



SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 6/12/2023

To: Board of Supervisors for County of Sonoma and Board of Directors for Ag + Open Space

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

Staff Name and Phone Number: Kim Batchelder, 565-7355, Christel Querijero, 565-7071

Vote Requirement: Majority

Supervisorial District(s): Countywide

Title:

2023 Vegetation Management Grant Program Recommendations and Acceptance of National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Grant Award

Recommended Action:

Board of Supervisors to:

- A) Accept recommendations for projects and funding amounts for the 2023 Vegetation Management Grant Program Cycle and authorize the County Administrator or Designee to execute vegetation management grant agreements for projects that are exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) with the project sponsors after approval of County Counsel as to form; direct the Vegetation Management Coordinator to file CEQA Notice of Exemptions for each of these projects.
- B) Accept recommendations for projects and funding amounts for the 2023 Vegetation Management Grant Program Cycle and authorize the County Administrator or Designee to execute environmental review grant agreements for other CEQA non-exempt projects that are with each of the project sponsors after approval of County Counsel as to form; direct the Vegetation Management Coordinator to file CEQA Notice of Exemptions for each of these projects.
- C) Adopt a resolution authorizing the County Administrator or Designee to execute a vegetation management grant agreement for the Sonoma Land Trust Vegetation Management Project, after approval of County Counsel as to form, and making CEQA findings as a responsible agency.

Board of Directors:

- D) Authorize the General Manager to sign a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) grant agreement for \$353,173.79, after approval of County Counsel as to form, to support technical assistance for fuels management, forest resilience and watershed health in the Russian River, leverage the funding from the PG&E Settlement Fund and take all actions necessary to implement the grant.

Executive Summary:

On January 10, 2023, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) presented an outline of the work required to continue to support communities and community organizations through the Vegetation Management Grant Program (VMGP) to best meet the needs of the county by funding sustainable vegetation treatments that would reduce the risk of wildfire, protect homes and community assets, and improve evacuation routes.

A Request for Proposals for the 2023 Vegetation Management Grant Program was issued on March 23, 2023, with a deadline of April 20, 2023. Thirty-six applications were submitted and evaluated by a multi-agency Evaluation Committee. The Committee and Vegetation Management Coordinator recommend full or partial funding to 19 projects for a total of approximately \$3,161,502. Staff request that the Board of Supervisors authorize the Vegetation Management Coordinator to complete final negotiations and the County Administrator or designee to execute Grant Agreements with each of these 17 grant applicants which have completed CEQA review. Two projects are still in the process of completing environmental compliance analysis and documentation. Staff intends to bring these two projects back to the Board in July 2023.

In July 2022, Ag + Open Space together with Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District submitted a proposal to National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's (NFWF) California Forests: Headwater Resilience 2022 grant program funded by Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to fund technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners in the Russian River watersheds of Sonoma County to support voluntary adoption of fuels management and forest health practices. NFWF selected the proposal for funding in the amount of \$353,173.79. This funding will lead to improvements in wildfire resilience, reduce soil erosion and protect soils, and store and mitigate the loss of carbon embedded in forestland resources. This grant requires a 1:1 match which will leverage the PG&E Settlement Funded Vegetation Management Grant program and capacity building efforts provided by Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs).

Discussion:

2023 Grant Cycle Summary and Funding Recommendations

On January 10, 2023, Ag + Open Space demonstrated to the Board the value of maintaining the Vegetation Management Grant Program (VMGP) for an additional year and providing \$3 Million of the PG&E Settlement Fund to support fuel reduction efforts, improve evacuation routes, offer education and capacity building to community organizations, fire service agencies, non-profit organizations, and resource managers. These grants will support vegetation treatments that would reduce the risk of wildfire, protect their homes and community assets, and improve community engagement. Staff also sought to improve consistency with the Sonoma County Community Wildfire Prevention Plan (CWPP). In addition, staff completed a series of workshops, site visits and discussions to provide potential applicants with greater clarity on selection criteria, provide solid examples of successful projects, and offer insights to environmental compliance.

