

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 7, 2021

**WILDLAND FIRE RESILIENCY PROGRAM**

21-019-01  
Project Manager: Fanny Yang

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$400,000 to Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District to reduce wildland vegetation fuels, remove fire prone invasive species, and expand shaded fuel break areas through their Wildland Fire Resiliency Program in up to 11 preserves in San Mateo County, and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

**LOCATION:** Multiple open space preserves within San Mateo County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Project Site Maps](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [Photos](#)
  - Exhibit 4: [Wildland Fire Resiliency Program Final Environmental Impact Report and Mitigation and Monitoring Reporting Program](#)
  - Exhibit 5: [Integrated Pest Management Program Final Environmental Impact Report, 2017 Addendum to Integrated Pest Management Plan, and Mitigation and Monitoring 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 four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000) to Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (“the grantee”) to reduce wildland vegetation fuels, remove fire prone invasive species, and expand

shaded fuel break areas through their Wildland Fire Resiliency Program in up to 11 open space preserves in San Mateo 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.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the “Wildland Fire Resiliency Program Final Environmental Impact Report” (WFRP EIR) attached as Exhibit 4 of the accompanying staff recommendation, which was certified by Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (MROSD) on May 12, 2021 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The proposed project is part of MROSD’s larger Wildland Fire Resilience Program (Program or WFRP).
  - a) The Conservancy finds that the project will have “potentially significant” effects in the areas of Biological Resources, Cultural and Tribal Cultural Resources, Geology and Soils, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Hazards, Hazardous Materials, and Wildland Fire, Hydrology and Water Quality, Noise, Recreation and Transportation. With regards to these impacts, the Conservancy finds that the project, as modified by the incorporation of the mitigation measures identified in the WFRP EIR, avoids, reduces, or mitigates all possible significant environmental effects of the project to less-than-significant levels except for the potentially significant impacts identified in finding 3b below.
  - b) The Conservancy further finds that the project may result in “significant and unavoidable” impacts to Aesthetics, but environmental and other benefits of the proposed project as described in the accompanying staff recommendation outweigh or render acceptable these unavoidable adverse environmental impacts to achieve the objectives of the project.
  - c) The Conservancy adopts the Findings regarding Significant Effects and Statement of Overriding Considerations set forth in this staff report.

4. The Conservancy has also independently reviewed and considered the MROSD Integrated Pest Management Program Final Environmental Impact Report (IPMP EIR) adopted on December 10, 2014 pursuant to CEQA and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 5. The Conservancy finds that the project, as part of the IPMP as 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 portions of the project involving activities carried out pursuant to the IPMP, will have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382.
5. Mitigation measures have been adopted by the MRSOD as lead agency for the project. As landowner, implementation of these mitigation measures under both the MMRP for the WFRP EIR and the IPMP EIR is within the jurisdiction of MRSOD.

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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$400,000 grant to Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (“MROSD”) to implement a portion of its Wildland Fire Resiliency Program (“WFRP”) and Integrated Pest Management Plan (“IPMP”) across multiple open space preserves in San Mateo County (the “project”). The eleven preserves that will be treated are Teague Hill, Thornewood, Windy Hill, Pulgas Ridge, Purisima Creek Redwoods, La Honda Creek, Skyline Ridge, Russian Ridge, Monte Bello, Los Trancos, and El Corte de Madera Creek. The objectives of the project, as part of the WFRP and the IPMP, are to increase forest health, improve overall safety by increasing shaded fuel breaks, and reduce wildfire risk by reducing fuel loads and removing invasive species in high priority areas.

The majority of land owned by MROSD is located within the wildland urban interface (WUI) – the zone of transition between unoccupied land and human development. Many of their preserves have a Fire Hazard Severity Zone rating of “High” or “Very High” as categorized by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. Land uses within the preserves are predominantly natural open space for recreation and conservation grazing. The preserves identified for treatment in the proposed project abut areas of low-density residential development, posing a significant concern for these areas in an event of a wildfire. As part of MROSD’s WFRP and its IPMP, the proposed project will increase wildland fire resiliency and provide a comprehensive approach to vegetation management in the eleven preserves.

