

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

December 1, 2022

Sonoma Mountain Vernal Pools Acquisition

Project No. 22-001-01

Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$787,500 to Sonoma Land Trust to acquire the 174-acre Sonoma Mountain Vernal Pools Property in Sonoma County for habitat preservation; biodiversity protection; climate resilience; improving wildlife corridors; and public access and tribal cultural uses compatible with natural resource protection.

LOCATION: 8301 Bennett Valley Road, Glen Ellen, Sonoma County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)

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 hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed seven hundred eighty-seven thousand five hundred dollars (\$787,500) to Sonoma Land Trust (the “grantee”) to acquire the 174-acre “Sonoma Mountain Vernal Pools” property at Glen Ellen, Sonoma County (Sonoma County’s Assessor’s Parcel No. 055-040-013-000 and 055-030-029-000), depicted in Exhibit 2 to the accompanying staff recommendation for protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources, including wildlife corridors and habitat, wetland and water resources, and landscape resilience related to climate change; open space; public access and recreational use compatible with the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources; and tribal and indigenous cultural use compatible with the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer):
 - a. All relevant acquisition documents for the acquisition including, without limitation, the appraisal, purchase and sale agreement, deed and conservation easement, escrow instructions, environmental or hazardous materials assessment, and title report;
 - b. A baseline conditions report; and
 - c. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
3. The property acquired under this authorization shall be managed, operated, and used for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources, including wildlife corridors and habitat, wetland and water resources, and landscape resilience related to climate change; open space; public access and recreational use compatible with the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources; and tribal and indigenous cultural use compatible with the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
4. The grantee shall submit any master plan for the property to the Conservancy for review for consistency with the acquisition purposes.
5. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property or in a nearby publicly-viewable area, the design and location of which are to be approved by the 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 addressing the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Sonoma Land Trust 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 disburse up to \$787,500 to the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) to acquire the 174-acre Sonoma Mountain Vernal Pools property (the Property) in the Bennett Valley region of Sonoma Mountain (see Exhibit 1, Figure 1) for protection, restoration, and

enhancement of natural and scenic resources, including wildlife corridors and habitat, wetland and water resources, and landscape resilience related to climate change; open space; public access and recreational use compatible with the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources; and tribal and indigenous cultural use compatible with the protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural and scenic resources. The proposed acquisition (the “project”) will expand the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor (Exhibit 5), a 10,000-acre east-west network of habitat that is part of the Marin Coast-Blue Ridge Critical Linkage, a critical component of California’s biodiversity.

In 2005, the Property’s landowners contacted SLT about conservation options, and SLT has been working to acquire the Property for the past 15 years. The Property is part of an area specifically identified by SLT as key to connecting large blocks of intact habitat on Sonoma Mountain to the Mayacamas. This project represents the first step of a multi-phased effort to establish a 575-acre wildlife protection and recreation corridor between Annadel State Park and North Sonoma Mountain Regional Park (see Exhibit 1, Figure 4).

The Property features oak woodland, grassland chapparal, riparian forest habitats, and two large vernal pools. The Property supports diverse populations of wildlife and plants, including sensitive and special status species (refer to the “Site Description” section below). The project offers a compelling opportunity to preserve these natural resources as the threat from local and regional development is great. Adjacent parcels have been converted into vineyards due to their proximity to accredited wine regions, putting the Property at risk for either vineyard or luxury housing development. If the Property is released to the open market, local zoning ordinances would allow for subdivision into eight residential lots along with an 87-acre vineyard. Such an outcome would result in the loss of 125 acres of oak woodland that provides carbon sequestration and wildlife habitat, negatively impacting the Yulupa Creek Watershed and Sonoma Creek, which supports recovery of Northern California Chinook salmon and steelhead trout; fragmentation of the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor, which will negatively impact current and future wildlife migration for bobcats, black bears, mountain lions, and other wildlife as documented in Audubon Canyon Ranch’s “Living with Lions” program; and production of greenhouse gas emissions associated with luxury housing and vineyard construction.

