



SUMMARY REPORT

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**Agenda Date:** 5/12/2026

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**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:** Misti Arias, General Manager 707-565-7360; Sheri Emerson, Stewardship Manager 707-565-7358

**Vote Requirement:** Majority

**Supervisory District(s):** Countywide

**Title:**

Stewardship Assistance Grant Program Agreements

**Recommended Action:**

- A) Adopt a resolution making certain findings, authorizing a grant program to provide stewardship assistance on Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District-protected agricultural and forested working lands, and delegating specified authority to the General Manager to administer the program, consistent with the grant agreements and the Stewardship Policy.
- B) Approve and authorize the General Manager to execute a Stewardship Assistance Grant Agreement with the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District for a total not-to-exceed amount of \$670,000, through February 15, 2030, for natural resource enhancement projects on agricultural and working forest lands protected by Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District conservation easements. No minimum amount of grant funding is guaranteed by this Agreement. The total amount awarded to the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District will depend on the number of eligible stewardship projects approved. □
- C) Approve and authorize the General Manager to execute a Stewardship Assistance Grant Agreement with the Sonoma Resource Conservation District for a total-not-to-exceed amount of \$1,330,000 □ through February 15, 2030, for natural resource enhancement projects on agricultural and working forest lands protected by Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District conservation easements. No minimum amount of grant funding is guaranteed by this Agreement. The total amount awarded to the Sonoma Resource Conservation District will depend on the number of eligible stewardship projects approved. □

**Executive Summary:**

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) permanently protects land through acquisition and perpetual stewardship of conservation easements. The current Ag + Open Space protected lands portfolio consists of 350 easement ownerships, protecting 127,000 acres, and almost 80% of that protected land is privately owned. Most of these properties also support agricultural and forestry uses through production of food, fiber and/or forestry products intended for sale. At the same time, Ag + Open Space protected properties present opportunities for enhancement of natural resources, such as wetlands, riparian corridors, grasslands, forests, and other ecosystems, as well as enhancing biodiversity, maintaining healthy soils and groundwater levels on working lands. While conservation easements protect the natural resource values on easement properties by restricting land uses and improvements, they generally do

not impose affirmative requirements for habitat restoration or enhancement. These types of projects may be undertaken by willing landowners and provide further benefit to public conservation interests, but funding for such projects is limited.

Access to funding and technical assistance can incentivize easement landowners to complete projects that enhance the natural resource values that the original conservation easement purchase was intended to protect. These enhancements often also support the agricultural values identified by the conservation easements as well as agricultural productivity. Federal funds typically available for this type of assistance are limited or are no longer available. Ag + Open Space, in partnership with both the Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts, is proposing a Stewardship Assistance Program to offer technical assistance along with small grants for planning, design, and implementation of projects that support natural resource stewardship on Ag + Open Space-protected agricultural and forested working lands.

### **Discussion:**

#### **Background**

Ag + Open Space-protected properties present opportunities for enhancement of natural resources, such as wetlands, riparian corridors, grasslands, and forests, as well as enhancing biodiversity and maintaining healthy soils and groundwater levels on working lands. The importance of protecting and improving these resources is highlighted by the Vital Lands Initiative, which identifies specific goals and objectives for conserving lands for agriculture, water, and wildlife, consistent with Ag + Open Space's 2006 Expenditure Plan. Conservation easements are a cost-effective way to conserve land, but they are only effective in protecting that land if they are consistently stewarded.

Ag + Open Space has a Stewardship Policy (most recently updated in 2021) to guide the ongoing stewardship of its conservation easements. Most conservation easements do not require that landowners undertake natural resource enhancement projects. Staff provide project review and technical assistance when landowners choose to do this work; however, land management is both complex and costly, and lack of access to resources is a major barrier to the implementation of restoration and enhancement projects on private lands.

#### **Why this Program is Needed**

- Agricultural and forested working lands (those that produce food, fiber, and/or forestry products for sale) face increasing environmental, economic, and climate pressures.
- Many owners and operators lack technical and financial capacity for infrastructure and stewardship improvements to protect and enhance natural resources on their properties. □
- A program offering technical assistance and financial resources to deliver these projects can accelerate implementation and advance county-wide climate-smart agriculture and open space goals.
- Existing models like the Natural Resource Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) show that grants plus technical assistance are an effective approach to achieving natural resource and habitat enhancement projects on working lands.
- There has been a significant loss of federal and state funding for similar programs over the last year.

