

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
May 5, 2022

**HOLLISTER RANCH COASTAL ACCESS PROGRAM**

Project No. 19-007-01  
Project Manager: Trish Chapman

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$2,300,000 to contract for services to prepare environmental review documents, a cultural and tribal resource survey, and a property appraisal for the Hollister Ranch Coastal Access Program, in Santa Barbara County.

**LOCATION:** Gaviota Coast, Santa Barbara County (Exhibit 1)

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [March 2022 Coastal Commission Program Update](#)

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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 the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two million three hundred thousand dollars (\$2,300,000) to contract for services to prepare environmental review documents, a cultural and tribal resource survey, and a property appraisal for the Hollister Ranch Coastal Access Program, in Santa Barbara County.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31111, regarding the Conservancy's ability to undertake planning and feasibility studies. The proposed authorization is also consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding System of Public Accessways.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
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## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$2,300,000 to contract for services for preparation of environmental review documents, a cultural and tribal resource survey, and a property appraisal for the Hollister Ranch Coastal Access Program. It is expected that the environmental review document will be a Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (PEIR), but this will be reviewed and confirmed as part of the planning process. The proposed authorization would be funded by a \$10 million General Fund appropriation to the Conservancy for public access at Hollister Ranch, located on the Gaviota Coast in Santa Barbara County.

Since 2019, the Conservancy has been working with the California Coastal Commission, the State Lands Commission, and State Parks to develop a contemporary Hollister Ranch Coastal Access Program (HRCAP or Program). In November 2021, the Draft HRCAP was presented to the Commission at an all day workshop. In December, the Conservancy approved an additional \$60,000 to revise the draft HRCAP based on Coastal Commissioner feedback. The proposed authorizations would allow the four agencies to continue with the next steps identified in the draft HRCAP for development of the program.

Before the HRCAP can be adopted by the Coastal Commission, the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) must be completed. Under CEQA, Coastal Commission review and approval of the HRCAP would be considered a “CEQA equivalent” process and so it would not be required that an Environmental Impact Report or other CEQA document be prepared. However, the four state agencies have determined that preparation of an environmental review document with a robust public input process would be a more prudent approach rather than using the Commission’s CEQA-equivalent authority (see Exhibit 2 for additional information). Related to the assessment of potential impacts, it has already been determined that a cultural and tribal resource survey of the beach access points is needed. The survey will identify areas where protective steps are needed to ensure that the HRCAP does not have adverse effects on the cultural and tribal resources. The survey will be undertaken with Chumash leadership and will be done separately but in coordination with the other resource analyses needed for the PEIR. Concurrent with development of the PEIR, the State Lands Commission will begin development of the appraisal of property rights needed to provide access through Hollister Ranch to the public beach areas.

For the environmental analysis, the Coastal Commission will be the lead agency, but the State Lands Commission will assist with preparation of the environmental review document since it has more experience developing CEQA documents than the Commission. As stated above, the State Lands Commission will lead the property appraisal effort. For the tribal and cultural resource survey, local Chumash tribes have requested that the survey be done with Chumash leadership. The contracting approach for this survey is still being discussed with the tribes.

**Site Description:** Hollister Ranch is a 14,000-acre, gated subdivision in Santa Barbara County with 8.5 miles of spectacular coastline. (See Exhibit 1). The ranch has been subdivided into 135

parcels, each of which can have up to 12 owners. The Hollister Ranch Owners Association oversees the subdivision and manages common spaces, including the roads and shared beach facilities. Adjacent (west) to Hollister Ranch is the privately owned 24,000-acre Cojo Jalama Ranch, and then Vandenberg Air Force Base to the north. These three properties constitute the least accessible stretch of California's coastline, with less than 2 miles of general public access in a 60-mile stretch. Adjacent to Hollister Ranch on the downcoast side (east) is Gaviota State Park.

The shoreline of the Hollister Ranch features tall bluffs, punctuated periodically by rocky outcroppings and pocket beaches. This topography makes it nearly impossible to walk safely along the shoreline from Gaviota State Beach to the Hollister Ranch beaches. This section of coast provides some spectacular scenic and recreational opportunities including excellent surfing areas, surf-fishing, diving areas, tidepools, and beaches with recreational and habitat values. None of these resources are currently accessible to the general public except to those traveling by boat, landowner guests, or invitees to the Ranch. The public is currently excluded from both the shoreline and Rancho Real Road, a private road that extends from the first public road through the 12 miles of Hollister Ranch and intersects with six private access roads leading to the shoreline.

This section of shoreline has rich and varied habitat supportive of one of the most intact terrestrial ecosystems on the south coast. The intertidal marine resources along the coast are rich and substantially pristine.

Railroad tracks used by Amtrak and freight trains are located between Rancho Real Road and the coast. At two of the beach access points, the railroad tracks cross via trestle bridges. This allows people to walk under the trestle and get safely on the other side of the tracks. At all other beach access points, there are uncontrolled, at-grade crossings which pose a significant safety risk for future public use.

Most of the Ranch land is open space that is used as grazing land by the Hollister Ranch Cattle Cooperative. There are very few fences on the property and cattle are sometimes found on Rancho Real Road.

#### **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 and in Exhibit 2.

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

In 2019 Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill 1680 (Limón 2019) which directed the four state agencies to develop a contemporary plan for coastal access to the Hollister Ranch

beaches. The FY 2021/22 State budget included a \$10 million appropriation to the Conservancy for public access to the Hollister Ranch beaches. These two actions by the legislature and the Governor illustrate that the HRCAP is a priority for the State.

