

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 27, 2021

**FITCH MOUNTAIN OPEN SPACE
WILDFIRE FUELS MANAGEMENT AND DEFENSIBLE SPACE**

Project No. 21-011-01
Project Manager: Lisa Ames

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$505,000 to the City of Healdsburg for their Fire Department to conduct wildfire fuel management, create defensible space, and update the management plan for Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve in Sonoma County, and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Healdsburg, Sonoma County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Project Letters](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Fire Risk Abatement Plan](#)
- Exhibit 4: [Mitigated Negative Declaration](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed five hundred five thousand dollars (\$505,000) to the City of Healdsburg (“the grantee”) for their Fire Department to conduct wildfire fuel management, create defensible space, and update the management plan for Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve in Healdsburg, 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. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
3. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Climate Ready Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan Final Mitigated Negative Declaration adopted by the City of Healdsburg on November 20, 2017 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”) and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4. The Conservancy finds that the proposed project as designed and mitigated avoids, reduces, or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a less-than-significant level, and that there is no substantial evidence based on the record as a whole that the project may have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15382.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$505,000 grant to the City of Healdsburg (“the City”) for their Fire Department to conduct wildfire fuel management and defensible space activities on Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve adjacent to Healdsburg in Sonoma County (see Exhibit 1). The proposed project will reduce fire risk and associated risks to life, property, public health, water quality, forest health, and natural resources that a wildfire on Fitch Mountain might cause.

Located immediately adjacent to the city of Healdsburg and along the middle reach of the Russian River, the heavily wooded Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve (“the Preserve”) is one of the most prominent physical landmarks found in northern Sonoma County. The Fitch Mountain area, including the Preserve, is designated as a “High Fire Hazard Severity Zone” (Cal Fire 2007). It falls within a State Responsibility Area and is under the control of Cal Fire. However, the area is considered a mutual threat zone due to the high fire risk and safety concerns and the ability for a fire to impact the incorporated city of Healdsburg. Due to the proximity to the city limits and the potential for rural fire to impact the city, the Healdsburg Fire Department is under contract with the Sonoma County Office of Fire and Emergency Services to

provide service to the areas of Fitch Mountain. The City is responsible for responding to any fire event on the mountain and works closely with Cal Fire to provide mutual aid.

The Preserve was purchased in 2014 by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (“District”) and transferred to the City in 2017. The District holds a “forever wild” easement over the property which insures 1) protection of the mountain’s biodiversity, soil and aquatic resources, and ecological functions; 2) protection of the mountain’s scenic values; and 3) provision of public recreational and educational opportunities that are compatible with the protection of natural resources. Additionally, the City receives stewardship assistance on the Preserve from LandPaths, a nonprofit organization whose volunteers maintain the trails, remove invasive species and conduct light forestry work. In 2015, the Coastal Conservancy funded development of a long-term management plan for the property that summarizes the existing ecological conditions on the Preserve, identifies key resource management needs, and provides recommendations for improving public access, managing public uses, and managing the risk of wildfire.

The City adopted the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Management Plan and its associated Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND) in November 2017 (see Exhibit 4).

Wildfires are driven by weather, wind, topography, and fuels. Several catastrophic, wind-influenced wildfires in 2017, 2019 and 2020 in Sonoma County overwhelmed fire fighters because of embers creating spot fires well ahead of the advancing edge of fire. This phenomenon underlines the importance of land management, specifically vegetation management to reduce hazardous fuel loads and effectively mitigate the severity of wildfires on urban edges. Per Mitigation Measure HAZ-3 of the MND: “Develop and Implement a Fire Abatement Plan”, the City developed a Fire Risk Abatement Plan (FRAP) for the Preserve (approved by the District), for the period of January 2021 through December 2026. The FRAP follows recommendations of the Management Plan with added treatments for effective and increased fuel reduction, as informed by recent fire events (see Exhibit 3).