Programs like EQIP are among the few that are available for natural resource enhancement projects on private land and, with the cuts in federal funding, there are even fewer resources for those who want to engage in this work.

Ag + Open Space is proposing a Stewardship Assistance Program that would:

- Offer grants through both the Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts to enable them to provide technical assistance, planning, design, and implementation of natural resource enhancement projects (not to exceed \$50,000 per project) on working lands that are protected by Ag + Open Space conservation easements.
- Encourage adoption of conservation practices that yield multiple public benefits by restoring sensitive habitats, maintaining biodiversity, improving soil health, and improving water quality and quantity. □
- Ensure accountability for public benefits by tracking and sharing measurable environmental outcomes.

The Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts are uniquely qualified to deliver these stewardship projects due to their local expertise in both natural resource management and agricultural and forestry operations. Resource Conservation District staff have positive working relationships with local landowners and consistently work to help the community learn better land management practices through broad outreach initiatives and technical service contracts. The Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts have available capacity to deliver these projects and are adept at securing and efficiently administering grant funding to achieve natural resource goals on working lands within Sonoma County, leveraging their knowledge and experience to maximize the benefits of outside funds. □

Expected beneficial impacts of this program include:

- Enhancement of natural resource values identified in and protected by Ag + Open Space conservation easements purchased with sales tax funding. □
- Restored and enhanced wetland, riparian, grassland, forest, and other sensitive habitats, helping to maintain and enhance the County's biodiversity and habitat connectivity. □
- Completed natural resource projects on working lands that improve habitat values, soil health, and water quality and quantity, while also enhancing agricultural production, sequestering carbon, and increasing the resilience of natural ecosystems to catastrophic wildfire, drought, and other climate-related extreme weather events.
- Landowners gain access to resources and technical support to implement meaningful stewardship practices that might otherwise be financially or technically out of reach.
- Strengthened partnerships among Ag + Open Space, Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts, conservation easement landowners, partner agencies-and enhanced capacity of local conservation and agricultural networks. □

### **Ag + Open Space Expenditure Plan Consistency**

As documented in the proposed Board resolution, the 2006 Expenditure Plan authorizes Ag + Open Space to expend Measure F funds towards on-the-ground projects on easement-protected lands, as follows:

- Restoration and improvement projects for Community Spaces Matching Grant Program projects

(Paragraph 5 of the 2006 Expenditure Plan);

- Initial public access, operation and maintenance projects for recreational lands (Paragraph 6 of the 2006 Expenditure Plan, and the 2016 Initial Public Access, Operation and Maintenance Policy); and
- Natural resource enhancement projects to benefit areas of biotic significance on easement lands (Paragraph 4 of the 2006 Expenditure Plan). □

The proposed Stewardship Assistance Program will provide funding and technical assistance support to incentivize enhancement of natural resources on agricultural and forested working lands protected by Ag + Open Space conservation easements, where such projects are not undertaken as a condition of the easement nor to remedy an easement violation or a violation of any law or regulation.

### **Program Coordination through Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts**

Ag + Open Space proposes to enter into separate grant agreements with Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts to provide a combined total of \$2,000,000 over four years to implement the program. Of this total, approximately \$670,000 will fund program outreach, planning, and technical assistance efforts, and \$98,500 (or 5% of the total) will fund contract administration and reporting. The remaining \$1,330,000 will fund on-the-ground project implementation by and through the Resource Conservation Districts, who will work directly with private landowners to deliver these public benefit projects.

### **Project Eligibility**

Projects that are eligible for funding under the proposed program are as follows:

- The project is in Sonoma County on land protected by an Ag + Open Space conservation easement.
- The project is intended to enhance the natural resources that are identified as conservation values protected by the Ag + Open Space conservation easement.
- The project must have a demonstrated public benefit, as defined by Ag + Open Space.
- The land is in commercial agriculture or forestry (producing food, fiber, and/or forestry products).
- Projects may be delivered in partnership with landowners, tenants, or land managers operating on eligible agricultural, forestland, cropland, or rangeland properties. However, in all cases, written permission from the landowner to manage and implement the project is required.
- The project must comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and any other required environmental and regulatory permits.
- Projects will not be eligible for Ag + Open Space 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 Ag + Open Space's conservation easement, as determined by Ag + Open Space in its sole discretion.
- Projects on land owned by public agencies are not eligible, as these funds are intended to increase the amount of natural resource enhancement work on privately-owned working lands.
- Ag + Open Space funding is limited to \$50,000 per project.

