



SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 5/21/2024

To: Board of Supervisors for County of Sonoma

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

Staff Name and Phone Number: Kim Batchelder, 565-7355, Christina Rivera, 565-2048

Vote Requirement: Majority

Supervisorial District(s): Countywide

Title:

2024 Vegetation Management Grant Program Recommendations

Recommended Action:

- A) Accept recommendations for projects and funding amounts for the 2024 Vegetation Management Grant Program Cycle and authorize the Policy, Grants, and Special Projects Deputy County Administrator 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 2024 Vegetation Management Grant Program Cycle and authorize the Policy, Grants, and Special Projects Deputy County Administrator 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.

Executive Summary:

On November 7, 2023, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) staff 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 2024 Vegetation Management Grant Program was issued on February 5, 2024, with a deadline of March 28, 2024. Twenty-two applications were submitted and evaluated by a multi-agency Evaluation Committee. The Committee and Vegetation Management Coordinator recommend full or partial funding to nine projects for a total of approximately \$1,000,000. Staff request that the Board of Supervisors authorize the Vegetation Management Coordinator to complete final negotiations and the Policy, Grants, and Special Projects Deputy County Administrator to execute Grant Agreements with each of these nine grant applicants.

Discussion:

2024 Grant Cycle Summary and Funding Recommendations

On November 7, 2023, the Board authorized continuing the Vegetation Management Grant Program (VMGP)

for an additional year allocating \$2,000,000 of the PG&E Settlement Fund for a two-track funding approach (\$1,000,000 to each track). This item focuses on Track 1 and makes funding recommendations 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 through a request for proposals process. These grants will support vegetation treatments that would reduce the risk of wildfire, protect their homes and community assets, and improve community engagement. As part of the 2024 VMGP, 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 February 5, 2024, with a deadline of March 28, 2024. Ag + Open Space, CALFIRE, and Permit Sonoma staff hosted two virtual workshops on February 13 and February 27, 2024. Attendance was approximately 20 viewers but 82 have reviewed the presentation on the County's YouTube channel. 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 the application process and grant guidelines and emphasized key characteristics of successful projects. Also, the team introduced the use of the 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 22 complete applications prior to the deadline on March 28, 2024. These proposals were then organized into five groups and evaluated according to their proposed project types (access and egress, wildland treatments, capacity building and education, environmental compliance, and multiple treatments). 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 California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and grant objectives across a geographic range under the greatest risk of wildfire.

The Evaluation Committee recommends funding nine projects for a total of \$1,000,000. Ag + Open Space staff recommends the Board of Supervisors authorize the Vegetation Management Coordinator to complete final negotiations to enter into Grant Agreements to be executed by the Policy, Grants, and Special Projects Deputy County Administrator each of these nine recommended grantees. These projects aim to create more than 10 miles of shaded fuel breaks and roadside treatments and includes close to 50,000 acres of land along the Mayacamas and Russian River corridor for future fuel reduction treatments under the California Vegetation Treatment Program - Environmental Impact Report (Cal VTP). In addition, all nine grantees will bring match funding that totals \$1,041,000 or essentially 1:1 to the VMGP grant funding across all projects. Two of the recommended grantees are providing community outreach and capacity building workshops in wildfire

resilience and prescribed grazing technical support.

Staff are proposing two 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:

- Brain Ridge Fuel Break Project (Coast Ridge Forest Council) - \$142,790.00
- Camp Meeker - Occidental Demonstration Fuels Reduction Project (Occidental CSD) - \$90,000.00
- St. Helena Road Shaded Fuel Break (Conservation Corps North Bay) - \$100,000.00
- Wohler Community Shaded Fuel Break (No. Sonoma County COPE) - \$100,000.00
- Collaborative Fuels Reduction in Sonoma Valley (Sonoma Ecology Center) - \$100,000.00
- LandSmart Grazing for Community Resilience (Gold Ridge RCD) - \$150,000.00

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:

- Engaging and Educating Sonoma County's Landowners (Fire Safe Sonoma) - \$75,826.00

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:

- East Geyserville Vegetation Treatment Program-EIR (No. Sonoma County Fire District) - \$150,000.00
- Mount Jackson Vegetation Treatment Program-EIR (WiConduit - Hacienda Improvement Association) - \$91,384.00

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).