For this proposed project, the City will make improvements to fire roads (dual purpose roads used for general as well as firefighting access) in the Preserve, create defensible space around city infrastructure, reduce fuels and remove invasive species, and create fire breaks between residential properties and open space. Specifically, this project will create an approximately 3-mile defensible space between the private property and open space using approved treatments in the FRAP. This would include using grazing animals such as sheep and goats to work in erosion sensitive areas and drainages. Shaded fuel breaks, wildfire calming areas and FRAP-approved fuels management projects will be completed with a fuels crew, fire department staff or masticator along the fire road and trails with chipper or burn piles. As part of the proposed project, the City will contract with a LandPaths biologist, a registered forester, a bird surveyor, and a hydrologist or engineer to prevent erosion from fuel reduction activities, and a road builder to protect the fire roads from erosion as required by the Management Plan. The project also includes updating the Management Plan to reflect the increase in wildfires in northern Sonoma County.

The proposed project will be broken into two phases. Phase I is from May 2021 through December 2022. Phase II will be from January 2023 until February 2024, though there is a possibility that the project can be completed sooner. The City’s goal is to get the Preserve to a point of annual maintenance that can be funded by the City budget. Before public ownership, the area was neglected for many years creating an overabundance of fire fuels. With the short-term intensive fire fuel reduction proposed by this project, the City expects to have the site manageable with an annual maintenance schedule within three years.

Site Description: The Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve is a 173-acre property that encompasses the entire 991-foot peak of Fitch Mountain and most of its surrounding slopes (Exhibit 1). The heavily wooded mountain is one of the most prominent physical landmarks found in northern Sonoma County, providing a scenic backdrop for the City of Healdsburg, other communities along the Russian River, and travelers along Highway 101. The Preserve is in the unincorporated county but is surrounded by the City of Healdsburg and within the City’s Sphere of Influence, Urban Growth Boundary, and Urban Service Area. The City holds title to the Preserve and the Sonoma County Agriculture and Open Space District holds a “forever wild” easement over the property.

The Preserve lies to the east of downtown Healdsburg. Residential parcels surround the base of Fitch Mountain and the Russian River, making up the Fitch Mountain community. Larger-sized, estate properties and more densely populated subdivisions lie to the west and southwest towards downtown Healdsburg. The Villa Chanticleer, a popular Healdsburg city park, wedding facility and conference center is adjacent to the Preserve. The Preserve is located immediately southeast of the River’s Bend reach of the Russian River and adjacent to the Sonoma County Regional Parks’ Del Rio Woods public beach and parking lot.

The Preserve is densely forested with coast redwood, Douglas fir, California bay, madrone, oaks, and a rich array of understory species. These forests provide valuable habitat for a wide variety of animal species. Its slopes drain directly to the Russian River, so the Preserve helps protect water quality in the river. In conjunction with other nearby protected lands, Fitch Mountain provides undeveloped habitat that is vital to maintaining wildlife migration corridors in the Russian River valley. With over 3 miles of trails, the Preserve provides valuable open space recreational opportunities for the community and visitors to the area.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: As the property owner and responsible party for managing wildfire risk, the City of Healdsburg Fire Department is the appropriate entity to conduct fire fuels management and defensible space efforts on the Fitch Mountain Open Space Preserve.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy

\$505,000

Project Total

\$505,000

The anticipated source of funding is a Fiscal Year 2020-21 special appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy. This appropriation was part of a package of funding for the purpose of urgent wildfire risk reduction. The proposed project is consistent with the anticipated funding source because it will reduce wildfire risk in Sonoma County.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The City of Healdsburg adopted the “Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan Mitigated Negative Declaration” and the associated Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (“MND/MMRP” both attached as Exhibit 4) on November 20, 2017. The MND assessed potential environmental impacts associated with implementing the Fitch Mountain Management Plan. The proposed project falls within the scope of the management plan, and its actions are within the scope of the MND. All potential impacts of the proposed project would be mitigated to less than significant, as discussed below.

General Project Measures:

The City will fully maintain habitat quality and complexity during the proposed action consonant with protecting public safety (Project Measure 10). Fire management activities will follow prescribed trail widths and clearances, engage personnel familiar with local plants and wildlife to guide vegetation management, and limit ground disturbance.

Biological Impacts:

The City shall ensure that protective measures for special-status plants are employed when engaging in management activities, including conducting surveys to detect the presence of such plants, and training work crews to recognize special-status plants as described in BIO-1. The City will employ protective measures for birds and bats, including avoiding work during critical bird breeding season and checking for bat presence when trimming trees (BIO-2 and BIO-3).

