

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 7, 2021

**HEALDSBURG OPEN SPACE PRESERVES
WILDFIRE FUELS MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL LINES**

Project No. 21-012-01
Project Manager: Lisa Ames

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$414,000 to the City of Healdsburg for its Fire Department to conduct wildfire fuel management and control line treatments on three open space preserves (Healdsburg Ridge, Callahan and Fitch Mountain) adjacent to the City of Healdsburg in Sonoma County, and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Healdsburg environs, Sonoma County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Fire Risk Abatement Plans](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Healdsburg Ridge Mitigated Negative Declaration](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [Fitch Mountain Mitigated Negative Declaration](#)
-

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 four hundred fourteen thousand dollars (\$414,000) to the City of Healdsburg (“the grantee”) for its Fire Department to conduct wildfire fuel management and control line treatments on three open space preserves (Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Preserve, Callahan Open Space Preserve and Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve) adjacent to the city of Healdsburg, Sonoma County.

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:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.

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 Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Preserve Management Plan Final Mitigated Negative Declaration adopted by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District on June 3, 2008 and has independently reviewed and considered the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan Final Mitigated Negative Declaration adopted by the City of Healdsburg on November 20, 2017 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibits 3 and 4, respectively. 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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$414,000 grant to the City of Healdsburg for its Fire Department ("the City") to conduct wildfire fuel management and control line treatments on three protected open space preserves - Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Preserve, Callahan Open Space Preserve and Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve ("the Preserves") - adjacent to Healdsburg in Sonoma County (see Exhibit 1). The proposed project will reduce fire risk and associated risks to public safety, critical city infrastructure, forest health, water quality, and natural resources from potential catastrophic wildfires on these wildland/urban interfaces.

The Preserves are all located east of and directly adjacent to the City of Healdsburg (see Exhibit 1 for site locations). The City owns fee title to the Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Preserve ("Healdsburg Ridge") and the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve ("Fitch Mountain"), and the Callahan Preserve is privately owned. The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District ("the District") holds conservation easements over all

three Preserves for the purposes of preserving their scenic values and contributions to the viewsheds of the Russian River Valley and of conserving native plant and wildlife diversity within the region. The Sonoma Land Trust also holds a “Forever Wild” easement over a portion of Healdsburg Ridge. Both Healdsburg Ridge and Fitch Mountain include passive public recreation features. The District collaborates with the City in the management of all three Preserves. An additional stewardship partner for the Preserves is the nonprofit organization LandPaths. LandPaths conducts trail watch program trainings and educational outings on Healdsburg Ridge and its volunteers help maintain trails, remove invasive species and conduct light forestry work on Fitch Mountain.

All three Preserves are designated as “High Fire Hazard Severity Zones” (Cal Fire 2007). The Preserves fall within a State Responsibility Area and are under the control of Cal Fire. However, the open space areas are considered mutual threat zones due to the high fire risk and safety concerns and the ability for a fire to impact the incorporated city of Healdsburg. Due to the proximity to the city limits and the potential for rural fire to impact the city, the Healdsburg Fire Department is under contract with the Sonoma County Office of Fire and Emergency Services to provide service to the open space areas adjacent to the City. The City is responsible for responding to any fire events on the Preserves and works closely with Cal Fire to provide mutual aid.

In California’s Mediterranean climate, with annual cycles of lush vegetative growth during mild, wet winters and springs, followed by extended warm, dry summers and falls, fire has periodically reshaped the landscape and vegetation communities for millennia. Many of the region’s plant communities are tolerant or even dependent on fire to germinate and thrive. Now that central Sonoma County is densely populated and developed, wildfire prevention and suppression is the norm. Land managers in the county are increasingly concerned about the effects of fire suppression on the rich mosaic of woodland, chaparral, and grassland habitats that characterize much of the county.

Fire suppression has increased fuel loads on the land and the climate is changing towards longer and drier summers and falls. These variables increase the likelihood that when fires do occur, they will be of high intensity with catastrophic effects on the plant and animal communities of the Preserves and on the adjacent human communities. High intensity fires on the wildland/urban interfaces (such as the Preserves) threaten life, property, public health and the city infrastructure of Healdsburg and its surrounding communities. Several catastrophic, wind-influenced wildfires in 2017, 2019 and 2020 in Sonoma County overwhelmed fire fighters because of embers creating spot fires well ahead of the advancing edge of fire. This phenomenon underlines the importance of land management tailored to mitigate the severity of wildfires on urban edges, specifically vegetation management to reduce hazardous fire fuel loads and the creation of control lines in proximity to residences and urban development.

