

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 6, 2020

REGIONAL FOREST AND FIRE CAPACITY PROGRAM

Project No.19-010-01
Project Manager: Tom Gandesbery

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$670,000 of grant funds from the California Natural Resources Agency's Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program to the Contra Costa and San Mateo County Resource Conservation Districts and the Amah Mutsun Land Trust to augment the Conservancy's October 17, 2019 authorization to disburse funds for planning and implementation projects that will improve forest health and wildfire resiliency, facilitate greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and increase carbon sequestration in forests.

LOCATION: Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo, Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties.

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Climate Change

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [October 17, 2019 Staff Recommendation](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 31113 of the Public Resources Code:

"The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed six hundred seventy thousand dollars (\$670,000) to augment the Conservancy's October 17, 2019 authorization, for the following nonprofit organization and public agencies to carry out planning and implementation projects that will improve forest health and reduce fire threat and that may reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and increase carbon sequestration within the State Coastal Conservancy's jurisdiction as follows:

- San Mateo County Resource Conservation District (Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network): One hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to improve vegetation mapping using LIDAR / GIS in Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties.

- Contra Costa Resource Conservation District: Four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000) to the Contra Costa County RCD, which will partner with the Alameda County RCD, to develop forest management plans and projects, secure permits, conduct stakeholder coordination, education and outreach, and implement demonstration projects in western Alameda and Contra Costa Counties.
- Amah Mutsun Land Trust: One Hundred Seventy thousand dollars (\$170,000) to the Amah Mutsun Land Trust to implement a prescribed burn program on public and private lands in San Mateo, Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties.

This authorization is subject to all of the conditions in the October 17, 2019 authorization, which is shown in Exhibit 2 to the accompanying staff recommendation.”

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 Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Section 31113, regarding addressing climate change and potential climate change impacts.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Amah Mutsun Land Trust is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy augment its October 17, 2019 authorization for grants to improve forest health and reduce fire threat by authorizing disbursement of an additional \$670,000 of funds received from the California Natural Resource Agency (CNRA) under its Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP). The additional funds would be disbursed to the Contra Costa and San Mateo County Resource Conservation Districts and the Amah Mutsun Land Trust for projects located in five counties that will improve forest health and reduce fire threat and that may reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and increase carbon sequestration.

As described in greater detail in the October 17, 2019 staff report (Exhibit 2), the Conservancy is one of nine recipients of RFFCP block grants the goal of which is to increase regional capacity to prioritize, develop, and implement projects that improve forest health and fire resiliency, facilitate greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and increase carbon sequestration in forests throughout California.

The projects composing the proposed authorization focus on the Wildland Urban Interface (“WUI”), where the impacts of wildfire pose the highest risks (see Exhibit 1). The WUI is generally defined as the zone where residential development is intermingled with undeveloped

forested or other naturally vegetated areas prone to wildland fire. See Exhibit 2 for more information.

San Mateo County Resource Conservation District **\$100,000**
Santa Cruz and Santa Clara Counties

The San Mateo County Resource Conservation District (SMRCD), through its leadership of the Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network (Stewardship Network), will undertake a project to develop data layers for a state-of-the-art geographic information system (GIS) map of vegetation, topography and other important attributes in the Santa Cruz mountains. This project is a joint effort with the Counties of Santa Cruz and Santa Clara and will follow the model of work done in Sonoma County. The work product will include fine scale vegetation maps down to a quarter acre scale and one-foot contours. The maps will also show relative hardwood versus conifer cover, impervious surfaces such as roads, and fuels including ladder fuels. Currently available maps are not useful for detailed geographic analysis (see Exhibit 1 San Mateo Map). The project is supported by numerous local and state agencies and is expected to result in products that will allow land managers and other stakeholders to set priorities. SMRCD is currently working with partners to raise funds for this project. The project cost is estimated to be about \$3 million and current funding commitments stand at about \$1.5 million.

