

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
May 5, 2022

**JENNER HEADLANDS  
COASTAL PRAIRIE ENHANCEMENT**

Project No. 08-064-03  
Project Manager: Lisa Ames

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to The Wildlands Conservancy for grazing infrastructure improvements to enhance native coastal prairie habitat, manage invasive plants, and reduce wildfire risk at the Jenner Headlands Preserve in Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** Jenner Headlands Preserve, Jenner, Sonoma County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)  
Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)  
Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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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 two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to The Wildlands Conservancy (“the grantee”) for grazing infrastructure improvements to enhance native coastal prairie habitat, manage invasive plants, and reduce wildfire risk at the Jenner Headlands Preserve in 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. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
  3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
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4. 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 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Wildlands Conservancy is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to \$200,000 to The Wildlands Conservancy (TWC) to improve grazing infrastructure in the coastal prairie habitat of the Jenner Headlands Preserve (Preserve) in Sonoma County. These rangeland improvements will significantly increase TWC's ability to prescriptively graze 787 acres of coastal prairie to support a high level of native biological diversity, enhance habitat for local wildlife, improve ecosystem function, reduce fire fuels, and improve the recreational experience for Preserve visitors.

The 5,630-acre Preserve was acquired in part by funds from the Conservancy in 2009 for the protection and enhancement of the site's significant natural and cultural resources and to provide for low intensity outdoor recreation and education. In 2016, the Conservancy funded public access improvements to the site to facilitate access to over 14 miles of trail across the headlands. The Preserve supports coniferous forest, critically important riparian areas, and 1,400 acres of rare coastal prairies and grasslands. Coastal prairie is a community of native perennial grasses and forbs that supports the highest plant diversity of all North American grasslands. It is identified as an endangered plant community in the California Natural Diversity Database and is recognized as an environmentally sensitive habitat area by the Coastal Commission. An estimated 90% of California's rare and endangered plant species live in grassland ecosystems and a mere 1% of California's native grasslands still survive.

Before TWC's ownership, cattle were allowed to roam freely throughout the Jenner Headlands, tending to overgraze the relatively flat areas of the central portion of the coastal prairie habitat and negatively impact sensitive riparian and wetland habitats. After acquisition of the Preserve, the Sonoma Land Trust and TWC prepared an Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP) to serve as the guiding document for the protection, restoration, enhancement, and management of its significant natural ecosystems and cultural resources. The overarching goal of the IRMP's coastal prairie management component is to support a high level of biological diversity, habitat structure and ecosystem function. To achieve this goal, the IRMP recommends year-round,

rotational cattle grazing for vegetation management of the coastal prairie habitat at the Preserve.

To implement the rotational cattle grazing needed to increase biodiversity and support the conservation of the native grassland species, the Preserve needs infrastructure improvements. The proposed project consists of the following infrastructure improvements that will enable TWC to manage and control grazing on 787 acres of coastal prairie: improving the existing water infrastructure (i.e. water troughs, tanks, pipelines and a solar pump) and installing new, or replacing dilapidated, wildlife-friendly fencing for efficient pasture management and trail alignment. The rotational grazing will reduce hazardous fuels adjacent to forested portions of the property. The proposed project will allow land managers at the Preserve to showcase grazing as a management tool to curtail invasive grasses, thereby increasing the abundance of native wildflowers and reducing vegetative fuel loads. TWC is active in education, provides demonstrative opportunities to regional stakeholders in land management, and hosts free recreation at the Jenner Headlands Preserve. Over 45,000 people visit the Preserve annually, ranging from local community members, school groups, and tourists. Thus, this project will be a publicly accessible teaching ground demonstrating the benefits of working landscapes in restoring native coastal prairie and mitigating wildfire risk.

**Site Description:** The Jenner Headlands Preserve consists of 5,630 acres of coastal land located just east of Highway 1, north of the Russian River where it meets the Pacific Ocean. The property's elevation ranges from 120 to 1,800 feet above sea-level with gentle west and southwest-facing slopes closer to Highway 1 gradating to steeper slopes (approximately 40%) on the upper reaches of the property. The Preserve is bounded to the west by views of the ocean and to the south by the popular tourist route from Jenner inland along Russian River Road. The primary land use of the property is open space preservation with limited cattle grazing.

The Preserve includes 13 types of habitats comprising approximately 3,200 acres of mixed redwood/Douglas fir forest and oak woodland and 1,400 acres of coastal prairie and other grasslands. The remaining acreage consists of coastal scrub, chaparral and riparian/wetland habitats. The property includes portions of eight watersheds, most of which have been designated as Significant Natural Areas by California Department of Fish and Wildlife. This variety of forests, grasslands, wetlands, and riparian areas is home to such fish and wildlife species as steelhead, river otter, red tree vole, fox, bobcat, mountain lion, red-legged frog and peregrine falcon and osprey.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The Wildlands Conservancy ("TWC") is a California private nonprofit public benefit corporation dedicated to preserving biodiversity and to providing passive recreation and education opportunities for free to the public. Over the past twenty-five years, TWC has established the largest nonprofit nature preserve system in California, comprised of twenty-two preserves encompassing nearly 200,000 acres of diverse mountain, valley, desert, river, and oceanfront landscapes. These preserves are open to the public free of charge for passive recreation, including camping, hiking, horseback riding, picnicking, birding, and more. In addition, TWC has preserved more than 800,000 acres of land with private funds.

