



APPROVED

January 9, 2024

COUNTY OF SONOMA

SUMMARY REPORT

575 ADMINISTRATION
DRIVE, ROOM 102A
SANTA ROSA, CA 95403
THE WITHIN INSTRUMENT IS A
CORRECT COPY OF THE ORIGINAL ON
FILE IN THIS OFFICE

ATTEST: January 9, 2024

M. CHRISTINA RIVERA, Clerk/Secretary

BY *Noelle Francis*

Agenda Date: 1/9/2024

#1

To: 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
Staff Name and Phone Number: Steph Tavares-Buhler, 565-7362
Vote Requirement: Majority
Supervisory District(s): 2nd

	Aye	No
Gorin	X	
Rabbitt	X	
Gore	X	
Hopkins	X	
Coursey	X	

Title:

Spring Hill Ranch (0053) Conservation Easement Acquisition

Recommended Action:

Approve resolutions of the Board of Directors of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District to:

- Determine that the acquisition of a conservation easement over Spring Hill Ranch is consistent with the Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District's Expenditure Plan and the 2020 Sonoma County General Plan;
 - Authorize the President to execute a conservation easement over the property, and associated certificates of acceptance after all closing conditions are met;
 - Dedicate the conservation easement interest to park and open space purposes pursuant to Public Resources Code section 5540;
 - Make certain determinations pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act and direct the filing of a notice of exemption;
 - Authorize up to \$2,620,000 for the acquisition of the Spring Hill Ranch conservation easement; and
 - Authorize recordation of all instruments necessary to accomplish the transaction, and directing the General Manager, in consultation with County Counsel, to take all other actions necessary or appropriate to establish a permanent conservation easement over the property.
- (Second District)

Executive Summary:

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District is proposing to purchase a conservation easement over the 581.5-acre Spring Hill Ranch property west of Petaluma. The conservation easement will protect the agricultural, natural resource, and scenic values of the property. Spring Hill Ranch is located near the Jacobsen Ranches and Pacheco Dairy conservation easements, as well as several protected agricultural properties across the county line. Ag + Open Space seeks authorization to pay up to the appraised value of \$2,620,000 for the acquisition of the conservation easement.

Discussion:

Property Characteristics/Project Significance

The Spring Hill Ranch project (the "Project") is the proposed acquisition of a conservation easement over an approximately 581.5-acre farm and dairy near Lake Laguna. The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (the "Ag + Open Space") is proposing to purchase a conservation easement over the

property that will protect its significant agricultural, natural resource, and scenic properties.

Spring Hill Ranch is located at 3925, 4234, 4235, and 3803 Spring Hill Road near Petaluma, California (the "Property") and is commonly known as "Spring Hill Ranch." It consists of three certificated parcels, an additional legal lot that may be eligible for up to two certificated parcels, and a 100-acre portion of a neighbor's parcel to be added via a lot-line adjustment (APNs: 022-240-007, 022-240-008, 022-240-009, 022-260-003, and part of 022-260-002). It could potentially be split into as many as five lots and although parts of it are encumbered with Williamson Act contracts, due to their configuration and its location near west Petaluma, it is considered at high risk of parcelization.

The Property has exceptional agricultural values, including abundant water secured through water rights, springs, stock ponds and an unusually high water table, and excellent agricultural soils. It has approximately 50 acres of prime agricultural soils and approximately 324 acres of agricultural soils of statewide importance, according to a soil report by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. It is located in a sheltered valley and has flat to rolling topography suitable for a variety of agricultural operations. It is currently used for silage/haylage and grazing operations, a cow dairy.

Spring Hill Road is a highly scenic local byway that is very popular with plein air painters, photographers, cyclists, and motor clubs. Almost the entire property is visible from Spring Hill Road, and parts of the Property are also visible from Chileno Valley Road and Bodega Avenue. There is a notable hill on the Property also visible from surrounding roads. Protecting Spring Hill Ranch's open space character is also important because a large portion of the property is a high priority groundwater recharge area for the Wilson Grove Highlands groundwater basin.

The Property hosts a mature oak woodland on a hill near the western boundary of the Property, where a year-round stream has good fish and wildlife habitat with rocks and pools. This creek, as well as three headwater drainages, flow west to Stemple Creek. An additional creek on the east side of the Property leads to Laguna Lake in the Chileno/Walker Creek watershed.