In addition to natural resource preservation, staff recommends funding acquisition of the Property so that the Property can be used for public and Tribal access consistent with resource protection. The project partners anticipate that an approximately one-mile section of the Bay Area Ridge Trail will be sited through the Property, helping to connect an existing 7.4 mile-section between North Sonoma Mountain Regional Park and Jack London State Historic Park (Exhibit 1, Figure 4). Other anticipated public uses consistent with resource protection include multi-use trails (pedestrian, bicycling and equestrian), bird watching, outdoor education, and nature study. In addition, based on conversations with Tribes, acquiring the Property will enable tribal and indigenous cultural uses that are compatible with the protection of the natural and scenic resources, including activities such tending, harvesting, foraging, and holding group and individual ceremonies on the Property. Given the size and location of the property, SLT and project partners anticipate constructing a single residence to support a caretaker to

operate and manage the property consistent with the acquisition purposes. The building envelope for the residence will be located to minimize impacts to natural and scenic resources. SLT is working on the proposed acquisition in partnership with the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) and Sonoma County Regional Parks (Regional Parks). SLT intends to transfer the Property to Regional Parks within two years. SLT will acquire the Property using funds from a variety of sources from the willing seller at a price discounted from its appraised value and perform preliminary management practices. As one of the funders, Ag + Open Space will hold a conservation easement on the Property, which will be recorded concurrently with the transfer to SLT. Within an anticipated two-year period, SLT will transfer the Property to Regional Parks, who will take ownership and prepare a Master Plan indicating how the Property will be used consistent with the conservation easement and the purposes for which the Conservancy funded the acquisition. SLT intends to promote tribal cultural uses, volunteer workdays, and limited public access through their existing engagement and stewardship programs during the interim ownership period before transfer. SLT and the project partners anticipate that the Property will not be opened to the public for unrestricted access until Regional Parks has prepared the master plan and constructed any needed public access amenities.

Site Description: The Property is located in the Bennett Valley, a small valley roughly nine miles southeast of Santa Rosa and northwest of the village of Glen Ellen, in rural unincorporated Sonoma County. The general boundaries are Highway 12 to the north and east, Rohnert Park to the southwest, Santa Rosa to the northwest, and Petaluma to the south. It sits adjacent to over 6,200 acres of protected lands (Exhibit 1, Figure 5), including Annadel State Park directly adjacent to the northwest, Sugarloaf Ridge State Park, and Calabazas Creek Open Space Reserve to the northwest, Sonoma Valley Regional Park to the southwest, and Jack London State Historic Park and North Sonoma Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve to the south. Bennett Valley Road provides easy access to the Property from Santa Rosa while Warm Springs Road connects the Property to Highway 12 from the southeast.

The Property supports a wide range of wildlife and plant populations through its rich habitat features. The two sizeable vernal pools (Exhibit 2) found on the property are of the montane variety, which are vernal pools that occur in mountainous regions, and are regionally rare. These montane vernal pools provide habitat for a unique array of species including two rare and threatened species; Baker's navarretia (an annual herb that is native and endemic to California) and Dwarf downingia (a wildflower that grows in wet areas such as vernal pools). Oak woodland is the primary habitat type and supports coast live oak, California Black oak, valley oak woodland, and two rare species; white alder and Oregon white oak. These woodlands are also home to rare plants including Jepson's leptosiphon (an annual herb) and green monardella (a small shrub that occurs on dry slopes and ridges in Sonoma County). Three thousand six hundred forty-four feet of Yulupa Creek crosses the Property, emptying into Sonoma Creek, which is a State of California designated Critical Coastal Water Resource and critical habitat for steelhead trout and Chinook salmon. Wetlands on the Property are seasonal and occur in the eastern, lower-elevation portions. One of the most valuable qualities of the

