

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 7, 2021

Jenner Headlands Preserve Fuels Reduction

Project No.08-064-03
Project Manager: Karyn Gear

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$209,800 to The Wildlands Conservancy to undertake fuels reduction and vegetation management on the Jenner Headlands Preserve, Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Jenner Headlands Preserve, Jenner, Sonoma County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

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 two hundred nine thousand eight hundred dollars (\$209,800.00) to The Wildlands Conservancy (“the grantee”) to undertake fuels reduction and vegetation management on the Jenner Headlands Preserve, 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 Wildlands Conservancy 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 grant of \$209,800 to The Wildlands Conservancy (TWC) to undertake vegetation management and fire risk reduction activities (the project) on the Jenner Headlands Preserve in western Sonoma County.

The project consists of conducting vegetation management via fuel load maintenance on 134 acres of previously established Shaded Fuel Break (SFB) and installing fencing to allow targeted cattle grazing. The project is located in a High Fire Hazard Severity Zone, heavily impaired by the rapid spread of Sudden Oak Death Syndrome (SODS), and adjacent to disadvantaged communities and communities at risk due to high forest fuel loads. The proposed project will improve the existing SFB by removing both surface and ladder fuels. The project will reduce wildfire risk for multiple rural communities (Jenner, Duncan Mills, Muniz Ranches, and Cazadero) with close to a thousand habitable structures within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). It will also reduce ignition risks from adjacent utilities (a PG&E 60 Kilovolt power line runs parallel to SFB), and reduce fire risk to coastal recreation areas (Jenner Headlands, Pole Mountain, and State Park lands). After improving the SFB, TWC intends to continue ongoing work with CalFire in applying prescribed fire on the SFB, and to showcase efforts as a demonstrational forest for local community stakeholders. Additionally, TWC will construct 3,200 feet of perimeter fencing along the western grassland bordering State Highway 1 in the area where a vehicle ignited a wildfire in 2017. The installation of perimeter fencing on the western grassland will allow for the implementation of targeted cattle grazing to reduce fine fuel loads (thatch buildup) and to impede the spread of fire from potential ignition sources along State Highway 1 and coastal recreation areas, such as the TWC Highway 1 Parking Lot.

TWC has demonstrated the capacity to protect habitable structures, reduce excessive fuel loads, and improve forest health at the Jenner Headlands Preserve and at many of its preserves throughout the State of California. It has conducted extensive outreach to both public and private landowners to help facilitate the implementation of fuel reduction work throughout the region. This proposed project will maintain an established shaded fuel break that was originally funded by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and CalFire, with in-kind work provided by the California Conservation Corps.

Site Description: The Jenner Headlands Preserve consists of 5,630 acres of coastal land located just east of Highway 1 north of the Russian River where it meets the Pacific Ocean. This visually spectacular property is adjacent to significant corridors of protected open space including the 10,000- acre Sonoma Coast State Beach with 17 miles of coastline, Sonoma Land Trust’s 560- acre Little Black Mountain Preserve, and over 10,000 acres of other protected lands in western Sonoma County. It is bounded to the west by views of the ocean and to the south by the popular tourist route from Jenner inland along Russian River Road. Mixed redwood and Douglas fir forest and oak woodland make up the approximately 3,200 wooded acres on the property. In addition, 1,600 acres of coastal prairie and other grasslands are a tremendous resource for biological diversity. The property includes portions of eight watersheds; much of the area has been designated as Significant Natural Area by California Department of Fish and Game (DFG). The property’s elevation ranges from 120 to 1,800 feet above sea-level and includes 13 types of habitat. This variety of forests, grasslands, wetlands and riparian areas is home to such fish and wildlife species as, steelhead, river otter, red tree vole, fox, bobcats and mountain lions, red-legged frogs and birds such as, peregrine falcon and osprey. The SFB component of the project lies along one of the ridges in mixed forest. The proposed grazing component is adjacent to the public access entrance to the property on Highway 1 (see Exhibit 1).

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Wildlands Conservancy (“TWC”) is a California private nonprofit public benefit corporation dedicated to preserving biodiversity and to providing passive recreation and education opportunities for free to the general public. Over the past twenty-five years, TWC has established the largest nonprofit nature preserve system in California, comprised of fifteen preserves encompassing 143,000 acres of diverse mountain, valley, desert, river, and oceanfront landscapes. These preserves are open to the public free of charge for passive recreation, including camping, hiking, horseback riding, picnicking, birding, and more. In addition, TWC has preserved more than 800,000 acres of land with private funds.

TWC has demonstrated experience as a successful project partner, having completed grants from the State Coastal Conservancy for acquisitions including the Estero Americano Coast Preserve and Santa Margarita River Trails Preserve, and for public access improvements at the Jenner Headlands Preserve.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$209,800
Project Total	\$209,800

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 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 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) 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 the disadvantaged communities of Jenner and Cazadero.

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.