

## Racial Equity Analysis: Stewardship Update and Endowment

Aligned with the Sonoma County Strategic Plan's *Racial Equality and Social Justice Pillar*, Ag + Open Space is committed to working towards achieving racial equity in County service and ensuring a workforce reflective of the community we serve. Ag + Open Space's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee has been working since the summer of 2020 on staff training and are now, as directed in our community-driven [Vital Lands Initiative](#), developing a roadmap to infuse principles of racial equity throughout our work. The roadmap has the following goals:

- Empower management with tools and direction to lead a multicultural and multiracial workforce
- Enhance Ag + Open Space competency and commitment to develop and implement racial equity initiatives across our work
- Embed racial equity principles in our operations and culture
- Focus on recruitment and hiring to diversify and retain talent
- Expand and deepen community engagement to develop authentic relationships with the communities who have experienced historic marginalization from the services offered by our institution
- Ensure commitments are sustained into the future

Utilizing the Racial Equity Toolkit (Toolkit), published by the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), and the support of the Sonoma County Office of Equity, staff has expanded consideration of racial equity in Ag + Open Space decisions, including policies, practices, programs, and budgets. Staff recognizes the Toolkit can help to develop strategies and actions that can mitigate and reduce racial inequities and improve outcomes for local communities of color and other communities who have been historically excluded from receiving the benefits of our services.

Below are responses to several questions adapted from the Toolkit provided by the County, answered in relation to the Stewardship Update and Endowment item to be considered by the Ag + Open Space Board of Directors.

### **How does your Program align with or leverage other Countywide initiatives to advance racial equity?**

Aligned with the Sonoma County Strategic Plan's *Racial Equality and Social Justice Pillar*, the Ag + Open Space *Vital Lands Initiative* provides additional guidance to advance racial equity, including initiatives to:

- Protect a variety of lands that ensure an equitable distribution of benefits to our diverse communities.
- Protect areas important for climate change and extreme event resiliency and adaption.
- Partner with public agencies and non-profit organizations to ensure that all communities have open space to enjoy.
- Integrate principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure our work is informed by, reflects the priorities of, and provides benefits to the diverse communities of Sonoma County.

What does land conservation (meaning both the preservation and ongoing stewardship of land) mean for our community?

Ag + Open Space protects land for life – to enhance our community’s resilience to climate change, to preserve local nature and wildlife, to protect our farms and ranches, to maintain the scenic beauty of our county, and to conserve places for all of us to experience and enjoy nature, healthy food, clean water, fresh air, and exercise.

Ag + Open Space-preserved lands are varied and are located across the county. Properties range from public parks like the Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve, to Matching Grant Program projects such as the Roseland Creek Park and Preserve, to agricultural lands and dairies like Bianchi Dairy, to working forests like Pryor Ranch, to natural grasslands like the Van Hoosier Wildflower Preserve, to coastal preserves with extensive public trails like Jenner Headlands. Many Ag + Open Space-protected properties include public access to bike pathways, walking trails, urban parks, and community gardens, as well as scenic vistas along the Sonoma Coast, highway corridors, and many other scenic roads and places within the county. Through stewardship, Ag + Open Space ensures permanent protection of these vibrant lands and creates inviting open spaces throughout Sonoma County, providing an opportunity for residents and visitors alike to experience open space.

Ag + Open Space also actively works to enhance the community’s understanding of and connection to that land. For over 20 years, Ag + Open Space has partnered with nonprofits and other local service providers to offer public outings, youth education, and workforce development programming that connect community members with the natural and working lands we have conserved through in-person and virtual experiences. This program increases awareness of and engagement of people of all ages with protected lands, providing safe and enjoyable opportunities to experience open spaces, and serves to inspire the current and next generation of conservation leaders. Staff and program partners are further refining the program to include a focus on equity and justice in land conservation and enhancing the community’s connection to privately held conservation lands.

