

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 7, 2021

**WILDFIRE RESILIENCE AT SADDLE MOUNTAIN OPEN SPACE PRESERVE**

Project No. 21-020-01  
Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up \$575,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District to conduct wildfire resilience activities at Saddle Mountain Open Space Preserve, Sonoma County, and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

**LOCATION:** Saddle Mountain Open Space Preserve, Sonoma County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Project Map](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Saddle Mountain Open Space Preserve Management Plan Mitigated Negative Declaration \(SCH #2019059008\), and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program](#)
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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 five hundred seventy-five thousand dollars (\$575,000) to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (“the grantee”) to conduct wildfire resilience activities at Saddle Mountain 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.
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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 Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Saddle Mountain Open Space Preserve Management Plan Mitigated Negative Declaration (SCH #2019059008) adopted by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District on August 6, 2019 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”) and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 3. The Conservancy finds that the proposed project as designed and mitigated avoids, reduces, or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a less-than-significant level, and that there is no substantial evidence based on the record as a whole that the project may have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15382.

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## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$575,000 grant to Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (“Sonoma Ag + Open Space” or “the grantee”) to conduct wildfire resilience activities at Saddle Mountain Open Space Preserve, Sonoma County (see Exhibit 1).

The proposed project is on a 960-acre open space preserve located northeast of the City of Santa Rosa, in the Mark West Creek watershed. The preserve burned at varying intensities in the 2020 Glass Fire, which left extensive standing dead material in the forest understory as well as surviving Douglas-fir encroaching on oak woodland and hardwood forest areas. Sonoma Ag + Open Space 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
- Areas within the Mark West, Tubbs and Glass Fire corridors

County Priority Project Types:

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

Specifically, Sonoma Ag + Open Space will establish an approximately one-mile-long shaded fuel break along an existing preserve road and contribute to 18 months of understory thinning on approximately 150 acres of high-priority oak woodland and mixed hardwood forest (see Exhibit 2). Work will be performed by professional tree crews, with the possibility of some assistance by the California Conservation Corps. Like others on the preserve, the shaded fuel break has been planned in coordination with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (“CAL FIRE”). It follows a road that is used for emergency personnel access and will be used as a control line for future prescribed burns with fuel reduction and forest health objectives.

The acreage targeted for thinning consists of native oak woodland and mixed hardwood forest. Thinning will target invasive Douglas-fir saplings that were largely killed by the 2020 Glass Fire and are now dry ladder fuels that could contribute to more extreme fire behavior and heavier overstory tree mortality in the next wildfire. Thinning will use saw crews and a combination of lop-and-scatter (cutting up and distributing the “slash,” which is the cut limbs, leaves, needles, and other removed woody debris), chipping (mechanical processing of woody debris), and pile burning as warranted by site conditions, to lower fuel loading, re-establish healthier, appropriate stand structure, and increase forest/woodland resilience to wildfire.

Regulatory agency restrictions around northern spotted owl occurrences on and near the preserve preclude tree cutting prior to September 1. In order to begin work immediately once owl restrictions are lifted, Sonoma Ag + Open Space will have a forester on site by August to mark project boundaries, retention trees, and slash treatment zones, and will have the tree crews on-site for orientation. All grant-funded work will conclude by March 2024.

**Site Description:** The 960-acre Saddle Mountain Open Space Preserve is located northeast of the City of Santa Rosa. It is situated in the Mark West Creek watershed which contains several Coho salmon and steelhead streams, special-status plant species, and important wildlife habitat. Ag + Open Space owns and manages the preserve to protect natural resources and offer recreational access that is compatible with preserving the conservation values of the property. 90% of the preserve burned at varying intensities in the 2020 Glass Fire.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The Conservancy has partnered extensively with Sonoma Ag + Open Space on projects that include acquisitions, property management planning, restoration, and providing public access. The grantee 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 bay-area 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>\$575,000</b>
Sonoma Ag + Open Space	\$115,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$690,000</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 two miles of the project site and are at risk of wildfires that may occur at Saddle Mountain Open Space Preserve.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

To manage, enhance, and protect the Saddle Mountain Open Space Preserve's resources, Sonoma Ag + Open Space approved the Saddle Mountain Open Space Preserve Management Plan and adopted a Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND) and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP) on August 6, 2019. The MND and MMRP are attached as Exhibit 3 for review. Staff have reviewed the MND and MMRP and provide the following summary of the significant effects and mitigations.

Work will be performed by professional tree crews, with possibility of some assistance by the California Conservation Corps. Thinning areas, including the shaded fuel break, will be scouted and flagged by a Registered Professional Forester, and sensitive areas (such as Watercourse and Lake Protection Zones) will be marked for avoidance consistent with Forest Practice Rules and **Mitigation Measure BIO-7 (Protect Wetlands and Waters)**. Thinning and fuel break activities will be done by saw crews only, with no use of heavy equipment, and no mastication or ground disturbance. Per **Mitigation Measures BIO-4 (Protect Nesting Birds)** and **BIO-5 (Protect Northern Spotted Owl)**, work will occur outside of northern spotted owl and nesting bird season, unless possible at other times under direction from California Department of Fish and Wildlife and with appropriate pre-work surveys.

Project activities may increase the spread of Sudden Oak Death disease. In order to prevent spread of this disease, Ag + Open Space will: (1) confirm selected nurseries follow best management practices in accordance with California Oak Mortality Task Force recommendations before purchasing any stock from them; (2) train staff on disease identification, transmission, and spread prevention best practices; and (3) educate preserve users on SOD spread prevention, all in accordance with **Project Measure 5 – Prevent Spread of Sudden Oak Death**.

Slash piles will be erected in areas where understory material is too dense to safely lop-and-scatter without creating unacceptably high surface fuel loading. Sonoma Ag + Open Space staff and a Registered Professional Forester will determine and flag appropriate areas for pile burning. Per **Mitigation Measures BIO-2 (Protect Special-status Plants During Prescribed Burning)**, these areas will be away from any known cultural resource sites or sensitive natural resource areas, and located only where surrounding vegetation and overstory canopy height are adequately distant to avoid heat impacts to overstory and adjacent vegetation. In addition, piles will be burned by qualified personnel during winter to early spring months when fire danger is lowest.

Prior to prescribed fire activities, a qualified archaeologist will work to identify any historic and archaeological resources present in the project area, mark their locations for exclusion from prescribed fire, and train wildland fire officials on how to protect any identified cultural resources in accordance with **Mitigation Measure CUL-3 (Minimize Impacts of Prescribed Fire on Cultural Resources)**.

Staff has independently evaluated the MND and MMRP, and concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment. Staff therefore recommends that the Conservancy find that the project as mitigated avoids, reduces or mitigates the possible significant environmental effects to a level of less-than-significant and that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment as that term is defined by 14 Cal. Code Regs. §15382.

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