Site Description: The Santa Cruz Mountains region extends from the San Francisco Bay area, south to the Pajaro River and is bounded to the east by the Santa Clara Valley and the Pacific Ocean to the west. The region is comprised of a diverse array of ecosystems which include diverse natural features ranging from ridge tops to alluvial fans, old growth forests, saltwater lagoons, marshes, mudflats, and intertidal zones. Ownership and land use varies from park and open space preserves to privately held timber and agricultural lands interspersed with both rural and urban communities. The proposed project will focus on areas of high and very high fire hazard, in mixed-conifer forest, oak woodlands, eucalyptus plantations, and chaparral and coastal sage scrub. These areas include properties are in both public and private ownership.

Contra Costa Resource Conservation District **\$400,000**
Contra Costa and Alameda Counties

The Contra Costa Resource Conservation District, in conjunction with the Alameda County RCD and the Diablo Fire-Safe Council , will conduct stakeholder coordination, education and outreach, planning, and permitting of demonstration projects. The hot and dry summers of the Bay Area, the steep topography of the East Bay Hills, seasonal wind patterns, thick wildland vegetation, dense residential development adjacent to parklands, and limited firefighting access all contribute to creating a substantial regional fire threat. In consultation with the Diablo Fire Safe Council (DFSC), the Contra Costa RCD will coordinate a multi-agency planning process to develop a Regional Priority Plan for forestry, fire protection and forested watershed improvements that spans both Alameda and Contra Costa counties. The RCDs will also provide permitting assistance for fuel reduction projects located in sensitive habitats within the wildland-urban interface and will educate public and private landowners about best practices in

fuels reduction and management through a variety of outreach methods. The proposed work of the RCDs will complement the work to be done under the previous authorization to the East Bay Regional Park District (Exhibit 2).

Site Description: The Contra Costa and Alameda County RCDs will work on private and publicly owned land throughout the two counties but will focus on areas of high and very high fire risk. These areas are concentrated along the western hills and the area surrounding Mount Diablo and include redwood and mixed pine and Douglas fir forests, eucalyptus and Monterey pine plantations, coyote brush scrub and coastal scrub, and oak woodlands.

The threat of catastrophic wildfires under Diablo-wind conditions (winds that blow from the east to west and usually occur during the late summer and fall) presents significant risks to public health and safety, homes, and property along the ever-expanding wildland-urban interface. During the 75-year period between 1923 and 1998, 11 Diablo wind-driven fires burned a total of 9,840 acres, destroyed more than 3,500 homes, took 26 lives, and resulted in over \$2 billion in financial losses; three large westerly wind-driven fires also burned 1,230 acres and consumed four homes. The 1923 Berkeley Fire destroyed 568 homes; the 1991 Tunnel Fire destroyed approximately 3,400 residences.

Amah Mutsun Land Trust

\$170,000

San Mateo, Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties

The Amah Mutsun Land Trust (AMLT), in collaboration with the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, is building a Cultural Burns Program to bring cultural burning back to their ancestral lands. Cultural burning is prescribed fire performed by indigenous people that promotes ecological and cultural resources, builds wildfire resilience and is informed by traditional ecological knowledge. AMLT will collaborate with other fire management agencies and conservation organizations such as Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, Save the Redwoods League, and California State Parks, to increase ecological wildfire management and traditional fire management practices. Project funds will support a part-time prescribed burn coordinator to plan and manage projects and ensure tribal members are trained in current best practices.

The work will be carried out by AMLT's Native Stewardship Corps, in coordination with the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. The Native Stewardship Corps is a work-training and cultural-relearning program for members of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. Native Stewards implement the research, restoration, and indigenous stewardship work to which Amah Mutsun Land Trust is committed. Native Stewards are supported in the field by a tribal elder and by AMLT research associates and professional staff. The Stewards will participate in the prescribed fire training exchange (TREX) approach and methodology to promote collaborative burning within Amah Mutsun territory. The TREX is a nationwide program created by The Nature Conservancy that has been successfully implemented on the North Coast.

