

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 6, 2020

Watsonville Slough Farm Public Access Planning

Project No.19-050-01

Project Manager: Tom Gandesbery

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County to prepare plans, designs, environmental review documents, and permit applications for five miles of public trails and a trail staging area at the Watsonville Slough Farm.

LOCATION: Watsonville Sloughs, Watsonville, Santa Cruz County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Map and Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Support Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31410 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (“the grantee”) to prepare plans, designs, environmental review documents, and permit applications for five miles of public trails and a trail staging area at the Watsonville Slough Farm, near Watsonville.

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.
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4. In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development' and the requirements of all applicable federal and state laws governing barrier-free access for persons with disabilities into 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 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding a system of public accessways.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
 3. The Land Trust of Santa Cruz County is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code."
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$300,000 grant to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (Land Trust) to prepare plans, designs, environmental review documents, and permit applications for creating five miles of public trails and a trail staging area at the Watsonville Slough Farm, near Watsonville (Exhibits 1, 2). Watsonville Slough Farm (WSF) is located southwest of the City of Watsonville and Pajaro, an unincorporated town in Monterey County, and approximately one-half mile from Pajaro Valley High School. The WSF trailhead will be connected to the nearby high school and downtown Watsonville by the Lee Road Connector Trail, a bike-pedestrian path and bridge project now being designed by the City of Watsonville with a grant from the State Coastal Conservancy (Exhibit 2). The Lee Road Trail will also connect the farm to the regional Santa Cruz County Rail Trail, which will also eventually serve as a segment of the California Coastal Trail.

Much of the nearby area qualifies as a disadvantaged community or severely disadvantaged community (Exhibit 2), and city staff have emphasized that there is an urgent need in the community for access to safe outdoor recreation and to connect with nature. Hiking trails at the farm will allow the local community to access natural areas a short distance from home. The rolling hills of the site will feature restored grasslands, oak woodlands and wetlands, and organic vegetable and berry fields which will be easily viewed through a vegetated buffer. The farm's landscape includes beautiful vistas overlooking wetlands, Watsonville to the east, and nearby farmland. The Land Trust hosts tours at the farm during the Monterey Bay Birding Festival and the trails will provide year-round access to these birding areas.

The Land Trust intends to design the trail staging area to welcome diverse community members, with multi-lingual signage and attractive landscaping. It will also include sustainability infrastructure, such as stormwater management bioswales and vegetated

infiltration basins. The trail staging area will include parking as well as bike racks and electric vehicle charging stations to accommodate sustainable modes of transportation. The Land Trust also envisions amenities such as restrooms, drinking water, picnic areas and a wildlife-friendly community garden. The visitor facilities will be designed by meet the guidelines of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA).

The farm trails project will be designed for nature walks and agri-tourism that highlight bird watching and demonstrate wildlife-friendly farming practices. They will include wetland boardwalks and fishing platforms that allow a close-up experience with the vibrant inland waterways collectively called Watsonville Sloughs (a network of five slough “arms”). The planning process will evaluate the feasibility of making the trails fully accessibly, and it is anticipated that at least some portion of the trail system will be ADA-accessible. The project’s planning process will also examine the feasibility of upgrading existing farm roads and facilities for use as part of the trails and staging area visitor amenities.

The proposed project includes the following components:

- Community engagement in the planning and design.
- Opportunities and constraints analysis, including a biological resources assessment and engineering feasibility analysis.
- Evaluation of potential impacts pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act.
- Preparation of designs, engineering plans and cost estimates.
- Preparation of permit applications.

Site Description: Watsonville Slough Farm is a 500-acre working ranch owned by the Land Trust and located in the coastal zone adjacent to the City of Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley High School (Exhibit 2). The property contains 250 acres of row crops, 123 acres of unfarmed upland habitat, and 128 acres of seasonal wetlands and riparian habitat. The farm lies in the coastal zone with units of the Watsonville Ecological Reserve owned by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife immediately to the west and east. Pajaro Valley High School is to the immediate north and farmland extends beyond on the north, west and south sides of the farm. Further east is the City of Watsonville and town of Pajaro.

The farm’s topography is gently sloping to rolling, characterized by upland areas sloping down toward the various slough fingers. Hanson Slough, which is located at the heart of the farm, flows within a willow riparian corridor bounded by hill slope cropland. The middle and lower portion of the Hanson Slough watershed is intermingled with willow riparian woodland and upland grassland. At the south end of Hanson Slough, the lower Struve Slough inland marsh extends to the confluence of Hanson during the winter and spring and is dominated by freshwater marsh vegetation. The southwestern end of the property is a critical part of the Watsonville Slough, functioning as the central drainage for all the slough tributaries, before winding through the lower basin, and joining the mouth of the Pajaro River before entering the Pacific Ocean.

