

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 7, 2021

EUCALYPTUS REMOVAL AND WEED ABATEMENT AT DAVIDSON RANCH RESERVE

Project No. 21-041-01

Project Manager: Shalini Kannan

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$47,721 to the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency for eucalyptus removal and weed abatement in a high fire hazard severity zone at Davidson Ranch Reserve, in Santa Clara County.

LOCATION: Davidson Ranch Reserve, City of Morgan Hill, Santa Clara County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Site Maps and Photos](#)

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 forty-seven thousand, seven hundred twenty-one dollars (\$47,721) to Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency (“the grantee”) for eucalyptus removal and weed abatement in a high fire hazard severity zone at Davidson Ranch Reserve, in Santa Clara 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. 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.
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STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$47,721 grant to the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency ("Habitat Agency") for implementation of two fire risk reduction tasks at Davidson Ranch Reserve (Exhibit 1) in the wildland-urban interface (WUI): 1) removal of 14 large eucalyptus trees from a drainage area, and 2) weed removal on an 0.4-acre un-grazed grassland hill. These activities would provide a 100' defensible space buffer between the Habitat Agency's public land and the neighboring residential properties.

The project area is a very high fire hazard severity zone (VHFHSZ) in a local responsibility zone (LRA), making it a high priority project for the Habitat Agency to complete as soon as possible to prevent wildfire destruction. Removing eucalyptus trees from the drainage will reduce the severity of future fires which would otherwise burn as a low grass fire in the adjacent serpentine grassland habitat. The complete removal of eucalyptus wood and debris will decrease the fuel load immediately adjacent to a residential community. Weed abatement on the adjacent grassland hill that cannot be effectively grazed will provide defensible space to buffer the Davidson Ranch Reserve from residential properties.

The Habitat Agency has contacted tree removal and weed abatement contractors and is ready to begin the project as soon as funds are available. Tree removal and one day of weed abatement will be completed by fall 2021. Further weed control will happen in spring 2022, and a follow-up herbicide treatment for resprouting eucalyptus will occur approximately 1 year following the project start date.

Although not funded by this grant, the Habitat Agency will also develop a grazing management plan to manage fire risk on the rest of the 94-acre Davidson Ranch Reserve property. The plan will target improving habitat for federally threatened and endangered species including the Bay checkerspot butterfly, which benefits from short grass height and increased forb abundance in serpentine grasslands managed with grazing.

Site Description: The 94-acre Davidson Ranch Reserve, owned by the Habitat Agency, is located on the outskirts of Morgan Hill. The property has neighborhoods directly adjacent to the east, south and west that are at risk of damage should a fire ignite at the Reserve. The specific areas of eucalyptus removal and weed abatement are at the end of the residential Llagas Vista Drive. Though much of the property is grazed by cattle, the area sited for weed removal is a grassland hill outside the grazing boundary that borders residential properties. Davidson Ranch Reserve was purchased to protect federally endangered plant species including the Santa Clara Valley dudleya and Coyote ceanothus, as well as special status species such as smooth lessingia and jewelflower.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Habitat Agency is a Joint Powers Authority comprising the Cities of Gilroy, Morgan Hill, and San Jose, and Santa Clara County. Formed in 2013, the Habitat Agency implements the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Plan, a conservation plan which provides a framework to protect, enhance, and restore natural resources in Santa Clara County, targeting 18 rare and endangered species and their habitats, while streamlining the environmental permitting process for impacts on threatened and endangered species. The Habitat Agency involves a network of scientists, administrators, and other specialists that oversee and carry out planning and design, habitat restoration, monitoring, and adaptive management programs for the properties in their Reserve System. The grantee is experienced in land management and has selected appropriate contractors to conduct the work in this authorization.

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 below.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section below.
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 and invasive vegetation management.
- 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 [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 grassland habitat health for federally threatened and endangered species, and will be focused on areas where homes and communities are most at risk, the 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 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 and improving resilience to fire.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$27,721
Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency	\$2,966
Project Total	\$30,687

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.

The Habitat Agency will provide staff support for project oversight and fund the development of a grazing management plan for the 94-acre Davidson Ranch Reserve property.

The \$2,966 listed above is an estimate of the Habitat Agency's contribution towards staff time and follow-up herbicide treatment. The Coastal Conservancy does not typically require matching funds nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders. Typical grant conditions require Grantees to provide any funds needed to complete the project.

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 habitat health and reducing the risks of wildfire that would adversely impact water quality and habitat in 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.

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, 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 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.