Stemple Creek is an impaired waterbody with water quality goals for nutrients and sediment from nonpoint sources and numeric targets for dissolved oxygen, temperature, pH, ammonia, and sediment. Its waters run to the Estero de San Antonio, a rare coastal habitat for waterfowl and nursery habitat for several commercial and recreational fisheries species. The Estero is included in the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary and is a state Marine Recreational Management Area. It has been used by generations of Californians, from indigenous peoples to modern-day ranchers, for harvesting food and for recreation.

One drainage on the Property flows to Laguna Lake, a vernal pool designated by the California Natural Diversity Database as sensitive habitat with rare, threatened, or endangered species. It is seasonal habitat to California newts (*taricha torosa*), which each winter famously cross Chileno Valley Road *en-masse* under the protective eye of local volunteers (the Chileno Valley Newt Brigade) to mate in the Laguna where they were born. The lake is also used extensively for migrating and breeding waterfowl. Water from Laguna Lake flows into Chileno/Walker Creek, which is also an impaired waterbody, with water quality goals for sediment, nutrients, and pathogens (fecal coliform). Chileno/Walker Creek is historical habitat for salmonids, although none have been spotted for more than a decade.

Project Structure

The conservation easement will protect the Property's agricultural, natural, and scenic resources. Agricultural and scenic values will be protected by limiting the Property to two owners and two legal lots and restricting development to two identified building envelopes, and an existing hunt camp. All agricultural practices that are legal and consistent with the long-term agricultural viability of the Property are permitted.

Because of the importance of Stemple Creek and Chileno/Walker Creek as habitat and to recreation and fisheries, the conservation easement will designate buffers around them, extending 75 feet from the centerline of the creeks, to protect and enhance their water quality, natural resource values, and ecological functions. The conservation easement will also protect the woodland on the west of the Property as a protected natural area. Any uses in these areas are subject to a management plan, which must be completed to the Ag + Open Space's satisfaction prior to closing.

Conformance with Adopted Plans

Vital Lands Initiative

The Spring Hill Ranch project is essential for the Agricultural Lands, Community Identity, and Wildlands categories of the Ag + Open Space Vital Lands Initiative. Conserving this Property meets multiple objectives described in the Vital Lands Initiative as follows:

- Protect lands that support diverse, sustainable, and productive agriculture, with an aim of creating a balanced portfolio of protected lands that represents the diverse types of agriculture in Sonoma County;
- Protect areas with multiple conservation features;
- Protect areas most threatened with development or conversion, including unique and scenic landscapes;
- Protect areas important for climate change and extreme event resiliency and adaptation; and
- Protect critical wildlife movement corridors and intact habitat areas, including rare, unique, or particularly diverse vegetation communities.

Sonoma County General Plan 2020

The project furthers several goals and policies in Sonoma County's General Plan 2020, specifically in the Land Use, Open Space and Resource Conservation, Agriculture, and Water Resources Elements as noted in, but not limited to, the following:

- Preservation of lands currently in agricultural production and lands with soils and other characteristics that make them potentially suitable for agricultural use. Retain large parcel sizes and avoid incompatible non-agricultural uses. (Goal LU-9)
- Preserve roadside landscapes that have a high visual quality. (OSRC-3)
- Preserve the unique rural and natural character of Sonoma County. (OSRC-6)
- Protect and enhance the County's natural habitats and diverse plant and animal communities. (Goal OSRC-7)
- Protect and enhance Riparian Corridors and functions along streams, balancing the need for agricultural production ... and other land uses within the preservation of riparian vegetation, protection of water resources, flood control, bank stabilization, and other riparian functions and values. (OSRC- 8)

- Encourage conservation of soil resources to protect their long-term productivity and economic value. (OSRC- 10)
- Protect, restore, and enhance the quality of surface and groundwater resources (WR-1).
- Protect existing groundwater recharge areas. (Objective WR-2.3)
- Reduce economic pressure for conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural use (Objective AR-2.4)
- Maintain the maximum amount of land in parcel sizes that a farmer would be willing to lease or buy for agricultural purposes. (Goal AR-3)

Ag + Open Space's Expenditure Plan

The project is consistent with the Ag + Open Space Expenditure Plan because it preserves agricultural land uses, biotic habitat areas, and scenic landscape units.