Historic fire suppression on MROSD lands has reduced biodiversity, facilitating the spread of invasive plant species into grasslands and other plant communities. In the absence of decades of fire, both live and dead fuels have accumulated in some areas, creating higher surface fuel loads, vegetation density, and nonnative species compositions. Previously logged forests have grown back with a much higher density of smaller trees, particularly Douglas-Fir, that are more

susceptible to fire. Prominent non-native invasive species include French broom, jubata grass, and blue gum eucalyptus, which have the potential to increase the intensity and severity of wildland fires.

The proposed project will focus on removing fire-prone invasive species to reduce current fuel load and restoring fuel composition closer to pre-fire suppression conditions through the removal of accumulated dead fuels and treatment of forest disease such as Sudden Oak Death. The proposed project will initially focus on expanding shaded fuel breaks, implementing fire fuel management, and removing invasive species that contribute to excess fire fuel, in up to 11 preserves. Vegetation removal and management will use both manual and mechanical methods including mowing and brush cutting, use of backhoes and excavators, and hand-pruning and sawing. Limited herbicide application approved under the MROSD's IPMP will also be used.

Expansion of existing shaded fuel breaks will take place at the Thornewood, Windy Hill, and Teague Hill preserves. Shaded fuel breaks are areas where the tree canopy would be thinned to reduce the potential for fire to move quickly or spread into the canopy. In particular, at the Windy Hill preserve, the proposed project will increase the shaded fuel break area on the northern end of the Sequoia's Retirement Complex to about 300 feet. The residences at the retirement complex could serve as shelter-in-place structures for any fire incidents; other tasks include removing small trees and coyote brush near the residences to improve fire safety.

Fuel reduction will be conducted at parking lots that also serve as fire response staging areas located in the El Corte de Madera Creek, Skyline Ridge, Russian Ridge, Los Trancos, and Monte Bello preserves. Invasive species removal work will be completed in Purisima Creek Redwoods and Teague Hill preserves. In areas of the La Honda Creek, Thornewood, and El Corte de Madera Creek preserves, invasive species will also be treated and removed to reduce fuel load and improve overall ecosystem resiliency. Additional fuel reduction work will be completed on the eastern border of Pulgas Ridge OSP. Fuel ladders and surface fuels will be greatly reduced while overstory and understory vegetation will be spatially separated to prevent ground fire from spreading into the forest canopies.

**Site Description:** All of the preserves are located within San Mateo County and are owned and managed by MROSD.

Teague Hill Open Space Preserve (OSP) is a 626-acre expanse of hillside situated on the western boundary of the town of Woodside. The preserve contains a mile section of the Bay Area Ridge Trail with Douglas-fir, Oak, Bay and Madrone forest that comprise a portion of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Three steep ravines cross through the preserve, and trails are open for hiking and horseback riding.

Thornewood OSP covers 167 acres located in the hills above the town of Woodside, offering a 1.5-mile trail system for easy hikes, dog walking, and horseback riding for visitors. Oak and madrone forest cover the majority of the preserve, with a second-growth Douglas fir and redwood forest flanking the western edge. Schilling Lake is located on the southern edge and hosts a variety of wetland vegetation types. Dennis Martin Creek flows along the eastern border. Thornewood also includes the site of the historic Thornewood estate.

Windy Hill OSP is 1,335-acres featuring open grassland ridges and forests of redwood, fir, and oak. Some chaparral is found on the preserve. Located near the city of Portola Valley, the preserve offers visitors with 14 miles of trails for hiking and mountain biking. Hang gliding, paragliding, and remote-control gliding are permitted with a special use permit. The area is rich with wildlife; species likely to be seen are California mule deer, coyote, California vole, white-tailed kite, American kestrel, California quail, California newts, with occasional sightings of mountain lions, although bobcats are more common.

Pulgas Ridge OSP is a small, 366-acre property located near the City of San Carlos. The preserve is composed primarily of hardwood forest with a concentration of chaparral to the northwest. Cordilleras Creek cuts through the northern portion of the preserve, with mixed riparian vegetation flanking both side of the creek. The preserve provides six trails for hiking and dog walking, including an off-leash area. Remnants of an old tuberculosis sanitarium demolished in 1985 to return the land to open space may be seen by visitors.

