

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 7, 2021

**WILDFIRE RESILIENCE ON NAPA COUNTY PROTECTED LANDS**

Project No. 21-025-01  
Project Manager: Moira McEnespy

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,078,684 to the Napa County Resource Conservation District for wildfire resilience activities at Linda Falls Preserve, Pacific Union College Demonstration and Experimental Forest, Suscol Intertribal Council’s Suskol House Land, and Moore Creek Park, Napa County, and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

**LOCATION:** Linda Falls Preserve, Pacific Union College Demonstration and Experimental Forest, Suscol Intertribal Council’s Suskol House Land, and Moore Creek Park, Napa County (see Exhibits 1 and 2)

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)  
Exhibit 2: [Project Sites Map](#)  
Exhibit 3: [Non-Industrial Timber Management Plan \(No. 1-96NTMP-015 NAP\) for Pacific Union College \(approved October 9, 1996\)](#)
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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 one million seventy-eight thousand six hundred eighty-four dollars (\$1,078,684) to the Napa County Resource Conservation District (“the grantee”) for wildfire resilience activities at Linda Falls Preserve, Pacific Union College Demonstration and Experimental Forest, Suscol Intertribal Council’s Suskol House Land, and Moore Creek Park, Napa County; and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

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. The grantee shall submit evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.
  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.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Non-Industrial Timber Management Plan (No. 1-96NTMP-015 NAP) for Pacific Union College adopted by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection on October 9, 1996 pursuant to the Forest Practice Act's certified regulatory program under which a Non-Industrial Timber Management Plan functions as the equivalent of an Environmental Impact Report under the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 3. The Conservancy finds that the proposed project at the Pacific Union College Demonstration and Experimental Forest 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 \$1,078,684 grant to the Napa County Resource Conservation District ("the RCD") for wildfire resilience activities over approximately 376 acres at four properties in Napa County: 120 acres on the Land Trust of Napa County's Linda Falls Preserve; 130 acres of the Pacific Union College Demonstration and Experimental Forest ("PUC Forest"); 16 acres on the Suscol Intertribal Council's Suskol House Land; and 110 acres of Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District's Moore Creek Park. (See Exhibits 1 and 2. Also note that when Native American words were put into English a phonetic spelling was used; the

Council uses the “Suscol” spelling for the organization and the “Suskol” spelling for the land project.)

Wildfire intensity, frequency, and related economic and social damages are increasing due to a combination of climate change, 150 years of fire suppression, and a growing population in the wildland-urban interface. Major wildfires in the past few years include the 2017 Tubbs and Atlas fires, the 2018 County (Guinda) fire, and the 2020 Glass and LNU Complex fires (the fourth largest fire in California history).

To address this increasing threat, the RCD and landowning partners have selected four publicly-accessible, protected properties in the eastern hills of Napa Valley on which to implement selective thinning and removal of trees and brush, including non-native vegetation (see Exhibit 2). Work will consist of hand thinning, lop-and-scatter (cutting up and distributing the “slash,” which is the cut limbs, leaves, needles, and other removed woody debris), and woody debris processing (such as mechanical chipping); methods will not use chemicals, cause significant ground disturbance, or impact any listed species or cultural resources. On all sites, activities will be conducted with professional foresters, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (“CAL FIRE”), parks and land trust staff, and/or Intertribal Council members.

These particular properties are within one of Napa County’s most vulnerable wildland-urban interface areas, as identified in the countywide Community Wildfire Protection Plan, and represent forestland ranging from the ridgetop to the valley floor in a high fire risk area that has not burned in recent history (see Exhibit 2).

Another reason is to use the properties’ publicly-accessible status to build the county’s overall capacity to address fire resilience by demonstrating forest health best practices to landowners, land managers, those interested in forestry careers, and the general community. The RCD will place signs and hold workshops at the four project sites. Workshops and field tours will be integrated as work progresses, to show progress and before/during/after site conditions, share methods, and promote workforce development. Some workshops may be tailored for other landowners to encourage future actions on their properties.

The Suscol Intertribal Council is particularly interested in using these sites to share indigenous perspective and knowledge, and provide training. A GrizzlyCorps member will assist RCD staff with implementing these actions. Launched in 2020, the AmeriCorps’ GrizzlyCorps program was designed by Project Climate at UC Berkeley’s Center for Law, Energy & the Environment in partnership with California Volunteers to send recent college graduates into rural communities across California to promote fire and forest resilience as well as regenerative agri-food systems. The RCD will also expand its youth programming to elevate forestry careers with high school students and tribal members, and to increase awareness of forest and fire ecology and practices.