Fiscal Oversight Commission Approval

On August 16, 2023, the Fiscal Oversight Commission ("FOC") in approving Resolution No. 2023-008 determined that a sale at or below the appraised value would not be paying more than fair market value for the acquisition of the conservation easement. Following this determination, the landowner provided evidence that "Parcel A" of the property (APN 022-260-003) is likely eligible for an additional certificated parcel. He provided the Ag + Open Space with a report and supporting documentation from surveyor Ray Carlson, and Cinquini and Passerino, under contract with Ag + Open Space, determined that the certificated parcels would very likely be approved by Permit Sonoma if submitted. Based on this information, Ag + Open Space requested an appraisal update from Mr. Harding to take these new facts into account. The appraised value of the conservation easement is \$2,620,000. Following Board approval Ag + Open Space will extend an offer to the landowner to purchase a conservation easement in an amount not to exceed the appraised fair market value.

The FOC will review the updated appraisal in a meeting on January 4, 2024, to consider if, by paying the updated appraised value, Ag + Open Space would not be paying more or receiving less than the fair market value for the acquisition of the conservation easement.

CEQA

Pursuant to California Code of Regulations section 15317, Ag + Open Space's acceptance of the conservation easement is exempt from CEQA because it will maintain the open space character of the area. Alternatively, pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.28(a) & (c), Ag + Open Space's purchase of the conservation easement is exempt from CEQA because the purpose of the transaction is to preserve the natural condition of the property including plant and animal habitats; for continuing agricultural use of the land; and preservation of open space.

Dedication

Consistent with Ag + Open Space practice, the Board is asked to dedicate the conservation easement to open space purposes pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 5540. By taking this action, Ag + Open Space is restricting its ability to convey or relinquish the protections embodied in the conservation easement.

Prior Board Actions:

none

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 23-24 Adopted	FY 24-25 Projected	FY 25-26 Projected
Budgeted Expenses	\$2,620,000		
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures	\$2,620,000		
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other (SCAPOS, Measure F)	\$2,620,000		
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
Total Sources	\$2,620,000		

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

Ag + Open Space has adequate appropriations in its FY 23-24 budget for the \$2,620,000 contribution to fee and conservation easement acquisition, which is funded by Sonoma County voter approved Measure F. Adequate appropriations exist in FY 23-24 budget for escrow and closing costs, which are not included in the fiscal summary table.