Purisima Creek Redwoods OSP spans 4,711 acres on the western slopes of the Santa Cruz Mountains overlooking the City of Half Moon Bay and the Pacific Ocean. Expansive reaches of secondary-growth redwood forests cover the eastern portion of the preserve, which transitions to coastal scrub to the west. Purisima Creek Canyon cuts through the middle of the preserve and contains a mix of redwood forests and riparian habitat. The preserve has over 21 miles of trails for hiking, bicycling, and horseback riding. The western portions of the site also offer suitable habitat for overwintering monarchs, and marble murrelets have been observed nesting in the preserve.

La Honda Creek OSP is a large 6,100-acre property located in the northern Santa Cruz Mountains near the communities of Woodside and La Honda. It contains mixed oak woodland and redwood forests to the north and grasslands to the south. Cattle ranching is ongoing within the preserve. Harrington Creek traverses the central portion of the preserve and contains conifer forest and mixed riparian vegetation. The preserve also holds numerous ponds that provide valuable aquatic habitat for the California red-legged frog and creeks that harbor steelhead and resident rainbow trout. There is a variety of cultural and historical resources, include remnants of historic homesteads, ranching, logging, and recreational uses. Lower La Honda Creek offers 6 miles of trails through open rolling grasslands while Upper La Honda Creek features 3.5 miles of shorter sections of trail through forest and redwoods.

Skyline Ridge OSP contains 2,143 acres of varied landscape, including ridge vistas, expansive meadows, a pond, and a quiet lake frequented by migrating birds. The main vegetation types include mixed evergreen forest, hardwood forest, and grassland, with some chaparral interspersed throughout. Alpine Pond and Horseshoe Lake are in the northern and eastern portion of the preserve. Stevens Creek and Lambert Creek flow through the preserve along with several smaller perennial streams. The preserve offers over 10 miles of trail for hikers, bikers, and equestrians of all ages and abilities. The David C. Daniels Nature Center features imaginative displays of art, touchable wildlife skulls and skins, pond animals for adults and children.

Russian Ridge OSP spans 3,137 acres located in the Santa Cruz Mountains and is composed of coniferous forest, oak woodland, and grassland vegetation communities. Grasslands cover the

hills, which transition into oak woodland on the slopes and finally coniferous forests at lower elevations. Poppies and lupines are the primary flowers that dominate the meadows; coyotes, bobcats, bats, and birds can be found on the preserve as well. Several perennial creeks flow through the preserve. Over 10 miles of trails are available for hiking, biking, and equestrian use.

Monte Bello OSP is a 3,436-acre property located near the City of Palo Alto. The preserve encompasses the upper Stevens Creek watershed between Monte Bello Ridge and Skyline Ridge. Rolling grasslands can be found along the preserve ridges and a dense span of coniferous forests is in the southwestern portion of the preserve. Chapparal is also distributed in the southern portion of the preserve along the eastern facing slopes. Monte Bellow OSP has a rich wildlife and ecosystem diversity.

Los Trancos OSP contains 274 acres and sits at an elevation of about 2,000 feet in the Santa Cruz Mountains above the City of Palo Alto. Forest and oak woodland vegetation cover the majority of the preserve, with grassland found around the perimeter. The San Andreas Fault runs through the center of the preserve. The preserve contains about 5 miles of hiking trails and is only open to equestrians and hikers.

El Corte de Madera Creek OSP includes 2,906 acres in the upper headwaters of the San Gregorio Creek Watershed. This preserve is characterized by steep terrain with valleys containing perennial creeks serving as critical habitat for steelhead trout and coho salmon. The preserve ridgelines are composed of redwood forests. Interweaving the mixed evergreen and redwood forests on the preserve are more than 3 miles of multiuse trails for hiking, horseback riding, and biking opportunities.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** MROSD has nearly 50 years of experience managing natural resources and public open space. MROSD owns and manages a regional greenbelt system of 65,000 acres of land, 26 open space preserves with diverse habitat, ranging from wetlands to redwoods forests, and over 246 miles of trail. Staff consists of over 175 employees across eleven departments including senior planners with extensive CEQA experience, Natural Resources specialists with expertise in resource ecology, and Land and Facilities field staff with experience in vegetation and fire management. MROSD has a successful history of securing grants from State agencies and effectively using funding to plan and implement natural resource, public access, and conservation acquisition projects. MROSD displays strong capacity to manage the proposed project and has an established procedure to select and manage contractors for fuel management tasks in the project.