The RCD and landowning entities will coordinate work on all four properties via the Forest Health Working Group, the county’s newly-formed forestry and fire resiliency forum composed of fire safe councils, public agencies, forest managers, tribes and non-profit organizations centered on California indigenous perspectives, industry, and community interest groups. The group’s purpose is to increase the community’s capacity to coordinate landscape-scale projects,

and the group actively coordinates issues related to on-the-ground work, such as use of best practices, crew availability and capacity, integration with other efforts (e.g., the County's roadside fuels reduction), biological and cultural resource assessment, and noticing requirements. Funds will contribute to the RCD's coordination of work at the four forest-thinning project sites.

Work is anticipated to commence: at Linda Falls Preserve and the PUC Forest on September 1 and August 1, respectively, to avoid the Northern Spotted Owl breeding and nesting season; on the Suskol House Land once the RCD's forester has developed a Cooperative Forest Management Plan; and at Moore Creek Park as soon as funds are awarded and work is feasible (e.g., some vegetation such as French broom should be pulled from moist ground to minimize ground disturbance and effort). All grant-funded work at Linda Falls Preserve and Suskol House Land is anticipated to be completed by December 2022; work at the PUC Forest and Moore Creek Park is anticipated to be completed by December 2023.

The amount and method of forest thinning at the Linda Falls Preserve is dependent on the amount of matching funds the RCD can secure. If the Land Trust does not receive the anticipated cost-share from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, it will not be able to go beyond lop-and-scatter with any other form of woody debris processing.

**Site Description:** Activities will take place on forestland ranging from the ridgetop to the valley floor in a high fire risk area that has not burned in recent history (see Exhibit 2).

The 177-acre **Linda Falls Preserve** is owned and managed by the Land Trust of Napa County, which offers public access via guided hikes. The Preserve is situated near the community of Angwin within the Conn Creek watershed. Elevation ranges from 810 feet to 1,580 feet. The substrate is of volcanic origin. Vegetation is predominantly coniferous forest with some mixed chaparral; there is evidence of community succession where Douglas Fir Forest has replaced oak woodland. Dominant species include Douglas fir, madrone, canyon live oak, black oak and California bay; other habitat types are white alder/bay/maple riparian forest and mixed manzanita/chamise/live oak chaparral. The Preserve protects over 132 native plant species including the rare Napa false indigo, one of the largest populations of narrow-anthered California Brodiaea, locally rare creeping wild ginger, and California willow-herb. The forest-thinning activities that are the subject of this authorization will take place on 120 acres of this property.

The approximately 850-acre **PUC Forest** is owned by Pacific Union College. Once the winter camp of the Wappo tribe of California Indians, the forest's rich biodiversity supports Northern Spotted Owls, the rare Napa false indigo, and some of the easternmost coastal redwood trees. It has been managed for forest products since the 1880's, once supporting a sawmill and supplying much of the lumber and firewood for the college (then "Healdsburg College"), which purchased the land in 1909. A large wildfire in 1931 had substantial impacts to the majority of the forest and greatly influenced the stand characteristics. The forest is covered by a Nonindustrial Timber Management Plan, and since December 2018 it is protected by a conservation easement held by CAL FIRE. Pacific Union College allows public use of the property, which supports 35 miles of recreational trails; the Napa County Regional Park and

Open Space District holds a trails license since 2019. The forest-thinning activities that are the subject of this authorization will take place on 130 acres of this property.

The 21-acre **Suskol House Land** property is owned by the Suscol Intertribal Council on Chiles Pope Valley Road. It is characterized by north-facing shrubland dominated by leather oak, manzanita, and chamise with California bay, foothill pine, and scattered oaks making up the overstory. Forest management prescriptions will likely include opening the understory through hand treatment of ladder fuels and undesirable species. The property does not have significant invasive species composition, but excessive shrubs have precluded healthy oak trees from growing, so these will have to be thinned out. There may also be an opportunity to transition the property to native ponderosa pine in the future through seeding and planting should that be a management objective of the Suscol Intertribal Council. The forest-thinning activities that are the subject of this authorization will take place on the forested 16 acres of this property.

