

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
March 26, 2015

SONOMA COUNTY LANDSMART ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENT

Project No. 15-002-01
Project Manager: Lisa Ames

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$37,000 to the Sonoma Resource Conservation District to prepare an environmental document to facilitate implementation of conservation practices throughout Sonoma County watersheds to improve water quality, reduce soil loss and protect fish and wildlife habitat.

LOCATION: Sonoma County (see Exhibit 1: Location Map and Sonoma RCD project areas)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Location Map and Sonoma RCD Project Areas](#)

Exhibit 2: [Letters of Support](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31165 and 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed thirty-seven thousand dollars (\$37,000) to the Sonoma Resource Conservation District (Sonoma RCD) to prepare an environmental document pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) that analyzes the environmental impacts of a suite of conservation practices proposed for properties throughout Sonoma County watersheds, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of funds, Sonoma RCD shall submit for the written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget and the names of any contractors it intends to employ for the project.”

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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding enhancement of coastal resources.

2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization would enable the Sonoma Resource Conservation District (Sonoma RCD) to prepare an environmental document pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) that analyzes the environmental impacts of its LandSmart conservation practices, which are intended to be implemented throughout Sonoma County watersheds, including the Russian River, Petaluma River, Sonoma Creek, Stemple Creek, and Gualala River watersheds. The Sonoma RCD anticipates the environmental document will likely be a mitigated negative declaration based on the experience of the Marin and Mendocino County RCDs in the implementation of their programs that comprise similar conservation practices. The Sonoma RCD’s LandSmart conservation practices are land management practices for agricultural lands that are designed to improve water quality and wildlife habitat.

Through its LandSmart Program, the Sonoma RCD works with agricultural landowners (growers and ranchers) to develop farm conservation plans that identify conservation management practices that can be implemented by the landowner, comply with local state and federal regulations, and help keep the land productive in the long term. The Sonoma RCD also develops local Integrated Watershed Management Plans that involve numerous stakeholders to determine how to more effectively manage the watershed in which they live and work. These plans are designed to promote balanced solutions that satisfy environmental, domestic, agricultural, and economic interests.

The Sonoma RCD assists landowners in improving water quality and wildlife habitat on their property through implementation of nutrient management, erosion control, stormwater management, water conservation, fisheries, wetland, and riparian habitat enhancement projects. Through the LandSmart program, the RCD provides a variety of technical services to landowners including road erosion assessment, stream assessment, wetland delineation, riparian revegetation planning, botanical surveys, wildlife surveys, and CEQA and permitting compliance.

The land management practices to be covered by the environmental document include wetland restoration and enhancement, stream channel stabilization, culvert removals or replacements, stream habitat improvement and management, sediment basins, filter strips, grade stabilization structures and irrigation storage reservoirs. A completed environmental document will streamline the process for landowners to obtain permits for these land management practices, thereby helping the Sonoma RCD persuade landowners to implement these practices.

Currently, the Sonoma RCD completes a CEQA document for each individual conservation practice to be implemented at a particular site. As a result, a large percentage of budget dollars goes to staff time and filing fees, rather than to implementation of conservation practices. An environmental document that covers a suite of the Sonoma RCD’s conservation practices will be more cost effective, accelerate implementation and ready the projects for a variety of grant funding programs, including the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service Farm Bill EQIP

funding. Landowners are more likely to participate in land conservation projects if the permitting process is streamlined and coordinated.

This approach to environmental review for conservation practices has already been completed by the RCDs of Mendocino County and Marin County. Both have completed county-wide mitigated negative declarations for their LandSmart programs and have successfully streamlined and accelerated on-the-ground conservation practices in their respective counties. The Sonoma RCD will use these environmental documents from Marin and Mendocino counties as a reference and will benefit from the experience of these other RCDs.

The Sonoma RCD is a reorganization of the Sotoyome and Southern Sonoma County RCDs, which occurred in July 2013. Both RCDs shared a nearly sixty-year history of conservation achievements in Sonoma County. In close partnership with landowners, these RCDs completed numerous restoration and sediment control projects in the watersheds of the Russian River, Sonoma Creek and Gualala River and were highly regarded for their technical assistance and local outreach and education programs. The Sonoma RCD continues the work of these RCDs.