The Sonoma County Vegetation Management Grant Program, currently housed within Ag + Open Space but funded through PG&E wildfire settlement funds, provides resources and grant funding for vegetation management in areas at high risk of wildfire. With the approved grant projects for 2023, the funds will have distributed approximately \$12 million to 65 community-driven projects across the county and has supported the work of local and regional fire districts, local Firewise and Community Wildfire Prevention Plan projects, Resource Conservation Districts, homeowner associations, nonprofit organizations, Tribes, and resource managers. Funded projects include implementing shaded fuel breaks, increasing grazing and calming zones, and more – all of which are designed to slow or prevent the spread of wildfire in our community. Sonoma County is all too familiar with the negative effects of wildfire in our communities, including property damage, toxic wildfire smoke, disruption of essential services and daily life, reduction of available housing, and most tragically, loss of human life. These effects are felt most acutely by our low-income residents and communities of color.

**What specific racial and/or economic inequities in Sonoma County does this Program intend to address/reduce?**

The mission of Ag + Open Space is to permanently protect the diverse agricultural, natural resource, and scenic open space lands of Sonoma County for future generations. Through the creation of Ag + Open Space, the voters of Sonoma County envisioned a future where scenic open spaces sustain a thriving farm and ranch economy, clean drinking water, viable ecosystems for fish and wildlife, and healthy communities where all people can access and enjoy the outdoors. In addition, protected working and

natural lands have an important role to play in sequestering carbon and avoiding greenhouse gas emissions while making Sonoma County resilient to extreme events, such as fires, floods, and drought, and the growing impacts of climate change.

We as a County have work to do to ensure that this future is inclusive and benefits all members of our community. Communities of color continue to be most vulnerable to extreme weather events, as an example. In its 2023 report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that land conservation is a key action towards helping the most vulnerable of communities adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change: "...Maintaining the resilience of biodiversity and ecosystem services at a global scale depends on effective and equitable conservation of approximately 30% to 50% of earth's land, freshwater and ocean areas, including near-natural ecosystems. Conservation, protection, and restoration of terrestrial, freshwater, coastal, and ocean ecosystems, together with targeted management to adapt to unavoidable impacts of climate change reduces the vulnerability of biodiversity and ecosystem services to climate change, reduces coastal erosion and flooding, and could increase carbon uptake and storage if global warming is limited ...Land restoration contributes to climate change mitigation and adaptation with synergies via enhanced ecosystem services and with economically positive returns and co-benefits for poverty reduction and improved livelihoods...."

The land conservation and stewardship work of Ag + Open Space plays an integral role in creating and maintaining that safer and healthier future, for everyone.

**Will the Program have impacts in specific geographic areas (neighborhoods, areas, or regions)? What are the racial demographics of those living in the area?**

Ag + Open Space's land conservation work spans the entire county. As outlined in the *Vital Lands Initiative*, Ag + Open Space takes a balanced approach to land conservation, protecting lands that support diverse, sustainable, and productive agriculture; open lands that surround and differentiate the county's urban areas and contribute to the unique scenic character of the county; open space and publicly accessible lands in and near cities and communities; natural lands and aquatic habitats that support sustainable ecosystems and water resources; and natural lands and terrestrial habitats that support plants, wildlife, and biodiversity.

Sonoma County is a large, urban-rural county encompassing 1,575 square miles, or approximately 1 million acres. Approximately 86% of land in Sonoma County is privately owned, and 48% of the land in the county is in some type of agricultural use.

The County's total population is currently estimated at 487,011. Sonoma County residents inhabit nine cities and a large unincorporated area, including many geographically isolated communities. The majority of the County's population resides within its cities, the largest of which are clustered along the Highway 101 corridor. Sonoma County's unincorporated areas are home to 146,739 residents, 30.1% of the total population. A significant number of these individuals live in locations that are very rural and geographically remote. White, Non-Hispanics currently represent 64.2% of the County's population while Hispanics account for 25.6%. Other ethnic groups include: Asian/Pacific Islander (5.2%), African Americans (1.7%), American Indians (1.0%), and persons reporting two or more races (2.3%). (Demographic data from Sonoma County Health and Human Services, [Geography, Demographics, and](#)

[Socio-Economic Data \(ca.gov\)](#).

