

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 7, 2021

**WILDFIRE RESILIENCE AT SONOMA COUNTY REGIONAL PARKS
SHILOH RANCH AND TAYLOR MOUNTAIN**

Project No. 21-024-01

Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up \$345,650 to Sonoma County Regional Parks to conduct wildfire resilience activities consisting of shaded fuel breaks at Shiloh Ranch Regional Park and prescribed grazing at Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve, Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Shiloh Ranch Regional Park and Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve, Sonoma County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Fire Proximity Maps](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Site 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 three hundred forty-five thousand six hundred fifty dollars (\$345,650) to Sonoma County Regional Parks (“the grantee”) to conduct wildfire resilience activities consisting of creating shaded fuel breaks at Shiloh Ranch Regional Park and carrying out prescribed grazing at Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space 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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$345,650 grant to Sonoma County Regional Parks ("SCRIP") to conduct fire resilience activities at two of its properties: create shaded fuel breaks at Shiloh Ranch Regional Park (Shiloh Ranch) and carry out prescribed grazing at Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve (Taylor Mountain) (see Exhibit 1).

These two regional parks surround the Santa Rosa and Windsor communities and their rural residences, and are highly vulnerable to wildfire and the exacerbating Diablo winds that push those fires into urban environments (see Exhibit 2). Shiloh Ranch wholly burned in the 2017 Tubbs Fire and was impacted again in the 2019 Kincade Fire, which left extensive standing dead material in the forest understory as well as surviving encroaching Douglas-fir in oak woodland and hardwood forest areas. The recently-acquired Cooper Creek addition to Taylor Mountain also requires additional fuels reduction via managed grazing of annual grasses. SCRIP 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
- Boundary areas between large public and private lands and dense developments
- Mark West and the Tubbs and Glass Fire corridors.

County Priority Project Types:

- Re-treatment and maintenance of recently burned areas (particularly near the WUI or vulnerable watershed areas that will be more difficult to treat once vegetation gets reestablished)
- Understory thinning of woodlands and forests

- Prescribed grazing where feasible.

Specifically, SCRP will create shaded fuel breaks in coordination with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (“CAL FIRE”) along four trails in Shiloh Ranch (see Exhibit 3, page 1); a total of 50 acres and five miles of trail corridor will be treated. Work will be conducted by contracted crews such as the California Conservation Corps, as available, and SCRP (as a back-up). Crews will use hand-tools such as hand saws, pole saws, and chain saws. Work on each trail will take two to four weeks to complete, and will commence as soon as funding is authorized and crews can be mobilized.

SCRP will also install 6,000 feet of fencing and develop water delivery and storage needed to expand cattle grazing into the recently-acquired 54-acre Cooper Creek property addition to Taylor Mountain (see Exhibit 3, page 2). To provide the needed water, SCRP will complete its application to the City of Santa Rosa for an encroachment permit to tap an existing City water supply (water tank) located adjacent to the property, and will install the pipes and troughs necessary to move the water to the desired locations on the property. Prescribed herbivory is one of the most cost-effective tools for long-term management of annual grasses, control of which is critical given the park’s location adjacent to residential neighborhoods in southeast Santa Rosa. Due to this year’s very dry conditions, cattle herds are being moved off of properties in this area earlier than usual; SCRP anticipates their return in January 2022, and will thus install the grazing infrastructure in fall 2021.

Site Description: Located in the foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains east of Windsor, the 860-acre **Shiloh Ranch Regional Park** includes canyons, meadows, grasslands, ridges, seasonal creeks, and a pond. The landscape features mixed woodlands of valley and black oaks, Douglas fir, chaparral, buckeye, bay laurel, big leaf maple, willow, madrone, and coast redwoods. The park provides habitat for deer, rabbit, fox, coyote, bobcat, quail, hawks, and many other species of wildlife and birds. Eight miles of trails allow access to an 850-foot ridgeline that offers sweeping views across the Santa Rosa Plain to the Coast Range.

Located in southeast Santa Rosa, the 1,100-acre **Taylor Mountain Regional Park & Open Space Preserve** features grassy hillsides, oak woodlands and several creeks that all provide habitat for a variety of wildlife. The park currently offers 6.4 miles of trails for hiking, biking, and horseback riding, an 18-hole disc golf course and an accessible natural play area; additional visitor-serving amenities will be developed per the Park Master Plan.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Conservancy has partnered extensively with SCRP on projects that include acquisitions, property management planning, restoration, and providing public access. In 2019, the partnership included adding the 54-acre Cooper Creek property to Taylor Mountain Regional Park & Open Space Preserve. SCRP has 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 (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

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

Coastal Conservancy	\$345,650
Shiloh Ranch \$196,650	
Taylor Mountain \$149,000	
SCRP	\$ 20,000
Project Total	\$365,650

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.

Unless specifically labelled “Required Match” the other sources of funding listed above are provided as estimates. The Coastal Conservancy does not typically require matching funds nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders. Typical grant conditions require Grantees to provide any funds needed to complete the project.

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 both parks, and lie within the path of wildfire-exacerbating Diablo winds that push wildfire into the urban environments. (see Exhibit 2).

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 15269, 15304, 15301, and 15303.

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.

Section 15303 (Small Structures) exempts construction and location of limited numbers of new, small facilities or structures; installation of small new equipment and facilities in small structures; and the conversion of existing small structures from one use to another where only minor modifications are made in the exterior of the structure. The water development activities to be undertaken at Taylor Mountain are consistent with this section.

Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.