The property provides central and important habitat of the Watsonville Slough System, which supports 270 species of resident and migratory birds, including threatened and endangered

species such as peregrine falcon, burrowing owls, tricolored blackbird and bald eagles. Pondered areas on the property support breeding sites for the California red legged frog and the western pond turtle. The slough system supports 23 different native plants and animals that are State and federally listed as threatened, endangered, or species of special conservation concern.

Grantee Qualifications: The Land Trust has successfully undertaken numerous grant funded projects, including the acquisition of property for the Highway 17 Laurel Curve Wildlife Crossing, funded by the Conservancy in 2016, and afore mentioned acquisition of the subject property funded by the Conservancy, in 2008. Currently the Land Trust manages about 20 miles of trail across six properties with an annual visitation of about 100,000. The Land Trust has a land management staff of 10 and an annual land management budget of \$1.8 million and implements \$500,000 to \$1 million in project expenses annually.

Project History: The Watsonville Slough Farm site was at one time proposed to be developed into a condominium complex, golf course and auto-mall, but was protected by the Land Trust through a series of acquisitions from 2009 to 2011. The acquisitions totaled \$14.5 million of which the Conservancy provided \$6.5 million and secured an additional \$680,000 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Since acquisition, the property has been managed for a mix of row-crop farming and upland and wetland wildlife habitat. In short, areas that were found to be less feasible for farming were set aside for habitat restoration while the remainder of the land is leased to farmers for vegetable and strawberry production. Proceeds from the farm leases are reinvested in the farm.

In accordance with the terms of the Conservancy's grant agreement, seventy five percent of the farm lease revenue must be reinvested in the property and surrounding areas for the purposes of habitat restoration, sustainable agriculture, and public access. Currently, the revenue is approximately \$400,000 per year. This has been, and will remain, the primary funding source for operations and maintenance of the proposed public access, alongside ongoing habitat restoration and agricultural sustainability projects. The farm revenue will also be used to match the proposed planning grant; as well as, future implementation grants for the project.

Several years ago, the Land Trust discussed with Conservancy staff the conceptual idea for the proposed farm trails. Since then, the Land Trust has been working closely with Watsonville Wetlands Watch and the City of Watsonville to extend formal trail access to the site via Harkins Slough Road and Lee Road (see Exhibit 2 map). The Land Trust submitted an application for the planning phase of the project in November 2019.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$300,000
Wildlife Conservation Board	\$300,000
Land Trust of Santa Cruz County	\$180,000
<u>Project Total</u>	<u>\$780,000</u>

The anticipated source for the Conservancy funds is an appropriation from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006, Public Resources Code Section 75001 et seq. (Proposition 84). Proposition 84 authorizes the Conservancy's use of these funds to promote access to and enjoyment of coastal resources through projects undertaken pursuant to the Conservancy's enabling legislation (Division 21 of the Public Resources Code). See Public Resources Code Section 75060.

Public Resources Code § 75060(e) allocates funds to the Conservancy for the protection of Monterey Bay and its watersheds. "Protection," as defined in Public Resources Code § 75005(m), includes "actions necessary to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources and includes acquisition, development, restoration, preservation and interpretation," as defined. "Development" is defined in Public Resources Code § 75005(f) to include physical improvement of real property.

Consistent with these provisions, the proposed project will promote access to and enjoyment of the Watsonville Slough Farms and adjacent sloughs, which is within the Monterey Bay watershed, by planning development of new trails that will link to the California Coastal Trail, via Lee Road, and the Rail Trail (Exhibit 2). The proposed project is consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, as described in the "Consistency with Conservancy's enabling legislation" section below. Accordingly, the proposed project is consistent with the funding requirements of Proposition 84 funds.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 et seq.) regarding public access to and enjoyment of the coast. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. Section 31400.1 specifies that the Conservancy may award grants to a nonprofit organization to develop lands for public access purposes to and along the coast. Through the proposed action, the Conservancy will play a primary role by providing a grant to the Land Trust to plan the proposed trail system which will be located within the coastal zone. The Lee Road Trail will also connect the farm's trailhead to the regional Rail Trail, a segment of the California Coastal Trail.

Section 31400.2 requires the Conservancy to consider a number of factors in determining the amount of funding for an access project. Consistent with this section, the proposed level of funding was evaluated relative to the total amount of funding available to the Conservancy for coastal access projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, and the Conservancy's project selection criteria (see Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines). The Land Trust has committed to provide 23% of the funding plus the staff time necessary for this project; however, the Land Trust does not have sufficient funds available to complete the project without assistance.

Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organization to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail (CCT). The proposed project will design a trail and staging area that is part of an inland trail

system that connects to the CCT. As indicated in Exhibit 1, the southern terminus of the Lee Road Connector Trail will connect to a future segment of the regional Rail Trail paralleling the current Santa Cruz Branch Line railroad tracks, which will run northwest (perpendicular to the coast) to a junction with the CCT.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will design 5 miles of new recreational trail and amenities that link to the existing regional Watsonville Area Scenic Trails Network.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan the proposed project prioritizes funding for a project that is in a disadvantaged community or directly benefits a disadvantaged community.

