

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
December 19, 2019

**EBABIAS CREEK RIPARIAN RESTORATION**

Project No. 19-030-01  
Project Manager: Julia Elkin

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District to implement riparian restoration on Ebabias Creek at the Ocean Breeze Dairy property within the Estero Americano watershed in Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** Ocean Breeze Dairy, Valley Ford, Sonoma

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Current Site Conditions](#)

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 31220 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 Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (“the grantee”) to implement the Ebabias Creek Riparian Restoration Project at the Ocean Breeze Dairy property within the Estero Americano watershed in Sonoma County.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding and Proposition 1 as the source of that funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.

5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into a landowner agreement sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, monitor and maintain the project and protecting the public interest in the improvements.

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 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resource protection.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.”
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#### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy disburse up to \$200,000 to the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (RCD) to implement the Ebabias Creek Riparian Restoration Project (project) on Ebabias Creek at the Ocean Breeze Dairy property in the Estero Americano watershed in Sonoma County. The project consists of revegetating an approximately two-acre, 1,800 foot corridor of Ebabias Creek with native plants and installing browse protectors and cattle exclusion fencing, followed by three years of monitoring and adaptive maintenance. The project will protect the streambed, shade the stream corridor, and maintain low water temperatures for salmonids and other sensitive riparian species, such as endangered red-legged frogs (*Rana aurora draytonii*), endangered California freshwater shrimp (*Syncaris pacifica*), and vulnerable northwestern pond turtles (*Clemmys marmorata marmorata*).

This riparian restoration project is a component of Ocean Breeze Dairy’s Carbon Farm Plan (CFP), which was developed by the private landowner and the RCD to increase carbon sequestration and reduce greenhouse gas emissions of the dairy property. Restoration of Ebabias Creek is also part of the property becoming a Demonstration Project Site under California Department of Food and Agriculture’s (CDFA) Healthy Soils Program. Under the Healthy Soils Program, Ocean Breeze Dairy will serve as an educational model of best land management practices for agricultural producers throughout the region. Upon completion of project implementation, the project partners will host a workshop series at the dairy property for other area producers to learn sustainable land stewardship opportunities and practices.

The project will be implemented through a partnership between the RCD, the local Conservation Corps North Bay (CCNB) who will provide construction labor, and Point Blue

Conservation Science's environmental education program (STRAW) who will provide volunteer planting and education programs for local school groups as part of project implementation.

Plantings will be maintained and monitored by STRAW staff, who will perform regular weed control, survival counts, and replanting for three years following installation to achieve at least an 80% survival rate. The landowner will be responsible for maintaining the exclusion fence and for long-term project maintenance.

**Site Description:** The project site is located on the Ocean Breeze Dairy along Ebibas Creek, a tributary to the Estero Americano, a coastal estuary that flows to the Pacific Ocean from seven miles inland. The Estero Americano is a unique coastal natural area consisting of open water, freshwater marsh, brackish marsh, mud flats, coastal grasslands, and a narrow coastal strand. The adjacent rolling but steep hills are surrounded by agricultural operations on both sides of the stream.

The Estero Americano is one of the most naturally diverse areas on the Northern California coast. It is an area rich in wildlife, migratory waterfowl, and wetland habitats. The waterway and environs are part of the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary and lie within the United Nations Central Coast International Biosphere Reserve. The Estero and its tributary, Ebabias Creek, are designated by NOAA as Critical Habitat for winter run steelhead trout.

In addition to its habitat values for aquatic species, the Estero Americano is at the heart of the Pacific Flyway. The Southern Pacific Shorebird Conservation Plan (Hickey et al., 2003) identifies the Estero as one of only two "wetlands of importance" for migratory shorebirds and waterfowl in Sonoma County.

According to the Estero Americano Watershed Management Plan (2007), the year-round freshwater flowing Ebabias Creek is likely the only restorable freshwater habitat for steelhead trout in the Estero Americano Watershed. While the riparian corridor is relatively intact in the creek's upper reaches, lower Ebabias Creek, where the Ocean Breeze dairy is located, has lost significant amounts of its riparian vegetation due to impacts from cattle that have roamed freely through the creek corridor, reducing riparian habitat quality and causing water quality impacts.

