

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
August 22, 2019

COOPER CREEK ACQUISITION

Project No. 19-021-01
Project Manager: Anna Schneider

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the Sonoma Land Trust to acquire the 54-acre Cooper Creek Addition in Sonoma County, for habitat conservation, water quality protection, open space and public access uses compatible with natural resource protection.

LOCATION: The Cooper Creek property is adjacent to Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve, Santa Rosa, Sonoma County (Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Area Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Project Location and Site Map](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Cooper Creek Addition and Access Points](#)
- Exhibit 4: [Conservation Lands Network Report](#)
- Exhibit 5: [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 an amount not to exceed two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to Sonoma Land Trust (“SLT”) for the acquisition of the property known as the “Cooper Creek Addition”, Santa Rosa, Sonoma County (Sonoma County’s Assessor’s Parcel No. 038-261-010), depicted in Exhibit 2 to the accompanying staff recommendation. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer):
 - a. All relevant acquisition documents for the acquisition including, without limitation, the appraisal, purchase and sale agreement, deed and conservation easement, escrow instructions, environmental or hazardous materials assessment, and title report;
 - b. A baseline conditions report;
 - c. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
3. The property acquired under this authorization shall be managed and operated for habitat conservation, water quality, public access, recreation and open space. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
4. Conservancy funding from the Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018 shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property or in a nearby publicly-viewable area, the design and location of which are to be 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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding improving public access to natural areas and protection of natural resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Sonoma Land Trust is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code and has purposes consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy disburse up to \$200,000 to the Sonoma Land Trust for the acquisition of the 54-acre real property known as the Cooper Creek Addition (Cooper Creek property) adjacent to Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve (Taylor Mountain), located in southeast Santa Rosa in Sonoma County (Exhibits 1 & 2). The Sonoma Land Trust, in partnership with the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space

District and Sonoma County Regional Parks (Regional Parks), seeks to acquire this property and transfer it to Regional Parks as a possible addition to the existing 1,100-acre Taylor Mountain.

Acquisition of the Cooper Creek property and its inclusion within a regional park will protect habitat and increase access to Taylor Mountain for outdoor and recreational activities. The property owners are willing to sell to the Sonoma Land Trust in lieu of listing it on the open market. SLT and the property owners executed a Purchase and Sale Agreement in February 2019 with a closing date of December 31, 2019. The property will be transferred at closing from SLT to Sonoma County Regional Parks.

The Cooper Creek property is at high risk for residential development and is adjacent to the Ragle Ranch residential area which has been fully developed. Wildlife and water quality would be adversely affected if the property were developed. Wildlife species that are already living on the urban fringe and use the riparian wildlife corridor would be disturbed. Water quality would be diminished, and groundwater recharge in the Santa Rosa Creek watershed would be negatively impacted as well. It is estimated that over 25 acres of groundwater recharge zones will be protected if residential hillside development is prevented. The property provides an opportunity to conserve wildlife habitat, as discussed in the Site Description, below. Acquisition of the Cooper Creek property will enhance water quality and protect a half-mile of riparian habitat for oak woodlands, mountain lions, and other wildlife.

The greenspace in southeast Santa Rosa is limited and acquisition of the Cooper Creek property will provide increased public access to recreation, particularly for the surrounding Severely Disadvantaged Communities (SDACs) and Disadvantaged Communities (DACs) that are located near Taylor Mountain (Exhibit 3). If the Cooper Creek property were developed for residential housing, access to the park would be even more difficult for these local, disadvantaged communities.

The addition of the Cooper Creek property to Taylor Mountain will facilitate creation of a new access point to Taylor Mountain. Four SDACs are within walking distance (less than 1 to 1.5 miles) from the Cooper Creek property. There are also several public transit routes that will connect the nearby SDACs with the Cooper Creek property. The Sonoma County Fairgrounds and associated campground are within two blocks of the Cooper Creek property, which will provide easy access for campers and equestrians. One potential access point to the Cooper Creek property is where Allan Way meets the property, which would serve as a convenient accessway for the SDAC/ DAC communities in the area. After acquisition, Regional Parks proposes to amend the park master plan for Taylor Mountain to include Cooper Creek and to develop plans for a parking lot and trailhead providing new access to Taylor Mountain for outdoor recreation such as hiking, biking, and birdwatching.

Additionally, the Cooper Creek property provides an opportunity for location of a critical segment of future continuous trail between Taylor Mountain and Trione-Annadel State Park (Annadel) by offering a connection to the anticipated Santa Rosa Southeast Greenway (Greenway) just a few blocks away. The 47-acre Greenway will provide approximately two miles of new trails, new open spaces with play and picnic areas from Highway 12 at Farmers Lane (a

few blocks from the Project), extending east through southeast Santa Rosa, ending at Spring Lake Regional Park and Annadel.

