



SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 11/7/2023

To: Board of Supervisors for Sonoma County and Board of Directors of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District

Department or Agency Name(s): Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, County Administrator

Staff Name and Phone Number: Kim Batchelder, 565-7355; Barbara Lee, 565-2510

Vote Requirement: 4/5th

Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Title:

2024 Vegetation Management Program Revisions and Staffing Request

Recommended Action:

Board of Supervisors:

- A) Approve a revised approach to the Vegetation Management Grant Program managed by Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) and authorize a fourth round of grant awards totaling \$2,000,000.
- B) Authorize the use of \$604,038 from the PG&E Settlement Funds set aside for vegetation management, to extend 1.0 FTE time-limited Program Manager (Vegetation Management Coordinator) through October 5, 2026; and add 1.0 FTE time-limited Administrative Aide through October 5, 2026.

Board of Directors:

- C) Adopt a Resolution amending the Department Allocation List adding 1.0 FTE, time-limited Administrative Aide position through October 5, 2026, and extending the 1.0 FTE Program Manager (Vegetation Management Coordinator) through October 5, 2026.

Board of Supervisors and Board of Directors:

- D) Adopt a Concurrent Budget Resolution amending the Non-Departmental Budget, which houses the 2017 PG&E Settlement Fund which includes the Vegetation Management set aside, and the Ag + Open Space budget to reflect the recommended actions in this Board item.

(4/5th Vote)

Executive Summary:

This item proposes a revision of the Vegetation Management Grant Program funded with \$25 million PG&E settlement funds and managed by Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) to enhance the County's ability to support a wider and more successful range of projects in the communities and landscapes most threatened by wildfire.

The Vegetation Management Grant Program funded by PG&E settlement funds has relied on funding community-based vegetation management projects selected through a competitive grant selection process

and has led to successful projects in a wide range of conditions. The funding has supported 65 grant agreements with a variety of community organizations, fire districts, and non-profit organizations and provided valuable lessons applicable for future wildfire resilience projects supported by County programs.

From the \$25 million set aside, in the first three years of the Vegetation Management Grant Program, 65 projects have been funded for a total of \$11.5 million. Approximately \$600,000 has been invested in staffing and support services (including environmental compliance support by Permit Sonoma). The current available balance is \$9.6 million.

In response to the Board's interest to offer a new funding cycle in 2024, staff recommends using \$2 million of the balance to support vegetation management grant projects using a two-track funding approach. This will allow the County to retain \$7 million from the PG&E settlement fund to apply to a future organizational structure and long-term funding strategies recommendation to be developed in the next 1.5 years. Through the proposed two-track approach, the County will be able to fund projects that are technically more suitable, with greater community and landowner participation, and more in-line with objectives and interests of local and state fire agencies, County departments and agencies, and community-based organizations. Staff can now apply the new tools supported by the County including the Community Wildfire Prevention Plan's Project Entry Portal, Sonoma County Fuel Mapper, and the Wildfire Resilience Planner to help us with gap analysis and public engagement.

To develop and implement this revised program structure, oversee the training workshops, coordinate with County and state partners, and support the organizational structure and develop a long-term comprehensive approach to wildfire resilience, Ag + Open Space staff need to add a time-limited, Administrative Aide position to support the program through October 5, 2026. The Vegetation Management program does not have any dedicated administrative support staffing. To date, the Vegetation Management Coordinator has received intermittent support by relying on assistance from staff in different departments. This approach is not sustainable, and a dedicated administrative support resource is required for the continued operations of this program. The new Administrative Aide will be half funded by the Vegetation Management funds and half funded through Ag + Open Space. Similarly, Ag + Open Space staff request an extension of the time-limited position of the Program Manager (Vegetation Management Coordinator) through October 5, 2026. This position is currently due to expire in June 2024. The extension of the Vegetation Management Coordinator position will continue to be funded by PG&E settlement funds.

Discussion:

In 2020 the County received a settlement with PG&E resulting from damages occurred in the 2017 Tubbs Fire. The Board of Supervisors set aside \$25 million of the total award for vegetation management. Subsequently, a contract with the Center for Law, Energy and Environment (CLEE) included a series of local and regional stakeholder meetings to help define how these funds should be used to improve the County's ability to reduce wildfire risk and protect communities and landowners across the County. On March 23, 2021, the Board approved a plan to support wildfire resilience and hire a Vegetation Management Coordinator (position recommended here for extension) to work with County departments and agencies, state and local agencies, fire professionals, community organizations, and partner organizations to implement these efforts.

The Vegetation Management Grant Program (VMGP) has implemented three community grant cycles and is also working on capacity building, work force development, technical assistance with various partners and

administering a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant.

In addition to these efforts, the County will be selecting a consultant to work with staff to address organizational structure and long-term funding strategies. This consultant will formulate recommendations for a sustainable Vegetation Management program model that will deliver long-term wildfire resilience mechanisms, which will be brought back to the Board in January 2026. Per Board direction in March 2021, funding for these recommendations will come from the remaining balance in the Vegetation Management set aside. As a result, fund balance needs to be retained in the Vegetation Management fund for this purpose.