Examples of eligible projects 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 water troughs, if needed;
- f. Enhancing habitat and reducing sedimentation through culvert replacement;
- g. Prescribed burns and prescribed grazing, if the primary purpose is to improve habitat conditions, rather than protect infrastructure;
- h. Improve forest health and watershed resilience;
- i. Protecting biotic habitat areas from excess nutrients through planting vegetated buffers, use of exclusionary fencing, and rotational or targeted grazing practices;
- j. 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;
- k. 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.

#### **Project Selection and Program Administration**

- The Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs) will receive application submissions, windows for which will be open annually or twice per year. Initial eligibility screening will be conducted by the RCDs, with support from Ag + Open Space staff as needed.
- Projects that are determined to be eligible will be ranked according to how they meet the goals of the program and support the purpose of the applicable conservation easement. Criteria will include, but not be limited to, project benefits such as enhancement of natural resource areas, wildlife habitat and movement corridors, water efficiency and storage function, soil health, carbon sequestration function, nutrient management practices, water quality, and forest health and ecosystem resilience to floods and wildfires. A project ranking system will be developed by Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation District staff in consultation with Ag + Open Space and approved by the Ag + Open Space General Manager.
- An application review committee composed of staff from Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District, Sonoma Resource Conservation District, Ag + Open Space, and a representative each from the Ag + Open Space Advisory Committee and Fiscal Oversight Commission will prepare recommendations for the consideration of the Ag + Open Space General Manager, who will make final decision to award project-specific funding to the RCDs to deliver the project.
- Project-specific agreements with landowners (e.g. access agreements, cost-share obligations, reporting requirements) will be established by the Resource Conservation Districts, in consultation with Ag + Open Space as needed.
- Project expenses incurred by eligible partners will be reimbursed by the Resource Conservation District pursuant to applicable contracts. All related documentation regarding the use of Ag + Open Space grant funds, including invoices, payments, documentation of project completion, will be maintained by the Resource Conservation District, as the responsible grantee.
- Project monitoring and tracking of overall progress towards meeting program goals will be conducted

by the Resource Conservation District, reported to Ag + Open Space, and made available to the public via the Ag + Open Space website.

- Program reports summarizing project types, dollars leveraged, and outcomes will be provided to the Ag + Open Space Fiscal Oversight Commission, Ag + Open Space Advisory Committee, and the Ag + Open Space Board of Directors on an annual basis. A final comprehensive program report will be provided at the end of the grant agreement term.

**Stewardship Policy Amendment and Delegation**

The proposed Board resolution ratifies Ag + Open Space’s Stewardship Policy, last updated in 2021, and delegates authority to the General Manager, in consultation with County Counsel, to make further amendments to the Policy as may be appropriate in the General Manager’s discretion from time to time. Minor changes to the Policy to accommodate the Stewardship Assistance Program will include the addition of this language to page 5, Conservation Easements, upon approval by the Board:

“Under limited circumstances, as provided by (Reso #xx), Ag + Open Space may provide funding towards stewardship activities on properties with Ag + Open Space-held conservation or open space easements that enhance the natural resources conservation values of those easements.”.

**Strategic Plan:**

n/a

**Racial Equity:**

n/a

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

No

**Prior Board Actions:**

July 12, 2016: Update to Stewardship Manual

**FISCAL SUMMARY**

<b>Expenditures</b>	<b>FY 25-26 Adopted</b>	<b>FY 26-27 Projected</b>	<b>FY 27-28 Projected</b>
Budgeted Expenses	\$250,000	\$1,000,000	\$750,000
Additional Appropriation Requested			
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$250,000</b>	<b>\$1,000,000</b>	<b>\$750,000</b>
<b>Funding Sources</b>			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other	\$250,000	\$1,000,000	\$750,000
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			

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<b>Total Sources</b>	<b>\$250,000</b>	<b>\$1,000,000</b>	<b>\$750,000</b>
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**Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:**

There are sufficient funds in Ag + Open Space's current year's budget and expenses will be included in future years' budgets. □

**Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):**

n/a

**Attachments:**

1. Resolution
2. Stewardship Assistance Program Coordination Grant Agreement with Sonoma Resource Conservation District
3. Stewardship Assistance Program Coordination Grant Agreement with Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District
4. Updated Stewardship Policy

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

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