Site Description:

The 54-acre Cooper Creek property is in southeast Santa Rosa, directly adjacent to Taylor Mountain. It is a privately-owned, undeveloped parcel, with a willing seller. The property elevation starts at 260 feet on its western boundary at the Farmer's Lane right-of-way and climbs to over 465 feet at the ridgeline. The property provides numerous vistas across southern Santa Rosa and scenic backdrop to surrounding neighborhoods. There are neighborhoods in southeast Santa Rosa that qualify as SDAC/ DAC's and are critically lacking in parks and greenspace for outdoor enjoyment and recreation.

The natural habitat of the Cooper Creek property consists of riparian forest, oak woodlands, grassland, and a half-mile of Cooper Creek, which is a seasonal tributary of Matanzas Creek in the Santa Rosa Creek watershed. The headwaters of Cooper Creek rise on the northern slopes of Taylor Mountain. The creek then flows north onto the Cooper Creek property, where it runs through a steep and lush canyon formed by the Rodgers Creek fault. Cooper Creek provides cool, clean water that contributes to recovery efforts for threatened steelhead and endangered Coho salmon further down the Santa Rosa Creek watershed and is potential habitat for threatened California red-legged frog. The preservation of this reach of Cooper Creek is recommended in the 2014 Santa Rosa Citywide Creek Master Plan because of its value for wildlife. The riparian habitat provides cover, forage, and water for numerous species and is a known wildlife migration corridor.

Based on the species present on adjacent Taylor Mountain, the CA Natural Diversity Database studies for Taylor Mountain and the Conservation Lands Network Biodiversity Portfolio Report (Exhibit 4, Bay Area Open Space Council, 2019) reported the property as having moderately suitable habitat for the following species:

- **Birds:** Acorn woodpecker, California quail, Hutton's vireo, loggerhead shrike, Northern harrier, pileated woodpecker, warbling vireo, white-tailed kite, wrentit, and yellow warbler.
- **Invertebrates:** Myrtle's silverspot.
- **Mammals:** Black bear, mountain lion, bobcat, gray fox, coyote, black-tailed deer, jackrabbit, brush rabbit, California kangaroo rat, dusky-footed woodrat, long-eared myotis, pallid bat, red tree vole, ringtail, and Western gray squirrel. Wildlife cameras on Taylor Mountain have documented the presence of numerous species, including mountain lion, black bear, and black-tailed deer.
- **Plants:** Blue oak, valley oak, brittle leaf manzanita, California foothill pine, Napa false indigo, pitcher sage, purple needlegrass, and wild hyacinth.

Grantee Qualifications:

Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) is a well-qualified land trust with more than 40 years' experience protecting over 50,000 acres in Sonoma County. SLT has administered acquisitions similar to the Cooper Creek acquisition, where the property is acquired and successfully transferred to and maintained by Regional Parks. One example is the 163-acre Santa Rosa Creek Headwaters acquisition which SLT acquired and transferred to Regional Parks to be added to Hood Mountain Regional Park.

SLT has administered many Conservancy grant-funded projects and meets grant requirements in a timely fashion, manages complex community planning processes, produces high-caliber restoration plans, and consistently conducts itself as a trustworthy partner. It is accredited by the national Land Trust Accreditation Commission, demonstrating excellence in fiscal responsibility.

Sonoma County Regional Parks has established itself as a mainstay and supportive partner in the preservation of open space, natural resources, and public access. Regional Parks operates and maintains over 11,000 acres in 55 park facilities, maintains another 3,500 acres of County land, and is well-equipped to manage the Cooper Creek property long-term with the dual benefit of natural resource protection and public access.

Project History:

The Conservancy has a long history of projects in Sonoma County, from acquisitions, habitat and restoration, to public access and trails projects. Conservancy funding has supported acquisitions such as: Sonoma Baylands (San Pablo Bay), Roche Ranch (1,657 acres) and Haire Ranch (1,091 acres) which ensure habitat protection for wetlands and open space. The addition of Cooper Creek to Taylor Mountain will similarly add to and complement surrounding parkland, improve public access, especially for disadvantaged neighborhoods, and support future regional trail systems.

Taylor Mountain provides the public with parkland for outdoor recreation and protects wildlife and natural resources. Taylor Mountain has eight miles of trails along several routes for hiking, biking, and horseback riding with plans for additional trails. The Taylor Mountain Phase I Master Plan calls for the eventual development of 17 miles of trails, a natural play area, hike-in-campsites, and a visitor center, as funding becomes available. Regional Parks also supports the site's agricultural and resource management history of grazing cattle.