## PROJECT FINANCING

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$400,000</b>
Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District	\$145,500
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$545,500</b>

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.

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.

**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

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.

### CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project will implement elements of MROSD's Wildlife Fire Resilience Program (WFRP) and its Integrated Pest Management Plan (IPMP). The relevant environmental impact analysis for the portion of the project under the WFRP is discussed in Section A and the environmental impacts for the portion of the project under the IPMP is discussed in Section B.

#### A. Wildland Fire Resiliency Program Final Environmental Impact Report

Potential environmental impacts of the project are addressed in the Wildland Fire Resiliency Program Final Environmental Impact Report (WFRP EIR) dated April 2021 and certified by the MROSD on May 12, 2021. The WFRP EIR assessed the environmental effects of activities necessary to manage vegetation and infrastructure and reduce wildland fire risks on MROSD's lands. Its Program is designed to: a) protect natural and cultural resources, b) strengthen landscape-level ecological resilience to changing climate and fire risk conditions, and c) facilitate ecologically sensitive wildfire response and training, while simultaneously enhancing public safety and education. This is achieved through a combination of vegetation trimming and removal, chipping, and use of prescribed fire and burn piles to use reduce fuel loads. The WFRP EIR identified a number of potentially significant environment effects of these activities that can be mitigated to "less than significant" effects through the mitigation measures set forth in the WFRP Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (WFRP MMRP; Exhibit 4). In addition, project will significant environmental effects in several areas of Aesthetics than cannot be mitigated. These are summarized below and assessed in detail in the WFRP EIR.

### **A.1 Findings for Significant Effects that can be Mitigated to Less-Than-Significant Levels**

The majority of the potentially significant effects identified in the FEIR can be mitigated and reduced to less-than-significant levels. Most of the impacts arise from the vegetation removal and the related use of vehicles and equipment. Potentially significant effects that can be reduced to less than significant were identified in the areas of Biological Resources; Cultural and Tribal Cultural Resources; Geology and Soils; Greenhouse Gas Emissions; Hazards, Hazardous Materials, and Wildland Fire; Hydrology and Water Quality; Noise; Recreation; and Transportation. Each of these areas and associated mitigation is summarized below.

#### **Biological Resources**

Potentially significant impacts on Biological Resources include impacts to special-status species, either directly or through impacts to their habitat; impacts to riparian habitat or other sensitive habitat communities; impacts to migratory fish and wildlife, including impacts to migratory corridors; and conflicts with policies and ordinances protecting Biological Resources. The WFRP MMRP identifies a number of biological mitigation measures to reduce these impacts such as:

- Surveys and monitoring by qualified biologists and relocation of activities to avoid special-status species and their habitats.
- Training implementation crews on resources of concern and avoidance measures.
- Compensatory mitigation on-site or off-site for long-term impacts to special-status species habitats or sensitive natural communities.
- Invasive species removal and post-treatment management.
- Implementation of best management practices (BMPs) to avoid impacts to sensitive wildlife known to occur in the project area.
- Protections for nesting birds, including timing of activities to avoid nesting season.
- Implementation of best management practices to minimize biological impacts of prescribed burn activities, including guidance for site selection and measures to facilitate wildlife escape from the area during burn activities.
- Avoidance of all wetland areas with compensatory mitigation if impacts do occur.

#### **Cultural and Tribal Cultural Resources**

Vegetation management activities could impact historical or archaeological resources, including potential disturbance of human remains or tribal cultural resources. MROSD will implement mitigation measures to ensure these impacts are less than significant. These measures include pre-work surveys and avoidance of cultural resources to the extent possible. If cultural resources cannot be avoided, MROSD will conduct Native American consultation, when applicable to the resource, and data recovery to document the resource prior to impact. If human remains are found, MROSD will halt work in the vicinity and consult with the County Coroner, and the Native American Heritage Commission, if remains are determined to be Native American.

### Geology and Soils

Potentially significant effects to Geology and Soils fall into two categories. Mechanical removal of vegetation and prescribed burning could lead reduced soil stability resulting in increased erosion and potentially landslides and other hazardous soil conditions. The second potential impact is if new facilities are constructed on expansive soils. To mitigate these impacts, MROSD will use prescribed herbivory when possible, to minimize subsurface soil disturbance. Standard erosion control and slope stability BMPs will also be implemented. Finally, MROSD will test for expansive soils before siting and constructing any new facilities.