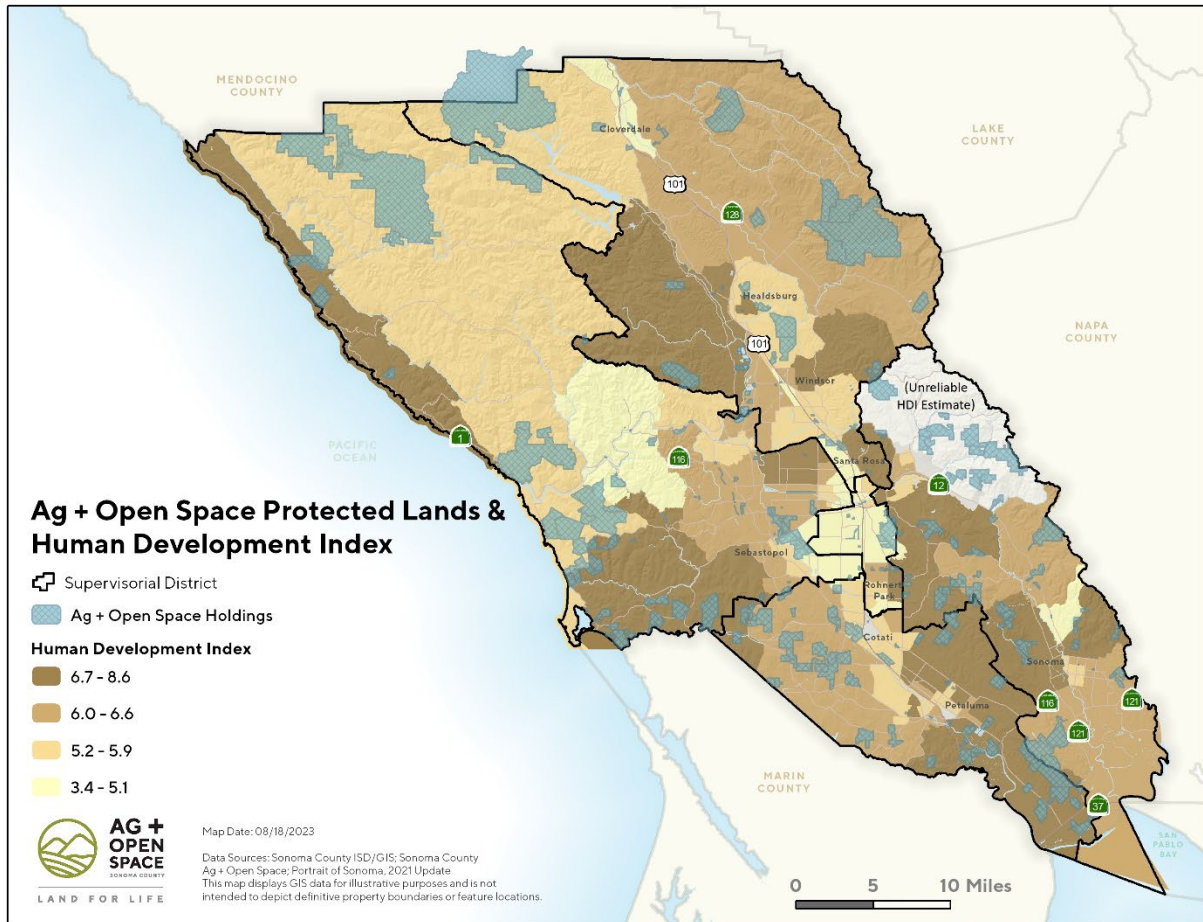


Figure 1 Ag + Open Space Protected Lands in relation to the Human Development Index (Portrait of Sonoma, 2021 Update).

To date, over 21% of the land in the county has been protected by Ag + Open Space and its land conservation partners, through fee-title purchase and/or acquisition of conservation easements. Further, Ag + Open Space has been the largest funding source for acquisition of land for expansion of parks and trails throughout the community. Of the 265 Ag + Open Space-protected properties, 87 are located in areas with a Human Development Index (HDI) Score that is less than the county median of 5.9 (Sonoma County Portrait of Sonoma, 2021 Update) (Figure 1). To understand this geographic distribution of projects one must understand how Ag + Open Space was created.

