

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 22, 2011

BAY AREA RIDGE TRAIL: CALABAZAS CREEK TRAIL PLAN

File No. 11-038-01
Project Manager: Betsy Wilson

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District for planning and design of a segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail located in the Calabazas Creek Open Space Preserve in unincorporated Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Off Highway 12 between Santa Rosa and Glen Ellen, Sonoma County (Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [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 disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District for planning and design of a segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail located in the Calabazas Creek Open Space Preserve in unincorporated Sonoma County, subject to the condition that no Conservancy funds shall be disbursed until the Executive Officer of the Conservancy has approved in writing a final work plan, including a budget and schedule, and any contractors proposed to be used.”

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 current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

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 improvement of public access to, within, and around the bay, coast, ridgetops and urban open spaces of the San Francisco Bay area.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

This authorization would provide up to \$100,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (District) for planning and design of a segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail (Ridge Trail) located in the Calabazas Creek Open Space Preserve (Preserve) in unincorporated Sonoma County. The proposed project will plan and design an approximately three-mile trail segment along the planned alignment of the Ridge Trail, plus a connector trail and staging area that will connect the floor of Sonoma Valley with the rim of the Mayacamas Mountains. Trail implementation would provide the public with an opportunity to hike, bike, and ride for extended lengths of trails along ridgelines that afford spectacular views.

The 1,280-acre Preserve, located off Highway 12 between Santa Rosa and Glen Ellen, is one of the few properties that extend from the Sonoma/Napa county line at the top of the ridge almost down to Highway 12 on the valley floor (Exhibit 1). The property was purchased by the District in 2004 as a future addition to Sugarloaf Ridge State Park. However, California State Parks has not been able to move forward with acquisition of the property and is unlikely to be able to do so in the foreseeable future. Currently, the Preserve is only accessible to the public via escorted outings, but the District would like to open the Preserve to general public access. The proposed trail design project is the first step in developing a trail system which will enable the District to open the Preserve to the public.

The proposed Calabazas Creek trail system will provide important components of the Ridge Trail system. While the planning process will more clearly define the alignment of the trail system, it is estimated that the planned trail segments will be six miles in length. Approximately half of the mileage will be a connector trail from a staging area on the Sonoma Valley floor to the Ridge Trail. The other half is an approximately three-mile segment along the rim of the Mayacamas Mountains, which follows the planned alignment of and will be dedicated as the Ridge Trail. With the addition of the proposed Ridge Trail segment, the overall Ridge Trail would be separated by only one parcel from already-existing segments of the Ridge Trail through Sugarloaf Ridge State Park and Hood Mountain Regional Park beyond that. The project will also plan and design a staging area on the Sonoma Valley floor in a reclaimed quarry large enough to provide staging for hikers, bikers, and equestrians.

The proposed trail system will provide a dramatic, aesthetic experience for trail users. The Preserve contains numerous ridges and valleys that rise to a prominent mountain ridgeline containing grasslands, oak woodlands and dense forest. The property is characterized by a deep canyon on its southern side containing Calabazas Creek, a major tributary to Sonoma Creek. Ridgelines high on top of the Mayacamas Mountains provide visitors with sweeping views of Sonoma and Napa Valleys and the rest of the Bay Area. From the ridge, trail users will be able to see the Sutro Towers, Oakland Bay Bridge, Golden Gate Bridge, and on a clear day, the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The project will also provide a host of important natural resource benefits. The project would realign the Nun's Canyon Road/trail through the Preserve. Realignment of this trail, which requires regular repair and maintenance following flood events, would reduce the sediment load into Calabazas Creek, a tributary to Sonoma Creek and a designated critical habitat area which supports endangered steelhead. In addition, sensitive alignment of a sustainable trail through the Preserve will maintain key linkages for a major wildlife corridor that stretches from the Mayacamas Range across Sonoma Valley to Sonoma Mountain.

The proposed project will also include the following tasks: 1) conducting natural and cultural resource assessments of the trail and surrounding areas to establish a baseline against which the effectiveness of management actions can be monitored and adaptive management implemented if necessary; 2) developing an operation and maintenance (OM) manual to guide long-term stewardship of the trail and surrounding resources, including a monitoring and adaptive management plan. The OM manual will contain the detail needed for implementation by community volunteers and include a volunteer plan that describes volunteer opportunities for implementation, monitoring, maintenance, education, fundraising, and community relations; 3) developing an outreach strategy to engage the local community to engage them in funding and volunteer commitments for project implementation and long term stewardship; and 4) documenting the planning and community engagement process as a model for a cost-effective, resource-sensitive, community-based approach to trail development that integrates biodiversity protection.

Since 1990, when Sonoma County voters approved the creation of the District and a sales tax funding source for acquisition, the District has preserved over 83,000 acres of land and has been ranked by the Farmland Preservation Report as one of the top five farmland and open space preservation programs in the Nation. The District has been a leader in providing public access to Sonoma County open spaces, and is a major partner in the creation of the Ridge Trail. The District has received and successfully managed numerous grants from the Conservancy for a variety of projects including land acquisitions, resource management plans, trail construction, and trail planning.