To preserve the ecological functions of the native habitats on the Preserves and protect the neighboring communities from the threat of fire, the City developed a Fire Risk Abatement Plan (FRAP) for each of the three Preserves (see Exhibit 2). All three FRAPs were approved by the

District, as the holder of the conservation easements. The FRAPs recommend treatment methods for fuel management that include creating control lines separating the open space vegetation from the City's utility easements and critical infrastructure and reducing fire fuels through grazing, prescribed burns, burn piles and ladder fuel removal. The FRAPS recommendations include keeping all emergency access roads maintained, using grazing animals such as sheep and goats to work in erosion sensitive areas and drainages, and creating shaded fuel breaks, control lines and wildfire calming areas. The proposed project consists of implementing the FRAPs. The project will be completed with a fuels crew, fire department staff or masticator. The project will be broken into two phases: Phase I will be from June 2021 through December 2022 and Phase II will be from January 2023 until February 2024, though there is a possibility that the project can be completed sooner.

Site Description: The Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Preserve is a 152-acre property located northeast of Healdsburg and east of Highway 101 in Sonoma County (Exhibit 1). It extends from 453 feet at the ridgeline above the Russian River Valley to 110 feet in the lower grasslands and lies within the Fitch Mountain Range. Healdsburg Ridge encompasses the headwaters of two drainages to the Russian River—Norton Slough and a direct tributary that joins the River near the dramatic curve called River's Bend. The site includes rolling hills and a long ridge supporting grasslands, oak woodlands, mixed forests, riparian scrub, and serpentine chaparral. Healdsburg Ridge provides nearly 3.5 miles of public trails for visitors to enjoy scenic vistas of the Mayacamas, the hills of Lake Sonoma and glimpses of the main stem Russian River. The surrounding lands include vineyards, residential development, and open space.

The Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve is a 173-acre property that encompasses the entire 991-foot peak of Fitch Mountain and most of its surrounding slopes (Exhibit 1). The heavily wooded mountain is one of the most prominent physical landmarks found in northern Sonoma County, providing a scenic backdrop for the City of Healdsburg, other communities along the Russian River, and travelers along Highway 101. Fitch Mountain is in the unincorporated county but is surrounded by the City of Healdsburg and within the City's Sphere of Influence, Urban Growth Boundary, and Urban Service Area. Fitch Mountain is densely forested with coast redwood, Douglas fir, California bay, madrone, oaks, and a rich array of understory species. These forests provide valuable habitat for a wide variety of animal species. Its slopes drain directly to the Russian River, thereby helping protect water quality in the river. In conjunction with other nearby protected lands, Fitch Mountain provides undeveloped habitat that is vital to maintaining wildlife migration corridors in the Russian River valley. With over 3 miles of trails, the Preserve provides valuable open space recreational opportunities for the community and visitors to the area.

The 107-acre Callahan Preserve (Exhibit 1) features a prominent ridgeline visible from Highway 101 and the City of Healdsburg. Its diverse habitats and biotic resources include riparian habitat along the Russian River, chaparral associated with serpentine rock outcroppings, open meadows, and mixed hardwood forest. Though adjacent to the Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Preserve, the privately-owned Callahan property is not open to the public. Grasslands form the border between the Callahan Preserve and the residential housing of the City.

In addition to hosting diverse native plants and wildlife, the grasslands and forests of the Preserves serve as important groundwater recharge and storage areas. These hydrologic processes help support the diverse array of vegetation communities and associated wildlife found on the Preserves and buffer nearby urban areas from higher stormwater flows. Natural, vegetated tributary channels also help to regulate flows and the delivery of sediment to downstream aquatic habitats, improving conditions for the endangered fish of the Russian River watershed.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Because the City owns both the Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Preserve and the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve, holds easements supporting critical infrastructure on the Callahan Open Space Preserve and is the responsible party for managing wildfire risk on all three Preserves, its Fire Department is the appropriate entity to conduct fire fuels management and control line treatments on these areas.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$414,000
Project Total	\$414,000

The anticipated source of funding is a Fiscal Year 2020-21 special appropriation of General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of wildfire risk reduction. The proposed project is consistent with the anticipated funding source.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Preserve

The Sonoma County Agriculture Preservation and Open Space District (“District”) adopted the “Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Preserve Management Plan Final Mitigated Negative Declaration” and the associated Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (“MND/MMRP” both attached as Exhibit 3) on June 3, 2008. The MND assessed potential environmental impacts associated with implementing the Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Management Plan. The District updated the management plan in 2015 in compliance with the 2008 MND.