Regional Parks has conducted initial outreach with several interested community groups including Santa Rosa Southeast Greenway Campaign Committee, Sonoma County Trails Council, Sonoma County Horse Council, Redwood Empire Mountain Bike Alliance, and Sonoma County Regional Parks Foundation, all of whom support the project. Regional Park's outreach methodology is aligned with the SCC's "Tips for Meaningful Community Engagement," including directly involving local residents, considering their concerns and aspirations, and obtaining feedback on alternatives.

Between July 2008 and July 2011, a dozen community meetings were held to solicit ideas on park development and use of Taylor Mountain. Outreach materials were available in Spanish and translation was available at the meetings and workshops. The meetings were held at local schools, public facilities, in neighborhoods, and at the site; meeting locations and times were convenient for residents who lacked transportation. Input from these meetings has informed the vision for the Cooper Creek property. This vision aligns with the Conservancy's mission to provide for public access to natural areas for exploration and recreation and to protect California's natural resources and habitats.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$200,000
Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and OSD	738,500
Sonoma County Regional Parks	302,250
Habitat Conservation Fund (to Regional Parks)	220,000
Project Total	\$1,460,750

The anticipated source of Conservancy's funding is the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018 (Proposition 68, Public Resources Code Division 45, Chapters 1-13, Sections 80000-80173), in particular, Chapter 9, which allocates funding to the Conservancy for projects that enhance and protect coastal and ocean resources and including projects that are consistent with the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. The proposed acquisition of the Cooper Creek property will enhance and protect coastal and ocean resources because:

- 1) The project will provide urban recreation that also protects habitat by facilitating future development of access to eight miles of trails at Taylor Mountain for hiking, biking, and natural experiences, and by protecting 54-acres of oak woodlands and a riparian corridor;
- 2) The project will protect groundwater recharge and water quality through avoiding hillside residential development;

(Pub. Res. Code section 80120(d)).

Proposition 68 provides that the Conservancy give priority to projects that leverage private, federal, or local funding or produce the greatest public benefit. (Pub. Res. Code section 80001(b)(2)). The Conservancy's funding will be matched six-fold by significant local and state funding as reflected in the project financing table. In addition, SLT is providing in-kind services in the form of staff time for project management for the acquisition and grant writing, which can be valued at approximately \$30,000. Sonoma County Trails Council and Redwood Empire Mountain Bike Alliance are providing \$2,750 of in-kind services for access improvements.

Proposition 68 requires that at least 15% of funds allocated for Chapter 9 be used for projects that serve SDACs. The proposed project will serve four SDACs located in southeast Santa Rosa by protecting habitat and open space that is near the SDACs and will facilitate future development of direct access to a larger regional park.

The project is consistent with the funding guidelines for expenditure of Proposition 68 adopted by the Conservancy on December 6, 2018. (See Pub. Res. Code section 80010). Specifically, the project serves as both an urban recreation project and habitat protection/restoration.

Although not a park project itself, the project will create additional access to park properties.

Finally, the project seeks to achieve the wildlife conservation objectives through a voluntary acquisition of private land. (See Prop. 68 Grant Guidelines, page 4).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Code Sections 31160-31165, to improve public access and protect natural habitat in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Consistent with section 31162, the project is within the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area. Under section 31162(b) the Conservancy may act to "protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas and other open-space resources of regional importance." Acquisition of the Cooper Creek property will ensure that this property is kept as natural habitat and protected from potential residential development and will become an addition to Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve.

Furthermore, under Section 31162(d), the Conservancy may "promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes." The Cooper Creek property will provide the urban population of Santa Rosa, including local disadvantaged communities, accessible greenspace and access points to Taylor Mountain, as well as a connection for a future trail segment between Taylor Mountain and Annadel State Park.

Consistent with Section 31163(c), the project is: 1) supported by adopted local or regional plans, such as the Sonoma County General Plan 2020 and the Santa Rosa Citywide Creek Master Plan; 2) is regionally significant providing opportunity for connectivity between a regional and state park; 3) can be implemented in a timely way, as the property will be acquired before December 2019; 4) will provide opportunities for benefits that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented, as the property could potentially be sold to a developer; and 5) includes significant matching funds from other sources of funding.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#)

GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 8, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will protect wildlife corridors important to urban-area resilience to climate change.

Consistent with **Goal 12, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will protect 54 acres of important upland habitat, a half mile of riparian and riverine habitat along Cooper Creek, as well as a wildlife corridor adjacent to Taylor Mountain.