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

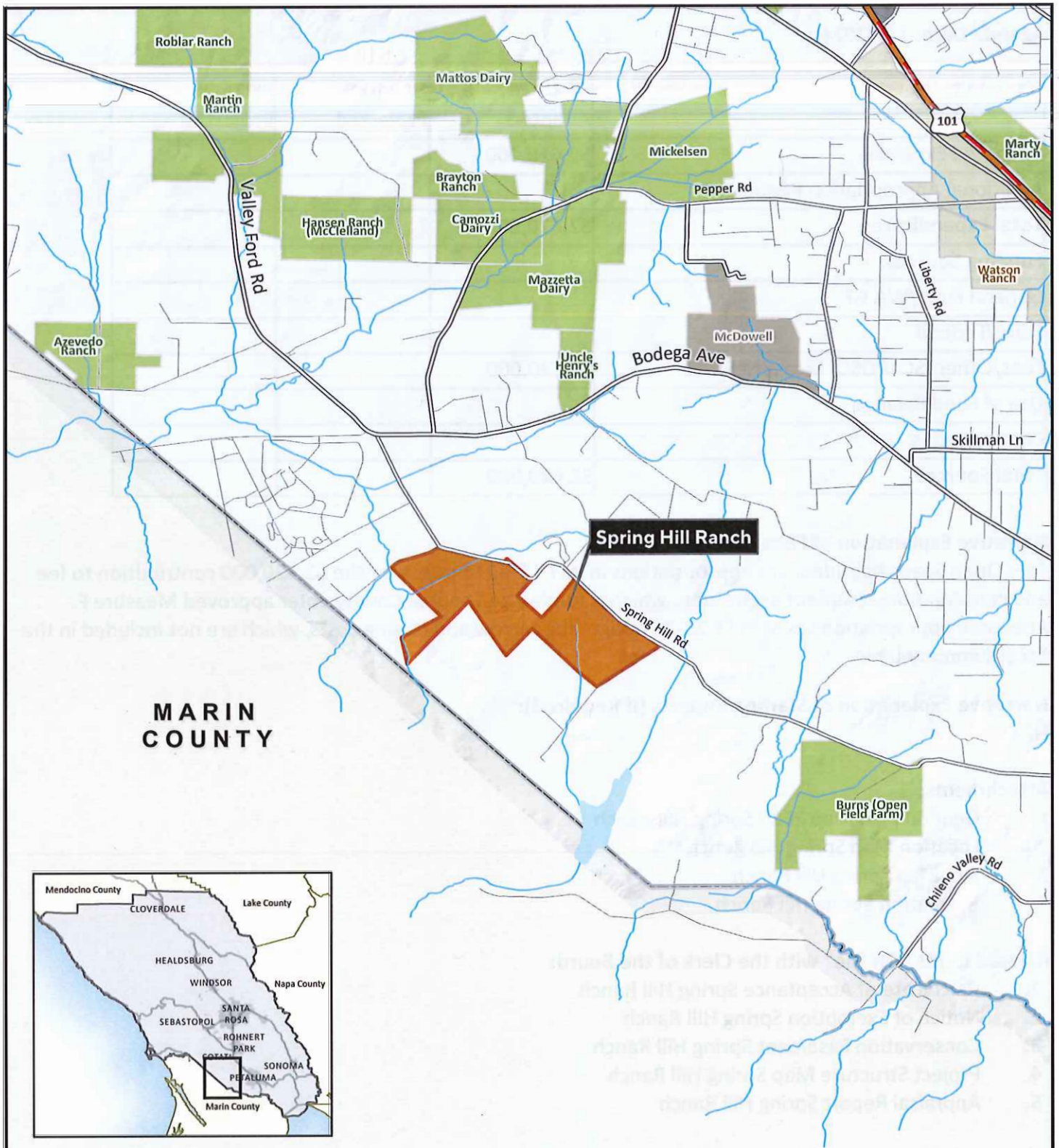
N/A

Attachments:

1. General Plan Map 2020 Spring Hill Ranch
2. Location Map Spring Hill Ranch
3. Site Map Spring Hill Ranch
4. Resolution Spring Hill Ranch

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

1. Certificate of Acceptance Spring Hill Ranch
2. Notice of Exemption Spring Hill Ranch
3. Conservation Easement Spring Hill Ranch
4. Project Structure Map Spring Hill Ranch
5. Appraisal Report Spring Hill Ranch



Spring Hill Ranch Location Map

- Spring Hill Ranch
- Ag + Open Space Open Space Easement
- Ag + Open Space Conservation Easement
- Other Public or Protected Land

