

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

December 1, 2022

Wildfire Resilience Program – 2022-2023, Augmentation

Project Numbers: 22-075-01 and 22-076-01

Project Manager: Rachel Couch

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$824,900 to the Cachuma Resource Conservation District and to the Santa Barbara Fire Safe Council for two additional wildfire resilience projects under the Conservancy’s Wildfire Resilience Program - 2022-2023.

LOCATION: Various locations in coastal watersheds in Santa Barbara County (see Exhibit 1)

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [September 22, 2022 Staff Recommendation](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy (Conservancy) hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed eight hundred and twenty-four thousand nine hundred dollars (\$824,900) to the Cachuma Resource Conservation District and to the Santa Barbara Fire Safe Council to develop and implement activities to increase wildfire resilience of California’s natural lands and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, as specified below:

Cachuma Resource Conservation District: Four hundred fifty-four thousand nine hundred dollars (\$454,900) to develop approximately 10 demonstration priority wildfire fuels reduction and habitat enhancement projects to reduce risk or severity of wildfire in the wildland urban interface in the City of Goleta and unincorporated Santa Barbara County.

Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council (SBCFSC): Three hundred seventy thousand dollars (\$370,000) to carry out SBCFSC’s mission and implement programs recommended in the Santa Barbara County Regional Wildfire Mitigation Program and Regional Priority Plan. Prior to

commencement of each project, each 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.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Any other agreements determined necessary for the project by the Conservancy's Executive Officer.

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 projects are consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The proposed grantees are nonprofit organizations organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy (Conservancy) authorize disbursement of up to \$824,900 of additional funds for two additional projects as part of the Conservancy's Wildfire Resilience Program-2022-2023, for which the Conservancy authorized disbursement of \$10,996,600 on September 22, 2022. The two additional projects will develop and implement vegetation management activities to increase wildfire resilience of California's forests, grasslands, and natural lands and reduce fire risk to communities. The grantees for these two projects will be the Cachuma Resource Conservation District and the Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council. The Conservancy's September 22, 2022 staff recommendation for the Wildfire Resilience Program – 2022-2023 describes multiple projects to be funded under this program. (See Exhibit 2). The two additional projects to be funded under this program are summarized below.

CACHUMA RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

\$454,900

Santa Barbara County Wildfire Resilience Collaborative

**Central Coast
Santa Barbara County**

The Santa Barbara County Wildfire Resilience Collaborative (Cachuma project) will develop a suite of 10 or more demonstration priority wildfire fuels reduction and habitat enhancement projects (wildfire projects) to reduce risk or severity of wildfire in the wildland urban interface in the City of Goleta and unincorporated Santa Barbara County. The Cachuma project will include planning for wildfire projects on both publicly owned and privately owned sites within the City of Goleta, unincorporated County, and the 2021 Alisal Fire Burn area. The planning will address a variety of vegetation management techniques including prescribed burn, prescribed herbivory, removal of invasive species, focused restoration, and removal of dead and downed vegetation. The Cachuma project includes preparing permit applications of the wildfire projects. The wildfire projects are being prioritized based on their wildfire risk reduction potential, proximity to vulnerable populations, and potential to deliver additional beneficial ecological impact. Goleta City, Goleta City Parks and Open Space Division, Santa Barbara County Fire, Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council, and the Environmental Defense Center are key partners in this phase of the Cachuma project, and other organizations will be engaged as technical service providers. The Cachuma project team will assist agencies with determining CEQA needs across jurisdictional boundaries.

A second component of the Cachuma project is the preparation of a study of the post-fire landscape, and a plan for possible treatment projects at the Arroyo Hondo Preserve as part of an overall effort to create a long-term fire resilient landscape that provides both ecological and cultural benefits. Research to recreate the pre-contact floristic profile is needed as well as an understanding of the post-fire regrowth prior to planning any possible burns. To carry out this second project component, the Cachuma Resource Conservation District will partner with a local Chumash tribal-led collaboration with the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County. This second project component will build knowledge and capacity for other Chumash-led fire risk reduction and post wildfire mitigation projects in the future. Planning work at Arroyo Hondo Preserve will identify the number and scope of treatment projects and what level of review is appropriate.

