

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 7, 2021

**FUELS REDUCTION AND BURN AREA RESTORATION FOR WILDLIFE RESILIENCE
IN SONOMA COUNTY**

Project No. 21-030-01
Project Manager: Julia Elkin

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$150,000 to LandPaths to conduct approximately 60 acres of fuels reduction and burn area restoration on the Bohemia Ecological Preserve, Riddell Preserve, Rancho Mark West Preserve, and Ocean Song Preserve properties in Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Sonoma County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

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 LandPaths (“the grantee”) to conduct approximately 60 acres of fuels reduction and burn area restoration on the Bohemia Ecological Preserve, Riddell Preserve, Rancho Mark West Preserve, and Ocean Song Preserve properties in Sonoma 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.

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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.
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 LandPaths to conduct approximately 60 acres of fuels reduction and burn area restoration on the Bohemia Ecological Preserve, Riddell Preserve, Rancho Mark West Preserve, and Ocean Song Preserve properties in Sonoma County (see Exhibit 1). The four preserves are owned and stewarded by LandPaths, a Sonoma County nonprofit organization.

While each LandPaths preserve has unique habitat features and management histories (see Site Description below), they have each experienced recent wildfire impacts. Heading into another severe wildfire season, the preserve properties will be made more resilient to wildfire through implementation of the following forest health and wildfire management activities: fuels reduction focusing on grasses, broom, coyote brush, and small trees; forest thinning to reduce sub-canopy Douglas fir cover; creation and maintenance of shaded fuel breaks on existing road systems within forested areas of the preserves; and establishment of defensible space around existing critical structures on the preserves. Work will primarily be conducted by hand using loppers and hand saws and access to work areas will be by foot or on roads. The majority of the work will occur on the Bohemia and Riddell Preserves, which have not burned in recent years.

Two of the LandPaths preserves experienced particularly severe wildfire impacts in 2020: 75% of the Riddell Preserve and over 80% of Rancho Mark West burned in the Walbridge and Glass fires respectively. These burned areas pose an increased fire risk as standing/dead/dying vegetation from prior wildfire serves as ladder fuel. The proposed project will conduct post-fire recovery and restoration within portions of these burned areas by removing dead and dying vegetation from the 2020 fires, chipping on-site material, and introducing fungal mycelium inoculated wood chips as needed for increasing soil moisture and available carbon in burn-

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scarred areas. Additionally, the project will remove flammable nonnative species that are highly adapted to spread into fire disturbed areas and create further fire fuels. Removal of these invasives and restoration actions will promote growth of native plant cover that does not pose such high fire risk and, once established, can outcompete invasive plant cover.

Site Description: The proposed project area consists of four preserves owned and managed by LandPaths; two in West Sonoma County (Ocean Song Preserve and Bohemia Ecological Preserve) and two in North Sonoma County (Riddell Preserve and Rancho Mark West Preserve) (see Exhibit 1).

The 800-acre Ocean Song Preserve includes one of the largest intact remnant serpentine grasslands, mixed conifer redwood forest, numerous springs, salmonids in Coleman Valley Creek and serves as an important wildlife corridor. Two houses and two barns are located on the property and require defensible space work according to CalFire specifications.

The 554-acre Bohemia Ecological Preserve in West Sonoma County near Occidental is home to diverse habitats comprised of serpentine outcrops, redwood and Sargent cypress forests, oak woodlands, native grasslands, and chaparral. Three creeks run through the property (Grub Creek, Margaret’s Creek, and Duvoul Creek) and feed into steelhead and coho salmon-bearing Dutch Bill Creek.

The 400-acre Riddell Preserve is owned and managed by LandPaths with a conservation easement held by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District. The property consists primarily of montane hardwood woodland, second growth redwood and Douglas-fir, significant stands of native bunch grass as well as riparian habitat. Approximately 75% of this preserve burned in the 2020 Walbridge Fire.

The 120-acre Rancho Mark West Preserve is dominated by a mixed conifer redwood forest interspersed small oak grassland area. significant portions (80-90% of forested area) of which burned in the 2020 Glass Fire.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: LandPaths is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Santa Rosa, with a mission to foster a love of the land in Sonoma County. LandPaths partners with many other agencies and organizations to conduct stewardship and public use programs on public lands and owns and manages several preserve properties in Sonoma County. The Conservancy has provided grants to LandPaths in the past for projects including construction of Sonoma Mountain Trail, acquisition of the Grove of the Old Trees, management of public access at Willow Creek, and acquisition of Rancho Mark West.

PROJECT FINANCING

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

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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.

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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.