Site Description: The 1,280-acre Calabazas Creek Open Space Preserve, located off Highway 12 between Santa Rosa and Glen Ellen, is one of the few properties that extend from the Sonoma/Napa county line at the top of the ridge down nearly to Highway 12 on the valley floor. A trail through the Preserve would start at 400 feet above sea level along Calabazas Creek and ascend over 1,500 feet to the rim of the Mayacamas Mountains. The property provides the only viable connection for the Ridge Trail from Sugarloaf Ridge State Park to the south. Representative photographs of the project area are provided in Exhibit 2.

The land includes a diversity of soil, vegetation, and topographic features which provide habitat for a wide range of important plant and animal species. Soil and topographic features include volcanic tuft basins, serpentine, rock outcrops, and cliff faces. Vegetation types include chaparral, mixed conifer, oak and madrone woodlands, wet meadows, redwood forest, and riparian vegetation. Numerous springs, annual streams, and perennial streams are found on the property, including a significant portion of Calabazas Creek and its associated riparian corridor and watershed. Calabazas Creek is a tributary of Sonoma Creek and is also designated critical habitat area which supports steelhead. The property also provides habitat for many species including mountain lion, deer, fox, and potentially bear.

Project History: The vision for the Bay Area Ridge Trail is a 500-mile multi-use (serving hikers, mountain bicyclists and equestrians), continuous trail that rings San Francisco Bay high on the ridgeline. Under the leadership of the Conservancy and the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council (BARTC) and supported by a diverse group of project participants, the Ridge Trail creates an interconnected system of open space and trails that provides recreational opportunities and scenic views to the public. Begun almost 20 years ago, over 325 miles of trail are now dedicated and/or open to the public in all nine Bay Area counties. This authorization will further the Conservancy's statutory and strategic goals of improving access around San Francisco Bay, and is consistent with previous Conservancy authorizations to negotiate and acquire trail easements, prepare trail construction plans and designs, and construct and open trail segments to the public.

In 2004, the District acquired Calabazas Creek Open Space Preserve at a cost of \$9.1 million (no Conservancy funding was provided). The Preserve was purchased as a future addition to Sugarloaf Ridge State Park. California State Parks has included the Calabazas Creek Open Space Preserve in the general plan for Sugarloaf Ridge State Park as an addition to Sugarloaf Ridge. However, State Parks has not been able to move forward with acquisition of the property and is unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future. Since the District will now be holding the property for some time, it plans to develop trails and open the property to the general public. The proposed trail planning project is the first step in opening the Preserve to the public.

The Conservancy has participated in conservation efforts in the area to close gaps in the Ridge Trail through acquisitions including a \$1.5 million grant toward the acquisition of the 292-acre Sonoma Mountain property, a \$200,000 grant for the acquisition of the 47-acre Skiles property, \$500,000 for planning and construction of the North Slope trail, and \$55,000 for planning of the East-Slope Sonoma Mountain trail. In addition, the District received \$1.25 million from the Conservancy to fund the Montini Open Space Preserve acquisition in 2005. The Calabazas Creek Trail Plan project is related to all of these projects in that they are primarily located in Sonoma Valley and involve the Ridge Trail to some degree.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District	<u>150,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$250,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for this grant is the fiscal year 2009/10 appropriation to the Conservancy from the "Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006" (Proposition 84). Proposition 84 funds may be used for the purposes of promoting access to and enjoyment of the urban open space resources in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy's enabling legislation. Consistent with the purposes of Proposition 84, the proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program (Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code), as described below.

Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 provides that the S.F. Bay Conservancy Program give priority to projects with matching funds. (Pub. Res. Code §31163(c)). The District has committed to providing matching funds for approximately sixty percent of the total cost of the project. In addition to funding, the District will contribute staff time for project management and

coordination, field work, permitting, preparing environmental documentation, and conducting fund-raising for the implementation phase. The Calabazas Creek Volunteer Patrol has and will continue to donate many hours per month in the patrol and maintenance of the property, including road/trail clearing, garbage removal, and patrol. BARTC staff will assist with facilitating meetings, organizing field tours, and other related events.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Funding of the project is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165, which addresses resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Pursuant to Section 31162(a) of the Public Resources Code, the Conservancy may award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area that will help to improve public access to, within, and around the ridgetops, consistent with the rights of private property owners, local plans, and without having a significant adverse impact on agricultural operations and environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife. Consistent with Section 31162(a), the proposed project is located in Sonoma County, one of the nine San Francisco Bay Area counties, would provide planning for a segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail, is not located in or near any agricultural operations, and will be designed to avoid significant adverse impacts to environmentally sensitive areas and is consistent with local planning efforts around the Ridge Trail.

Consistent with Section 31163(a), the Conservancy cooperates with nonprofit land trusts and other organizations in identifying and adopting long-term resource and outdoor recreational goals for the San Francisco Bay Area. Completion of the Ridge Trail is identified in (1) *The San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program Regional Needs Briefing Book (Bay Area Open Space Council, July 1999)* and (2) *400 Miles and Beyond: A Strategic Plan for Completing the Bay Area Ridge Trail (BARTC, 2006)*.