A request for proposals was issued on March 23, 2023, with a deadline of April 20, 2023. Ag + Open Space, CALFIRE, and Permit Sonoma staff hosted two virtual workshops. All former applicants and interested parties were invited to these workshops and given a link to the Ag + Open Space Vegetation Management Grant Program website and the CWPP Project Entry Portal Hubsite. These workshops highlighted application process and grant guidelines and emphasized key characteristics of successful projects. Also, the team introduced the use of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) Project Entry Portal. Applicants were instructed on how to enter information into the Project Entry Portal as a requirement to apply to the VMGP.

Ag + Open Space received 36 complete applications prior to the deadline on April 20, 2023. These proposals were then organized into six groups and evaluated according to their proposed project types (ex. access and egress, defensible space, wildland treatments, capacity building and education, environmental compliance, and multiple treatment group). The Vegetation Management Coordinator assembled a six-person, multi-agency Evaluation Committee to review the proposals and complete a scorecard for each applicant. The

Evaluation Committee consisted of representatives from Permit Sonoma, CALFIRE, Sonoma Water, Ag + Open Space, and Regional Parks each of whom are subject matter experts in fields of prescribed fire, fuel treatments, and resource conservation. The Evaluation Committee used the scorecard to evaluate the quality of each proposal, technical and organizational capacity, and costs and skills needed to execute the proposed project. After scoring the proposals and analyzing the collective performance of all applicants, the Evaluation Committee completed its process by assessing the amount of funding proposed by the best proposals and reached consensus on the projects with the greatest potential for success, compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), grant objectives across a geographic range under the greatest risk of wildfire.

The Evaluation Committee recommends funding to 17 projects for a total of \$3,161,502. Ag + Open Space staff ask the Board of Supervisors to authorize the Vegetation Management Coordinator to complete final negotiations to enter into Grant Agreements to be executed by the County Administrator or designee with each of these 17 recommended grantees to hone the projects to ensure success and maximize benefits to the County. Pending CEQA review, these projects aim to treat more than 3,365 acres of vegetation and include over 26,000 acres of land on the northeastern portion of the County for future fuel reduction treatments. In January 2023, Ag + Open Space requested \$3 Million to fund the grant program. However, three grantees in the 2021 and 2022 were unable to complete their proposed objectives due to extenuating circumstances and returned the funds to the County for future use. The total amount returned was \$161,806.00, most of which will be added to the \$3 million approved on 1/10/23. The recommended grantees will bring over \$1.8M of matching funds to these recommended projects.

Unsuccessful project applications will be part of an on-going effort by Permit Sonoma, Ag + Open Space, and Sonoma Water to complete a gap analysis of the funded projects by the VMGP and the FEMA funded grants managed by Permit Sonoma to identify projects that could be funded in the future. This analysis will also include the opportunity to provide technical assistance to support projects that are within high to very high wildfire risk areas but were not awarded grant funding.

Since, 2021 the County's Vegetation Management Grant program has approved 46 grant agreements resulting in 3,125 acres of treated areas, including over 51 miles of shaded fuel breaks, 675 homes with defensible space along Calistoga Road, Kashia tribal community, Wilshire-Crystal Heights, Foothill community, Mark West community, and others, 55 miles of roadside treatments, 615 acres being grazed or treated with prescribed burns.

Staff are proposing three sets of authorization, based on CEQA considerations for each category. All of these approvals are for separate projects under CEQA, because none of these projects are mutually interdependent and all have separate independent utility. Additional information about the proposed funding level for each of these projects can be found in Attachment 1.

Grants for Exempt Vegetation Management and Education/Outreach:

Based on the contents of the applications that were received, Staff have determined that the following projects are categorically exempt from CEQA and propose that the Board authorize the execution of grant agreements for each of these vegetation management projects:

- Wind Creek Community Fuel Treatments

- Calistoga Road Shaded Fuel Break
- Sonoma-Napa Boarder Ridgeline Fuel Break
- Shiloh Ranch Fuels Reduction
- Jack London Park Fuels Reduction
- Walling Community Shaded Fuel Break
- Lake Sonoma West Strategic Control Network, Phase 2
- Muniz Ranches Shaded Fuel Break, Phase 7
- Shelterwood-Cazadero Shaded Fuel Break
- LandSmart Grazing for Community Resilience
- Prescribed Fire Implementation Fund

These projects are exempt from further CEQA review pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15304 (“Minor Alterations to Land”). These projects are “alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry or agricultural purposes.”

