

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 7, 2021

Flat Top Park Fire Resilience

Project No. 21-035-01
Project Manager: Megan Cooper

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$581,500 to North East Trees for the Flat Top Park Fire Resilience project in the City of Los Angeles.

LOCATION: City of Los Angeles, County of Los Angeles

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Site 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 five hundred eighty one thousand, five hundred dollars (\$581,500) to North East Trees (“the grantee”) to increase resilience to harmful wildfires at Flat Top Park in the City of Los Angeles.

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-relate 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 grantee is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$581,500 to North East Trees for the Flat Top Park Fire Resilience project in the City of Los Angeles. The Flat Top Fire Resilience Project is a collaboration between North East Trees (“grantee”) and local community leaders to increase resilience to harmful wildfires at Flat Top Park in the City of Los Angeles. Flat Top Park is a 38-acre public park owned, operated, and maintained by the North East Trees. It is in a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone, as classified by the Los Angeles Fire Department, which is unique as it is located less than three miles from the densely populated urban core of downtown Los Angeles (Exhibit 1). Flat Top Park is surrounded by the disadvantaged and low-income neighborhoods of Lincoln Heights, Highland Park, Cypress Park, Happy Valley, and Montecito Heights, all which experience high density, very high risk for wildfires, and substandard environmental conditions such as poor air quality. The park is open to the public and is a desperately needed oasis of natural open space and wildlife corridor that connects densely populated and disadvantaged communities such as the nearby Boyle Heights, to the nearby open spaces such as Ernest E. Debs Park, Mt Washington, Happy Valley, Elephant Hill, and Ascot Hills but current conditions create a fire-prone environment at the park (Exhibit 2).

This project will implement a comprehensive fuel reduction and non-native vegetation management plan, which includes increasing the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), following defensible space guidelines, and protecting nearby habitable structures. The goal of creating fire resilience at Flat Top Park will be achieved through an ecosystem-based approach that prioritizes fuel reduction, implementing defensible space guidelines, non-native invasive plant removal, and native habitat restoration in fire prone areas. Fuel reduction, brush clearance, and invasive plant removal throughout the park will be the first step of the project. This will be followed by planting at least 250 locally-grown container plants/trees, prioritizing locally sourced native plants from North East Trees’ youth led native plant nursery.

Implementation of the project will provide stewardship opportunities for local residents and provide jobs skills training for local at-risk (also known as “at-risk”) youth. Local at-risk youth will be hired through the grantee’s Youth Environmental Stewardship (YES) program. They will be trained by habitat restoration ecologists and will have the opportunity to work with

both local LA City/County Fire Department firefighters and CALFIRE urban foresters, expanding their knowledge base and creating a pipeline to future employment. Local residents will also have volunteer opportunities to help with the project and outreach will include fire safety information for the community. Because North East Trees owns the property and it currently has active grants to conduct native habitat restoration and fuel reduction work at Flat Top Park, the project is shovel ready and on-the-ground work for this project will begin in August 2021

Site Description: Flat Top Park is a 38-acre public park located in the City of Los Angeles and owned, operated, and maintained by the North East Trees. It is surrounded by the disadvantaged and low-income neighborhoods of Lincoln Heights, Highland Park, Cypress Park, Happy Valley, Boyle Heights, and Montecito Heights. The parkland property was successfully acquired by the North East Trees in December 2014 using Los Angeles County Regional Park and Open Space District Proposition A funds. The property is protected open space in perpetuity and is open to the public.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: North East Trees owns and operates Flat Top Park. It has been successfully implementing urban forestry and urban greening projects for over 20 years and has arborists, landscape architects, and construction managers on staff. It also has the existing Youth Environmental Stewardship program, which will provide job training opportunities through this grant. North East Trees also has an on-going urban forestry project with the Conservancy at nearby Debs Park in Los Angeles.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$581,500
Others	\$65,000
Project Total	\$646,500

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

The grantee is providing approximately \$65,000 in match funding from the County of Los Angeles, Measure A funds.

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.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

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.

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.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A**, the proposed project benefits a disadvantaged community.

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 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.