

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 7, 2021

MENDOCINO COUNTY FUELS REDUCTION CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAM

Project No. 21-014-01
Project Manager: Karyn Gear

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$197,621 to Mendocino County to implement the Mendocino County Fuels Reduction Capacity Building Project in Mendocino County.

LOCATION: Brooktrails Greenbelt, unincorporated Mendocino 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 ninety-seven thousand six hundred twenty-one dollars (\$197,621) to the County of Mendocino (“the grantee”) to implement the Mendocino County Fuels Reduction Capacity Building Project in Mendocino 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) 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. The grantee shall submit evidence that it has permission to implement the project from all project site landowners.

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 grant of \$197,621 to the County of Mendocino to acquire equipment and implement an on-the-ground training program for fuels management at the Brooktrails Greenbelt to build inhouse capacity for fuels reduction projects throughout the County of Mendocino (Exhibit 1: Project Location).

The Mendocino County Fuels Reduction Capacity Building Project is a partnership between the County of Mendocino (County) and the Mendocino County Fire Safe Council (MCFSC) which will increase local capacity to conduct fuels reduction treatments to protect homes and lives in Mendocino County via the purchase of a chipper truck to haul MCFSC-owned chippers, and the training of local staff to operate the chipper to support fuels reduction projects across Mendocino County. The project's goals are to: 1) train crews to operate vehicles, wood chippers, and other necessary equipment to implement fuels reduction work; 2) decrease long-term costs of fuels reduction activities conducted by the MCFSC by using in-house crews instead of contractors; and 3) purchase necessary equipment to support the program. The expected outcomes of the project are the training of at least five new fuels reduction technicians; 2) vegetation management on approximately 75 acres at the Brooktrails subdivision; and 3) creation of a fuels reduction training video for future crew training. With the trained crew and equipment in hand, the County will be able to expand its vegetation management efforts across the County.

The Conservancy's grant will enable the County to purchase a chipper-hauling truck and cover all costs associated with crew training, including supply purchases, payments to vendors who will provide training, and administrative costs for project management and coordination. Following a week of initial crew onboarding/basics training, the crew will receive four weeks of training in the field. Staff will be trained in fuels reduction techniques on public lands within the boundaries of the Brooktrails Community Services District (BTCSD) at the Brooktrails

“greenbelt,” 2,500 acres of forested lands set aside during subdivision development and owned by BTCSD.

The Brooktrails subdivision was identified in the 2020 Mendocino County Fire Vulnerability Assessment as an area “at extreme risk for wildfire.” Fuels reduction activities will focus on areas adjacent to infrastructure such as BTCSD water storage tanks and public access walking trails. Mendocino County staff will provide project management, oversight, and reporting. During the training period, the County expects approximately 75 to 100 acres of the highest priority areas will be treated at Brooktrails. Following completion of the training, the County will deploy the crew and chipper truck throughout the County in coordination with the MCFSC to undertake vegetation management efforts.

This project will help to achieve Goal 2 of the California Wildfire Resilience and Forest Health Action Plan: Strengthen Protection of Communities. By training a crew to operate chippers owned by the MCFSC, the MCFSC will be able to implement fuels reduction activities such as roadside fuels reduction, defensible space assistance programs, and community chipper days without the use of contract crews. For the want of a chipper truck, the MCFSC must pay private contractors at a rate of \$1,500 to \$1,800 per day for a two-person crew with a chipper truck hauling a MCFSC-owned chipper. By training an in-house crew to complete this work and purchasing a chipper truck, the MCFSC cost for a two-man crew to conduct these activities will be reduced to less than \$1,000 per day. This cost savings will increase the amount of fuels reduction work which can be completed by the MCFSC by 50%-80%. This increase in efficiency will allow the MCFSC to increase the pace of fuels reduction work around homes and other values at risk as well as submit more competitive funding applications due to the lower unit cost of fuels reduction crews. In addition, by creating a training video which documents the training provided using SCC funding, future crew training will be able to leverage this investment to greatly defray training costs and further expand MCFSC fuels reduction capacity in the future.

Site Description: The on-site training program will occur at the BTCSD greenbelt area, in unincorporated Mendocino County northwest of the City of Willits, in the upper Eel River watershed. Brooktrails is a 7,773-acre forested development which contains approximately 1,600 dwellings and has 6,000 residents, mainly on small 1/6 to 1/3 acre lots. The greenbelt covers 2,300 acres and borders a large portion of the parcels in the subdivision. According to the 2020 Mendocino County Fire Vulnerability Assessment, a huge accumulation of wildland fire fuels has built up around the residences in the subdivision, and the combination of a poorly designed road system, high population density, the large accumulation of forest fuels, and a very restricted exit corridor puts residents at extreme risk for wildfire. The area to be treated during the training program is adjacent to the BTSCD water supply system, including redwood water tanks and the water treatment plant, as well as along a community trail system that could serve as firebreaks/ control lines in the event of a wildfire. The vegetation is a mosaic of redwood/fir/tanoak stands with varying levels of understory shrubs and interspersed shrub filled openings. It is expected that following the crew training program, the County’s crew will conduct additional fuel management activities throughout the County.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Mendocino County has partnered with the Mendocino County Fire Safe Council to increase local capacity and share equipment for fuels reduction activities. The County has the capacity to manage the grant and oversee the training program for County staff, and the Fire Safe Council will provide the chipper equipment.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$197,621
Project Total	\$197,621

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.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

All components of the proposed project 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.

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](#) 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.