In addition, Staff proposes authorization of grant agreements for the following exempt education/outreach projects:

- Diamond Mountain Mark West VTP-Outreach Project
- Better Outcomes for Defensible Space and Land Management Through Education and Outreach
- Fire Forward: Building Capacity for Prescribed Fire in Sonoma County

These projects are education and outreach efforts that are exempt pursuant to CEQA’s “common sense” rule in CEQA Guidelines section 15061(b)(3).

Grants to Complete Environmental Review:

The following projects are not exempt and have not completed environmental review. Staff proposes authorization of grant agreements to complete the environmental review and not for the vegetation management project itself. Further awards could occur based on the outcome of the environmental review, but the Board may not commit to awards for vegetation management for these projects until environmental review is completed:

- North Lytton Springs Phase I
- The Geysers’ Planning Unit VTP-EIR

These projects are categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines sections 15262 (feasibility or planning studies), 15378(b)(4) (government funding activities that do not involve the commitment to specific projects), and 15306 (information collection).

Grant for vegetation management where the County is a CEQA Responsible Agency:

For the following project, the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District has completed CEQA review for the work in the grant. Staff proposes that the Board authorize the award of this grants after the Board makes responsible agency findings in the attached proposed resolution:

- Roger’s Ridge Shaded Fuel Break (Sonoma Land Trust Preserves Vegetation Treatment Project)

The proposed resolution makes the required findings to approve the grant agreement.

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Grant

In May 2023, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation presented a grant agreement to Ag + Open Space to fund a technical assistance program for farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners in the Russian River watersheds in a variety of vegetation management, wildfire resilience, soil erosion prevention, watershed health and carbon sequestration. Ag + Open Space, in partnership with Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (RCD) and Sonoma RCD and many local organizations will provide technical assistance to landowners in the Russian River watersheds to support their voluntary adoption of conservation practices. Technical assistance services will lead to improvements in wildfire resilience, reduce soil erosion and protect soils, store and mitigate the loss of carbon embedded in forestland resources, and protect and enhance watershed health. Partners will provide specialized training to natural resource professionals, hand crews and fire crews, resulting in more safe and effective implementation of conservation practices.

Participants in workshops will be introduced to a wide range of fuel treatments like shaded fuel breaks, prescribed fire, prescribed grazing, defensible space and wildland treatments. Forest thinning and invasive plant removal, mastication and chipping, and the proper use of tools and safety equipment will provide landowners, crews, students, resource managers with a comprehensive approach to reducing the threat of wildfires while improving the health of forested landscapes and ecosystem services.

The NFWF's California Forest: Headwater Resilience 2022 grant program specified that the geographic location of the grant activities must be within the Russian River watersheds. The aim of this grant is technical assistance to landowners. This grant provided an excellent opportunity to support additional capacity building in the areas where the Vegetation Management Grant Program was actively supporting communities to address fuel loads and collaboration to support landscape-scale fuel management efforts within the Russian River corridor. Currently, the VMGP has funded 20 projects within the Russian River and aims to support an additional six grants that are proposed within southern portion of the Russian River.

The grant funding will be used to provide a series of workshops and direct technical assistance to communities and landowners and land managers in order to address a wide variety of natural resource challenges. High priority topics related to wildfire fuels management and forest health (including improving forest stand structure, assessing forest disease and pathogens, controlling invasive species, reducing fire hazard, identifying hazard trees, enhancing ecosystem services, and developing holistic management plans), soil and watershed protection (including post-fire erosion control, arresting stream incision, controlling erosion and sediment to reduce flow impairment), and carbon sequestration (e.g. reducing fuel loads and protecting forest stands with shaded fuel breaks to reduce high-mortality forest crown fires and retain carbon in healthy forested landscapes and forest soils).

The project will protect resources in key salmonid restoration watersheds including, Dutch Bill Creek, Green Valley Creek, Mark West Creek, Dry Creek, Austin Creek, Maacama Creek, and Guerneville North watersheds. The success of the project will be assessed by the number of people reached with technical assistance activities, such as technical site visits, incentives application assistance, project development, educational field tours, presentations and

workshops. This project is categorically exempt pursuant to CEQA’s “common sense” rule in CEQA Guidelines section 15061(b)(3).