The Sonoma County Coastal Wetlands Enhancement Plan (1987), adopted by the Conservancy, identifies the Estero Americano as degraded and states that bank erosion, gully erosion, loss of riparian habitat, and sedimentation are common in the watershed. The Estero has also been identified by The Nature Conservancy as one of its "Portfolio Conservation Areas" due to the importance to its coastal wetland system.

The Ocean Breeze Dairy has been owned by Jarrid Bordessa since 2003 and operates as a certified organic milk dairy. The property contains 310 acres of coastal grassland and over 4,500 feet of perennial stream corridor along Ebabias Creek.

**Grantee Qualifications:** Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (RCD) is a qualified and appropriate grantee to implement this project. For nearly two decades, the RCD has been a

regional leader for improving agricultural practices within the Estero Americano Watershed. They have demonstrated the capacity to manage on-the-ground project implementation with private landowners, as well as the ability to successfully partner with other organizations in the region on long term goals and near term projects. The RCD has over twenty years of success managing grant funds from federal and state funders, including the Conservancy, and has a strong record of successfully completing similar projects.

**Project History:** The Coastal Conservancy has been involved in planning and restoration efforts in the Estero Americano estuary and watershed since 1987. The Conservancy’s involvement has included funding the Sonoma County Coastal Wetland Enhancement Plan in 1987, the Estero Americano Ranch Implementation Projects, Phases I & II in 2004-2006, the Estero Americano Preserve Enhancement Project in 2005, the Estero Americano Watershed Management Plan in 2007, and the Estero Americano Dairy Enhancement Project in 2008. The Estero Americano Dairy Enhancement Program-Phase II project implemented pasture improvements and riparian fence installation at Ocean Breeze Dairy along Ebabias Creek just downstream of the current project reach.

In addition to integrated management planning and implementation, the Conservancy has participated in land conservation efforts in the Estero Americano watershed. In 1997 and 2001, the Conservancy partnered with the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation & Open Space District and the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) to purchase the 127-acre Estero Americano Preserve, now owned and managed by the SLT. In 2011, the Conservancy partnered with SCAPOSD and Sonoma County Regional Parks Department to acquire a conservation and public access easement over the 495-acre Bordessa Ranch property. In 2015, the Conservancy partnered with the Wildlands Conservancy and SLT on acquisition of the 547-acre Estero Ranch property.

The proposed project is part of Gold Ridge RCD’s Carbon Farm Planning (CFP) program, which was launched as the result of a 2015 Conservancy Climate Ready grant to a regional partnership led by Marin RCD. That Climate Ready-funded regional partnership enabled Gold Ridge RCD to develop a CFP template and positioned the RCD to receive a large federal Natural Resource Conservation Service grant, which in turn funded development of the Ocean Breeze Dairy CFP in 2018. The Ebabias Creek Riparian Restoration Project is the first step in implementation of that CFP.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$200,000</b>
<b>California Department of Food and Agriculture</b>	
<b>Healthy Soils Program</b>	<b>\$36,582</b>
<b>Natural Resource Conservation Service</b>	
<b>Environmental Quality Incentives Program</b>	<b>\$14,506</b>

**Natural Resource Conservation Service**

**Cooperative Agreement**

**\$4,050**

**Project Total**

**\$255,138**

The anticipated source of funding for this project is an appropriation from the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 (Water Code §§ 79700 et seq., or “Proposition 1”). Funds appropriated to the Conservancy derive from Chapter 6 of Division 26.7 of the Water Code (commencing with § 79730) and may be used “for multi-benefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects for the watersheds of the state” (Section 79731).

The project meets a number of objectives under Proposition 1, including protecting and restoring aquatic ecosystems, including fish and wildlife corridors (Section 79732(a)(4)), and reducing contamination of streams and coastal waters, and restoring natural system functions that contribute to water quality (Section 79732(a) (11)).