Public access to the Hollister Ranch beaches has been the subject of a 40-year conflict with strong opinions and emotions on multiple sides. In addition, Hollister Ranch is located in a fairly remote, undeveloped part of the coast. For both of these reasons, developing a public access program for the Hollister Ranch beaches is challenging. The proposed PEIR, cultural and tribal resource survey, and property appraisal are required to advance the coastal access program. The Hollister Ranch Coastal Access Program has involved and will continue to involve extensive community engagement.

**3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.**

The HRCAP was developed with extensive tribal input from the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians (SYBCI), the Coastal Band of the Chumash Nation (CBCN), Barbareño/Ventureño Band of Mission Indians, and the Barbareño Band of Chumash Indians. The HRCAP includes a Chumash Cultural Access component that would allow Chumash tribal members to engage in activities associated with Chumash cultural practices that general public users will not be allowed to do.

As discussed above, the HRCAP identifies the need for the cultural and tribal resource survey calls for the survey to be done with the guidance and leadership of the Chumash tribes. The state agencies are also discussing with the tribes opportunities for tribal-led education of public visitors on Chumash culture and history, and roles the tribes may want to have in future management of the public access program. Additional tribal consultation will be conducted as part of preparation of the PEIR.

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

Impacts of sea-level rise over the coming decades will lead to significant changes to the Hollister Ranch coastline as coastal bluffs erode, beaches flood, and coastal ecosystems evolve. Planning for installation of permanent infrastructure for the HRCAP will include an analysis of sea-level rise impacts and design recommendations to increase the resiliency and adaptability of public access improvements. Sustainability will also be enhanced through the use of electric shuttles and installation electric vehicle charging stations at a future staging area.

**5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impacts.**

The goal of the HRCAP is to provide public access to a beautiful, largely undisturbed part of the southern California coastline, providing a unique coastal experience for Californians. One of the Program's objectives is to provide equitable access and the Program calls for providing periodic shuttle access directly from northern Santa Barbara communities such as Guadalupe, Lompoc, and Santa Maria to more proactively serve low-income, people of color, immigrant, and English learner communities. The Chumash Cultural Access component (see below) is also important for providing equitable access. In addition, the Program has been carefully designed to minimize impacts to biological, cultural, and tribal resources and reduce conflicts with cattle

operations on the Ranch. Finally, the Program provides the community with ongoing oversight of the access program through the HRCAP Advisory Committee that will be formed.

**6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.**

The planning effort for the HRCAP utilized a multi-faceted public engagement approach to incorporate the interests and concerns of a broad range of Californians. Although the project started with face-to-face meetings and workshops, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the public engagement process was switched entirely to a virtual environment. Public engagement included: 1) creation of a working group of 18 people with different backgrounds, expertise, and perspectives on public access to help develop the public access program. The Working Group met five times. It helped to establish the Program Objectives and the planning evaluation criteria, and provided feedback on the development of the Draft HRCAP conceptual approach, options related to visitor capacities, and creation of an Advisory Committee; 2) several listening sessions held with smaller groups of stakeholders including tribes, representatives of environmental justice communities, environmental educators, surfers, Hollister Ranch homeowners and others; 3) a series of surveys provided to the more than 1700 people on the HRCAP email list; 4) a virtual meeting to present the Conceptual Program and receive feedback had more than 100 people participate; and 5) tribal consultations.

The preparation of the environmental review document will provide another opportunity for continued community participation in shaping the access program.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$2,300,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$2,300,000</b>

Conservancy funds for the proposed augmentation are expected to derive from a \$10 million General Fund appropriation to the Conservancy for the public access at Hollister Ranch. The four State agencies that are collaborating on the HRCAP established a spending plan for the \$10 million appropriation and agreed that \$2,300,000 is the appropriate amount to budget for the proposed work.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 *et seq.*).

Section 31400 states that it is the intent of the Legislature that the Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline.

Pursuant to section 31400.2, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of the initial development of public accessways. Consistent with this section and given the General Fund appropriation for public access at Hollister Ranch, the Conservancy is providing the total amount of the anticipated costs.

Pursuant to section 31400.3, the Conservancy may provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of this division. Consistent with this section, the Conservancy is working collaboratively with the three other state agencies to develop a program for public access to the Hollister Ranch shoreline.

In addition, Public Resources Code section 31111 allows the Conservancy to undertake plans and feasibility studies to carry out the purposes of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

In addition, section 30610.8, in the Coastal Act, directs the Conservancy and the State Lands Commission to use their full authority provided under law to implement public access at the Hollister Ranch in the County of Santa Barbara.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop conceptual designs for approximately 8.5 miles of Coastal Trail through Hollister Ranch.

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will assist the effort to secure real property or property interests to facilitate the development of the California Coastal Trail through Hollister Ranch.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop a program for opening an area of California's coast that is currently inaccessible for public access.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The preparation of the PEIR, cultural and tribal resource survey, and property appraisal involve only feasibility and planning studies and may include basic data collection, resource evaluation, and research, that will not impact any environmental resources, for possible future action which has not yet been approved, authorized, adopted, or funded by the Conservancy or another agency. Therefore, these components of the proposed authorization area statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to California Code of Regulations title 14, section 15262 and categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to California Code of Regulations (CCR), title 14, section 15306. Planning carried out as part of this project will consider environmental factors as required by section 15262.

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