

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 22, 2022

**Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District Wildfire Resilience Program**

Project No. 22-042-01

Project Manager: Kostoula Vallianos

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,080,000 to Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District to reduce wildland vegetation fuels on approximately 200 acres, purchase equipment for use in reducing wildland vegetation fuels, refine existing prescribed fire plan and conduct associated environmental review, and build staff capacity to implement their Wildland Fire Resiliency Program.

**LOCATION:** Multiple Midpeninsula Regional Open Space Preserves within San Mateo County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District Wildfire Resilience Program Staff Recommendation dated June 7, 2021](#)

Exhibit 3: [Photos](#)

Exhibit 4: [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 one million and eighty thousand dollars (\$1,080,000) to Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (“the grantee”) to reduce wildland vegetation fuels on approximately 200 acres of land, purchase equipment for use in wildland vegetation fuel reduction, refine existing prescribed fire plan and conduct associated environmental review, and increase the grantee’s Wildland Fire Resiliency Program capacity through hiring additional staff.

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.
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2. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
3. 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.
4. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.

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.

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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$1,080,000 grant to Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (“MROSD”) to reduce wildland vegetation fuels on approximately 200 acres, purchase equipment needed for the project, refine existing prescribed fire plan and conduct associated environmental review, and build capacity to implement their Wildland Fire Resiliency Program (WFRP) through hiring additional staff.

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 proposed project will increase MROSD’s wildland fire resiliency through the implementation of important vegetation treatments and increase the grantee’s capacity to conduct wildfire resilience work.

Historic fire suppression on MROSD lands has reduced biodiversity, increased fire risk through buildup of vegetative fuels, and facilitated the spread of invasive plant species. As a result, these open spaces have high fuel loads, dense vegetation, and areas full of nonnative species. 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.

As part of this project, approximately 200 acres of high priority areas with severe fire danger will be treated using mechanical and manual methods to reduce fire fuel. These areas are located within Russian Ridge and Skyline Ridge Preserves and Windy Hill and El Corte de

Madera Creek Open Space Preserves. Work will include removal of invasive species and fuels reduction activities along evacuation routes and previously treated areas. Activities will include mowing and brush cutting, use of backhoes and excavators, hand-pruning, and sawing. Limited herbicide application approved under the MROSD's Integrated Pest Management Program (IPMP) will also be used.

The Russian Ridge and Skyline Ridge Open Space Preserve project site is an escape route located along Alpine Road from the intersection of Page Mill Road and Highway 35/Skyline Boulevard to Portola Redwoods State Park. The escape route serves multiple communities including, but not limited to, Loma Mar, La Honda, Middleton Tract, and Pescadero. The Windy Hill Open Space Preserve project site is also an escape route located along Alpine Road from the intersection of Willowbrook Drive and a shaded fuel break consisting of dense vegetation downhill from Willowbrook Drive. The escape route serves the communities of Coal Creek, Rocky Creek, and Portola Valley Ranch. Near the center of the El Corte de Madera Creek Preserve, invasive species and encroaching vegetation will be removed.

In addition to the treatments discussed above, there are three elements of the proposed project that are focused on MROSD's capacity building. First, the project includes purchase of remote-control slope mowers, track excavator with forestry masticator attachment, and a self-propelled track chipper with trailer to allow them to efficiently implement vegetation management on steep slopes, included as part of the fuel reduction work in the four preserves. Second, the project includes refinement of the WFRP-prescribed burn plan and preparation of associated environmental documents. Once the refined plan and environmental documents are approved by the MROSD board, three specific prescribed burn plans will be developed. Third, the project includes the hiring of two additional staff at MRSOD for two and a half years to support implementation of their Wildland Fire Resiliency Program.

**Site Description:** The four preserves are located within San Mateo County and are owned and managed by MROSD.

Skyline Ridge OSP contains 2,143 acres of varied landscape, including ridge vistas, expansive meadows, a pond, and a 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, and 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.

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.

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 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.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, 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 will accelerate MROSD's high priority fire hazard reduction projects to increase fire resiliency in Wildland-Urban Interface areas of District lands that are located within CALFIRE identified fire severity risk zones. The project will treat approximately 200 acres of high priority area in four District preserves leveraging a 67% local match and ensuring on-going maintenance to protect significant resources on public land. The project will also increase

capacity in the Wildland Fire Resiliency Program to develop a prescribed fire plan and related environmental documents to meet the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act, completing the final component envisioned in the Wildland Fire Resiliency Program. The project furthers goals in the California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan (January 2021) and the Santa Cruz-San Mateo Community Wildfire Protection Plan (April 2018).