As the entity responsible for operations and management and public safety for the property, the City of Healdsburg developed a Fire Risk Abatement Plan (FRAP) as a component of the management plan. The MND applies to the initial management plan which includes the activities recommended in the FRAP. The proposed project falls within the scope of the initial management plan, and the FRAP and its actions are within the scope of the MND. All potential impacts of the proposed project would be mitigated to less than significant, as discussed below.

Biological Impacts:

The City shall perform a biological survey for rare, threatened, and endangered (“RTE”) species, sensitive species, and species of concern for all areas to be disturbed prior to any disturbance being permitted to occur. The survey shall recommend actions to avoid, reduce and/or

minimize impacts and shall outline required actions that need to occur prior to disturbance. (BIO -Mitigation Measure 4.1)

Operations and Maintenance and Public Safety:

The City shall mitigate fire risk by implementing measures such as mowing grassland areas within designated fire buffer areas and around trailheads and thinning areas where designated fire buffer areas consist of woody shrubs and trees. (Management Task 5.6)

Staff has independently evaluated the MND/MMRP and concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment. Less than significant impacts would be temporary in duration.

The proposed action is anticipated to result in long-term benefits to aesthetics, biological resources, greenhouse gas emissions, hydrology and water quality, and reduced wildfire risk in the project area. Staff therefore recommends that the Conservancy find 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.

Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve

The City of Healdsburg adopted the “Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan Mitigated Negative Declaration” and the associated Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (“MND/MMRP” both attached as Exhibit 4) on November 20, 2017. The MND assessed potential environmental impacts associated with implementing the Fitch Mountain Management Plan. The proposed project falls within the scope of the management plan, and its actions are within the scope of the MND. All potential impacts of the proposed project would be mitigated to less than significant, as discussed below.

General Project Measures:

The City will fully maintain habitat quality and complexity during the proposed action consonant with protecting public safety (Project Measure 10). Fire management activities will follow prescribed trail widths and clearances, engage personnel familiar with local plants and wildlife to guide vegetation management, and limit ground disturbance.

Biological Impacts:

The City shall ensure that protective measures for special-status plants are employed when engaging in management activities, including conducting surveys to detect the presence of such plants, and training work crews to recognize special-status plants as described in BIO-1. The City will employ protective measures for birds and bats, including avoiding work during critical bird breeding season and checking for bat presence when trimming trees (BIO-2 and BIO-3).

Fire Hazard Mitigation:

While carrying out the project, the City shall mitigate fire risk by implementing measures including prohibiting vegetation management during National Weather Service red-flag days,

requiring vehicles to be equipped with spark arresters and standard firefighting equipment, and limiting driving and power tool use during periods of high fire danger (HAZ-1). The City shall ensure that all managed burns are overseen by authorized personnel, that burn piles are limited in size and utilized in appropriate weather (HAZ-3).

Staff has independently evaluated the MND/MMRP and concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment. Less than significant impacts would be temporary in duration.

The proposed action is anticipated to result in long-term benefits to aesthetics, biological resources, greenhouse gas emissions, hydrology and water quality, and reduced wildfire risk in the project area. Staff therefore recommends that the Conservancy find 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.

Callahan Open Space Preserve

The proposed fire fuel reduction activities on the Callahan Open Space Preserve are categorically exempt from the requirement to prepare an environmental impact report or negative declaration under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations, Sections 15301(h) (Existing Facilities) and 15304(f) (Minor Alterations to Land).

Section 15301 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. This project involves the maintenance of existing roadways being used for emergency access and creating defensible space to protect critical infrastructure where the City has recorded easements and will not expand existing or former use of the site.

Section 15304 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. Such projects include, but are not limited to, fuel management activities within 100 feet of structures to reduce the volume of flammable vegetation, if the public agency having fire protection responsibility for the area has determined that 100 feet of fuel clearance is required due to extra hazardous fire conditions. This project involves fuel management activities within 100 feet of structures to reduce the volume of flammable vegetation. The City has determined that 100 feet of fuel clearance is required due to extra hazardous fire conditions and the activities will not result in the taking of endangered, rare, or threatened plant or animal species or significant erosion and sedimentation of surface waters.

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.

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 conducted last fall (2020) 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 Sonoma County, within the Coastal Conservancy's jurisdiction pursuant to Chapters 4.4 and 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
6. **Need:** California is facing unprecedented fire risk due to climate change, decades of fire suppression, and a growing populace. The extent of fire risk reduction projects that are needed to address the risk, including in advance of the upcoming fire season, cannot occur without public funding.
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:** 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.
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 exacerbated by the effects of climate change, including increased average temperatures, reduced marine fog, and longer and more severe droughts.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** This work seeks to mitigate GHG emissions from catastrophic wildfires by lessening the fire risk, improving forest resiliency to fire and improving carbon sequestration.