The Calabazas Creek Trail Plan project satisfies all of the criteria for determining project priority under 31163(c), since the project: 1) is supported by adopted regional plans including: the District's Acquisition and Strategic Plans, Bay Area Ridge Trail Council trails plan, the Sonoma County Outdoor Recreation Plan (pending), Sugarloaf Ridge State Park General Plan, the California Climate Adaptation Strategy, Sonoma Creek watershed plans, Association of Bay Area Governments "*Focus Our Vision*", and is consistent with the following plans: Sonoma County General Plan, the Sonoma Creek watershed TMDL, the Sonoma County Oak Woodland Management Plan (in prep), the Bay Area Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, and the Sonoma County Climate Action Plan; 2) serves a regional constituency by creating additional trail length for the Bay Area Ridge Trail; 3) can be implemented in a timely manner; 4) provides access that may be lost if the project is not quickly implemented due to the potential for degradation of the alignment; and 5) will include significant matching funds from the District.

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

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective F** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will plan for a portion of the Bay Area Ridge Trail that when implemented will add approximately three miles to the Bay Area Ridge Trail. The trail site is located in the Calabazas

Creek Open Space Preserve and will provide a connector trail from the Sonoma valley floor near Highway 12 to the the rim of the Mayacamas Mountains near the Sonoma/Napa County line.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted June 4, 2009, 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 proposed project is strongly supported by a diversity of entities including Congressman Mike Thompson, State Senator Noreen Evans, State Assemblyman Mike Allen, California Department of Parks and Recreation, the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, the County of Sonoma Board of Supervisors, Sonoma Land Trust, Sonoma Ecology Center, the California Native Plant Society, the Oakmont Hikers of Sonoma County, and the Volunteer Patrol Coordinator of Calabazas Creek Open Space Preserve. See project letters in Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located in Sonoma County, within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
5. **Need:** Without Conservancy funds, development of this trail and comprehensive management plan could be delayed significantly, which would also delay the opening of the property to general public access. In addition, the existing Preserve road would continue to degrade, especially during flood events, and sediment deposition into Calabazas Creek would continue, diminishing the creek's habitat value for endangered steelhead as well as the overall water quality in the watershed. The Conservancy is ideally suited to provide funding in a timely manner to ensure continuation of the project.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project is regionally significant for recreation in that it will provide planning for further construction of the Ridge Trail. When implemented, the trail plan would provide a critical link in the Ridge Trail that connects visitors from the Sonoma Valley floor to sweeping views along the Ridge Trail from the rim of the Mayacamas Mountains. This Ridge Trail segment would be about three miles long and, with its addition, the overall Ridge Trail would be separated by only one parcel from already existing segments of the Ridge Trail through Sugarloaf Ridge State Park and Hood Mountain Regional Park beyond that. Additionally, trail implementation would allow the Preserve to be opened for the public to enjoy.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project is not vulnerable to potential future sea level rise as the project elevations range from 400 to 2,000 feet above sea level and it is not located close to a shoreline.

Additional Criteria

8. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
9. **Readiness:** The project is ready to begin as soon as the necessary funding can be obtained.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
11. **Cooperation:** Completion of the Ridge Trail is one of the goals identified in the Bay Area Open Space Council’s *The San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program Regional Needs Briefing Book (July 1999)*. In addition, the proposed project is consistent with the BARTC’s adopted alignment and the report entitled *400 Miles and Beyond: A Strategic Plan for Completing the Bay Area Ridge Trail (2006)*.
12. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** Because of its climatic, topographic and geomorphic diversity, as well as the level of contiguous open space and connected habitats, the Preserve is an important geographic area in allowing species dispersal as an adaptive response to climate change. The habitats and species found on the Calabazas Preserve may shift in response to climate change, and various abiotic and biotic factors may change in and around the trail corridor. The alignment and design for the proposed trail will be sustainable and habitat protection and enhancement measures that will be incorporated into the trail alignment and design will not interfere with these expected adaptation processes (e.g., dispersal, population shifts). Stewardship and enhancement measures are expected to contribute to habitat and population resiliency.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** While the planning process will not result in green house gas (GHG) emissions, trail construction itself would likely result in minor emissions of GHG. The District intends to design the trail so as to minimize GHG emissions resulting from trail construction, operation and maintenance. In addition, the environmental documentation will quantify GHG emissions from trail construction and operation and identify additional minimization measures as necessary.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The project is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262 (“Feasibility and Planning Studies”), since it is for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted, or funded. The planning studies will include consideration of environmental and cultural factors, to avoid impacts to sensitive environmental and archeological resources.

Part of the project consists of basic data collection and resource evaluation activities, including those necessary for planning the trail alignment and preparing environmental review documents for construction of the trail. These information-collecting activities will be designed and implemented in a manner that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource and are thus categorically exempt from CEQA review, under CCR Section 15306 (“Information Collection”).

Upon approval, staff will file a CEQA Notice of Exemption for the project.