

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 7, 2021

**WILDFIRE RESILIENCE AT SPRING LAKE REGIONAL PARK**

Project No. 21-022-01  
Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$277,166 to the Sonoma County Water Agency to conduct wildfire resilience activities at Spring Lake Regional Park, Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** Spring Lake Regional Park, Sonoma County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Fire Proximity 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 two hundred seventy-seven thousand one hundred sixty-six dollars (\$277,166) to the Sonoma County Water Agency (“the grantee”) to conduct wildfire resilience activities at Spring Lake Regional Park, 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. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
  - c. 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.

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## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$277,166 grant to Sonoma County Water Agency (“Sonoma Water”) to conduct wildfire resilience activities at Spring Lake Regional Park, Sonoma County, which is operated by Sonoma County Regional Parks (see Exhibit 1).

Sonoma Water owns degraded forest areas where Douglas fir trees are overcrowding and shading out the native oaks, constituting ladder fuels that bring surface fire to the canopy and result in a high-severity fire. Several recent wildfires, including the 2017 Tubbs/Nuns Fires and the 2020 Glass Fire, came dangerously close or actually into the park’s eastern boundaries (see Exhibit 2). The area remains at high risk for burning and could potentially act as a corridor for fires to reach heavily populated areas of Santa Rosa. Sonoma Water therefore proposes fire resilience activities within the County’s priority geographic focal areas and consistent with the County’s priority project types, both summarized below.

#### County Focal Areas:

- High fire-risk areas to the northeast of developed communities
- Areas that burned in recent fires and/or have a high fire-return interval
- Areas surrounding primary evacuation routes and key infrastructure
- Boundary areas between large public and private lands and dense developments
- Mark West and the Tubbs and Glass Fire corridors

#### County Priority Project Types:

- Creation of “calming zone” vegetation removal buffers and strategic fuel breaks along the wildland urban interface
- Understory thinning of woodlands and forests
- Prescribed grazing where feasible
- Creation/maintenance of defensible space within 100 feet of homes, and
- Education and outreach campaigns or materials within the community or focus area regarding wildfire safety, vegetation management, and fire prevention.

Specifically, the proposed project consists of vegetation management including trimming and cutting by hand, removing, chipping on-site, mowing, and grazing activities using sheep and goats. The vegetation removal by hand crews and mowing can begin this June. The grazing activities are anticipated to begin in March 2022 and continue until July 2022. The proposed project will conclude by December 2022.

Sonoma Water is also interested in coordinating with the Sonoma Ecology Center's Sonoma Biochar Initiative to convert the removed biomass to biochar in the field using various practices such as small-scale, top-lit conservation burns, and kilns. Biochar can be used to amend soil, sequester carbon, and improve soil water holding capacity. Sonoma Water intends to seek additional funding from outside the Conservancy to pursue these biochar activities.

**Site Description:** Constructed between 1961 and 1964 as a flood protection reservoir, Spring Lake consists of three steel and concrete dams, spillways, channels, and flow regulators that divert floodwaters from Spring Creek and Santa Rosa Creek into Spring Lake, alleviating much of downtown Santa Rosa's flooding. In the 1970s, the land surrounding the reservoir was developed into parkland. Sonoma Water owns the land and operates and maintains potable water tanks within the park, including the Sonoma Aqueduct which runs along the property boundaries delivering potable water to residents to the east and south of Santa Rosa. The park is operated by the Sonoma County Regional Parks Department under a contract with the Sonoma Water. The park's 313 acres are surrounded by considerable residential development and accommodate a 72-acre lake; a three-acre swimming lagoon; miles of walking, hiking, and horseback-riding trails; a visitors' center; campsites; picnic areas; and boating facilities.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** Sonoma Water will work in partnership with Sonoma County Regional Parks, with whom the Conservancy has partnered extensively on projects that include acquisitions, property management planning, restoration, and providing public access. Both Sonoma Water and Sonoma County Regional Parks have demonstrated capacity to manage external grants and deliver projects within schedule and budget.

#### **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 (California Natural Resources Agency, 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 (California Department of Fish and Wildlife, 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" (Office of Planning and Research, 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**

1. **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.

2. **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).
3. **Readiness:** The project is ready to begin work immediately.
4. **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.
5. **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.

#### PROJECT FINANCING

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$277,166</b>
Sonoma Water	\$28,834
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$306,000</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.

#### 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 a disadvantaged community. Severely disadvantaged communities (SDACs) are located within one mile of the park and lies within the path of wildfire-exacerbating Diablo winds that push wildfire into the urban environments.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

All components of the proposed project are categorically 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.