

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 7, 2021

SONOMA LAND TRUST WILDFIRE RESILIENCY

Project No. 21-029-01
Project Manager: Julia Elkin

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$150,000 to Sonoma Land Trust to conduct wildfire risk reduction activities on the Little Black Mountain Preserve, Laufenberg Ranch, Pole Mountain Preserve, and Live Oaks Ranch properties in Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Sonoma County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Current Site Conditions](#)

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 and fifty thousand dollars (\$150,000) to Sonoma Land Trust (“the grantee”) to conduct wildfire risk reduction activities on the Little Black Mountain Preserve, Laufenberg Ranch, Pole Mountain Preserve, and Live Oaks Ranch properties in Sonoma 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 Sonoma Land Trust is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$150,000 grant to Sonoma Land Trust to conduct wildfire risk reduction activities on the Little Black Mountain Preserve, Laufenberg Ranch, Pole Mountain Preserve, and Live Oaks Ranch properties in Sonoma County (see Exhibit 1).

Sonoma County's native habitats evolved with fire and are largely adapted to regular fires of moderate to low intensity. However, the removal of fire from the landscape has resulted in an unnaturally large buildup of surface and ladder fuels and forests with too many small diameter trees per acres. These conditions, combined with the lengthening dry (fire) season and higher temperatures now put natural and human communities at risk. As California faces another extreme fire season, fuels reduction activities are a critical tool to ensure healthy forest structure that will reduce wildfire severity and impacts.

The proposed project would meet this threat and reduce fire hazards on Sonoma Land Trust's preserves by returning approximately 55 acres of forest preserve lands to a more natural and fire resilient condition, breaking the continuity of forest fuels, vertically and horizontally, and reducing the rate of fire spread, intensity, duration, and risk of crown fire. Vegetation management methods will include shaded fuel break creation and management, roadway clearing, and forest thinning. All activities will be conducted by hand crews using methods such as loppers and chainsaws. Additionally, Sonoma Land Trust will enhance native oak woodland habitat, by hand-removing encroaching firs and caging select oaks to protect them from herbivory until they grow above the deer browse line.

Shaded fuel breaks will consist of removing shrubs and understory trees, reducing surface and ladder fuels, within 100 feet of existing roads or fire breaks, reducing fire fuel loads and creating safe places for firefighters to stage equipment and fight wildfire. Trees under 8" in diameter at breast height ("DBH") will be felled. For trees over 8" DBH, hand crews will remove lower limbs, creating space between trees. In oak woodlands, the focus will be on removing encroaching firs and bay trees to promote woodland health.

Shaded fuel break maintenance will be conducted by hand crews using loppers and chainsaws to prune shrub, brush, and stump sprouting regrowth along existing roadways and to maintain the spacing, removed ladder fuels, and reduced surface fuels. Vegetated material will be left on site by lopping and scattering or chipping.

Hand crews will also clear roadways using loppers and chainsaws to remove shrubs, brush, and small diameter trees. Larger trees will be pruned to create and/or maintain a twelve-foot-wide by twelve-foot-high vegetation free area so that residents have safe emergency escape routes and fire-fighting crews can have safe access for their activities. A masticator operating from the road may be used for a portion of these activities.

Forest Thinning / Fire Fuel Reduction will be completed by hand crews using loppers and chainsaws to reduce fire fuels and increase space between trees. Trees 8" DBH and smaller will be cut down. In previously burned areas, bay and madrone resprouts with multiple stems will be pruned to 2 or 3 stems per tree. Material will be left on site by lopping and scattering and chipping.

These treatment activities have been reviewed by Sonoma Land Trust with CalFire staff and are identified in existing forest management plans prepared by Registered Professional Foresters. Maps from the forest management plans are provided in Exhibit 1. Project implementation will mostly occur outside of the bird nesting season. When that is not possible, a biologist will be hired to do nesting bird surveys in advance of the activity. Nest trees will be flagged and a buffer established. No vehicles or heavy equipment will be used off-road. Work in streams, creeks, and other water bodies will be avoided. No grading will occur and no soil disturbance is expected.

Site Description: The work will occur on four Sonoma Land Trust preserves within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). These preserve properties have high habitat values and their locations are important for community safety in the adjacent populated areas of Jenner and Calistoga. Two lie in the west side of the Sonoma County, and two are on the east side.

The 500-acre Little Black Mountain Preserve ("LBM") lies several miles west of the town of Cazadero and was almost completely consumed by the Creighton Ridge Fire in 1978. The Preserve's forestlands are an even-aged thicket comprised of stump-sprouting hardwoods and conifers that need to be thinned for forest health and wildfire resilience. The ranch road on this Preserve serves as an important escape route for the local community.

Pole Mountain Preserve lies adjacent and south of LBM, Jenner Headlands Preserve, and Muniz Ranches subdivision. This 200-acre Preserve has a public trail that is well used to access unparalleled coastal views and is home to the Pole Mtn Fire Lookout, which provides fire detection services for the safety of the communities of west Sonoma County.

Laufenburg Ranch is 174 acres of grassland, oak woodland, mixed conifer, and agricultural lands in Knights Valley near the Napa-Sonoma county boundary. The Tubbs Fire burned up to its southern boundary and the Kincade Fire burned to its northern boundary. The Preserve is poised to serve as a demonstration site for fire resilience amongst a mosaic of habitat types and land uses.

The 572-acre Live Oaks Ranch (LOR) is on the eastern side of Knights Valley. The Tubbs Fire roared across the Preserve and the Glass Fire came very close. It is surrounded by hundreds of acres of protected lands and rural homes. The northwestern ridgeline of the Preserve offers a strategic location to enhance community safety by installing a shaded fuel break that separates Knights Valley from the nearby town of Calistoga.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Sonoma Land Trust is a nonprofit organization that works closely with private landowners, public agencies, nonprofits, and foundations to protect the scenic, natural, agricultural, and open landscapes of Sonoma County for the benefit of the community and future generations. Sonoma Land Trust is a member of the California Council of Land Trusts and is accredited by the national Land Trust Accreditation Commission. Since 1976, Sonoma Land Trust has protected over 50,000 acres of beautiful, productive, and environmentally significant land in and around Sonoma County. The Land Trust demonstrated significant experience in property stewardship and the restoration of conservation properties. They have received numerous Conservancy grants, including the Cooper Creek acquisition, Pole Mountain acquisition, Haire Ranch acquisition, and Jenner Headlands acquisition.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$150,000
Project Total	\$150,000

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) 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 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.

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 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.