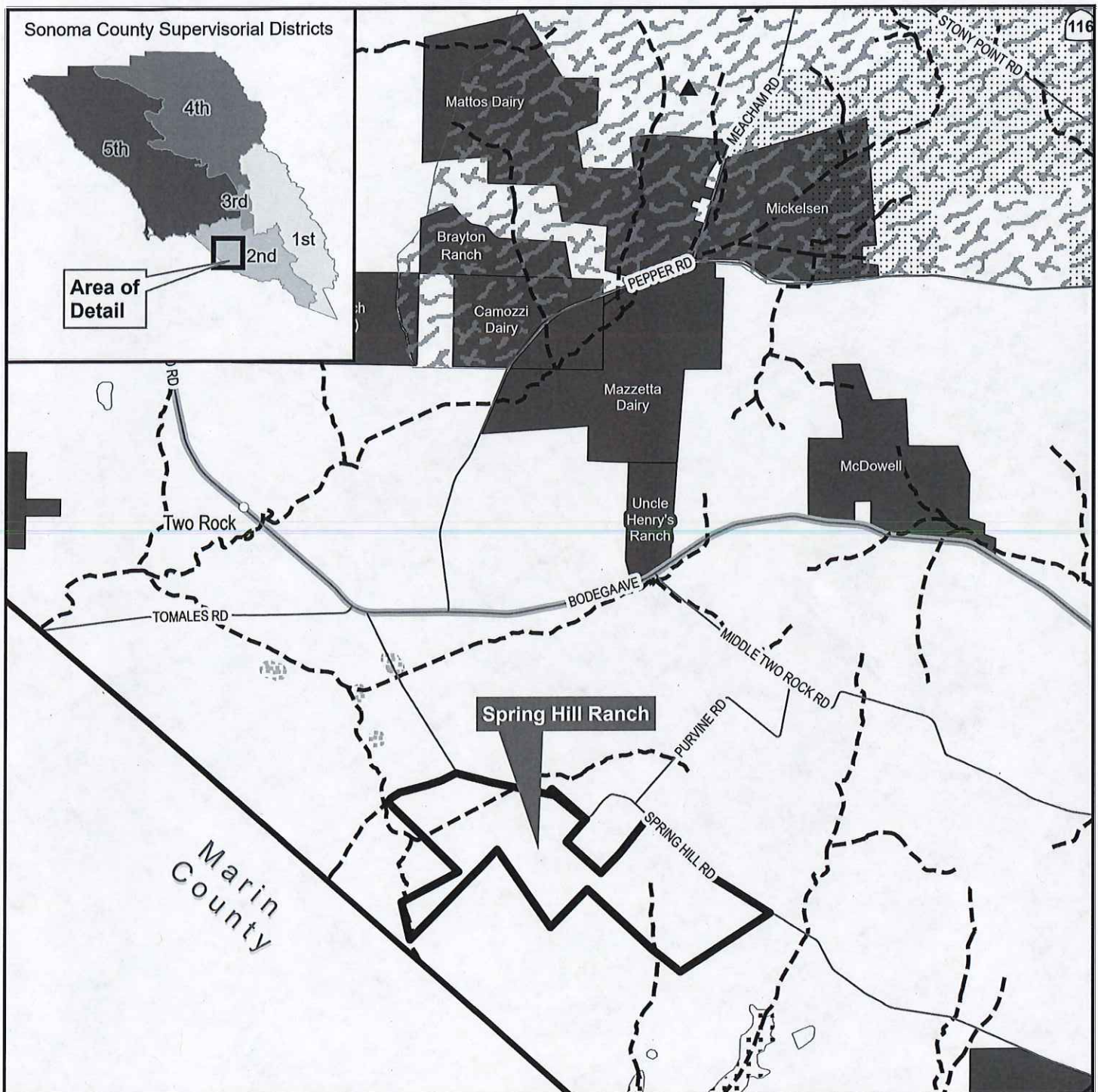


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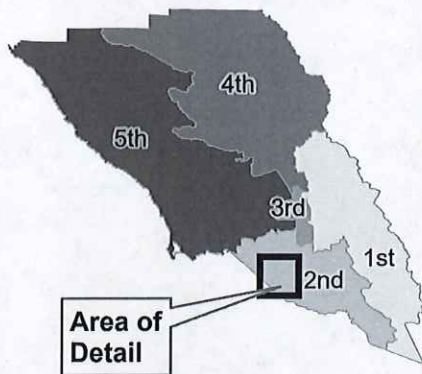
Map Date: 7/20/2023
Sources: CPAD (protected lands); Sonoma Water (streams); County GIS (roads, cities, Urban Service Areas)
This map displays GIS data for illustrative purposes only and is not intended to depict definitive property boundaries or feature locations.

0 0.5 1 2 Miles





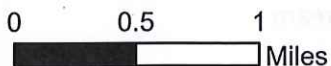
Sonoma County Supervisorial Districts



Area of Detail

Spring Hill Ranch

LOCATION / GENERAL PLAN MAP



Map Date: 7/20/2023
Sources: Sonoma County GIS Group;
Sonoma County General Plan 2020,
Open Space and Resource
Conservation Element.
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Open Space and Resource Conservation Element

- Spring Hill Ranch
- Incorporated City Land *
- District Holdings
- Protected Public Land *
- SCENIC RESOURCES**
- Community Separator
- Scenic Landscape Unit *
- Scenic Corridor
- OUTDOOR RECREATION**
- Planned Future Park

BIOTIC RESOURCES


- Special Status Species Occurances *
- Special Status Species Habitat
- Potential Range of California Tiger Salamander
- Marshes and Wetlands *
- Sensitive Natural Communities
- Habitat Connectivity Corridor *
- Riparian Corridor


* Not on this map




Spring Hills Ranch

Site Map

 Property Boundary

 Assessor Parcel

 Intermittent Stream

 Perennial Stream



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Map Date: 7/21/2023

Sources: Sonoma Water (streams); County GIS (parcels, roads); Pictometry International & Sonoma County, Spring 2021 (aerial); Esri World Imagery (aerial)

This map displays GIS data for illustrative purposes only and is not intended to depict definitive property boundaries or feature locations.

0 0.2 0.4
Miles

