
Date: May 12, 2026

Item Number: _____

Resolution Number: _____

4/5 Vote Required

Resolution of the Board of Directors of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District Making Certain Findings, Authorizing a Grant Program to Provide Stewardship Assistance on District-Protected Agricultural and Forested Working Lands, and Delegating Related Authority to the District General Manager to Administer the Program Consistent with the Approved Grant Agreements and the Stewardship Policy, as Amended.

Whereas, the *Sonoma Climate Resilient Lands Strategy (2022)*, which was developed jointly by the County of Sonoma and the District, includes recommendations towards conserving and stewarding natural and working lands, and calls for resilience projects on natural and working lands to protect biodiversity and ecosystem health; and

Whereas, the District's Vital Lands Initiative establishes land conservation goals and objectives for natural and working lands, based on the best available science and data, as well as extensive input from District partners and the community, and recognizes the key and necessary role of active land stewardship to further the conservation purposes of the District's conservation easements;

Whereas, Goal 5 of the Climate Action and Resiliency Pillar of the County of Sonoma's 2021-2026 Strategic Plan, calls for maximizing opportunities for mitigation of climate change and adaptation through land conservation work and land use policies, including actions to improve habitats that in turn support carbon sequestration and climate change adaptation. The District as the County's taxpayer-funded land conservation organization has a key role in helping to meet this goal; and

Whereas, stewarding protected natural and working lands to support and maintain Sonoma County's incredible biodiversity helps ensure that our community can rely on healthy natural systems that clean and recharge water sources, filter air, sequester carbon, and provide space and healthy soils for growing food; and

Whereas, in November of 2006, the voters of Sonoma County approved Measure F (Sonoma County Open Space, Clean Water, and Farmland Protection Measure) extending the District's funding to March 31, 2031. Measure F included an Expenditure Plan, which governs the District's expenditure of tax revenues, which became effective upon voter approval ("Expenditure Plan"); and

Whereas, the Expenditure Plan specifically authorizes sales tax expenditures for the protection

of “community separators, greenbelts, scenic landscape units, scenic corridors, agriculturally productive lands, biotic habitat areas, riparian corridors and other areas of biotic significance, and other open space projects,” including acquisition of conservation easements for the protection of these open space designations; and

Whereas, to date, activities to enhance natural resource and recreational conservation values of land protected by District-held conservation easements have been funded via the Community Spaces Matching Grant Program authorized by Paragraph 5 of the Expenditure Plan, including creek restoration and enhancement projects conducted by area cities and Sonoma County Regional Parks, among others; and other activities to enhance the recreational conservation values on District-protected lands have also been funded via the District’s Initial Public Access, Operation and Maintenance Policy, authorized by Paragraph 6 of the Expenditure Plan for recreational lands; and

Whereas, projects to enhance the natural resource conservation values of natural and working lands, including restoration and enhancement of habitat, invasive species management, reduction of erosion and sedimentation, bank stabilization, improving soil health, nutrient management, replenishment of groundwater, and others, are consistent with Paragraph 4 of the Expenditure Plan, as protection of biotic habitat areas, riparian corridors and other areas of biotic significance, including restoration and resource management activities that protect sensitive natural areas; and

Whereas, Paragraph 4 of the Expenditure Plan defines “areas of biotic significance” to include freshwater and tidal marshes, wetlands, special status species locations, woodlands and forests, wildlife habitat corridors and lands along creeks and streams critical to protecting fisheries and water quality; and

Whereas, working agricultural and forested lands face increasing environmental, economic, and climate pressures, with many owners and operators lacking technical and financial capacity to manage natural resources beyond those actions that are strictly necessary for maintaining regulatory-compliance and other daily operations; and

Whereas, Ag + Open Space permanently protects land through acquisition and perpetual stewardship of conservation easements, and more than 100,000 acres of the approximately 127,000 acres of land protected with Ag + Open Space conservation easements (or almost 80%%) is privately owned; and

Whereas, to support conservation practices on privately-owned working lands that restore and enhance natural resources, enhance biological diversity, encourage healthy soil, protect water quality, and that also yield multiple other benefits including sequestering carbon and bolstering climate resilience, the General Manager is recommending the establishment of a Stewardship Assistance Program (“Program”) to provide technical assistance and small grants towards the

planning, design, and implementation of stewardship projects to enhance the natural resource conservation values of District-protected agricultural and forested working lands; and

Whereas, through the Program, lands conserved by the District will become eligible for stewardship investments, including technical support from the Sonoma County's Resource Conservation Districts, to implement practices that might otherwise be financially or technically out of reach and are intended to enhance the natural resource conservation values on the property;

Whereas, Public Resources Code section 5546 authorizes the District to "contribute money, in those amounts the board of directors, by resolution, finds to be proper, to... any municipality, county, or other public corporation, district, or agency, for the purpose of ... improving [natural areas, ecological and open space preserves] ..., when in the judgment of the board of directors the ... improvement is so located and planned as to be of benefit to the District;" and

Whereas, the Sonoma Resource Conservation District and the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District are both special districts of the State of California formed pursuant to Division 9 of the California Public Resources Code, rendering them eligible, pursuant to Public Resources Code section 5546, to receive District grant funding for the Stewardship Assistance Program, which shall be of benefit to the District for all of the foregoing reasons.