The Cachuma project will also maintain and update the Resilience Planning Tool (www.sbcwildfireresilience.org) developed under a previous Conservancy grant as a centralized clearinghouse and information sharing platform for partners and stakeholders as wildfire and treatment projects progress through planning and implementation.

Funding: The proposed source of funding is a block grant to the Conservancy from the Department of Conservation’s Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP). The RFFCP seeks to increase capacity to prioritize, develop, and implement projects that improve forest health and fire resiliency. The Conservancy’s block grant covers projects from Marin County south to Ventura County. The proposed Cachuma project is consistent with the anticipated funding source.

CEQA: The proposed Cachuma project, as well as the maintenance of the resilience planning tool, is statutorily exempt under 14 CCR Section 15262 (Feasibility and Planning Studies) because it involves development of plans and a study for possible future actions that have not been funded or approved.

SANTA BARBARA FIRE SAFE COUNCIL

\$370,000

Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council Capacity Enhancement

**Central Coast
Santa Barbara County**

The Santa Barbara County Fire Safe Council (SBCFSC) project (Santa Barbara project) consists of SBCFSC hiring a full-time Executive Director and staff assistant to carry out SBCFSC’s mission and administer programs recommended in the Santa Barbara County Regional Wildfire Mitigation Program (RWMP) and Regional Priority Plan (RPP). Activities under the Santa Barbara project will include performing basic SBCFSC administrative oversight tasks and membership management; conducting public wildfire education programs; organizing and sustaining local neighborhood and community organizations as FireWise USA chapters; partnering with other public agencies and nonprofits to apply for and secure funds to develop or expand wildfire mitigation strategies included in the RWMP and RPP such as regional fire fuel hazard reduction strategies (chipping, native restoration, roadside vegetation management, grazing, and structural retrofits) to benefit participating communities; and representing SBCFSC in public forums and in collaborative planning activities. In carrying out the Santa Barbara project, SBCFSC will work with all communities within Santa Barbara County potentially threatened by wildfire, including conducting targeted outreach to disadvantaged communities to support FireWise participation. SBCFSC is transitioning from an all-volunteer organization to a fully staffed organization. Funding staff positions will enable long term coordination and administration of the RWMP and RPP projects. Planning and implementation of existing wildfire mitigation projects is being led by project managers and contractors funded by other grants.

Funding: The proposed source of funding is a block grant to the Conservancy from the Department of Conservation’s Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP). The RFFCP seeks to increase capacity to prioritize, develop, and implement projects that improve forest health and fire resiliency. The Conservancy’s block grant covers projects from Marin County south to Ventura County. The proposed Santa Barbara project is consistent with the anticipated funding source.

CEQA: As described above, the proposed Santa Barbara project includes both wildfire resilience planning and administration of some activities. For the planning components, the proposed Santa Barbara project is statutorily exempt under Title 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262 (Feasibility and Planning Studies) because it involves planning for possible future actions that have not been approved or funded. It is also statutorily exempt under Section 15269 (Emergency Projects), because it involves administration of fuel management activities necessary to prevent catastrophic wildfire. Although the Santa Barbara project includes administration of wildfire mitigation strategies by applying for and securing funds, use of such

funds for regional fire fuel hazard reduction strategies (chipping, native habitat restoration, roadside vegetation management, grazing, and structural retrofits) are nonetheless categorically exempt under Section 15304 (Minor Alterations to Land) because such activities involve minor alterations in the condition of vegetation without the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. Such activities are also exempt under Section 15301 (Existing Facilities), because they involve maintenance of existing landscaping, native growth and existing fire fuel breaks.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed augmentation remains consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, as described in the September 22, 2022 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