Fire Hazard Mitigation:

While carrying out the project, the City shall mitigate fire risk by implementing measures including prohibiting vegetation management during National Weather Service red-flag days, requiring vehicles to be equipped with spark arresters and standard firefighting equipment, and limiting driving and power tool use during periods of high fire danger (HAZ-1). The City shall ensure that all managed burns are overseen by authorized personnel, that burn piles are limited in size and utilized in appropriate weather (HAZ-3).

Staff has independently evaluated the MND/MMRP and concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment. Less than significant impacts would be temporary in duration.

The proposed action is anticipated to result in long-term benefits to aesthetics, biological resources, greenhouse gas emissions, hydrology and water quality, and reduced wildfire risk in the project area. Staff therefore recommends that the Conservancy find that there is no

substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment as that term is defined by 14 Cal. Code Regs. §15382.

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

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The recommended project would be undertaken pursuant to Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which authorizes the Conservancy to address the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction (Section 31113(a)).

Pursuant to Section 31113(b), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to undertake projects that include reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and addressing extreme weather events, sea level rise, flooding, and other coastal hazards that threaten coastal communities, infrastructure, and natural resources.

Pursuant to Section 31113(c), the Conservancy must prioritize grants for projects that maximize public benefits and have one of several purposes, including reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Consistent with these sections, the proposed project maximizes public benefits and is a priority because it facilitates the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from increased wildfires due to climate change. Besides reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the public benefits include improvement of forest health and protection of life, property, public health, water quality, and natural resources.

The proposed project addresses resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction by improving forest health and reducing the risks of wildfire that would adversely impact water quality and habitat in a coastal watershed (Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code) that is also within one of the nine counties of the San Francisco Bay Area (Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code).

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 implement projects to increase resilience to climate change impacts using nature-based solutions and other multi-benefit strategies.

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 proposed project will help implement:

 - [California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan](#) (Governor's Forest Management Task Force, January 2021), which calls for activities such as fuels reduction, forest thinning, vegetation management, prescribed fire, shaded fuel breaks, defensible space, and enhancement of fire-prone habitats to reduce fire risk.
 - The [California Forest Carbon Plan](#) (CNRA, 2018), which calls for restoration of natural fire regime and forest composition through a multitude of approaches including thinning, prescribed burns, invasive vegetation management, and shaded fuel breaks.
 - The [Community Wildfire Prevention & Mitigation Report](#) (Cal Fire, 2019), which urges state and local agencies to implement the goals of the Carbon Forest Plan and lays out recommendations to agencies to increase the scale and pace of management and mitigation actions to improve forest health and resiliency.
 - The [Forests and Rangelands Companion Plan, California State Wildlife Action Plan Update](#) (CDFW 2015), which encourages projects that seek to create a healthier and more resilient forest ecosystem.
 - The [Environmental Goals and Policy Report "A Strategy for California @ 50 Million, Supporting California's Climate Change Goals"](#) (OPR, 2015), Goal 6 of the Steward and Protect Natural and Working Landscapes section, which calls on the State to "Build resilience into natural systems and prioritize natural and green infrastructure solutions".
4. **Support of the public:** See Exhibit 2.
5. **Location:** The proposed project is located in Sonoma County, within the Coastal Conservancy's jurisdiction pursuant to Chapters 4.4 and 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
6. **Need:** California is facing unprecedented fire risk due to climate change, decades of fire suppression, and a growing populace. The extent of fire risk reduction projects that are needed to address the risk, including in advance of the upcoming fire season, cannot occur without public funding.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** Minimizing wildfire risk is of statewide significance.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The subject land is situated well above current and projected Year 2100 sea levels.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** The 2020 fire season broke numerous records. The proposed project is urgently needed to reduce fire risk in advance of the upcoming fire season.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** This project addresses three major issues: it seeks to reduce wildfire risk, improve forest health, and will be focused on areas where homes and communities are most at risk, the wildland-urban interface.
11. **Readiness:** The project is ready to begin work immediately.
12. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The project will address fire resiliency in the context of anticipated climate change. Fire resilience is a critical issue exacerbated by the effects of climate change, including increased average temperatures, reduced marine fog, and longer and more severe droughts.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** This work seeks to mitigate GHG emissions from catastrophic wildfires by lessening the fire risk, improving forest resiliency to fire and improving carbon sequestration.