Property is its adjacent location to the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor, which is part of the Marin Coast-Blue Ridge Critical Linkage. This critical corridor provides habitat connectivity to a wide range of wildlife including mountain lions, bobcats (Exhibit 2, Figure 8), black bear, American badger, and black-tailed deer.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: SLT has more than 40 years' experience protecting over 50,000 acres in Sonoma County and is well qualified to carry out the transaction and manage the property until transfer to Regional Parks. SLT has administered acquisitions similar to the Sonoma Mountain Vernal Pools acquisition, where the property is acquired and successfully transferred to and maintained by Regional Parks. Two examples are the 163-acre Santa Rosa Creek Headwaters acquisition which SLT acquired and transferred to Regional Parks for addition to Hood Mountain Regional Park; and the 54-acre Cooper Creek acquisition, transferred to Regional Parks for addition to Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve.

SLT has administered many Conservancy grant-funded projects and meets grant requirements in a timely fashion, manages complex community planning processes, produces high-caliber restoration plans, and consistently conducts itself as a trustworthy partner. It is accredited by the national Land Trust Accreditation Commission, demonstrating excellence in fiscal responsibility.

Regional Parks has established itself as a mainstay and supportive partner in the preservation of open space, natural resources, and public access. Regional Parks operates and maintains over 11,000 acres in 55 park facilities, maintains another 3,500 acres of County land, and is well-equipped to manage the Property with the dual benefit of natural resource protection and public access.

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 to acquire the 174-acre Sonoma Mountain Vernal Pools property is a good investment of state resources because it will contribute to meeting the state's biodiversity and equitable outdoor access goals as outlined in the Strategic Land Acquisition section of the Governor's 30 x 30 Executive Order. It will also formalize traditional tribal access to a site that has been an important resource gathering area for thousands of years.

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.

To date, SLT and the project partners have engaged with the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, who are traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area. The upcoming Master Plan will affirmatively provide for cultural uses compatible with the protection of the natural and scenic resources, including activities such as harvest or foraging, and holding group and individual ceremonies.

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

The proposed project will permanently protect the property from development, protecting the wildlife corridor connecting the Napa and Sonoma counties through the Sonoma Valley and habitats for threatened and sensitive species, and preventing greenhouse gas emissions. The project will continue to deliver benefits, including carbon sequestration by preserving oak woodlands, and improving public access for the Bay Area region.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The proposed project will deliver multiple benefits including: 1) permanently protecting the Property from development, thereby protecting the wildlife corridor connecting the Napa and Sonoma counties through the Sonoma Valley and habitats for threatened and sensitive species; 2) improving climate resilience because of the accessible microhabitats created by landscape permeability and diverse topography; 3) and providing public access to a highly scenic, open-space resource of regional importance in the Bay Area and providing spectacular views of the surrounding mountains and valleys and by linking popular local and state parks through a proposed Bay Area Ridge Trail segment.

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

SLT has engaged stakeholders as feasible during the development of this project. Property owners in the rural residential neighborhood were directly engaged to generate support for the acquisition, resulting in donations towards the purchase price. A local Tribe with links to the area was also directly engaged, enabling discussions towards mutual benefits. Lastly, SLT has worked with relevant local government agencies and political leaders to gain support. Local government agencies have contributed resources towards this project, including preliminary arrangements for transfer of the property to Regional Parks, who will carry out a Master Planning process involving deeper community engagement upon transfer.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$787,500
Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District	\$1,150,000
Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation	\$1,000,000
California Natural Resources Agency	\$483,500
Individual Donors	\$50,000

Project Total

\$ 3,471,000

Conservancy funds are anticipated to come from an FY20/21 appropriation to the Conservancy from the “California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access For All Act of 2018” (Prop 68, Public Resources Code Division 46, Chapters 1-13, Sections 80000-80173). In particular, Chapter 10 of Prop 68 allocates funds to the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program for projects to improve a community’s ability to adapt to the unavoidable impacts of climate change; improve and protect coastal and rural economies, agricultural viability, wildlife corridors, or habitat; develop future recreational opportunities; or enhance drought tolerance, landscape resilience, and water retention. (Pub. Res. Code sections 80130 and 80133(b)).