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:**
 - Coastal Act (1976). Public Resources Code Section 30210 on public access and recreation calls for "maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse," and Section 30214 calls for public access and recreation that "takes into account the need to regulate the time, place, and manner of public access depending on the facts and circumstances in each case. . .". The proposed project will develop a trail design that furthers these public access goals.
 - Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan (2018 Update). The proposed project furthers the following goals: Parks, Recreation and California Culture (PC) goal PC-1 to "Augment public access to the coast and coastal recreation while protecting beaches and coastal areas consistent with resource conservation priorities", including subgoals PC-1.9 and PC-1.11 by designing coastal recreation trails and facilities that are resilient to climate change impacts; PC-3 to maximize opportunities to connect urban populations to natural spaces through urban parks, wetlands, and river parkways; and

PC-6.1 to invest in robust outreach to make outdoor recreation more accessible to underrepresented youth, low income communities, and communities of color (PC-6.1).

- California Wellness Plan (2014). The proposed project will promote goal 1.5 of the California Wellness Plan to increase biking and walking by providing 5 miles of pedestrian trails near an urban community.
4. **Support of the public:** Project supporters include: City of Watsonville; Watsonville Wetland Watch; Pajaro Valley High School and Pajaro Valley Unified School District; Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance Program; Zach Friend, Santa Cruz County Supervisor; Greg Caput, Santa Cruz County Supervisor; Assemblymember Robert Rivas; Assemblymember Mark Stone; State Senator Bill Monning.
 5. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of Santa Cruz County.
 6. **Need:** The Land Trust is providing significant match funds, but without additional funding from the Conservancy the project will not take place.
 7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The project will result in a design of five miles of recreational trails and visitor amenities that will be open to the public via a parking lot onsite as well as a connector trail to the City of Watsonville on Lee Road. The Watsonville Sloughs system is an area of significant natural resource and includes a state designed state wildlife area.
 8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project is located on properties that are 20-40 feet in elevation, and therefore not subject to flooding associated with sea level rise within the next 100 years; however, a boat launch may be designed as part of the project and their design would accommodate rising tidal elevations within its lifespan.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will provide the general public with a safe and informative wildlife viewing experience while showcasing how farming can be compatible with public use including educating the public about ways to lessen the impacts of farming on the environment. Typically, agricultural land in the Pajaro Valley is strictly off-limits to the public, for reasons related to food safety and private ownership. There are few examples of farms where the public is welcome, and none are within walking distance of the City. Also, the agricultural industry has been in conflict with schools and urban communities. Impacts such as odor and pesticides, as well as concerns by growers about trespass and vandalism, has led to extensive conflict. This project will hopefully show how urban and agricultural land use can co-exist, which may in turn affect the public’s perception related to land conservation and the threat of urban sprawl.
11. **Readiness:** The Land Trust has allocated staff to support this project and anticipates grant funding from the Wildlife Conservation Board (scheduled the January meeting of the WCB). The Land Trust has a proven track record of successfully completing trail planning and construction projects throughout the County.

12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** In 1999 the Conservancy provided a grant to the County of Santa Cruz to develop the Watsonville Slough Enhancement Plan. The enhancement plan identified a number of high priority actions including to develop “access improvements to enable a greater public awareness of the values of the Watsonville Sloughs for native wildlife and natural resources as well as their economic, social and recreational values. In 2002 the Conservancy granted \$3 million to the City of Watsonville to acquire approximately 80 acres of grassland, riparian, wetland, and agricultural land surrounding Pajaro Valley High School. A primary objective of the acquisition was to fortify the urban/rural boundary in order to help protect hundreds of acres of wetlands and high value farmland. From 2009-2011, the Conservancy provided \$6.5 million to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County for acquisition of four properties totaling 490 acres of farmland, known collectively as the “Watsonville Sloughs Farm” for wetlands protection and agricultural preservation. The proposed access project will provide a significant educational opportunity for students at nearby Pajaro Valley High School and the outdoor program offered by Watsonville Wetlands Watch which is located at the High School.
13. **Cooperation:** The Land Trust is working with Watsonville Wetlands Watch (WWW) and the Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County on this project. The Land Trust works closely with the farmers leasing land at the farm to manage the property for water quality and habitat protection. The Land Trust also plans to work with WWW to bring high school students to the farm as part of the natural history curriculum. The Land Trust also is partnering with the RCD on projects that improve water quality and best management practices of the farm.
14. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The proposed trail is not vulnerable to the impacts of climate change

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project to design five miles of the public trails and a trail staging area with visitor amenities such as picnic areas and parking, along with preparation of environmental analyses and permit applications, is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262, as it involves preparation of plans and designs for future actions which have not yet been approved or funded, and for which the planning will consider environmental factors. The proposed project is also categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to CCR Section 15306 because it includes basic data collection and resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.