TWC has demonstrated experience as a successful project partner, having completed grants from the Conservancy for acquisitions including the Estero Americano Coast Preserve and Santa Margarita River Trails Preserve, and for public access improvements at the Jenner Headlands Preserve.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

**Selection Criteria**

**1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.**

See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Strategic Plan” section below.

**2. Project is a good investment of state resources.**

The proposed project to implement grazing infrastructure improvements is a good investment of state resources because (1) it will protect and enhance the biodiversity of coastal prairie grassland, an endangered California plant community; (2) it leverages non-state resources - NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds; and (3) it will serve as a demonstration property showcasing excellence in forest management, fire preparedness, riparian restoration, and innovative grazing practices.

**3. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.**

The rotational grazing enabled by the infrastructure improvements will continue to deliver benefits over time by gradually improving the biodiversity of the native grassland and controlling invasive plant species. This vegetation management approach increases the landscape’s resiliency to wildfire and drought.

**4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

The proposed project will (1) increase the biodiversity of 787 acres of rare coastal prairie habitat; (2) enhance habitat for local wildlife; (3) reduce wildfire fire risk by controlling fire fuels adjacent to the forest; (4) improve the recreational experiences for the public; and (5) showcase the benefits of a working landscape.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$200,000</b>
National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)	\$152,755
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$352,755</b>

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to come from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84, California Public Resources Code (“PRC”) section 75001, et seq.) Section 75060 authorizes the use of Proposition 84 funds for protection of coastal waters and watersheds, including projects that protect and restore the natural habitat values of coastal waters and lands. Sections 75005(n) defines the term “restoration” and states, in part, that restoration includes: “in the case of natural systems and landscape features includes, but is not limited to, projects for the control of erosion, the control and elimination of exotic species, prescribed burning, fuel hazard reduction, fencing out threats to existing or restored natural resources, road elimination, and other plant and wildlife habitat improvement to increase the natural system value of the property.” The proposed project will protect and restore coastal prairie grassland through grazing management, and therefore is an appropriate use of Proposition 84 funds. Pursuant to section 75071(c) and (e), the proposed project is a priority for funding because it supports relatively large areas of an under-protected major habitat type -coastal prairie, and there is a non-state matching contribution toward the restoration costs.

Conservancy projects funded utilizing Proposition 84 must be consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation. As discussed below, this project is consistent with Chapter 6 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation.

TWC was awarded a NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) grant of \$152,755 for this project. The EQIP grants invest in solutions that conserve natural resources for the future while also improving agricultural operations.

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 proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251- 31270), regarding enhancement of coastal resources.

Sections 31251 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of natural or human induced events or incompatible land uses have suffered loss of natural values. The proposed project will enhance coastal prairie habitat degraded through past land uses by implementing improved grazing management practices.

As required in Section 31252, the proposed project is consistent with the Sonoma County Local Coastal Program (LCP). Section III of the LCP, Environmental Resources, includes resource management recommendations to protect coastal prairie grassland (Numbers 48-52). The Sonoma County General Plan Resource Conservation Element identifies grasslands as one of Sonoma’s eight plant communities and includes conservation and protection policies in Section

5.1-2. Goal RC-5 states, “Promote and maintain the County’s diverse plant and animal communities and protect biotic resources from development activities”.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective B** of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project enhances 787 acres of coastal prairie habitat on a significant natural resource and public access property on the Sonoma coast.

Consistent with **Goal 7, Objective B**, the proposed project will enhance working lands in a manner compatible with sensitive natural resources.

Consistent with **Goal 8, Objective C**, the proposed project will implement climate change adaption by increasing resiliency to wildfire and drought.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A**, the proposed project benefits the disadvantaged communities of Jenner and Cazadero.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

All components of the proposed project are categorically exempt from environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines at California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Sections 15301, 15302, and 15303.

Section 15301 (Existing Facilities) exempts the 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 and water supply reserves. Section 15302 (Replacement or Reconstruction) exempts the replacement or reconstruction of existing structures and facilities where the new structure will be located on the same site as the structure replaced and will have substantially the same purpose and capacity as the structure replaced. Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures) exempts the construction and location of limited numbers of new, small facilities or structures.

The improvements to existing water infrastructure constitutes repair or minor alterations to existing structures. Replacing dilapidated fencing constitutes reconstruction of existing structures on the same site and for the same purpose (cattle management). The installation of new fencing constitutes the location of new, limited small structures. The management of cattle with the improved infrastructure constitutes operation of an existing facility or topographical features. Accordingly, the project is categorically exempt under these sections.

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