Now, Therefore, Be It Resolved that this Board of Directors hereby finds, determines, declares and orders as follows:

1. *Truth of Recitals.* That the foregoing recitations are true and correct.
2. *Expenditure Plan Consistency.* That the Program is consistent with the Expenditure Plan approved by the voters of Sonoma County in 2006 via Measure F, because it will protect and enhance biotic habitat areas, riparian corridors and other areas of biotic significance, including restoration and resource management activities that protect sensitive natural areas.
3. *California Environmental Quality Act; Notice of Exemption.* That the Program authorized by this resolution is exempt from the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (Public Resources Code Sections 21000 *et seq.*) pursuant to Cal. Code Regs. Tit. 14, § 15378, which provides that the creation of government funding mechanisms or other government fiscal activities, which do not involve any commitment to any specific project which may result in a potentially significant physical impact on the environment is not a project under CEQA. Immediately upon adoption of this resolution, the General Manager is directed to file with the County Clerk, and the County Clerk is directed to post and to maintain the posting of a notice of exemption pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 21152.

4. *Funding Determination; General Manager Authority to Sign and Administer Approvals under Contracts.* That the General Manager is authorized and directed to execute, on behalf of the District those certain grant agreements with the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District and the Sonoma Resource Conservation District in the form on file with the Clerk and entitled "Stewardship Assistance Grant Agreement," through which up to \$2,000,000 in funding will be allocated for the Program. The General Manager is further authorized to grant all approvals contemplated by these two grant agreements to the Resource Conservation Districts, including the authority to approve individual projects deemed eligible for funding, consistent with the criteria established by this Resolution.

5. *Eligible Expenditures of Grant Funds.* The following expenditures shall be eligible for reimbursement under the Program, in accordance with the provisions of this policy. Eligible projects must serve primarily to restore and enhance biotic habitats, including but not limited to, wetlands and streams, riparian, oak woodland, forest, chaparral, coastal, and grassland habitats, and must not individually exceed \$50,000. All expenditures shall be subject to the terms and conditions described in the grant agreements hereby authorized and all such expenditures shall be subject to annual review and audit by the District's Fiscal Oversight Commission. Examples of such projects could include:

- a) Restoring and enhancing wetlands, streams, native grasslands, oak woodlands, and other sensitive biotic habitats
- b) Removal and management of invasive species;
- c) Planting of native plant species in disturbed areas;
- d) Stabilization of stream and river banks with native vegetation or other bioengineering techniques;
- e) Enhancement of habitat through exclusion of livestock from riparian or other sensitive areas, and related placement or relocation of livestock infrastructure, if needed;
- f) Enhancing habitat and reducing sedimentation through practices such as culvert replacement, road reshaping, gully or rill stabilization, bioengineering, or fencing;
- g) Prescribed burns and prescribed grazing, if the primary purpose is to improve habitat conditions, rather than protecting development/infrastructure;
- h) Protecting biotic habitat areas from excess nutrients through practices such as planting vegetated buffers, use of exclusionary fencing, and rotational or targeted grazing practices;
- i) Improving soil health, structure, and water retention capacity through careful grazing management, compost application, and other best practices, to replenish groundwater and reduce the need for surface water diversion from streams;

- j) Establishing vegetated swales and repairing areas of erosion such as gullies and rills to improve the ability of land to slow surface water flows, increase retention and absorption, and replenish groundwater aquifers.

Projects will not be eligible for District funding if they directly or indirectly serve to bring a project site, or any uses thereof, into compliance with any applicable federal, state, or local law, regulation, or order. In addition, for a project to be eligible for grant funding through this Program, the property to be benefitted by the project must be in compliance in all respects with the terms and conditions of the District's conservation easement, as determined by the District in its sole discretion.

6. *Stewardship Policy Amendment.* That the District Stewardship Policy in the form on file with the Board is hereby approved, and the General Manager is authorized to make such future changes to the Policy as may be deemed appropriate from time to time, in consultation with County Counsel.

Directors:

Rabbitt:

Coursey:

Gore:

Hopkins:

Hermosillo:

Ayes:

Noes:

Absent:

Abstain:

So Ordered.