in order to avoid future threats to the Property's important natural resources. The landowner has agreed to sell the Property, an opportunity that will likely be lost if the purchase is delayed. Funds are in place which would also be lost if the project does not move ahead.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** This project will result in the protection of important oak woodlands, wetlands and threatened and endangered species habitat. Additionally, acquisition of the Property will increase opportunities for public access and will preserve an important scenic resource.
9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
10. **Readiness:** The Property owner has indicated a willingness to sell and negotiations must proceed in a timely manner. The District and the Land Trust have identified most of the funds and are ready to move forward with the project.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy has been actively engaged in protecting the resources of Sonoma County, including those of Sonoma Mountain. Most recently, in April, 2008, the Conservancy helped fund the construction of a segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail which will traverse the north slope of Sonoma Mountain.
12. **Cooperation:** This project is a cooperative effort of the District and the Land Trust, with support from multiple agencies and organizations.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA: Acquisition of the Sonoma Ranch Property is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations (CCR) Sections 15313 and 15325. Section 15313 exempts acquisition of lands for fish and wildlife conservation purposes where the intent of the acquisition is to preserve the land in its natural condition. The proposed project is also exempt pursuant to 14 CCR Section 15325 due to the fact that it is an acquisition of land to preserve existing natural conditions and open space. Upon Conservancy approval of the proposed authorization, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.