The origins of Ag + Open space reach back to the original General Plan adopted in 1978, which marked a turning point in Sonoma County history. After several years of highly charged community debate over growth management, our community adopted policies aimed at reducing sprawl, protecting agricultural lands and open space, maintaining community character through the use of community separators, and directing future development into cities along the Highway 101 corridor where infrastructure could support a growing population. The first Sonoma County General Plan in 1978 called for “provision of greenbelts surrounding and separating urban areas, retention of agricultural resources...and preservation of our natural resources.” The 1989 Sonoma County General Plan went further and called for the “establishment of an Open Space District” ...”to acquire and administer open space land”, as well as a funding source for both the acquisition and stewardship or management of acquired title or development rights (conservation easements). When Ag + Open Space was formed in 1990,

conservation easements were intentionally chosen as a land conservation tool that could stretch limited Ag + Open Space sales tax funding further than if the agency were to seek outright ownership of the land, since stewarding conservation easements is an order of magnitude less expensive than the cost of land ownership and management. The sales funding could then be leveraged to attract various federal, state, and private grant funding sources in order to protect larger tracts of privately-owned land, primarily located outside of urban areas.

However, conservation easements would also prove to be a tool critical for protecting land within and immediately surrounding communities as well. Since 1994, Ag + Open Space has provided funding to public agencies and nonprofits for the protection of open spaces within Sonoma County communities for local agriculture, community recreation, natural resource restoration, and public access through the Matching Grant Program. This unique program has pledged nearly \$40 million towards projects in all nine incorporated cities and in multiple unincorporated areas, allowing our partners to leverage that funding to develop diverse and innovative projects throughout our county. Of the 64 awarded Matching Grant Program projects, 34 are in areas with a HDI score below county median of 5.9, while 53 of 64 awarded projects are within a ten-minute walk from areas with a HDI score below the county median. The 2021 Portrait of Sonoma Update reports that four census tracts have an HDI score of under 4.00 (Rohnert Park B/C/R sections, and Bicentennial Park, Comstock, and Roseland in the urban areas of Santa Rosa). Ag + Open Space and its partners continue to pursue projects within and near these areas so that residents and visitors can easily access open space areas, whether it is a trail along a creek, a City or Regional Park, or a central plaza for gatherings. Santa Rosa's Citywide Creek Master Plan describes a network of trails along the more than 90 miles of creeks that flow through the City limits, including Santa Rosa, Roseland, Colgan, Piner, Paulin, Coffey, and many other creeks that run through the above-mentioned neighborhoods. This is just one example of an initiative where Ag + Open Space funding has helped bring projects from concept to reality, in this case through Ag + Open Space's funding of numerous Matching Grant Program projects along Santa Rosa's creeks (Figure 2).



*Figure 2 Examples of creek and open space projects funded in part by Ag + Open Space through the Matching Grant Program. From left to right: Roseland Creek, Colgan Creek, Prince Memorial Greenway along Santa Rosa Creek.*

The benefits of conserving land extend to all people that live, work, or visit Sonoma County. For example, research findings around open space resources identify increased positive mental and physical health outcomes of access to these areas. The Trust for Public Land's related research *Economic & Health Benefits of Open Space* ([www.TPL.org/resource/economic-health-benefits](http://www.TPL.org/resource/economic-health-benefits)), finds that community

parks in underserved areas, many of which are communities of color, advance equity and well-being by promoting physical activity, improving mental health, reducing urban pollutants, sequestering carbon, and reducing flood risk by sinking and slowing runoff.

While many of the benefits of Ag + Open Space-protected properties are direct and tangible—such as parks that provide places to play, gather, and sit in the shade, or farms that sell produce and cheese on site—there are numerous indirect benefits provided by open spaces throughout the county. Land conservation is an important tool in mitigating climate change, as agricultural lands and natural systems sequester carbon and have substantially lower rates of greenhouse gas emissions than urban areas. Land conservation also helps to avoid vehicle emissions by reducing sprawl, while ensuring multiple community benefits such as agricultural viability, greenbelts, scenic viewsheds, recreational areas and biological diversity.

**Who are the most affected community members who are concerned with or have experience related to this issue/program? How will you involve these community members in the development and implementation of this program?**

Sonoma County Ag + Open Space is a community-created, taxpayer-funded agency that provides lasting protections for agricultural and natural lands in Sonoma County. As a public agency, Ag + Open Space is committed to full transparency and community engagement to ensure the proper use of public funds and to maintain the public's trust and understanding of its work. With that in mind, Ag + Open Space engaged the community in all aspects of the *Vital Lands Initiative* planning process to ensure that our work reflects the community's needs and vision.

