

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 7, 2021

**Maintenance of Defensible Space at Audubon Starr Ranch**

Project No. 21-028-01

Project Manager: Mary Small and Jennifer Fields

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to seven thousand six hundred fifty dollars (\$7,650) to the National Audubon Society to create and maintain defensible space around buildings within Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary, located in unincorporated Orange County.

**LOCATION:** Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary, Trabuco Canyon, Unincorporated Orange County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Fuel Reduction and Road Grading on Starr Ranch \(CEQA\)](#)

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**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 seven thousand six hundred fifty dollars (\$7,650) to National Audubon Society (“the Society”) to create and maintain defensible space around buildings within its Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary, located in unincorporated Orange County.

1. 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:
  - a. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
  - b. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
2. If the grantee uses the grant funds to purchase equipment costing \$5,000 or more, the grantee shall use such equipment for wildfire-related purposes for the duration of the useful life of the equipment.

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 National Audubon Society is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

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**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to seven thousand six hundred fifty dollars (\$7,650) to the National Audubon Society (“the Society”) to create and maintain defensible space (at least 100 feet) around buildings within the Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary, located in unincorporated Orange County. This project will increase the wildfire resilience of the Ranch and neighboring community. It will minimize the direct wildfire pathways to 12 historic Ranch buildings, reduce radiant heat exposures to structures and surrounding native vegetation, reduce the potential for embers to ignite structures and native vegetation adjacent to structures, and provide a safe place for fire personnel to defend structures and allow for safe routes for evacuation. Treatment activities include raising tree canopy around buildings, brushing vegetation, removing dead or downed vegetation adjacent to buildings, thinning, trimming, pruning, or skirting existing vegetation adjacent to homes, and removing hazardous dead or dying vegetation adjacent to roadways and structures. The total treatment area is 12 acres and defensible spaces around 12 buildings on the 4,000-acre property.

The project is urgently needed because of increased drought conditions and fire risk resulting from climate change in California. This project is located in the Santa Ana Mountains, which was the site of two life-threatening fires in 2020 (Bond and Silverado fires) and fire risk will be incredibly high this year due to dry climate and drought conditions. This project will not only protect historic buildings within the Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary that are used for outdoor education and staff residences, but also protect unique California vegetation (e.g. coastal sage scrub) and increase safety for fire personnel.

The project will bring Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary into compliance with Public Resources Code (PRC) section 4921, which requires 100 feet of defensible space around structures located in mountainous, forested, or brush or grass covered land. 100 feet of defensible space reduces the threat of catastrophic wildfires to wildlands, property structures, and adjacent communities to prevent the loss of human lives. Specifically, within Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary, there are seven seasonal staff that live on site and the site is adjacent to other residential areas. This

project will increase the amount of time residents have to get to safety and give a safe space for fire personnel to protect nearby residential areas from fire impacts.

Conservancy funds will be used to hire the Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA) and pay for the equipment needed (rental of chipper and work vehicles) to conduct this project. The work will take one eight-hour day to complete.

**Site Description:** Located in the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains, Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary is a 4,000-acre wildlife preserve owned by the National Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary is bordered by Caspers Wilderness Park to the south and southeast, Cleveland National Forest to the north and east, and the communities of Coto de Caza and Dove Canyon to the west. Starr Ranch protects a mosaic of native habitats: coastal sage scrub, grassland, oak woodland, chaparral, and riparian woodland. The majority of riparian woodland at Starr Ranch Sanctuary is found along Bell Creek, which runs north to south through Starr Ranch, entering Starr Ranch from Cleveland National Forest and leaving through Casper’s Wilderness Park. Bell Creek eventually joins San Juan Creek, which then flows out to the Pacific Ocean. Minor tributaries that flow into Bell Creek on Starr Ranch include Fox and Crow Creeks, and also Tick and Dove Creeks which bring urban runoff from Dove Canyon into a pumping system that provides water to the Trabuco Canyon Water District for recycling. The project will provide at least 100-feet of defensible space for each of the ranch’s 12 structures, which are located on 12 acres of property.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The Society has extensive experience managing grants and has conducted similar fire fuel reduction projects on their property at Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary with OCFA.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$7,650</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$7,650</b>

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.

**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).

**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:** There is enormous public support for wildfire risk reduction. A statewide poll last fall found that 74% of surveyed voters believe that wildfire threat is greater now than in the past.
  5. **Location:** The proposed project will be located in a county within the Coastal Conservancy’s jurisdiction.
  6. **Need:** California is facing unprecedented fire risk due to climate change and a growing populace. The proposed funding was approved to accelerate fire risk reduction projects in advance of next year’s fire season. This funding is needed to initiate this work as soon as possible.
  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:** California is facing unprecedented fire risk due to climate change and a growing populace. 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 (WUI).
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 due to increased average temperatures, reduced marine fog and longer and more severe droughts.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** This project seeks to mitigate GHG emissions from catastrophic wildfires by lessening the fire risk, improving resilience to fire, and improving carbon sequestration.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

All components of the proposed project are categorically and statutorily exempt from environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines at California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Section 15304, 15301, and 15269.

Section 15304 (Minor Alterations) exempts projects that consist of minor alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry and agricultural purposes.

Section 15301 (Existing Facilities) exempts projects that consist of operation, repair, maintenance, or minor alterations of existing structures, facilities, or topographical features, involving negligible expansion of existing or former use of the site. Such projects include, but are not limited to, management of existing landscaping or native growth.

Section 15269 (Emergency Projects) exempts emergency projects, including: emergency repairs to serviced facilities necessary to maintain service essential to the public health, safety, or welfare, including those repairs that require a reasonable amount of planning to address and anticipated emergency; and specific actions necessary to prevent or mitigate an emergency.

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