### Hazards, Hazardous Materials, and Wildland Fire

Work performed in areas with known hazardous materials has the potential to mobilize those materials or expose workers to them. To avoid this, MSROD will map the areas with known hazardous materials and avoid WFRP activities occurring in those areas. Some vegetation management activities, and in particular prescribed burning, could block emergency access routes and/or potentially lead to wildfires. To mitigate these risks, MSROD will coordinate with regional emergency responders to ensure adequate access. In addition, burn activities will only take place on low-fire risk days, with measures in place to contain the fire, and nearby trails closed to avoid any risk to the public.

### Hydrology and Water Quality

Potential impacts to hydrology and water quality stem from the potential destabilization of soils by vegetation management treatments, or through direct impact by construction equipment. These potential impacts will be mitigated by the measures identified to mitigate the Geology and Soils impacts. In addition, direct stream crossings will first be avoided, and second be limited to periods when the streambed is dry. If a wet stream must be crossed temporary plates or an equivalent structure will be placed across the stream banks to serve as a temporary bridge.

### Noise

Vehicles and equipment used to undertake the vegetation management work could increase noise levels above levels allowed by local ordinances. Mitigation measures include use of electric equipment and compliance with buffer zone noise ordinances established by San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

### Recreation

Potentially significant impacts to recreation could occur if impacts to the MROSD preserve users drives them to use other recreation facilities, leading to deterioration of those facilities. However, only a small amount of MROSD's preserve lands would be impacted. This, combined with implementation of mitigation measures related to safety of preserve users will mitigate this potential Recreation impact to less than significant.

### Transportation

Potential impacts to transportation could occur if vegetation management activities block access for emergency responders. Mitigation for this impact includes coordination in advance

with emergency responders when access routes may be affected by project activities and implementation of systems to ensure emergency vehicles continue to have access.

Conservancy staff have independently reviewed and considered the WFRP EIR. The Final EIR analyzes several alternative ways to achieve the programmatic objectives of the Wildland Fire Resiliency Program which outlines a comprehensive approach to vegetation management, including pre- and post-response activities to wildland fire on Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District lands. Staff recommends the Conservancy find that there is substantial evidence that the mitigation measures identified in the WFRP MMRP for Biological Resources, Cultural and Tribal Cultural Resources, Geology and Soils, Hazards, Hazardous Materials, and Wildland Fire, Hydrology and Water Quality, Noise, Recreation, and Transportation, avoid, reduce, or mitigate significant environmental effects of the project to a less-than-significant levels.

## **A.2 Findings for Potentially Significant and Unavoidable Effects**

The WFRP FEIR identifies potentially significant and unavoidable effect from implementation of the project in the area of Aesthetics. Proposed project activities include alteration of vegetation and installation of new firefighting infrastructure that could significantly and adversely affect scenic resources and the visual character of MROSD lands.

### **Aesthetics**

The vegetation management areas will need to be expansive in order to be effective. Although the mitigation measures will plan to design areas to preserve vegetation where visible from scenic points, vegetation needs to be cleared for effective wildland fire reduction.

Aesthetics-1: Substantial impact on a scenic vista, or substantial degradation of the existing visual character or quality of public views of the site and its surroundings. Vegetation and fuel management activities of the project could result in temporary impacts on scenic vistas along trails or at scenic viewpoints. These impacts include dust from construction activities, new roads, staging areas, or other fire management infrastructure. Mitigation measures include dust control, site selection guidelines for design of new infrastructure, avoiding removal of mature trees, and vegetation treatments to break up linear visual impacts. These measures will reduce most of these impacts to a less-than-significant level, but occasionally, it may not be possible to avoid effects that would degrade visual quality.

Aesthetics-2: Substantial damage to scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway. The project would involve wildland fire management activities across Midpen lands and in many cases scenic resources, including historic structures, unique rock outcroppings, and trees, are viewable from State scenic highways. Vegetation removal could degrade visual character or quality. Mitigation measures identified for the impact of Aesthetics-1 will also reduce most of these impacts to less-than-significant. Occasionally, it may not be possible to avoid impacts that would degrade visual quality. Impacts in those instances may be significant and unavoidable.