As required by Proposition 1, the proposed project provides multiple benefits. By implementing riparian restoration in the Estero Americano watershed, the project will benefit depleted native fish populations and other aquatic, avian, and insect species that utilize riparian habitat. The project’s restoration of native riparian vegetation will further the riparian corridor’s resilience to projected climate change impacts.

In accordance with Section 79707(b) which requires agencies to prioritize “projects that leverage private, federal, or local funding or produce the greatest public benefit”, this project leverages local cash and in-kind contributions as discussed in the last paragraph of this section.

The project’s implementation approach delivers educational benefits. The grantee’s partnership with Point Blue Conservation Science’s environmental education program (STRAW) ensures that school-age children and volunteers will participate in hands on outdoor education as part of the project through onsite vegetation planting days. Additionally, separate from the project but based upon the work of the project, the Ocean Breeze Dairy will host a workshop series for other area agricultural producers on sustainable land stewardship.

The project was reviewed and subsequently recommended for funding through a competitive grant process under the Conservancy’s Proposition 1 Grant Program Guidelines adopted in September, 2016 (“Prop 1 Guidelines”). (See Section 79706(a)). The proposed project meets each of the evaluation criteria in the Prop 1 Guidelines as described in further detail in this “Project Financing” section, the “Project Summary” section and in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” section of this staff recommendation.

The project leverages additional grant funding from CDFA Healthy Soils Program (\$36,582) and the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (\$14,506) as well as an NRCS Cooperative Agreement (\$4,050).

Point Blue will provide a minimum of \$55,000 in in-kind volunteer labor for conducting site plantings. The landowner, Organic Valley, and Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District will provide a minimum of \$13,500, \$3,000, and \$11,999 respectively, in in-kind services.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The project is consistent with Chapter 5.5 (Section 31220) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection. Under § 31220(a), the Conservancy may award grants for coastal watershed water quality protection and restoration projects that achieve one or more of the specified objectives described in §31220(b).

Consistent with § 31220(b)(2) the project will protect fish and wildlife habitat within coastal and marine waters and a coastal watershed, through planting of native riparian vegetation.

Consistent with § 31220(b)(4), the project will reduce unnatural erosion and sedimentation of coastal watersheds, through the implementation of streamside exclusionary cattle fencing on the Ocean Breeze Dairy property within the Estero Americano watershed.

As required by § 31220(a), Conservancy staff has consulted with State Water Resources Control Board in the development of the project to ensure consistency with Chapter 3 of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code.

Finally, as required by § 31220(c), the project includes a monitoring and evaluation component in the form of three years of monitoring and adaptive maintenance, and is recommended in or consistent with local watershed management plans. See discussion under "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan / State Water Quality Control Plan" section, below.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#)  
GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will help preserve fish and wildlife corridor from coastal to inland habitat areas by working to protect a freshwater stream corridor of value to salmonids, migrating birds, and insects.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will restore coastal stream corridor habitat by planting native riparian vegetation.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will improve fish passage and provide favorable water temperatures by reducing cattle grazing impacts and increasing vegetative shading of Ebabias Creek.

Consistent with **Goal 7, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will foster the long-term viability of coastal working lands by assisting a farmer in reducing the impact 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:**

The project is consistent with the *CA Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan* (California Natural Resources Agency, 2014) "Actions Needed to Safeguard Agriculture" by implementing sustainable farm operation systems that integrate natural resource conservation and watershed protection through restoration of streams.

The project furthers *California Water Action Plan* (California Natural Resources Agency, 2014) Goal #4: "Protect and Restore Important Ecosystems", which calls for restoration of coastal watersheds to benefit local water systems and eliminate barriers to fish migration.

The project implements the *California Wildlife Action Plan* North Coast-Klamath Region Priority Objective O: "Federal, state, and local agencies, NGOs, and private landowners should protect and restore under protected and sensitive habitat types such as riparian areas."