Consistent with **Goal 13, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will complete an acquisition that will increase the amount of land accessible to the public through additional trails, to Taylor Mountain, and eventually to the future Southeast Greenway and facilitate a link to Annadel State Park.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will benefit four SDACs within the community by providing access points to Taylor Mountain Regional Park for outdoor recreation.

**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:**

"California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report": by preserving the property as open space, this project helps meet this plan's goals to reduce the amount of land consumed by development. By linking to regional trails, the project also facilitates reduction of vehicle miles traveled as communities can access the park on foot or by bicycle.

"CA Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan": the project advances many Safeguarding California strategies for resilience to climate change. The project's accessible microhabitats increase resilience, due to landscape permeability and diverse topography, and adjacency to a protected area is vital for ecosystem adaptation.

"California Water Action Plan": the project advances CWAP goals to protect strategically important lands to ensure that conversion of these lands does not have a negative impact

on our water resources. The project will permanently protect the health of Cooper Creek, supporting habitat and connectivity for salmonids and other fish, wildlife, and plants.

“CA Wildlife Action Plan”: The project supports SWAP Goal 1 (Abundance and Richness), and Goal 2 (Enhance Ecosystem Conditions). It furthers the goal to promote connectivity and the ecological integrity of important wildlife habitat.

4. **Support of the public:** This project is supported for habitat protection of Cooper Creek and for the access and trails it will provide as part of a larger regional park, creating new access points for the local neighborhoods, some of which are in SDAC’s. In 2011, a dozen community meetings were held to solicit park development and use ideas from the community, with positive support. If the property is acquired, there will be additional community outreach during the planning process to add Cooper Creek to Taylor Mountain, ensuring continued community support. There are also numerous Sonoma County agencies such as Regional Parks, Board of Supervisors, the Agricultural and Open Space District; and others, including State Senator Mike McGuire, Assembly member Marc Levine, Mayor of Santa Rosa, Sonoma County Supervisor Shirlee Zane, Sonoma County Parks Foundation, Sonoma County Regional Parks, Santa Rosa Southeast Greenway Campaign Committee, Trails Council, Horse Council, Sonoma County Trails Council, and the Redwood Mountain Bike Alliance, who support this project (See Exhibit 5, Project Letters).
5. **Location:** The Cooper Creek property is in southeast Santa Rosa, adjacent to Taylor Mountain Regional Park, Sonoma County, in the San Francisco Bay Area. The addition of the Cooper Creek property to Taylor Mountain will expand and retain open, scenic landscape, protect habitat, protect water quantity and quality and increase public access to trails and parkland for outdoor recreation in the San Francisco Bay Area.
6. **Need:** Conservancy funding will close a critical funding gap towards acquisition of the property, which would not succeed without this funding. The property would then be at high-risk for residential development.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** Taylor Mountain is a regional park with trails and provides habitat for species in the Santa Rosa Creek watershed. The Cooper Creek property would add 54 acres to this protected parkland and serves the greater San Francisco Bay Area, particularly the North Bay Area.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The Project is not close to a shoreline and is located at elevations of several hundred feet above sea level.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
10. **Innovation:** The project will provide a substantial section of the trail connection to the planned Santa Rosa Greenway. Linking these properties together with pedestrian and bike trails will provide a future continuous trail connection from Taylor Mountain to Annadel.

11. **Readiness:** The project is ready to move forward once final funding from the Conservancy is confirmed.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.
13. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** According to “Climate Ready Sonoma County: Climate Hazards and Vulnerabilities,” Sonoma County will experience hotter, drier weather, with longer summers and more frequent and intense droughts, leaving less water available for recharge and runoff as well as more variable rains and floods. The property is most vulnerable to potential flooding and erosion in the riparian corridor. Because the project will protect the property from residential development, stormwater impacts, including onsite flooding, will be reduced, and the project will help protect local water supply and water quality and enhance groundwater recharge. The property also provides a critical riparian wildlife corridor, increasingly vital as refuge during hot weather.
14. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The project will not result in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Protecting the property’s grasslands and oak woodlands will sequester carbon. SLT does not have plans to seek carbon credits.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project is categorically exempt from environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines at 14 Cal. Code of Reg. Sections 15313(a), 15325 and 15316, which exempt acquisitions of property for purposes of: preserving fish and wildlife habitat; preserving the natural conditions of the property, including plant and animal habitats and its open spaces; and transfer of land to establish a park. The proposed project will preserve the existing natural conditions and habitats of the property, and the management plan for the park has not been developed by Regional Parks.

An anticipated future use of the property is as an access to Taylor Mountain park by creating parking, trailhead, and trail access across the property. However, these activities will be evaluated for their potential environmental effect when Regional Parks updates their master plan for Taylor Mountain. Those activities are not funded, approved or adopted through this authorization.

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