Ag + Open Space considers this to be an ongoing conversation with the community. We want to be conversing with all communities within the county to understand how our land conservation work can best meet our community's collective needs. For example, Ag + Open Space hosts an annual dogbane plant harvest and cordage demonstration day at the Dogbane Preserve, located just north of Santa Rosa, working with various interested individuals, organizations, and representatives of different tribes in the region. The Preserve is one of just a few sites in the state with a healthy population of the dogbane plant, which is used for various tribal cultural practices. As we start to develop a Management Plan for the property, we will be engaging local tribes to understand how the property can be best managed to support these uses. There are countless other conversations that we are having and will continue to have regarding how our work can better serve the needs of all communities, especially those communities of color. Further, we want to ensure that these conversations are accessible to all, with appropriate and adequately-resourced translation, interpretation, and other outreach support services.

**How will the Program document and evaluate the Program's impact on communities of color and low-income communities? What *additional* disaggregated demographic data will your Program need to collect, track, and evaluate to inform future decisions, and/or develop mitigation practices to respond to unintended impacts of the project in communities of color?**

We may intrinsically understand on a 'gut' level that land conservation provides benefits to an entire community, but it is necessary to test the assumption that the land conservation work of Ag + Open Space benefits all who live in, work in, and visit Sonoma County, including those from communities of

color. Ag + Open Space is working to better understand the scope and scale of benefits to individuals and to communities. As an example, we can quantify the amount of water that may be held in the soil of a property or captured by trees and plants during a storm, but how exactly does this translate to flood risk reduction and increased water quality for people within the watershed? Who specifically are the beneficiaries of these “ecosystem services” and are they being provided equitably across the county? These are difficult questions to answer, and we don’t yet have the data and technology to model impacts at the local scale.

In addition to documenting where there are direct and indirect benefits of our land conservation work to communities of color and low-income communities, we must also assess where there may be unintended consequences of a land conservation action. For example, preservation of a property in an urban area may in fact reduce the availability of land for affordable housing or may inadvertently lead to displacement of lower-income residents as property values increase with additional community amenities. Ag + Open Space takes special care to ensure that its land conservation actions are consistent with and guided by the County General Plan, city general plans, and other relevant regional planning efforts and is committed to evaluating potential negative impacts that may come from land use restrictions.

The benefits of land conservation are more easily evaluated at the nexus between our human populations and natural systems – particularly for urban open space projects. Ag + Open Space is developing a Park Gap Analysis in partnership with Regional Parks to identify where additional park and open space amenities could be located to ensure that all communities within the County have access to the benefits that parks provide. We will be able to identify priority areas for future projects, set goals and timelines, and measure our progress towards meeting those goals.

Southwest Santa Rosa is one area that has been considered to be in need of additional parks and open space. The Greenbelt Alliance recently released a community profile for Southwest Santa Rosa, indicating that this area is facing growing risks of wildfire and extreme heat. The area includes a population of over 38,000, predominantly Latinx (50.1%), with other populations by race including 35.9% white, 7.7% Asian, 2.6% Black or African American, and 3.2% two or more races. The 2021 Portrait of Sonoma Update indicates that this area has a HDI score of between 3.38 to 4.79. The population is vulnerable to climate change in terms of extreme heat, flooding, and wildfire effects including pollution from toxic smoke and reduction in the availability of affordable housing. Many of the farmworkers that work in Sonoma County’s agricultural sector reside in Southwest Santa Rosa. Many work the annual vineyard harvest, the timing of which coincides with peak wildfire season, and can result in exposure to wildfire smoke and extreme heat conditions.

Ag + Open Space has funded, in part, 12 acquisition, restoration, and park enhancement projects across 7 properties in Southwest Santa Rosa and the immediately adjacent areas. (Figure 3) These projects provide the direct benefits of access to open space and where agricultural activity occurs, greater access to locally grown healthy foods. These projects also provide a respite from the effects of extreme heat, with shade trees along restored areas of Colgan Creek, for example (Figure 4). The restoration of Colgan Creek also provides increased carrying capacity of floodwaters that protects nearby homes and farmland, and increased carbon capture through revegetation of trees and shrubs.