The rugged 1,600-acre **Moore Creek Park** consists of two contiguous units, both managed by the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District. The property includes oak woodlands, Douglas fir and madrone forest, grasslands, and chaparral. Wildlife in the park is plentiful, including large mammals such as black bears, mountain lions, bobcat, gray fox and coyote. The 763-acre Moore Creek Unit to the north was a privately owned cattle ranch prior to its acquisition by the District in 2008. The almost 900-acre Hennessey Unit to the south consists of watershed land purchased by the City of Napa when it developed Conn Dam and Lake Hennessey in the 1940's. The forest thinning activities that are the subject of this authorization will take place on 110 acres of the Moore Creek Unit, where wildfire hazard is much higher due to denser forest stands.

### **Grant Applicant Qualifications**

Established as a special district in 1945, the Napa RCD has a history of partnership with the Conservancy on projects that include acquisitions, watershed protection and restoration, vineyard demonstration practice, and fish passage improvement. The Napa RCD has demonstrated capacity to manage external grants and deliver projects within schedule and budget. Additionally, the Napa RCD has developed a forest health and fire resiliency program with technical specialist staff who support project planning, implementation, and community outreach and education.

### **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 will be 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.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$1,078,684</b>
USDA NRCS EQIP (pending)	\$287,500
Napa County Fire Mitigation Funds (secured)	\$231,893
Napa County Joint Powers Agreement contribution (secured)	\$30,000
CAL FIRE Standard Agreement (secured)	\$18,000
National Association of Conservation Districts Technical Assistance Grant (secured)	\$14,824
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$1,660,901</b>

There are two anticipated sources of Conservancy funding. The first 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. All proposed project activities are consistent with this anticipated funding source. Staff will ensure that the workshops, Grizzly Corps member, and youth program components will be supported solely using this General Fund source.

The second is a Fiscal Year 2018-19 appropriation to the Conservancy from the “California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018” (Prop 68, Public Resources Code Division 46, Sections 80000-80173). In particular, Chapter 10 allocates funds for projects that plan, develop, and implement climate adaptation resiliency projects, including projects to improve a community’s ability to adapt to the unavoidable impacts of climate change; improve and protect coastal and rural economies and habitat; develop future recreational opportunities; or enhance landscape resilience. The proposed project except for the components specified in the above paragraph is consistent with this anticipated funding source because it constitutes a climate adaptation project under PRC Section 31113 within the San Francisco Bay Area Program jurisdiction that does the following: Addresses wildfire hazard that threatens communities, infrastructure, and natural resources;

preserves, enhances, and prioritizes natural lands and natural infrastructure (in this case, healthy forestlands); and provides multiple public benefits, including preserving recreational opportunities. This funding source will be applied to the on-the-ground forest thinning activities, including coordination on best practices and implementation, and signage.

Unless specifically labeled “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.

The RCD and project partners will also contribute in-kind staff time valued at approximately \$80,000.

**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.



**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

All components of the proposed project that will take place on the Linda Falls Preserve, Suskol House Land, and Moore Creek Park properties are statutorily and 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 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 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.

All proposed activities on the PUC Forest are covered under the PUC's Nonindustrial Timber Management Plan ("NTMP," see Exhibit 3). The plan specifically discusses fire protection, a primary objective of the landowner, and states that CAL FIRE is working with the landowner to reduce wildland fire risk and hazard on the property. Specific activities to enhance fire protection include thinning, harvesting, under-burning, and slash treatment. The plan provides measures to protect cultural and historic resources, including limiting or prohibiting heavy equipment and slash burning in specific areas; to protect threatened and endangered species, including avoiding the Northern Spotted Owl breeding season and precluding activities within 500 feet of nesting owls; to protect water quality and quantity, including marking equipment exclusion zones, restrictions on percent of canopy cover that can be removed, and limits on amounts of soil disturbance; and to ensure slash treatment is conducted to meet or exceed the minimum standards of the Forest Practice Rules.

Timberland use in California is primarily governed by the Forest Practice Act and Forest Practice Rules; the Forest Practice Act's regulatory scheme is a certified regulatory program under which a NTMP functions as the equivalent of an EIR. Staff has therefore independently evaluated the PUC NTMP (No. 1-96NTMP-015 NAP) authorized by the CAL FIRE on October 9, 1996 and concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed activities at the PUC Forest 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.