Track 2 Funding:

In November 2023, the Board allocated \$2,000,000 to fund the 2024 VMGP - \$1,000,000 for the Track 1 Request for Proposal process resulting in today's recommendations; and \$1,000,000 for Track 2 for projects identified through the Resilient Forests and Watersheds workshop series. Since June 2023, Ag + Open Space together with Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs), Permit Sonoma, and CALFIRE have been working with a variety of communities and organizations to enhance project design and provide technical assistance through these workshops. So far, Gold Ridge RCD and Ag + Open Space have hosted nine local workshops focused on four different communities in west county with an additional five more workshops scheduled through December 2024. These workshops are aimed at landowners and organizations in high to very high wildfire risk area with a propensity to collaborate and engage with fire professionals, resource managers, and County staff to implement technically sound projects. Staff anticipates bringing up to 10 new projects for funding to the Board by Fall 2024.

Since 2021, the County's Vegetation Management Grant program has approved 65 grant agreements totaling \$11,500,000, resulting in 5,426 acres of treated areas, including over 82 miles of shaded fuel breaks, 630 homes with defensible space along Calistoga Road, Kashia tribal community, Wilshire-Crystal Heights, Foothill community, Mark West community, and others, 64 miles of roadside treatments, and 3,000 acres being grazed or treated with prescribed burns.

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 \$6,970,468 of the original \$25,000,000 has yet to be allocated.

Project	Board Date	Amount
Allocate \$25,000,000 to Vegetation Management	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
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
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

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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 Grant program	11/7/2023	-\$2,000,000
Staffing Request (Admin Aide (0.5) and Veg. Mgt. Coordinator to 10/2026	11/7/2023	-\$604,038
<i>Vegetation Management Allocations Made To date:</i>	<i>-\$18,029,532</i>	
Remaining Balance:	\$6,970,468	

Strategic Plan:

The nine 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.

This item directly support 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 3: Leverage grant funding to support sustainable vegetation management program.

Racial Equity:

Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?

No

Prior Board Actions:

November 7, 2023 - Presented to the Board of Supervisors a two-track funding approach to provide \$2,000,000 in vegetation management grants to support community efforts in wildfire resilience in high priority areas. Track 1 would use a traditional Request for Proposal model. Track 2 funding would rely on projects generated from the Resilient Forests and Watersheds community workshop series. Staff proposed to the Board support for additional staffing and extension of the Vegetation Management Coordinator's contract to October 2026 to continue this work.

June 12, 2023 - Presented to the Board of Supervisors staff recommendations to fund a total of 19 new vegetation management grant projects for 2023. The total sum of \$3,161,502 were distributed across these 19 different projects. In addition, Ag + Open Space requested approval to accept a \$353,173.79 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation with a 1:1 match from PGE funding to implement a series of workshops throughout the Russian River watershed to improve forest health, watershed protection, wildfire resilience, carbon sequestration, and soil protection.

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 \$3,000,000 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 \$25,000,000 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 \$3,000,000 to support seven vegetation management projects and future projects.

March 23, 2021 - Approved up to \$4,000,000 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 \$1,600,000 for expansion of fuel mapper decision support tool and outreach to parcel-scale decision support tool countywide.

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY23-24 Adopted	FY24-25 Projected	FY25-26 Projected
Budgeted Expenses		\$1,000,000	
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures		\$1,000,000	
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other - PGE Settlement Fund		\$1,000,000	
Use of Fund Balance			
General Fund Contingencies			
Total Sources		\$1,000,000	

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The Board of Supervisors allocated \$25,000,000 from the PGE settlement toward vegetation management on October 6, 2020 and \$2,000,000 for a two-track funding approach to vegetation management grants on November 7, 2023. This request is for \$1,000,000 of the already allocated \$2,000,000 to fund nine grant agreements. With the approval of the \$2,000,000 on November 7, 2023 for the 2024 Vegetation Management grant cycle, the remaining balance from the vegetation management original \$25,000,000 allocation is approximately \$6,970,468.

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Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

N/A

Attachments:

- 1) 2024 Vegetation Management Grant Recommendations list
- 2) 2024 Vegetation Management Grant applications and recommendations map

Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:

None.