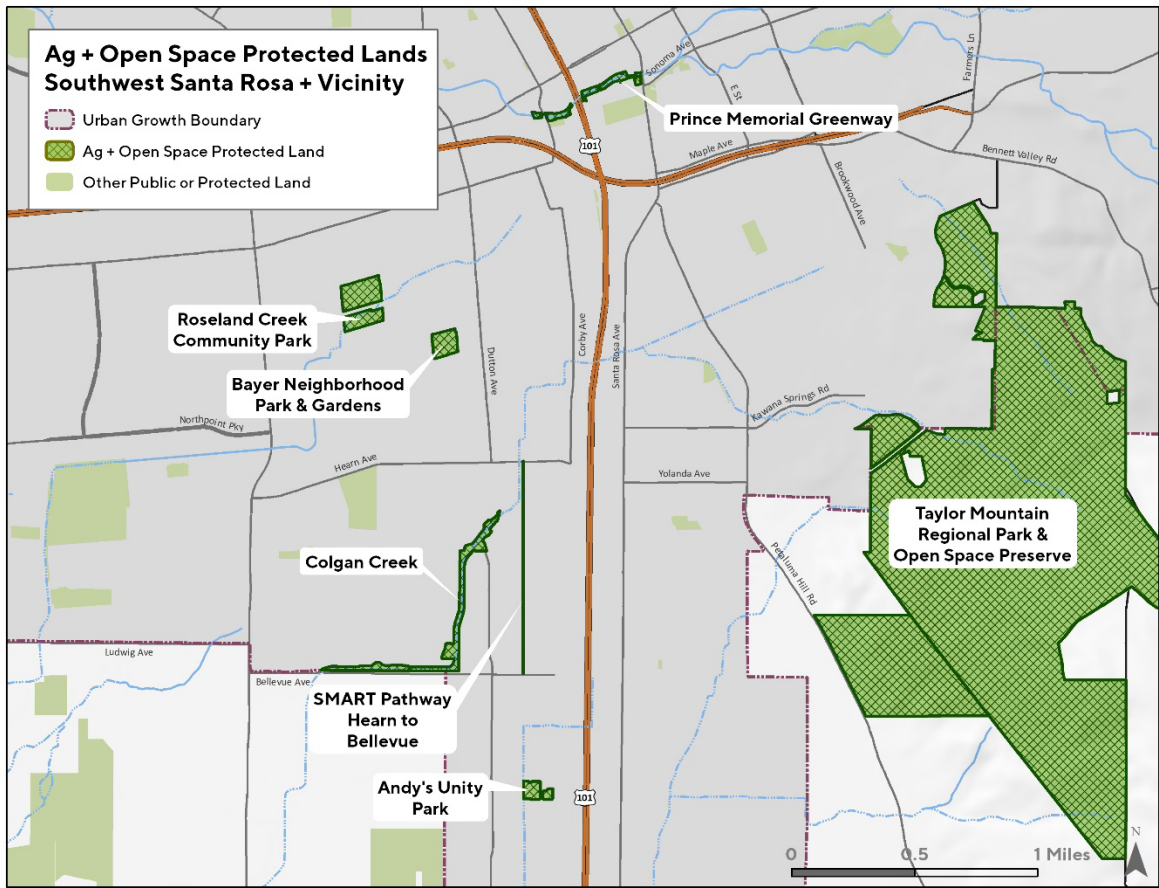


Figure 3 Ag + Open Space-funded urban open space projects in southern Santa Rosa and the vicinity.