The project is feasible, has a reasonable budget, relies on best available science, and builds on well-established partnerships. Working with local fire agencies, CALFIRE, the community, and the MROSD's Board of Directors, the MROSD developed the WFRP to enable the MROSD to implement increased environmentally sensitive vegetation management for their lands. The WFRP is designed to protect natural and cultural resources, expand landscape-level ecological resilience to fire hazard conditions and a changing climate, and facilitate ecologically sensitive wildland fire response and training while enhancing public safety and education.

**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.**

MROSD staff have discussed the project and WFRP program with tribes including the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area. One of the objectives of the prescribed burn plan will be to include cultural burns which would be conducted in partnership with the Tribes. Tribal members would also be invited to other burn opportunities as appropriate, such as trainings and/or resource burns.

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

The project will deliver ongoing benefits to increase 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. California is facing unprecedented fire risk due to climate change and a growing populace. Both the 2020 and 2021 fire seasons broke numerous records.

Specifically, the project supports and implements the work of MROSD's WFRP which is MROSD's plan for wildfire resilience across their managed lands.

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

The proposed project will reduce fire risk, protect escape routes, and improve ecological health of MROSD Preserves by removing invasive plants. The project contributes to regional benefits in reducing catastrophic fire risk that can indirectly yet significantly impact under sourced communities when severe smoke is prolonged throughout the larger region, as was evident in the 2020 fires, causing people to shelter at home and exposing many to high levels of particulate matter.

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

On May 12, 2021, the MROSD certified the WFRP’s final Program Environmental Impact Report and adopted the WFRP, following an extensive public process. MROSD has consulted with state and federal agencies including CAL FIRE and California Office of Emergency Services among others for the proposed project. MROSD outreach will raise awareness about the project, beneficial fire, and the benefit to the community for regional wildfire and forest health projects. As part of the proposed project, MROSD will convene meetings including a public open house for feedback and two public Board meetings for decisions for prescribed fire planning; and will host 2-3 annual meetings with local fire agencies to understand their yearly priorities as a part of the WFRP annual planning process. The WFRP team will build relationships with adjacent property owners and regional partners, engage community with forest health treatment outreach updates at local meetings and events.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$1,080,000</b>
Others (excluding in-kind)	\$2,203,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$3,283,000</b>

The proposed funding for this project will come from a grant to the Coastal Conservancy from the Department of Conservation’s (DOC) Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP). The Conservancy is one of the subregional recipients of RFFCP block grants. The goal of the RFFCP is to increase regional capacity to prioritize, develop, and implement projects that improve forest health and fire resiliency, facilitate greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and increase carbon sequestration in forests throughout California.

Unless specifically identified as “Required Match,” the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

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

The recommended projects 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, including those that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and address 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 will restore the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, or natural lands and reduce fire risk to communities. The project will help California's natural lands to be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires which may ultimately reduce greenhouse gas emissions released from increased wildfires due to climate change.

The proposed project addresses resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction by improving forests, grasslands, or natural lands 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 a project to restore the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, and natural lands in a manner that reduces fire risk to communities. The project will help California's natural lands to be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

On June 7, 2021, the Conservancy considered the "Wildland Fire Resiliency Program Final Environmental Impact Report" (WFRP EIR) and the "Integrated Pest Management Program Final Environmental Impact Report" (IPMP EIR), both of which were certified by MROSD in connection with its Wildfire Resilience Program and its vegetation management activities in the wildland urban interface and around structures (respectively); and the Conservancy authorized a grant to MROSD for wildland fuels reduction activities in 11 of its preserves. (Exhibit 2) The recommended authorization includes funding additional wildland fuel reduction activities within 4 of the 11 preserves that were the subject of the prior authorization and funding additional staff to help MROSD implement the Wildfire Resilience Program in its preserves. The proposed activities are addressed by the Conservancy's CEQA findings on June 7, 2021. There have been no changes in MROSD's wildfire fuel reduction activities that would trigger the need for additional CEQA review.

Conservancy staff filed a Notice of Determination for the previous grant authorization on June 16, 2021 and will file another Notice of Determination following the Conservancy's authorization of the recommended grant.

The proposed preparation of a prescribed fire plan, environmental documentation and permit applications is statutorily and categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines at 14 California Code of Regulations Sections 15262 and 15306, which exempt projects that involve feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved; and basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Upon approval of the grant, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.