Site Description: The proposed project will analyze environmental impacts of a suite of best land management practices that are intended to be implemented across Sonoma County. Specific watersheds covered in the project scope include the Russian River, Petaluma River, Sonoma Creek, Stemple Creek, Laguna de Santa Rosa, Mark West Creek and Gualala River watersheds. The list of species of concern in these areas includes coho salmon, steelhead trout, California freshwater shrimp, Myrtle's silverspot butterfly, red-legged frog, western pond turtle, tidewater goby, salt marsh harvest mouse, California clapper rail and Sebastopol meadowfoam.

Project History: LandSmart is the name for a regional program carried out by Mendocino, Sonoma and Marin County RCDs that assists landowners in improving water quality and wildlife habitat on their property by implementing nutrient management, erosion control, stormwater management, water conservation, fisheries, wetland and riparian habitat enhancement projects. Through this program, the Sonoma RCD provides a variety of technical services to landowners including road erosion assessment, stream assessment, wetland delineation, riparian revegetation planning, botanical surveys, wildlife surveys, and CEQA and permitting compliance.

In December 2014, the Sonoma RCD approached the Conservancy for funding assistance with development of a county-wide mitigated negative declaration similar to the environmental documents completed by the Mendocino and Marin County RCDs to streamline implementation of their LandSmart projects. The Sonoma RCD proposes to utilize applicable information developed through the Mendocino and Marin County RCD mitigated negative declarations to inform the Sonoma RCD environmental review, resulting in time and cost saving.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$37,000
Sonoma County	\$10,000
Project Total	\$47,000

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to derive from the FY 2014-2015 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 50), Water Code Section 79500, et seq. Proposition 50 funds are appropriated to the Conservancy for projects undertaken pursuant to the Conservancy's enabling legislation (Division 21 of the Public Resources Code) that restore and protect coastal watersheds, including associated planning and permitting. (Water Code Section 79570). The proposed project is to complete the CEQA review process for land management practices that will improve habitat and ecological functioning of Sonoma County watersheds for the benefit of salmonids and other sensitive species. The project is consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation as described below. Finally, Proposition 50 requires that watershed protection actions be consistent with local and regional watershed plans. (Water Code Section 79507). The proposed project is to complete CEQA review of land management practices that are intended to improve water quality and wildlife habitat and help attain the goals in the Regional Water Quality Control Board's *Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coast Region*, adopted January 2007 and updated in 2011. The CEQA review process will consider whether the land management practices are consistent with local and regional watershed plans, and identify mitigation measures if necessary. Thus, the proposed project is consistent with local and regional watershed plans. Accordingly, the proposed project is an appropriate use of Proposition 50 funds.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270), regarding enhancement of coastal resources.

Section 31251 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of natural or human-induced events or incompatible land uses have suffered loss of natural values. Timber and past agricultural practices, road construction, mining and residential development in Sonoma County watersheds have increased sediment delivery to the creeks and to the rivers and estuaries downstream. The proposed preparation of an environmental review document will lead to projects that will restore fish habitat and aid in the recovery of salmon and steelhead populations. Thus, this grant will facilitate corrective measures that will enhance the natural character of the area, consistent with Section 31251.

Section 31251.2 authorizes the conservancy to award a grant to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside of the coastal zone. The proposed project, which will be carried out by the Sonoma RCD, a local public agency, involves analyzing conservation practices in Sonoma

County watersheds, some of which are located both within and outside the coastal zone. The conservation practices will benefit the coastal resources of these watersheds, particularly anadromous fish.

As required in Section 31252, the proposed project is consistent with the Sonoma County Local Coastal Program as described in the “Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies,” as described below.

Section 31253 states that the Conservancy may provide up to the total of the cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. Consistent with this section, the amount of funding provided by the conservancy has been determined by the total amount of funding available for coastal resource enhancement projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, urgency and other factors.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective D**, the proposed project will lead to implementing projects to preserve and enhance coastal watersheds and floodplains.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective E**, the proposed project will lead to implementing projects to improve fish habitat including projects to remove barriers to fish passage, ensure sufficient instream flow, and provide in stream habitat and favorable water temperatures.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective G**, the proposed project will lead to implementing projects to improve water quality to benefit coastal and ocean resources.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective B**, the proposed project will lead to implementing projects that foster the long-term viability of coastal working lands, including projects to assist farmers, ranchers, and timber producers to reduce impacts of their 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, last updated on October 2, 2014, 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. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:** By completing environment review for a suite of LandSmart conservation practices in Sonoma County, the project serves to promote and implement the goals of several state plans including:

- *California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft). Key Action #1 of the report is to “Preserve and Steward State Lands and Natural Resources” which includes the preservation of agricultural lands and working landscapes to support the state’s agriculture and forestry industries in the most sustainable manner.
 - *CA Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan* (California Natural Resources Agency, July 2014). The plan identifies “Actions Needed to Safeguard Agriculture” including soil conservation, innovating sustainable farm operation systems that integrate energy, water, and natural resource conservation, watershed protection, flood protection through restoration of streams and wetlands, and implementing management practices to store carbon in soil.
 - *California Water Action Plan* (California Natural Resources Agency, 2014). Goal #4, “Protect and Restore Important Ecosystems”, calls for the restoration of coastal watersheds to benefit local water systems and eliminate barriers to fish migration. Goal #5 “Manage and Prepare for Dry Periods” calls for small scale tanks or impoundments to reduce extraction from streams during low flows. Goal #6 “Expand Water Storage Capacity and Improve Groundwater Management” calls for increasing groundwater recharge.
4. **Support of the public:** The Natural Resources Conservation Service works in close partnership with the Sonoma RCD on its LandSmart program and provides cost share dollars through Farm Bill EQIP funding for conservation practices on the ground and therefore is very supportive of a streamlined CEQA process for its clients that participate in RCD programs. Farming groups such as the Farm Bureau and Sonoma Winegrowers are also supportive of a streamlined process for their members participating in programs with the RCD that help with water quality, regulatory compliance and sustainability goals.
 5. **Location:** The proposed project will occur in watersheds throughout Sonoma County and benefit water quality and habitat in coastal and San Francisco Bay draining streams.
 6. **Need:** If funds were not available from the Conservancy, the Sonoma RCD would be unable to prepare a comprehensive CEQA document for its LandSmart Program continue to complete CEQA documents in a piecemeal and inefficient manner, leading to more project budget dollars going to staff time and filing fees, rather than to on-the-ground conservation projects, and impeding the Sonoma RCD’s efforts to persuade agricultural producers to implement the land management practices that will improve water quality and habitat. On-the ground work would not be accelerated as anticipated if the CEQA process were not streamlined and coordinated internally. Some small projects may even be delayed until 2016 without a more streamlined and cost-effective process.
 7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Sonoma County LandSmart Environmental Document is of state-wide interest due to the possibility of improving habitat for the recovery of Coho salmon and the promotion of sustainability for California agriculture.
 8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The Sonoma County LandSmart Environmental Document will consider sea level rise vulnerability in the analysis of conservation practices that are the subject of the study.

Additional Criteria

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The Sonoma RCD will utilize the CEQA document to implement projects that assist land managers in meeting or exceeding environmental regulations while simultaneously benefiting the water quality and natural habitats of Sonoma County watersheds.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Innovation:** The LandSmart program utilizes the most current information on effective land conservation practices and includes innovative techniques such as rainwater catchment systems to reduce stream diversions and carbon farming projects.
12. **Readiness:** The Sonoma RCD is prepared to complete the environmental document before the construction season begins in summer 2015.
13. **Cooperation:** The Sonoma RCD has a long history of extensive voluntary participation of landowners and a close partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Sonoma County Local Coastal Program, certified in 1981 and revised and incorporated into the Sonoma County General Plan on December 12, 2001, identifies the need for public action and assistance to resolve sedimentation, loss of riparian vegetation, and stream bank erosion in freshwater fishery resources. The LCP contains the following objectives for the effective management and protection of freshwater fishery resources: 1) identifying sources of sediment; and 2) managing riparian corridors along streams to provide protection for fish habitat. Further, the proposed authorization is consistent with the LCP Environmental Resources Management Recommendations for Riparian Areas (10) that “require erosion control measures for projects affecting the riparian corridor”.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Completion of an environmental review document for conservation practices under the *Sonoma County LandSmart* program is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262, in that it involves the funding of planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted, or funded. It is also categorically exempt under §15306, in that it consists of data collection, research, and resource evaluation that will not result in disturbance to an environmental resource. Staff will file a notice of exemption upon approval.