

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 7, 2021

**CITY OF SANTA CRUZ WILDFIRE RESILIENCE**

Project No.21-023-01  
Project Manager: Tom Gandesbery

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to the City of Santa Cruz to undertake vegetation management to reduce fire risk at two open space areas at Arroyo Seco Canyon and DeLaveaga Park.

**LOCATION:** City of Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Site Specific Maps](#)

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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 one hundred thousand dollars (\$ 100,000) to the City of Santa Cruz (“the grantee”) to undertake vegetation management on two city-owned properties at Arroyo Seco Canyon and DeLaveaga Park.

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.
3. 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.

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$100,000 grant to the City of Santa Cruz (“City”) to undertake vegetation management to reduce fire risk at Arroyo Seco Canyon and DeLaveaga Park. The proposed project will protect 43 total acres of the City’s natural resources as well as, surrounding neighborhoods, by removing invasive, non-native plant species and creating multiple fuel breaks in the two open space areas (Exhibit 2). The project implements a high priority project identified in the City’s 2018 Climate Action Plan.

Both Arroyo Seco Canyon and DeLaveaga Park are located at the wildland-urban interface of the southern foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains (Exhibit 1) and are located adjacent to residential areas. The properties and their surrounding neighborhoods are identified on CAL FIRE’s Fire Hazard Severity Zone maps as a mix of High and Moderate Risk. The City has identified both open space areas as high risk for wildlife with some areas of extreme risk. The fire risk stems from a combination of fuel load and topography.

The project will complete work on up to 26 acres of land at Arroyo Seco Canyon and up to 17 acres of land at DeLaveaga Park. In Arroyo Seco Canyon, the City will manage vegetation along an emergency access route running north to south and east to west through the open space. Vegetation fuel breaks will also be established between the open space and the surrounding structures. At DeLaveaga Park, the City will undertake vegetation management and construct a 1.9-acre fuel break along an existing emergency access road to keep the road safe and accessible and also provide a shaded fuel break between structures and vegetation. The City has recently worked to establish shaded fuel breaks in both areas but does not have sufficient funds to complete the vegetation fuel management that is needed to provide further protection to fire crews and adjacent neighborhoods. The proposed work will consist mainly of treatment by privately contracted hand crews, mechanical equipment, and prescribed fire to remove combustible vegetation such as Acacia, nonnative grasses, scotch broom and Eucalyptus debris.

**Site Description:** The Arroyo Seco Canyon is approximately 26 acres in area and features steep slopes overgrown with native and non-native shrubs and trees. The park includes an emergency-access road bisecting the property and bounded by adjacent residential neighborhoods which run north nearly to the UC Santa Cruz campus (Exhibit 2). The project will

enhance existing emergency access and create fuel breaks between vegetation and surrounding structures visible in the attached maps. DeLaveaga Park, which is approximately 17 acres in size, and is also bounded by adjacent private land and residential neighborhoods. Both open space areas are located in the southern in the Santa Cruz Mountain foothills.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The City is well qualified to manage this grant. The City has received and managed a number of federal and state grants in the last few years, including grants from CALFIRE, Caltrans and the Coastal Commission. The proposed work will be managed by the City’s Fire Department with assistance from the Climate Action Program of the City Manager's Office.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$100,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$100,000</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.

Unless specifically labelled “Required Match” the other sources of funding listed above are provided as estimates. 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.

The City will provide project management and oversight by Fire Department staff.

**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](#) GOALS & OBJECTIVES**

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:**
  - a. 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 is located 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, Sections 15301, 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 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.