### **A.3 Statement of Overriding Considerations**

In the event a project has unavoidable significant potential effects, the CEQA Guidelines require the decision-making agency to balance, as applicable, the economic, legal, social, technological, or other benefits of a proposed project against its unavoidable environmental risks when determining whether to approve the project (Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15093). If the specific project benefits outweigh the unavoidable adverse environmental effects of the project, a Statement of Overriding Considerations may be adopted and the project approved, despite its adverse environmental effects. The overall environmental benefits of the proposed project, as detailed in the WFRP EIR, warrant the Conservancy's decision to approve the project even though some of the environmental effects of the Wildland Fire Resilience Program cannot be mitigated and will result in significant and unavoidable effects. The project will provide the following public benefits that justify proceeding with the project despite the environmental cost of the unavoidable significant effects:

- Strategically placed fuel treatments have been shown to substantially reduce wildland fire risk thereby increasing public safety, increasing fire resiliency of the forest, and providing benefits for long-term carbon management. The project reduces the risk of wildland fires and thus helps avoid the high economic cost associated with wildland fires.

For these reasons, the Conservancy staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the project, as mitigated, avoids or reduces to less than significant all potentially significant environmental effects, except for the unavoidable significant impacts to Aesthetics. With respect to these potential unavoidable effects, Conservancy staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the environmental, economic, and social (public safety) benefits of the project outweigh the unavoidable environmental effects, thereby warranting its approval.

Upon Conservancy approval of the proposed projects, Conservancy staff will prepare and file a Notice of Determination.

### **B. Integrated Pest Management Program Environmental Impact Report**

One aspect of the proposed project includes treatment of vegetation with herbicides. This work will be carried out pursuant to MROSD's Integrated Pest Management Program (IPMP). On December 10, 2014, the MROSD certified the Integrated Pest Management Program Final Environmental Impact Report (IPMP EIR). It adopted an addendum to the IPMP EIR on February 27, 2019 (Exhibit 5). The purpose of the IPMP is to comprehensively direct management of all pests on MROSD properties. The IPMP is intended to formalize and streamline guidelines and procedures for management of while protecting natural resources and public health. The IPMP EIR determined that activities within the plan have the potential to result in significant Biological Resources and Cultural Resources impacts, but that required mitigation measures will reduce potential impacts to less-than-significant levels. Staff has independently evaluated the

IPMP EIR, its addendum, and the IPMP Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (IPMP MMRP; Exhibit 5) and concurs that there is no substantial evidence the project will have a significant effect on the environment in the area of Biological and Cultural Resources. The potential effects will be mitigated to a less-than-significant level. The mitigated effects are summarized below:

### **B.1 Significant Effects Reduced to Less Than Significant Levels by Mitigation**

#### **Biological Resources**

The project implements portions of the Program which could result in potentially significant impacts to special-status species through manual, mechanical or chemical treatments leading to loss of habitat or direct mortality. Mitigation measures include consulting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Wildlife prior to conducting pest management in critical habitat for special-status species. Special training will be done for prior to application of herbicides that could be toxic to special-status invertebrates. Mitigation measures also include biological surveys for special-status species in advance of treatment and avoidance of impacts to bat roosting sites during nursery season.

The project could also result in potentially significant impacts to wetlands through application of herbicides, release of sediment to wetlands during adjacent manual and mechanical activities, or intentional conversion of stock ponds to ephemeral wetlands to control bull frogs and non-native fish. Potential impacts will be reduced through implementation of regulatory permit requirements and compensatory habitat restoration or creation.

#### **Cultural Resources**

The project includes manual and mechanical IPM activities for buildings that could change the significance of an historical resource by incorporating barriers or building retrofits to buildings or structures that have not been evaluated for historical significance. To mitigate this impact, structures will be evaluated for eligibility for listing on the California Register of Historic Resources prior to physical changes. If structures are determined to be eligible for the California Register of Historic Resources, building retrofits or barriers will follow the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, and Reconstructing Historic Buildings, or the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings.

If IPMP activities were to uncover human remains, MROSD will halt work in the vicinity and consult with the County Coroner, and the Native American Heritage Commission, if remains are determined to likely be Native American.

Staff 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 pest management aspects of the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment as that term is defined by Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382.

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