



SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 2/27/2024

To: The County of Sonoma Board of Supervisors

Department or Agency Name(s): County Administrator's Office

Staff Name and Phone Number: Barbara Lee, 707-483-5323; Jaida Nabayan, 707-460-5744

Vote Requirement: Majority

Supervisory District(s): County-Wide

Title:

Wildfire Resilience Planning Coordination Agreement

Recommended Action:

Authorize the County Administrator to execute a Professional Services Agreement with Eastern Research Group in an amount not to exceed \$398,887 with a term end date of February 27, 2026, to develop a sustainable model for delivering long-term wildfire resilience.

Executive Summary:

In January 2023, the Board of Supervisors approved an organizational structure to improve collaboration among County departments and agencies working on wildfire resilience and promote collaboration with external partners and stakeholders. The Resilience Coordination Team (RCT) will be led by the County Administrator's Office (CAO) and comprised of department heads engaged in wildfire resilience work. The RCT will receive input from, and provide guidance to, four subject matter Technical Advisory Committees (TACs). The Board also identified \$400,000 in vegetation management funds for professional services to support and leverage the RCT structure and develop recommendations for organizing, managing, and funding wildfire resilience on an ongoing basis.

The proposed agreement with Eastern Research Group (ERG) will organize and support the RCT structure and leverage the expertise of County staff as well as TAC members to identify the scope, organization, management, and funding mechanisms for a successful and sustainable wildfire resilience program. It also includes an engagement plan to bring a broader array of community voices into wildfire resilience discussions through partnerships with community-based organizations.

Discussion:

The County Board of Supervisors has provided leadership, vision, and resources for staff across many departments and agencies to advance wildfire resilience programs. This project seeks to expand success through deeper integration across programs, and by developing a sustainable model to organize, manage, and fund this work ongoing.

Background:

On October 6, 2020, the Board allocated \$25 million in PG&E settlement funds from the 2017 wildfires towards

vegetation management to protect communities and help landowners and resource managers work together to reduce the threat of wildfire and improve the health of natural ecosystems. In December 2020, the Board approved the use of additional PG&E settlement funds to retain U.C. Berkeley's Center for Law, Energy and the Environment (CLEE) to convene local and regional stakeholders and resource experts to develop recommendations for using the \$25 million, and for the development and outreach of wildfire decision support tools.

CLEE's recommendations, presented to the Board on March 23, 2021, identified six categories as a framework for prioritizing, allocating and leveraging PG&E settlement funds allocated for vegetation management: Immediate Vegetation Management Activities; Community Outreach and Education; Labor and Workforce Development; Data, Planning, and Mapping; Centralizing Governance and Project Coordination; and Long-term Financial Sustainability.

The Vegetation Management Grant Program is administered by Ag + Open Space and has invested approximately \$11.5 Million in fuel treatments, education, training and coordination. In October 2021, Ag + Open Space convened a Vegetation Management TAC that initially helped shape and refine the grant program, but then assisted the Healthy Forest Ad Hoc Committee in implementing the CLEE recommendations. This TAC is expected to continue under this wildfire resilience planning and coordination project.

Permit Sonoma's Fire Prevention and Natural Resources Divisions are implementing multiple, large FEMA grants to assess and deploy home hardening (Wildfire Adapted Sonoma County), promote defensible space (Chipper Program + assessments), reduce landscape fuels (Hazardous Fuels Reduction Program), and to create a comprehensive "Home-Out/Landscape In" approach to wildfire resilience (Wildfire Resilient Sonoma County, Building Resilient Infrastructure & Communities or BRIC project). This wildfire resilience project includes a TAC advising the "Home-Out" strategies.

On September 13, 2022, the Board of Supervisors approved the Sonoma County Climate Resilient Lands Strategy which lays out project blueprints for improving resilience to climate hazards in nine eco-regions across Sonoma County. The Strategy calls for ongoing coordination and engagement with other County departments and agencies, with local indigenous tribes, and with communities, technical experts, non-profit partners, and local leaders. This wildfire resilience project includes a TAC advising on climate resilient lands strategies that will be led by the CAO's Climate Action and Resiliency Division (CARD).

On January 10, 2023, the Board of Supervisors approved an organizational structure to improve collaboration among County departments and agencies and promote collaboration with external partners and stakeholders. Many divisions and departments were impacted shortly after this approval, and did not have capacity to initiate the process. In the interim, Ag + Open Space, Permit Sonoma, and CARD have each worked on individual program elements related to the launch of the RCT structure. The RCT will be led by the CAO and comprised of department heads engaged in wildfire resilience work. The RCT will receive input from, and provide guidance to four subject matter Technical Advisory Committees (TACs):

- 1) **Landscape Management (Landscape-In)** - a rescoping of the Vegetation Management TAC currently coordinated by Ag + Open Space;
- 2) **Community and Infrastructure Protection (House-Out)** - a new TAC to be coordinated by Permit Sonoma Fire Prevention to support defensible space and home hardening activities;
- 3) **Climate Resilient Lands** - a new TAC coordinated by CARD to inform landscape-based resilience; and
- 4) **Organizational Structure and Long-term Funding** - a new TAC to be jointly coordinated through County Counsel and the County Administrator's offices, that will evaluate wildfire resilience work in Sonoma County and, where relevant, in other jurisdictions, to identify organizational and resource needs, and to make recommendations for a successful and sustainable ongoing, integrated wildfire resilience program.

