

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 7, 2021

San Antonio Creek Community Defensible Space Project

Project No. 21-042-01
Project Manager: Rachel Couch

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$396,000 to Santa Barbara County for a community defensible space project in the San Antonio Creek area of Santa Barbara County.

LOCATION: Southern Santa Barbara County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Figures and Photos](#)

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 and ninety-six thousand dollars (\$396,000) to Santa Barbara County ("the grantee") to conduct a community defensible space project in the San Antonio Creek area foothills of Santa Barbara 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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$396,000 grant to the County of Santa Barbara to implement a community defensible space project in the San Antonio Creek area foothills of the Santa Ynez mountains in part of wildland-urban interface (WUI) of southern Santa Barbara County.

Southern Santa Barbara County sits on a coastal plain south of the Santa Ynez Mountain Range. Over the past 150 years, urban expansion from the lower elevations into the nearby foothill and mountainous wildland urban interface (WUI) areas has increased fire hazards that add to the complexity of the region's wildfire management. These changes, in addition to the area's arid Mediterranean climate, mountainous terrain, arid seasonal offshore "sundowner" winds that blow from inland deserts, and climate changes, have resulted in larger, more intense wildfires that occur more frequently and pose a substantial threat to human life, improvements, and the area's environment and local economies. The project area was identified as at high risk for wildland fire in the 2019 San Marcos Pass-Eastern Goleta Valley Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP).

The proposed project consists of 10 shaded fuel reduction treatments totaling 70 acres located in the San Antonio Creek area of San Marcos Pass community in the foothills between Santa Barbara and Goleta. These treatments will reduce the potential for loss of life, property loss, and environmental damage during a wildfire. The project will utilize hand crews to remove dead vegetation, reducing ladder fuels, and to selectively thin standing vegetation. The existing fuel is predominately mature oak woodland with scattered chaparral. Crews will limb mature trees and prune off dead branches. The cut material will be chipped and spread uniformly on site. The shrub dominated areas will be treated with a residual mosaic approach, leaving scattered shrubs and islands of intact formation comprising approximately 50% of the original cover. No mature trees will be removed. No work will occur within 50 feet of a riparian corridor. The project will utilize the Santa Barbara County Fire Department Hand Crew to complete the fuel treatments.

Santa Barbara County will conduct community outreach and engagement as part of the project. Property owners, environmental groups, and agencies have differing ideas on how to protect property and natural habitats, but all have experienced the community-wide trauma of record wildfires in recent years. Local community members and stakeholders identified through the 2016-2018 CWPP process will be invited to attend an informational meeting describing the project and offered opportunities to provide input on project elements and ways to engage in community resilience building and disaster preparedness education efforts. The County will retain a biologist monitor each site before treatment occurs to flag sensitive species and nesting birds so vegetation crews can avoid them.

Site Description:

The project areas lie within the planning area of the San Marcos Pass/Eastern Goleta Valley Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) in the vicinity of San Antonio Creek. This planning area covers approximately 2,024 acres of mostly private property that borders wildland open space and contains 761 single-family homes, a park, a reservoir, substation, and a retirement community. The project will take place on ten smaller county-owned open space sites varying in size from 3 to 17 acres surrounding suburban residential neighborhoods which connect to more dense neighborhoods adjacent to the cities of Santa Barbara and Goleta. These foothills have burned multiple times in the past two decades in the Painted Cave (1990), Jesusita (2009), and Cave (2019) fires. The foothills in this area are especially vulnerable during sundowner wind events given the community's location at the bottom of San Marcos Pass. The winds are naturally funneled by topography directly into the foothills, with gale force winds, high temperatures, and low relative humidity often reaching Red Flag Warning criteria. A range of fuel conditions exist in the surrounding area, including grassland, agriculture, oak woodlands, riparian, and moderate to heavy chaparral. Ornamental vegetation is a significant factor in this community. Several large agricultural properties with permanent orchards provide portions of the community some significant separation from wildland fuels. The public San Antonio Creek Trail runs the length of one of the open space areas and is heavily utilized for outdoor recreation. Two other areas contain County facilities, including the Fire Department Headquarters and Emergency Operations Center.

Grant Applicant Qualifications:

The Santa Barbara County Fire Department (SBCFD) is well qualified to manage the project. The department is organized into two battalions with over 260 employees and has administered dozens of state and federal grants over past decades. In addition, SBCFD is under contract with CAL FIRE to provide wildland fire protection on all State Responsibility Areas (SRA) in the county, including the project area.

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 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 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

Coastal Conservancy	\$396,000
Project Total	\$396,000

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. 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).

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 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 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.