

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
November 21, 2024

**MONTEREY STRATEGIC COMMUNITY FUEL BREAK**

Project No. 24-053-01  
Project Manager: Kostoula Vallianos

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,626,000 to the United States Forest Service to treat approximately 24 miles of historic fuel breaks by removing vegetation along the Santa Lucia ridge line within the Los Padres National Forest to protect neighboring communities in Monterey County from catastrophic wildfire.

**LOCATION:** Los Padres National Forest, Monterey County

---

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project 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 one million six hundred twenty-six thousand dollars (\$1,626,000) to the United States Forest Service (“the grantee”) to treat approximately 24 miles of historic fuel breaks by removing vegetation along the Santa Lucia ridge line within the Los Padres National Forest to protect neighboring communities in Monterey County from catastrophic wildfire (the “project”).

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.

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 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Climate Ready Program (Section 31113).
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

---

## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of an amount not to exceed \$1,626,000 to the United States Forest Service (“Forest Service”) to treat approximately 24 miles of historic fuel breaks by removing vegetation along the Santa Lucia ridge line within the Los Padres National Forest to protect neighboring communities in Monterey County from catastrophic wildfire (the “project”).

The fuel break segments originated as fire lines and include ridgelines as well as existing roads. They have been historically used during suppression response. These areas provide a strategic and tactical advantage for both ground-based and aerial firefighting personnel and equipment. By proactively designing and establishing strategic fuel breaks during a non-emergency environment, the Forest Service can reduce the reliance on mechanized equipment and subsequently reduce the adverse impacts on the landscape caused by fire suppression activities.

This project is crucial for enhancing wildland fire suppression efficiency, ensuring timely response, and protecting communities and infrastructure. Prepared fuel breaks allow for aggressive and effective fire control with fewer resources, reducing wildfire risk to life and property in areas like Big Sur and Palo Colorado, which have approximately 2,000 residents combined and millions of visitors every year. This project aims to prevent extensive wildfires, like the 2016 Soberanes Fire, which left burn scars on 132,127 acres.

In the Monterey Ranger District of the Los Padres National Forest, communities are developed up to the edge of the forest. All of the fuel break segments are within the wildland urban interface (WUI). Historical data shows that suppression costs are significantly higher in WUI than in wilderness areas, emphasizing the need for proactive strategies to keep wildfires out of the WUI. Additionally, minimizing the adverse impacts of fire suppression activities on the landscape is essential, as repeated use of bulldozers can scar the land and hinder native vegetation growth.

Beginning in 2020, the Forest Service started initial work on reestablishing some fuel breaks in Los Padres National Forest, but this is a large project, and re-established segments also need regular maintenance work. The Forest Service started initial work on each segment listed on Table 1 except the Mescal Ridge and Post Summit to Little Sur River segments. This project consists of treatment on all segments listed in Table 1 including the 14 segments that the Forest Service initially treated. Fuel break widths will vary between 150 to 300 feet depending on the terrain. Each fuel break segment is situated within 1-3 miles of local communities and/or recreation sites, including Big Sur, Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park, Andrew Molera State Park, the Palo Colorado, Jamesburg, and the Cachagua communities.

Exhibit 1 provides a map of the fuel break segments that the project will treat. Table 1 below includes every segment in the project and identifies the segments within the Ventana wilderness Area and the communities in the vicinity.

Table 1. Fuel Break Segments

<b>Fuel break Segment/Unit</b>	<b>In Wilderness</b>	<b>Vicinity</b>
1. Bottchers Gap to Skinner Ridge	No	Palo Colorado
2. Chews Ridge Lookout; MIRA	No	Cachagua - Jamesburg
3. Chews Ridge Lookout to Wilderness Boundary	No	Cachagua – Jamesburg
4. Hennicksons Ridge to Tassajara Road	Yes	Cachagua – Jamesburg
5. Lower Skinner Ridge to Boy Scout Camp	No	Palo Colorado
6. Mescal Ridge	No	Palo Colorado
7. Mt. Manuel to Big Sur Wild River	Yes	Big Sur
8. North Coast Ridge Road, Terrace Creek Trailhead to Cold Springs	No	Big Sur
9. North Coast Ridge Road, Cold Springs to Tan Bark Trail	No	Big Sur
10. North Coast Ridge Road, Tan Bark Trail to Anderson Peak	No	Big Sur
11. Partington Ridge	No	Big Sur
12. Post Summit to Little Sur River	Yes	Palo Colorado – Big Sur
13. Post Summit to Mt. Manuel	No	Palo Colorado – Big Sur
14. Skinner Ridge	Yes/No	Palo Colorado
15. Skinner Ridge to Devils Peak	Yes	Palo Colorado
16. Tan Bark Trail	No	Big Sur

Approximately 10 miles of the fuel breaks are in the Ventana Wilderness. Activities in wilderness areas will include vegetation removal using traditional tools and handheld motorized equipment, with maintenance every 3-5 years through hand thinning, piling, burning, and adhering to Leave No Trace practices. Travel will be limited to hiking and livestock, with base camps set up when necessary.