Proposed Agreement:

The proposed agreement will facilitate the launch of the RCT structure early in the project, support its operation, and coordinate the work of the TAC's. Working with the RCT and the TACs, the consultant will develop recommendations to the Board for the delivery of an integrated, sustainable long-term wildfire resiliency program. In particular, the consultant will staff the Organizational Structure & Long-term Funding TAC, which will provide the forum to explore and refine concepts in organization and funding for wildfire resiliency. The consultant will ensure that concepts developed by the TAC are periodically reviewed with the RCT for policy guidance. The consultant will work with the CAO to support and facilitate engagement with the Board as needed. The consultant will also provide administrative support to the other TACs, including logistical support and facilitation of meetings, preparing periodic progress reports, findings, and recommendations from each TAC to the RCT. Recommendations to the Board are anticipated by the end of 2025.

Request for Proposals and Selection:

Staff issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) on September 25, 2023, for Wildfire Resilience and Climate Change Planning and Coordination. The RFP closed on October 27, 2023. Proposers were scored based on their demonstrated ability to provide the services described in the RFP, including their working knowledge of wildfire risk reduction; a strong conceptual approach to process management, program and organizational assessment, and revenue development; and a compelling plan for community engagement. They were also scored on their experience, qualifications, and expertise, the quality of their work, proposed cost of service relative to scope, a demonstrated history of providing similar services to comparable entities, and their willingness to accept the County's contract terms. Additional points were awarded to providers who met the County's criteria for Local Preference and Living Wage Preference. A copy of the RFP is included as Attachment 2.

The evaluation committee included staff from the County Administrator's Office's Climate Action and Resiliency Division, Ag + Open Space, Permit Sonoma, and Sonoma Water. Five proposals were received, of which four included all required elements. The proposal from ERG was the highest scoring overall and the only proposal within the available budget amount. Their project team includes WRA, Inc., a local environmental firm with expertise supporting wildfire resilience in Sonoma County. The ERG team is well equipped for this project, given their experience working at the intersection of resilience, conservation, equity, and land use in California and the Bay Area. Recent projects demonstrating this expertise include developing the Sonoma County Climate Resilient Lands Strategy, supporting The Nature Conservancy and the California Department of Conservation in identifying strategies for improved governance and funding of nature-based climate solutions, providing communication and technical support for Sonoma Water's Forecast Informed Reservoir Operations (FIRO) project in the Russian River Watershed, and supporting the Bay Conservation and Development Commission's (BCDC's) recently launched Regional Shoreline Adaptation Plan. They are a primary contractor for the National Weather Service (NWS), supporting hazard risk communication, climate resilience and analysis of fire weather watches and warnings in California. ERG demonstrated expertise and experience working with potential funders, such as foundations (i.e., National Fish and Wildlife Foundation), state and federal funding, as well as identifying stable funding sources for organizational development.

Strategic Plan:

This item directly supports the County's Five-year Strategic Plan and is aligned with the following pillar, goals, and objectives:

Pillar: Climate Action and Resiliency

Goal: Goal 1: Continue to invest in wildfire preparedness and resiliency strategies

Objective: Objective 1: Provide educational resources to the community that promote and facilitate carbon neutral and fire hardening construction for new and existing homes.

Objective: Objective 2: Expand outreach and education on vegetation management and provide additional resources to land owners to help mitigate fire risk.

Objective: Objective 3: Leverage grant funding to support sustainable vegetation management program.

Pillar: Resilient Infrastructure

Goal: Goal 5: Maximize opportunities for mitigation of climate change and adaptation through land conservation work and land use policies

Objective: Objective 1: By 2025, update the County General Plan and other county/special district planning documents to incorporate policy language and identify areas within the County that have the potential to maximize carbon sequestration and provide opportunities

Racial Equity:

Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?

No

Prior Board Actions:

04/18/2023: FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Phase 1 Grant Acceptance

01/10/2023: 2023 Vegetation Management Program Update and Healthy Forests Ad Hoc Committee Recommendations

09/13/2022: Sonoma County Climate Resilient Lands Strategy

03/23/2021: Findings from the Vegetation Management Policy and Planning Group Discussions Convened by Berkeley Law's Center for Law, Energy and the Environment (CLEE), and Consideration of Vegetation Management Allocations from the PG&E Settlement Funding

10/06/2020: PG&E Settlement Funds - Community Feedback and Preliminary Allocation Discussion

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY23-24 Adopted	FY24-25 Projected	FY25-26 Projected
Budgeted Expenses	\$198,887	\$200,000	
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures	\$198,887	\$200,000	
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other - PG&E Settlement Fund	\$198,887	\$200,000	
Use of Fund Balance			
General Fund Contingencies			
Total Sources	\$198,887	\$200,000	

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

In January, 2023, the Board approved \$400,000 in Vegetation Management Funds from the PG&E settlement and that funding was approved in the Ag + Open Space budget for this purpose. By agreement between the CAO and Ag + Open Space, the CAO will oversee and manage the contract.

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

None.

Attachments:

1. Professional Services Agreement with Eastern Research Group
2. Request for Proposals for Wildfire Resilience and Climate Change Planning and Coordination

Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:

None.