Staff recommend authorizing the Ag + Open Space General Manager to execute the grant agreement in a form approved by County Counsel and to take all actions necessary to implement the grant.

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 and serves to illustrate that approximately \$9,574,506 of the original \$25,000,000 has yet to be allocated.

| Project | Board Date | Amount |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Allocate \$25M to Vegetation Management | 10/6/2020 | \$25,000,000 |
| 2021 Community grants for Vegetation Management | 3/23/2021 | -\$3,725,494 |
| Santa Rosa Junior College Funding | 3/23/2021 | -\$500,000 |
| Vegetation Management Coordinator Salary & Benefits (3 years) | 3/23/2021 | -\$660,000 |
| Permit Sonoma staffing for CEQA support | 7/13/2021 | -\$300,000 |
| Set aside for community projects once CEQA issues are resolved (\$3,000,000 was set aside only \$2,000,000 was needed) | 7/13/2021; updated 4/19/22 | -\$2,000,000 |
| Community grants for Vegetation Management - 2022 | 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 |
| <i>Vegetation Management Allocations Made To date:</i> | | <i>-\$15,425,494</i> |
| Remaining Balance: | | \$9,574,506 |

Strategic Plan:

The 17 recommended projects will continue the work started in 2021 to help protect communities throughout the County from wildfire. These projects will build capacity in applying a variety of skills and fuel treatments on landscape scales and engage local landowners to participate in enhancing our resilience to wildfire events.

With the National Fish and Wildlife grant, the County will be able to offer more training opportunities for landowners and engage more communities in wildfire resilience planning and strategies. This grant application was successful largely because of the prospect for leveraging the PG&E Settlement Fund for capacity building

efforts with communities across the county.

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

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Pillar: Climate Action and Resiliency

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

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

Prior Board Actions:

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 \$3.0 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. October 6, 2020 - Allocation of \$25M from the PG&E settlement for vegetation management

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

October 19, 2021 - PGE Settlement Funded Vegetation Management Grant Program informational update.

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

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

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

FISCAL SUMMARY

| Expenditures | FY 22-23 Adopted | FY 23-24 Projected | FY 24-25 Projected |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Budgeted Expenses | | \$3,514,676 | |
| Additional Appropriation Requested | | | |
| Total Expenditures | | \$3,514,676 | |
| Funding Sources | | | |
| General Fund/WA GF | | | |

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|--|--|--------------------|--|
| State/Federal - Natural Resources Conservation Service | | \$353,174 | |
| Fees/Other - PGE Settlement Fund | | \$3,161,502 | |
| Use of Fund Balance | | | |
| Contingencies | | | |
| Total Sources | | \$3,514,676 | |

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The proposed grants will be paid out of the 2017 PG&E Settlement fund, in accordance with allocations approved by the Board of Supervisors during the January 10, 2023 meeting. There are sufficient appropriations in the FY 2023-24 budget to cover the costs of these grants. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant will leverage funding already approved for capacity building and technical assistance approved by the Board during the same meeting.

| Staffing Impacts: | | | |
|--|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Position Title (Payroll Classification) | Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step) | Additions (Number) | Deletions (Number) |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

None

Attachments:

- 1) 2023 Vegetation Management Grant Recommendations list
- 2) 2023 Vegetation Management Grant applications and recommendations map
- 3) National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Grant Agreement
- 4) Proposed Resolution Of The Board Of Supervisors Of The County Of Sonoma, State Of California, Approving A Grant For The Roger’s Ridge Shaded Fuel Break Project (The Sonoma Land Trust Preserves Vegetation Treatment Project), Making Findings As A Responsible Agency, Adopting A Statement of Overriding Considerations, And Adopting An Addendum To The California Vegetation Treatment Program Environmental Impact Report As A Responsible Agency.

Exhibit A to Resolution: Sonoma Land Trust Preserves Vegetation Treatment Project Project-Specific Analysis And Addendum To The CalVTP Program EIR and Associated Findings Of the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District

Exhibit B to Resolution: Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District Findings and Statement of Overriding Considerations for CEQA Project-Specific Analysis and Addendum Regarding the Sonoma Land Trust Preserves Vegetation Treatment Project

- 5) Vegetation Management Grant Program Update 2023

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

None