TOTAL PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$824,900
Project Total	\$824,900

The anticipated source of funding is a block grant of \$8.8 million to the Conservancy from the California Natural Resource Agency under its Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP). The Conservancy is one of nine recipients of RFFCP block grants (Exhibit 1). The goal of the RFFCP is to increase regional capacity to prioritize, develop, and implement projects that improve forest health and fire resiliency. The Conservancy’s block grant covers projects from Marin County south to Ventura County. Projects funded by the RFFCP block grant are consistent with the funding source because they include training, education, and purchase of equipment to increase local capacity to undertake wildfire resilience projects; regional planning, coordination, and data gathering activities to support future fuel management projects; and support for local entities in the environmental review and permitting process.

The 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 augmentation remains consistent with the Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation as described in the September 22, 2022 staff recommendation (Exhibit 2).

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

The additional proposed projects assist the Conservancy in meeting a number of its Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives. Relevant Goals and Objectives are listed below, along with the

names of the proposed projects that meet each goal. Please see the “Project Summary” section, above, for how each proposed project meets the relevant goal(s) and objective(s).

Consistent with **Goal 8, Objective C**, the Cachuma and Santa Barbara Projects will restore the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, and natural lands in a manner that reduces fire risk to communities. The projects will help California’s natural lands to be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A**, the Cachuma and Santa Barbara Projects are located in disadvantaged communities or directly benefit disadvantaged communities.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

Conservancy staff reviewed the proposed projects for compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (Public Resources Code Section 21000-21189) and its implementing regulations (14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Sections 15000-15387).

The two proposed projects (the Cachuma project and Santa Barbara project) are categorically and or statutorily exempt under CEQA. Please see the “Project Summary” section above for more information on each proposed project and why it is exempt from CEQA. Applicable CEQA exemptions are listed below.

Development of fuel management and fire resilience plans is exempt under Section 15262 (Feasibility and Planning Studies), which applies to planning and feasibility studies for possible future actions that have not been approved, adopted, or funded. Both the Cachuma project and Santa Barbara project qualify for this exemption because they contain planning and feasibility studies for future actions that have not been approved, adopted, or funded.

Section 15269 (Emergency Projects) exempts emergency projects, such as: emergency repairs to service facilities necessary to maintain service essentials to the public health, safety, or welfare, including those repairs that require a reasonable amount of planning to address an anticipated emergency; and specific actions necessary to prevent or mitigate an emergency. The Santa Barbara project qualifies for this exemption because it involves administration of wildfire mitigation strategies by applying for and securing funds for fuel management activities that are necessary to prevent catastrophic wildfire, which has a high probability of occurring at any of the project sites in the near future due to warming summer temperatures and severe drought caused by climate change. In addition, the Santa Barbara project involves outreach to and coordination with partnering landowners and neighborhood organizations as well as overseeing administration of grant funds to be used for activities such as repairs to emergency access roads, fuel breaks, and other infrastructure needed to respond to wildfires when they occur.

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 a site. Such projects include, but are

not limited to, management of existing landscaping, native growth, and roads. The Santa Barbara project qualifies for this exemption because it involves hiring staff positions that will apply for, secure and oversee administration of funds, and will coordinate with project managers on management of existing native vegetation through the removal of dead and dying trees, thinning, reduction of ladder fuels, grazing, and other similar activities; and maintenance of fire roads and emergency access roads.

Section 15304 (Minor Alterations to Land) exempts projects that involve minor alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation without the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. The Santa Barbara project qualifies for this exemption because it involves hiring staff positions that will apply for, secure and oversee administration of funds, and will coordinate with project managers on management of existing native vegetation through the removal of dead, dying, and immature trees, thinning, reduction of ladder fuels, grazing, and other similar activities. These fuel management activities will not change the nature of the land or alter the basic character of the vegetation and habitat at the project sites.

Upon approval of the exempt projects, Conservancy staff will file Notices of Exemption for each project.