Site Description: AMLT Native Stewardship Corps will participate in collaborative training exchanges and prescribed burns with project partners at Klamath TREX, Yurok TREX, San Vicente Redwoods, Ano Nuevo State Park, Big Basin State Park, and other conserved lands along the central coast yet to be determined. In San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties, AMLT will

work in areas of mixed-conifer forest, oak woodlands, eucalyptus plantations, and chaparral and coastal sage scrub. Projects may also occur in the Santa Lucia Mountains, and Gabilan Range Mountains of Monterey County where vegetation types range from coastal scrub and maritime chaparral along the coast to coast live oak woodlands, mixed conifer forests, annual grasslands, interior and montane chaparral, blue oak and gray pine woodlands, and Monterey cypress stands.

Project History: At its October meeting, the Conservancy awarded \$3,067,000 of grant funds to the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, The East Bay Regional Parks District, and the Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District and the Cachuma Resource Conservation District to carry out RFFCP projects. See Exhibit 2.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 670,000
CALFIRE	\$500,000
County of Santa Clara	\$410,760
County of Santa Cruz	\$121,400
Mid-Peninsula Open Space District	\$200,000
Santa Clara Open Space Authority	\$50,000
To be determined	\$1,617,840
Project Total	\$3,570,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for the proposed authorization is a block grant from the CNRA pursuant to its Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program. Funding for the RFFCP is derived from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF), also referred to as California Climate Investment dollars. See Exhibit 2 for more details.

The project financing list above shows matching funds for the San Mateo RCD’s mapping project only; approximately \$1.6 million of additional funds are being sought from other agencies. Because the project is not scalable, a critical threshold of funding, approximately \$3 million, must be reached in order for the project to move forward.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed projects are consistent with the Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation as described in the October 17, 2019 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN

GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

The proposed projects are consistent with the Conservancy's Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives as described in the October 17, 2019 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S

PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed projects are consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines as described in the October 17, 2019 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2), with the following additions.

4. **Support of the public:** These projects are supported by the Diablo Firesafe Council; Firesafe San Mateo and Firesafe Santa Cruz.
5. **Location:** The proposed project carried out by the Amah Mutsun Land Trust and San Mateo RCD would be located within the coastal zone of San Mateo, Santa Cruz, and Monterey Counties. The RCDs of Alameda and Contra Costa counties will implement projects in their respective counties.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

Staff has reviewed the proposed projects to be undertaken by the San Mateo RCD, the Contra Costa RCD, and the Amah Mutsun Land Trust and has determined that the projects are statutorily and categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) as described below.

Preparation of forest management plans, vegetation mapping, permit coordination efforts, and other planning activities are statutorily exempt from the requirement to prepare an environmental document under CEQA pursuant to Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262 Feasibility and Planning Studies, which exempts planning and feasibility studies for possible future actions which the agency, board, or commission has not approved, adopted, or funded.

Anticipated brush clearing and other fuel reduction activities are categorically exempt from CEQA under Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15304 Minor Alterations to Land as these efforts would result in minor alterations to the condition of the land and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry or agricultural purposes.

Projects elements such as vegetation mapping which consist of basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities and which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource are categorically exempt CEQA under Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15306 Information Collection.

Smaller forest thinning and fuel reduction projects are also categorically exempt CEQA under Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15333 Small Habitat Restoration. Section 15333 applies to projects which do not exceed five acres in size with the goal of assuring the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife provided that:

- There would be no significant adverse impact on endangered, rare or threatened species or their habitat pursuant to Section 15065 of Title 14, California Code of Regulation.
- There are no hazardous materials at or around the project site that may be disturbed or removed, and
- The project will not result in impacts that are significant when viewed in connection with the effects of past projects, the effects of other current projects, and the effects of probable future projects.

Upon approval, staff will file Notices of Exemption for these projects.