

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 7, 2021

**BLITHEDALE RIDGE FUELS REDUCTION**

Project No. 21-036-01  
Project Manager: Karyn Gear

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$144,000 to the City of Mill Valley to reduce fuels build up, create defensible space along the Blithedale Ridge Fire Road and perform fire-related public outreach in the vicinity of the Blithedale Summit Open Space Preserve, Mill Valley, Marin County.

**LOCATION:** Blithedale Ridge, City of Mill Valley, Marin County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

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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 forty-four thousand dollars (\$144,000.00) to the City of Mill Valley (“the grantee”) to conduct vegetation management, defensible space activities, and fire-related public outreach to reduce fire risk in the vicinity of the Blithedale Ridge Fire Road in Mill Valley, Marin 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.
3. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

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 is recommending the Conservancy authorize a grant of \$144,000 to the City of Mill Valley for the Mill Valley Fire Department (MVFD) to undertake fuels management activities along the Blithedale Ridge Fire Road and perform fire-related public outreach in the vicinity of the Blithedale Summit Open Space Reserve, in the community of Mill Valley. The area to be treated is in and along the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), and directly abuts private housing and the Blithedale Ridge Fire Road. Creating a fuel break by removing dense vegetation will improve defensible space (see Exhibit 1). The proposed project is a collaborative effort among the Marin County Open Space District (District), the Marin County Fire Department, and the MVFD to target large, dense infestations of broom along the Blithedale Ridge fire road, as well as remove dead and dying pine trees, all of which pose a severe hazard for wildland fire to adjacent homeowners in the Mill Valley community.

The fuel break will assist firefighters in protecting communities that adjoin District lands in the event of a wildland fire, while at the same time, the removal, control, and eradication of French broom and pine trees will contribute to the functionality of the fuel break and enhance native habitat that supports local wildlife.

The proposed project will:

- Reduce wildfire threat to ecosystem health and community safety;
- Address forest pests and other threats: Monterey pines are susceptible to pitch canker and beetle infestations which can threaten native species;
- Protect an urban/suburban forest and woodland in an area of dense human population and continued development;
- Reduce wildfire risk to neighboring communities by eliminating non-native invasive Monterey pines that are more flammable than native vegetation;
- Restore native habitat in oak woodlands and mixed hardwood forests; and
- Address present and future climate change by making the forests and species within it more resistant to and resilient from changing climate by removing non-native invasive species, and restoring native species and ecosystems.

The MVFD will use tree care professionals to remove approximately 4-7 large Monterey pines (*Pinus radiata*) by cutting down, bucking logs, and chipping small wood and slash in place during year one. Contractors will assist in the control of approximately 2.5 acres of French broom (*Genista monspessulana*), a persistent non-native shrub that is abundant within the larger area. Crews will then return in the following two springs to use an approved herbicide to spray the resprouted French broom stems. The methods of cutting, followed by 2-3 years of herbicide use have had the best success rate for control of this species. The seed bank can be persistent for decades, but several years of treatment can greatly reduce the chances that buried seeds will germinate. Removal of non-native trees and shrubs will greatly reduce highly flammable fuels in the site, remove non-native species, and begin to return the area to a more open, native-dominated woodland.

Throughout the project, natural resource specialists and ecologists from Marin County Parks will plan, coordinate, and assist in supervising all contractual work. In addition, MVFD will be assisting with public outreach to local homeowners in the area about the project and encouraging homeowners to assist with fire risk reduction by completing defensible space zones near their homes. Public outreach will include social media outreach, direct mailing and/or home visits to those homeowners and homeowner associations directly affected by the project and the fire danger posed by the presence of highly flammable non-native pines.

**Site Description:** The proposed project lies in the hills above the City of Mill Valley, on lands owned by the Marin County Open Space District and the City of Mill Valley. The area is part of the 643-acre Blithedale Summit Open Space Preserve on Mount Tamalpais, which separates the communities of Larkspur on the North and Mill Valley on the South. The area to be treated includes approximately 13.2 acres of grasslands, oaks and woodlands that lie between the Blithedale Ridge Fire Road and private homes.

The project area, located at the southern end of the preserve, has been designated a very high fire hazard severity zone. The site is a relatively steep south-facing hillside and is covered by a mixture of invasive non-native Monterey pine and Monterey cypress, invasive non-native French broom, and native mixed hardwood woodlands. The proposed project lies in the buffer zone that is adjacent to a public road and 100 to 500 feet from homes in Mill Valley. There are many challenges within the project area, including a steep slope, dozens of large Monterey pines and Monterey cypress, areas that have high densities of young French broom, and difficulties with equipment access. In addition, about half of the project area has not burned once in recorded history (last 100+ years) while about half last burned in 1929 (85 years ago); native woodlands in the project area have a mean reference fire return interval of 29 years.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The Mill Valley Fire Department was created more than a century ago, and has vast experience managing federal, state and local grants, including grants from FEMA, CalFire, PGE and private organizations. The Fire Department has a well-established relationship with Marin County Parks and is well equipped to undertake the proposed project and along with Marin County Parks staff will oversee subcontractors doing the on-the-ground work.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$144,000</b>
City of Mill Valley	\$16,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$160,000</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.

**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 service 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.

**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:** 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.