In the 14 miles of non-wilderness areas, activities will include a combination of hand and machine methods, including hand thinning, machine piling, prescribed fire within the fuel break footprint, and herbicide treatment with maintenance needed every 3-5 years. Herbicide application will follow strict standards to protect people and the environment.

When planning these types of treatment activities, the Forest Service assembles an interdisciplinary monitoring team composed of highly skilled staff such as fuels specialists, tool specialists, landscape architects, trail specialists (when a fuel break segment contains a trail), and resource advisors. This team develops a report known as a Situation Report, which recommends the appropriate equipment, tools, and workforce for each specific fuel break segment. The Situation Report provides an accurate assessment of current vegetation conditions. The report also identifies expected timelines and personnel involved and conveys specific instructions to crew leaders.

The proposed project aligns well with the Forest Service's 10 year Wildfire Crisis Strategy plan known as "Confronting the Wildfire Crisis" strategy, which focuses on protecting communities and improving forest resilience through increased forest health treatments and proactive wildfire risk reduction. By enhancing wildfire suppression efficiency and reducing response times, the project supports the broader goals of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy to make forests more resilient and safer for communities.

**Site Description:**

The 333,167-acre Monterey Ranger District (the "District") of the Los Padres National Forest spans from the Pacific Ocean to the Salinas Valley in central California. 81% of the District is designated wilderness and includes approximately 90 miles of coastline. The District provides many recreational opportunities and resource values including wilderness, a wild and scenic river, redwoods, a vast trail system (51 trails spanning roughly 44 miles with 33 trail camps), camping, and day use. The Big Sur coastal area along California Highway 1 is an iconic, world-class destination, valued for its outstanding scenic qualities and land-ocean interface. The area draws local, regional, national, and international visitors year-round.

Vegetation communities are a mosaic of coastal scrub, chaparral, oak woodland, annual grasslands, mixed hardwood forest, and coastal redwood forest. Chamise is the most common species, covering approximately 30% of the District. Fire is one of the most dramatic natural forces to shape the local plant communities. As a result, plants have adapted ways to reproduce under reoccurring fires. The distribution, composition, and structure of almost all plant communities in this region are influenced by fire.

The proposed project spans both inside and outside the Ventana Wilderness. The fuel breaks will intersect and use various recreational trails (Post Summit, Mount Manuel, Boronda, De Angulo, Little Sur, Bottchers Gap, Skinner Ridge, Anastasia Canyon), campgrounds (Timber Top, Cold Springs, Pico Blanco, Bottchers Gap), special use areas and infrastructure (Monterey Institute for Research in Astronomy, Chews Ridge Fire Lookout, Anderson Peak Communications site), and a cultural site (Chews Ridge). The area is also home to a variety of endemic and sensitive species, including the California Condor, Spotted Owl, California Red-

Legged Frog, Smith's Blue Butterfly, and various other birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:**

The Forest Service serves on the Executive Committee of California's Wildfire Task Force. The agency is responsible for and deeply engaged in the effort to reduce catastrophic wildfire in California. The Forest Service manages about 33 million acres in California. The Los Padres National Forest staff have been working to plan and implement similar projects throughout the forest.

The Monterey Strategic Community Fuel Break project is a national priority that received more than \$1.1 million from The Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership and \$1.4 million from California Climate Investments (CCI) from 2020 to 2024, enabling initial work on 415 acres. The funding from both CCI and Joint Chiefs ended in FY2024. The Joint Chiefs' Partnership, a collaboration between the Forest Service and NRCS, and CCI's Wildfire Prevention Grants Program, both aim to mitigate wildfire risks, improve public safety, and enhance forest health through substantial funding and strategic initiatives. The Forest Service's centralized Acquisitions and Procurement Management Branch, along with the Regional Forest Service Office in California, support Procurement, Contracting, Grants and Agreements, with the Los Padres National Forest having dedicated staff for these functions.

**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 is a good investment of state funding. The project is feasible, has a reasonable budget, and addresses a demonstrated need and regional problem. The project implements many statewide wildfire and forest resiliency goals. The proposed project is consistent with several state plans, and specifically with the following:

- California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan (Governor's Forest Management Task Force, January 2021), which calls for activities such as fuels reduction, forest thinning, vegetation management, prescribed fire, shaded fuel breaks, defensible space, and enhancement of fire-prone habitats to reduce fire risk.
- The California Forest Carbon Plan (California Natural Resources Agency, 2018), which calls for restoration of natural fire regime and forest composition through a multitude of approaches including thinning, prescribed burns, invasive vegetation management, and shaded fuel breaks.