The recommended project is within the San Francisco Bay Area Program and will be undertaken pursuant to the Climate Ready Program established in Chapter 3 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation. The project purpose is to protect wildlife corridors and habitat; develop future recreational opportunities; and enhance drought tolerance, landscape resilience, and water retention. The recommended project is therefore consistent with the intended funding source.

The proposed project was selected through a competitive grant process under the Conservancy’s “Proposition 68 Guidelines San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program - Climate Adaptation Funds” adopted August 22, 2019. The proposed project meets the evaluation criteria in the Proposition 68 Guidelines as described in detail in this section, the “Project Summary” section above, and in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria” section above.

California Natural Resources Agency funding comes from their Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program, which provides grants for additional or enhanced mitigation, above and beyond compensatory requirements for environmental impacts caused by new or modified public transportation facilities. In this case, funds were awarded for enhanced protection of oak woodland, rare plants, a portion of Yulupa Creek, and two vernal pools; strengthening the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor; and future nature-based recreational opportunities.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code authorizes the Conservancy to address the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within the Conservancy’s jurisdiction (Section 31113(a)). The recommended project will address resources within the Conservancy’s jurisdiction because it will be undertaken within the County of Sonoma, one of the nine counties of the San Francisco Bay Area (Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code).

Section 31113(b) authorizes the Conservancy 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. Consistent with this section, the recommended project will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by preventing the

development of vineyards and estate housing on the property and protect the Property's natural resources.

Section 31113(c) states that the Conservancy must prioritize grants for projects that maximize public benefits and have one of several purposes, including reducing emissions of greenhouse gases, preserving and enhancing natural lands, conserving biodiversity, and providing recreational opportunities. Consistent with this section, the recommended project maximizes public benefits (see the "Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria" section above) and reduces greenhouse gas emissions associated with vineyard and estate housing development, preserves the Property's rich ecological resources including prime oak woodland, grassland, and seasonal wetland habitats, conserves biodiversity, including two rare oak species, and provides recreational opportunities by improving connectivity to protected lands and by potentially closing a Ridge Trail gap connecting Annadel SP and North Sonoma RP.

Section 31113(d) states that when allocating funds made available pursuant to Chapter 10 of Proposition 68 the Conservancy shall prioritize projects that (A) use natural infrastructure, (B) provide multiple public benefits, and (C) give consideration to projects in a variety of ecosystems. Consistent with this section, the recommended project will provide multiple benefits as described in the Project Selection Criteria above.

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

Consistent with Goal 8, Objective C, the proposed project will protect wildlife corridors important to urban-area resilience to climate change.

Consistent with Goal 12, Objective A, the proposed project will protect seasonal wetlands in the form of vernal pools.

Consistent with Goal 12, Objective B, the proposed project will protect 174 acres of important upland habitat as well as a wildlife corridor adjacent to Trione-Annadel State Park.

Consistent with Goal 13, Objective C, the proposed project will complete an acquisition that will increase the amount of land accessible to the public through additional trails between North Sonoma Mountain Regional Park and Trione-Annadel State Park.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project is categorically exempt from environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines at 14 Cal. Code of Reg. Sections 15313, 15316, and 15325, which exempt acquisitions of property for purposes of: preserving fish and wildlife habitat; establishing a park if no management plan has been prepared yet; and preserving open space and the existing natural conditions of the property, including plant and animal habitats. The proposed project will preserve the existing natural conditions and habitats of the property, and a management plan has not yet been prepared.

An anticipated future use of the property is as a potential of the Bay Area Ridge Trail between Trione-Annadel State Park and North Sonoma Mountain Regional Park. However, this use will be evaluated for its potential environmental effect when Regional Parks updates their master plan for North Sonoma Mountain Regional Park. This activity is not funded, approved, or adopted through this authorization.

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