A. Vegetation Management Grant Program Progress

The first Vegetation Management Grant agreements were awarded in June 2021 to provide immediate funding to fuels management, roadside treatments, defensible space projects, community education and coordination efforts. In September 2021, the Vegetation Management Coordinator position was created and allocated to Ag + Open Space to develop and improve the Vegetation Management Grant Program (VMGP) and to coordinate the County's multi-pronged approach to wildfire resilience as outlined by the CLEE report.

Today, through the VMGP, the Board has authorized \$11.5 million to 65 projects through three annual rounds of grant proposals that has led to fuels treatments, large-scale planning efforts, enhanced evacuation routes and education programs (Table 1) as well as the benefit of increased community participation and collaboration between landowners.

Table 1: Summary of Fuel Treatments

	Defensible Space (homes)	Shaded Fuel Breaks (miles)	Roadside Treatments (miles)	CAL VTP (acres for fuel treatments)	Prescribed grazing/burns (acres)
2021-2022	630	52	55	19,210	615
2023	0	30	8.7	26,411	2430
Total	630	82	64	45,621	3,045

The approach staff has taken since the formation of the VGMP has been to ensure the program is as comprehensive as possible. After implementing the VGMP over three successive fiscal years (FY20-21, FY21-22, and FY22-23), the advantages and disadvantages of using only an open, applicant-driven request-for-proposal approach have become clear. In terms of advantages, the approach has generated many high-quality projects across diverse landscapes and conditions with a variety of organizations (homeowner associations, resource conservation districts, local non-profits, fire districts, etc.). In terms of disadvantages, the approach has resulted in proposals that are not well coordinated or connected on the ground, or that do not align with priorities of the local fire districts or CalFire.

B. Proposal for the 2024 Vegetation Management Grant Program

Staff propose the following structure for identifying and funding vegetation management projects to move the

County towards greater wildfire resilience. (See Attachment 3)

Track 1: (\$1.0 million) Select projects under the “traditional” Request for Proposal (RFP) process that has been used since 2021 using selection criteria, an evaluation committee, and grant approval process.

Timing: RFP released in January 2024 and closed in March with awards in April 2024 with 18 months to complete work.

Track 2: (\$1.0 million) Identify projects through Resilient Forests & Watersheds Workshop Series supported by technical advisors from the resource conservation districts, CALFIRE, fire professionals, and other partner organizations. Landowners and community organizations would work with these technical advisors to develop projects that are technically sound and address critical fuel management needs fully compliant with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). This Track would incentivize landowners to work with their neighbors and community organizers to accomplish high-priority landscape level treatments.

Timing: On-going selection and project development - grant agreements to conform with Track 1 in structure and deliverables - 18 months to complete work.

C. Staffing Request

In January 2023, the Board approved funding for administrative support for the Vegetation Management program. To date, funds have been used to hire temporary personnel and fund portions of existing positions in different departments. This approach is not sustainable, and a dedicated administrative support resource is required for the continued operations of this program. Therefore, this Board item is requesting the addition of a 1.0 Administrative Aide to help support the Vegetation Management program. This position will work half-time on the Vegetation Management program and half-time for Ag + Open Space; it will likewise be half-funded by the Vegetation Management program and half-funded by Ag + Open Space. The position would be responsible for grant program operations and administration, management of contracts related to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant and match, and associated administrative activities related to the Technical Advisory Committees and coordination with CAO staff. If approved, total staffing for Vegetation Management activities will be 1.5 FTEs; the 1.0 Vegetation Management Coordinator and 0.5 FTE of this new Administrative Aide position.

In addition, Ag + Open Space staff recommends the extension of the Vegetation Management Coordinator position to October 5, 2026. This position is due to expire in June 2024. This extension will allow this position to continue to manage the recommended modified Vegetation Management Grant Program, Resilient Forests & Watersheds Workshop Series, contractual services of Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant, and track and manage the PG&E settlement funds for vegetation management. The Vegetation Management Coordinator would continue to support the Landscape-Level Technical Advisory Committee, the development of the Resiliency Coordination Team, and provide guidance to the consultant currently being selected by the CAO to evaluate an appropriate organizational structure and long-term, sustainable funding source for wildfire resilience. This position is recommended to be extended through October 2026. The position would be funded by the PG&E settlement fund.

Vegetation Management Funding Overview

On October 6, 2020, the Board of Supervisors allocated \$25,000,000 of the 2017 PG&E settlement award toward Vegetation Management. The table below provides an update on how these funds have been

designated since that time.