- The Community Wildfire Prevention & Mitigation Report (CAL FIRE, 2019), which urges state and local agencies to implement the goals of the Carbon Forest Plan and lays out recommendations to agencies to increase the scale and pace of management and mitigation actions to improve forest health and resiliency.

The Los Padres National Forest is a National Priority Landscape identified by the Forest Service and meets the strategic goals and outcomes of the Forest Service's Wildfire Crisis Strategy.

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

Fire resilience is a critical issue in California 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. The 2024 fire season also appears to be a treacherous one. So far this year, fires across California have burned hundreds of thousands of acres.

The proposed project will help increase wildfire resilience for the Los Padres National Forest and will aid in protecting the communities of Big Sur, Palo Colorado, Cachagua, and Jamesburg from potential catastrophic wildfire. Several thousand residents live within the Los Padres WUI. Millions of visitors come to the Big Sur region annually.

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

Maintenance will be required every five years, depending on regrowth and wildfire activity, and will be managed by the Forest Service. This proactive approach by the Forest Service aims to help transform local communities into safe and resilient places, focusing on planning for future wildfire events and preventing devastating wildland fires from encroaching into the urban interface.

In general, the project will help increase fire resiliency in this portion of Monterey County. California is facing unprecedented fire risk due to climate change, a growing populace, and an increasing number of people living in high fire risk areas, including areas adjacent to wildlands. Enhanced wildfire resilience will have multiple benefits, including reducing loss of life, economic loss, and impacts on public health from wildfires; protecting fish and wildlife habitat; and preventing the loss of sequestered carbon.

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

The Forest Service is committed to collaborative engagement at the community level, helping advance fire-adapted communities, and improving effectiveness and efficiency in responding to wildfires. Recognizing the risk to communities from wildfire, the Forest Service engaged collaboratively with local stakeholders through FireScape Monterey between 2012-2015. The FireScape framework is a planning practice focused on developing plans for defensible space and fuels breaks in close coordination with stakeholders.

FireScape Monterey's vision is to promote protection of both life and property affected by wildfire and healthy resilient ecosystems through collaborative stewardship. Over 35 government and non-government organizations participated and helped focus and prioritize the Los Padres National Forest fire management practices. FireScape Monterey was critical to

the development of this project. Since the completion of the project’s planning and NEPA compliance, the Monterey Fire Safe Council has taken the lead in coordinating stakeholders and conducting community engagement. The Forest Service actively participates in the Monterey Fire Safe Councils, which includes monthly calls to coordinate and plan projects.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$1,626,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$1,626,000</b>

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to come from Fiscal Year 2022-2023 appropriations from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of wildfire risk reduction. (The Budget Act of 2021, AB 128, as amended by SB 170 and Budget Act of 2022, SB 154 as amended by AB 178). The proposed project is consistent with these fund sources because it will help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. The Forest Service is providing \$155,000 of in-kind match in the form of staff time.

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)-(c), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to undertake projects within its jurisdiction 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.

Pursuant to Section 31113(c), the Conservancy must prioritize grants, to the extent allowed, for projects that maximize public benefits and that accomplish one of several purposes, including reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Consistent with these sections, the proposed project will maximize benefits to the public by restoring 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 be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires, which may ultimately reduce greenhouse gas emissions released from increased wildfires due to climate change.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN](#):**

Consistent with **Goal 4.2 Wildfire Resilience Projects**, the proposed project will treat approximately 24 miles of historic fuel breaks by removing vegetation along the Santa Lucia ridge line within the Los Padres National Forest to aid in protecting neighboring communities in Monterey County from potentially catastrophic wildfire

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from CEQA pursuant to Public Resources Code section 4799.05(d), which exempts state funding of projects undertaken on federal lands that consist of prescribed fire, thinning, or fuel reduction to reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire. This exemption is applicable only to projects that have been reviewed under the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and if the Secretary for Natural Resources has certified that NEPA and laws that affect management of federal forest lands in California have not been substantially amended since August 31, 2018. On January 13, 2022, the Secretary for Natural Resources made the necessary certification. The proposed project was reviewed in the Prosper Ridge Prairie Plan Environmental Assessment, dated 1/18/2014 (DOI-BLM-CA-N030-2013-0002). Accordingly, Conservancy funding of the proposed project is exempt from CEQA under Section 4799.05(d).

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