

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 7, 2021

**Ready for Wildfire/Cazadero**

Project No. 21-017-01  
Project Manager: Karyn Gear

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$115,000 to the Cazadero Community Services District to acquire a Brush Chipper, skid steer bucket loader and supplies for use in vegetation management activities, and to undertake such activities, to decrease the risk of wildfire in the vicinity of Cazadero, Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** Cazadero, Sonoma County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)

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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 fifteen thousand dollars (\$115,000.00) to the Cazadero Community Services District (“the grantee”) to acquire necessary equipment for, and to undertake, vegetation management activities to reduce wildfire risk in the vicinity of Cazadero, in the Russian River watershed, Sonoma County, subject to the following conditions:

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) a detailed work program, schedule and budget.
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.

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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of \$115,000 to the Cazadero Community Services District (CCSD) to acquire necessary equipment and supplies for, and to undertake, vegetation management activities to reduce wildfire risk along county roads and on public and private property in the vicinity of Cazadero in western Sonoma County (Exhibit 1).

The village of Cazadero was threatened from the recent Meyers & Walbridge wildland fires of 2020. This small and diverse community nestled in a coastal redwood forest is frequented by tourists, studded with summer camps, and vacation retreats, and is challenged by limited evacuation routes in a very high fire hazard severity zone. Thick vegetation along County roadsides has historically seen little to no abatement of growth. These roadsides also serve as fuel breaks, emergency vehicle access, defensible space, or fire control lines. The Sonoma County Community Wildfire Protection Plan notes that increasing understory and the effects of Sudden Oak Death, which has killed thousands of oak and tanoaks in the region, are adding to the potential for wildfire in the lower Russian River watershed. That plan also identifies fuels build up and lack of defensible space around homes, tree mortality, and availability and safety of evacuation routes as very high concerns for the CalFire Battalion Chief with responsibility for the area.

The proposed project consists of purchasing equipment such as a Vermeer BC 1000xl Brush Chipper, Bobcat skid steer bucket loader, and various rolls of saw chain needed to help clear vegetation and process materials throughout the CCSD's service area and conducting vegetation management with the equipment. Currently, the CCSD rents equipment to support its volunteer workdays, but the high daily rental fees limit their capacity to support vegetation management. The equipment acquired through Conservancy funding will be maintained by the CCSD and stored at the Cazadero Volunteer Fire Department. The CCSD will engage community volunteers to support removal of roadside hazards of ladder fuels and tree canopy affecting the primary evacuation route of this congested subdivision and to create defensible space around structures. The goal is to thin the stands of woody fuels and organic debris, and process the spoils into mulches, landscape stabilization material, and byproducts for home heating. By providing the necessary equipment with Conservancy funding, the community will be able to continue its vegetation management work into the future.

**Site Description:** Cazadero is a disadvantaged community located in western Sonoma County in the Austin Creek drainage of the Russian River watershed (see Exhibit 1). The community lies

within Sonoma County’s Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) zone and has been mapped by Calfire as a High Fire Hazard Severity Zone. Initial work will be undertaken in the vicinity of the Cazadero General Store, the hub of the community. The topography of the target area for vegetation management is moderately steep hillsides covered in broken tree branches and dead organic debris, scotch broom brush, pepperwood, maple, fir, and redwood trees on both private property and within the County road right of way. Fast growing fir and pepperwood trees competing for sunlight grew at odd angles over the edges of the roadbed at extreme heights. These canopy trees present falling hazard during wind events and wildfire evacuations. See Exhibit 2 for photos for examples of treated areas.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The Cazadero Community Services District is a small local district that provides fire protection, street lighting, recreation and park services to a population of approximately 1,500. The district was created in 1963, and among other responsibilities, manages the Cazadero Volunteer Fire Department. The District employs a fire chief, an administrative assistant, a park maintenance worker, and a facilities custodian. The CCSD will work in partnership with the Fire Safe Cazadero committee, an all-volunteer group of property owners and engaged community members dedicated to reducing fire fuel hazards within the community, maintaining a safe ingress and egress route during emergencies, and decreasing the risk to first responders during wildfire emergencies. The community is galvanized in its concerns and efforts to reduce the fire fuel load, secure evacuation routes, and increase fuel breaks, and is prepared to start the project immediately.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$115,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$115,000</b>

The anticipated source of funding is a Fiscal Year 2020-21 special appropriation of General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of wildfire risk reduction. The proposed project is consistent with the anticipated funding source.

**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 and 15304.

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.

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

**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.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A**, the proposed project 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:**

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 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.