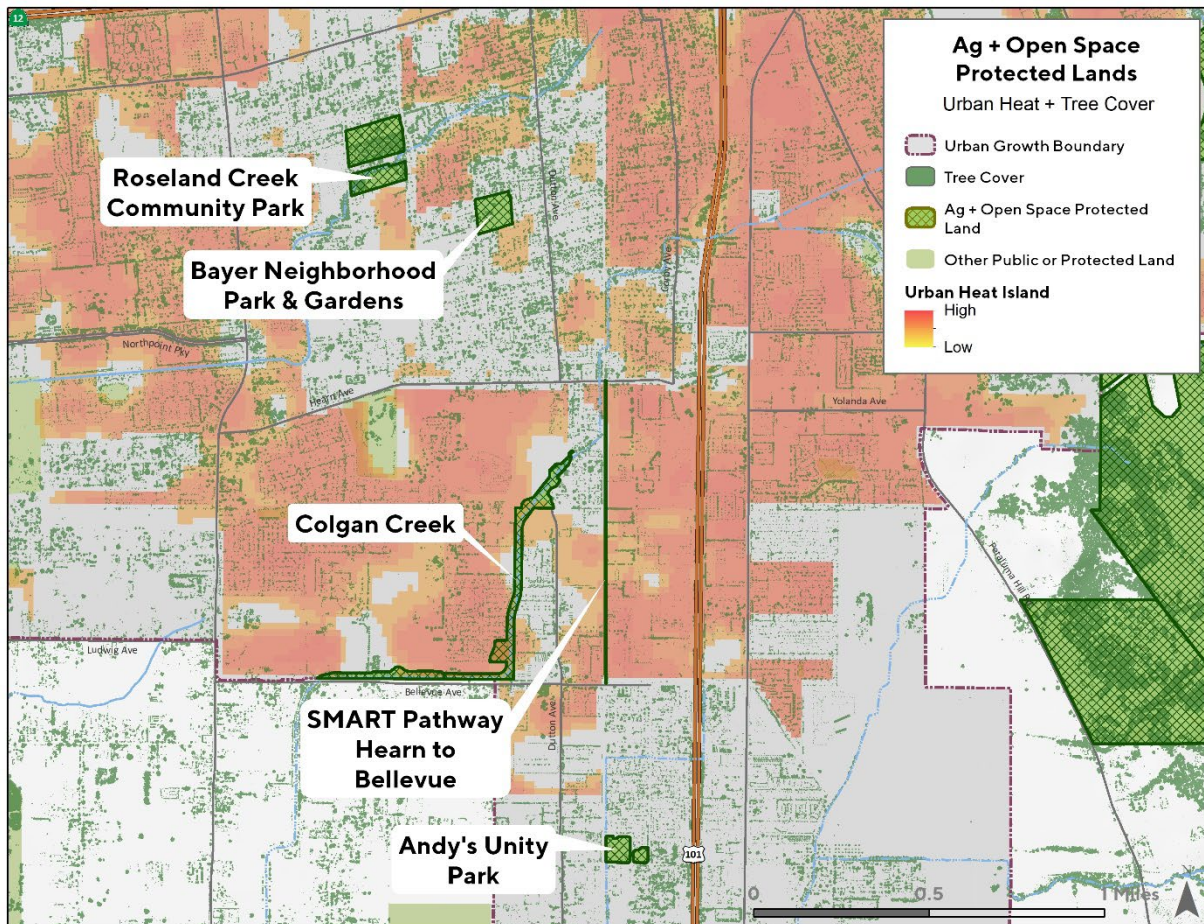


Figure 4 Map showing tree cover (Sonoma Veg Map; 2013 conditions) and Urban Heat Island Severity (Trust for Public Land; 2019 conditions) in relation to Ag + Open Space-funded urban open space in southwest Santa Rosa. Urban Heat Island Severity shows where certain areas of cities are hotter than the average temperature for that same city as a whole. Severity is measured on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being a relatively mild heat area (slightly above the mean for the city), and 5 being a severe heat area (significantly above the mean for the city).

As Ag + Open Space continues to invest in projects located in Southwest Santa Rosa and other vulnerable areas of the county, we will continue to track the observed benefits and outcomes of this work, and compare this information with that available via the county’s racial demographic data and also standard quality of life measures such as the Human Developmental Index scores. Regularly checking in on how our work is positively affecting the communities with the lowest HDI scores, through direct engagement with the affected communities, as well as participating in local and regional socio-economic and scientific studies, will help us fine-tune future investments.

More generally, we must continue to look at ways of measuring and tracking the broader public benefit of land conservation work to public health – clean air, clean water, visual relief, access to locally produced food, and outdoor spaces to experience and enjoy. This might be through continued measurements of economic benefit, as used in *Healthy Lands Healthy Economies* studies, or tracking our progress in addressing vulnerability to and mitigating the risk of climate change. Then, looking at how these projects are meeting our goals around increasing equitable access to the public benefits of land

conservation – which communities benefit, who lives in these communities, where is additional work needed.