Project	Board Date	Amount
Vegetation Management Allocation	10/6/2020	\$25,000,000
2021 Vegetation Management Grant Program	3/23/2021	-\$3,725,494
Santa Rosa Junior College Funding	3/23/2021	-\$500,000
Veg. Mgt. Coordinator Salary & Benefits (3 years)	3/23/2021	-\$660,000
Permit Sonoma staffing for CEQA support	7/13/2021	-\$300,000
Conditionally approved projects (\$3,000,000 was set aside only \$2,000,000 was needed)	7/13/2021; updated 4/19/22	-\$2,000,000
2022 Vegetation Management Grant program	4/19/2022	-\$3,300,000
Technical Assistance for community grants	4/19/2022	-\$500,000
2023 Vegetation Management Grant program	1/10/2023	-\$3,000,000
Community Outreach and Education	1/10/2023	-\$600,000
Data Planning Mapping and Prioritization	1/10/2023	-\$150,000
Organizational Structure and Funding	1/10/2023	-\$400,000
Programmatic and Administrative Support	1/10/2023	-\$290,000
2024 Vegetation Management Grants	Proposed	-\$2,000,000
Staffing Request (Admin Aide (0.5) and Veg. Mgt Coordinator to 10/2026	Proposed	-\$604,038
<i>Vegetation Management Allocations To date:</i>		<i>-\$18,029,532</i>
Remaining Balance:		\$6,970,468

Strategic Plan:

The proposed actions aim to provide greater community engagement and capacity building while incentivizing landowners and communities to collaborate with County departments and agencies, fire professionals from CALFIRE and local fire districts, and County partners like Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts, and non-profit organizations. This investment of resources and additional staff will improve the quality and efficiency that resources will reach wildfire resilience projects on the landscape scale to mitigate the risk of future large-scale wildfires.

This item directly supports the County's Five-year Strategic Plan and is aligned with the following pillar, goal, and objective.

Pillar: Climate Action and Resiliency

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

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

Prior Board Actions:

June 12, 2023 - The Board of Supervisors accepted recommendations to fund seventeen vegetation

management grant agreements for \$3,161,502. The Board of Directors of Ag + Open Space approved the General Manager to accept a \$353,173.79 grant from National Fish & Wildlife Foundation matched by \$353,174.00 of the PG&E settlement funds for capacity building and technical workshops.

January 10, 2023 - Presented to the Board of Supervisors a summary of advances on the strategic goals and objectives laid out by the Center for Law, Energy and the Environment (CLEE) and local and regional stakeholders. Requested \$3 million to continue to support community organizations and their interest in managing a wide variety of fuel reduction efforts in areas seriously threatened by wildfire through the Vegetation Management Grant Program and the CWPP Project Entry Portal.

April 19, 2022 - Presented to the Board of Supervisors funding recommendations for 26 vegetation management projects to be completed by December 31, 2023.

July 13, 2021 - Approved \$300,000 to Permit Sonoma for Extra Help to lead Cal VTP and \$3 million to support seven vegetation management projects and future projects.

March 23, 2021 - Approved up to \$4 million for community grants for vegetation management projects and \$660,000 allocated to Ag + Open Space to hire Vegetation Management Coordinator.

December 15, 2020 - Received County and community feedback on vegetation management priorities; allocated \$70,000 for CLEE groups and \$1.6 million for expansion of Wildfire Fuel Mapper decision support tool and outreach to parcel-scale decision support tool countywide.

October 6, 2020 - Allocation of \$25 million from the PG&E settlement for vegetation management.

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 23-24 Adopted	FY 24-25 Projected	FY 25-26 Projected
Budgeted Expenses			
Additional Appropriation Requested	\$2,604,083		
Total Expenditures	\$2,604,083		
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
PG&E Settlement Fund	\$2,604,083		
Ag + Open Expenditure Plan			
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
Total Sources	\$2,604,083		

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The funds for these vegetation management activities are derived from the 2017 PG&E Settlement funds. The \$2,000,000 recommended represents the 2024 4th Vegetation Management Program Grant Cycle and \$604,038 represents staffing costs expanded to be in place through 10/5/2026 to support the multi-agency program. Details of the staffing costs are available in Attachment 4.

Staffing Impacts:

Agenda Date: 11/7/2023

Position Title (Payroll Classification)	Monthly Salary Range (A -I Step)	Additions (Number)	Deletions (Number)
Administrative Aide	\$5,965.68 - \$7,249.26	1	0
APOSD Program Manager (1299)	\$10,903.46-\$13,253.21	1	0

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

A 1.0 Time-Limited Admin Aide is being added; this position will be funded 50% by the 2017 PG&E Settlement Funds and 50% from Ag + Open Space through Measure F sales tax revenue. An existing 1.0 Time-Limited Program Manager (Vegetation Management Coordinator) is extended; this position will be funded by the 2017 PG&E Settlement Funds.

Attachments:

1. Attachment 1 - Budgetary Adjustment Resolution
2. Attachment 2 - Position Allocation Resolution
3. Attachment 3 - Proposed Vegetation Management Grant Program Revisions
4. Attachment 4 - Staffing Budget

Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:

None