The project supports two objectives from the *NOAA Coastal Multispecies Plan for Central California Coast Steelhead*: Objective DPS-CCCS-7.1.1 "Improve riparian areas" and Objective DPS-CCCS-18.1.1.1 "Aid and encourage willing landowners to fence livestock from the stream channel."

1. **Support of the public:** The proposed authorization has support from the private landowner, public agencies, and environmental organizations, including Organic Valley, Point Blue Conservation Science, the local Natural Resource Conservation Service office, and California Department of Food and Agriculture. See project letters in Exhibit 3.

4. **Location:** The project is located outside the coastal zone of Sonoma County, but benefits coastal resources by restoring freshwater habitat for steelhead trout in the Estero Americano Watershed.

5. **Need:** Without Conservancy funds in addition to the significant project funds already secured, the RCD would be unable to fully implement the improvements necessary to achieve desired riparian corridor benefits. The RCD would either need to dramatically reduce the project scale or return CDFA cost share funds.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Estero Americano is nationally recognized for its unique mix of coastal and inland resources. The project will promote vital habitat values within the Estero.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The lower tributaries of Estero Americano, including Ebabias Creek, may be affected by sea level rise as high tides push saline influence further upstream into the riparian corridor.

#### **Additional Criteria**

8. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
9. **Readiness:** The RCD and landowner are ready to implement the project immediately.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
11. **Cooperation:** This project is the result of strong cooperation across a broad array of partners who will be part of project implementation, including Organic Valley, the landowner, Point Blue Conservation Science, Conservation Corps North Bay, the local NRCS office, and CDFA’s Healthy Soils Program.
12. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** With climate change, the project region is expected to experience more extreme weather events, manifesting as more intense winter storms, prolonged summer droughts, and changing coastal fog patterns. Creating a diversely vegetated riparian corridor that provides stream shading is a strategy to increase the ecological resilience of the project site in the face of these changes.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** While implementation will result in some GHG emissions from vehicle use to access the site, these impacts will be offset by the project’s carbon sequestration benefits. Long-term sequestration will be assured through a landowner agreement stating that the habitat values of the riparian corridor must be maintained for a 25-year period. Carbon sequestration for this 2-acre riparian buffer planting, as calculated through the USDA COMET-Planner, comes to approximately 4 metric tons CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per year.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

While the project is located outside the Coastal Zone, the proposed authorization is consistent with the Sonoma County Local Coastal Program (LCP) certified in 1981 and revised on August 3, 2001. Specifically, the LCP’s Section III Environmental Resources identifies riparian areas of the Estero Americano as critical resource areas and recommends them for resource enhancement and protection. Consistent with a specific implementation recommendation made in this section of the LCP, this riparian restoration project includes provisions to protect the restored

riparian area from inappropriate cattle grazing. The project is also consistent with LCP Section IV Resources-Agriculture, which states that ranch restoration projects may be conducted for the purposes of improving agricultural viability and watershed conservation. The Section goes on to state that implementation measures will correct detrimental land use and operational practices, which is the case with the project's approach of installing cattle exclusion fencing around the restored riparian area.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/  
STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:**

The project is consistent with the Estero Americano Watershed Management Plan (Hickey, P et al. 2007, Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District), specifically with Key Habitat Goal HAB-01 to "assess, protect, and enhance riparian habitat". The project helps achieve the plan's specific target to "increase riparian cover along 14 stream miles that are currently unvegetated." The Estero Americano Watershed Management Plan was funded by the Conservancy, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service and a US EPA grant administered through the State Water Resources Control Board.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

This restoration project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under the CEQA Guidelines at California Code of Regulations Title 14, Section 15333 'Small Habitat Restoration Projects', as the project area will not exceed five acres in size and will consist of revegetating a highly disturbed area using principally hand labor without adversely impacting rare, endangered or threatened species or their habitat. The installation of the fencing is exempt pursuant to Section 15303 'New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures,' which exempts installation of new small structures, including fencing. (See Cal. Code Regs. Title 14 Section 15303(e).) The grantee has already filed a Notice of Exemption with the State Clearinghouse and the County of Sonoma (SCH #2018129471).

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